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**The MYSTERY of the  
SWAYING CURTAINS**

**FRANCES K. JUDD**

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*Title:* The Mystery of the Swaying Curtains

*Date of first publication:* 1935

*Author:* Mildred A. Wirt Benson (as Frances K. Judd)

*Date first posted:* July 9, 2020

*Date last updated:* July 9, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200717

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





A trap door in the ceiling slowly opened. (See [Page 123](#))

KAY TRACEY MYSTERY STORIES

# THE MYSTERY OF THE SWAYING CURTAINS

By  
FRANCES K. JUDD

*Author of*  
THE SECRET OF THE RED SCARF  
THE STRANGE ECHO  
THE SHADOW ON THE DOOR

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK  
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY  
PUBLISHERS

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# CHAPTER I

## A GHOSTLY FIGURE

A thick blanket of fog, unusual for the month of September, hung low over the well-kept grounds of Carmont High School. Kay Tracey sat at her desk in the art class, her brown eyes thoughtfully regarding the grey mist which swirled like smoke about the windows. Across the aisle from her the Worth twins squirmed restlessly.

“I wish the closing bell would ring,” whispered Betty.

Wilma consulted her tiny wrist watch. “It’s five minutes late now,” she said softly.

“I wonder what is the matter?” her twin responded.

Kay leaned over to them.

“This fog makes me think of London,” she commented in an undertone, as the teacher stepped out into the hall. “What a perfect setting for a mystery story. A dense fog to hide the crime—a shrill scream—the pad of running feet—then a policeman’s whistle!”

Dong! Dong! D-o-n-g!

Betty sprang to her feet like a frightened deer. “Oh my, I thought for a moment that——”



The mischievous Kay laughingly gathered her friends' books and her own together and bade the twins follow her to the locker room. There was a rush of students, among them Ethel Eaton, who persisted in being the first to leave.

"I'll miss my train if I don't get out at once," she announced loudly. "Let me through!"

"Well, we're taking the same one you are and we don't expect to miss it."

"That's your lookout, not mine," the unpleasant girl responded with a shrug.

The girls lived at Brantwood, a town about ten miles distant from where they attended school. They made the trip daily, returning home on the train which left around four in the afternoon. The walk to the station was a long one, so the girls were always obliged to go along rapidly to make time. They could see only a few feet ahead of them, for the mist enveloped everything in a thick veil that afternoon.

"Wilma, what a wonderful poem you could make up about this fog," mused Kay, referring to her friend's talent.

"Don't!" cried Betty. "We have no time. Why encourage her?"

"Because of my flare for dramatics and plotting, I guess," laughed Kay. "What a fine setting for a real thrilling——"

She broke off abruptly as a shrill scream pierced the air. Electrified, Kay and her chums halted in their walk to the station.

“What was that?” Betty half whispered.

Kay did not reply, for she was trying to localize the sound. She listened intently.

Again there came that shrill, hysterical cry. This time the girls were certain it was very near them.

“Someone is in trouble!” Kay cried, as she ran forward, her chums following close behind her.

In their anxiety the girls almost stumbled over an object which lay at the edge of the sidewalk.

“Why, Ethel Eaton!” Kay exclaimed in amazement, as she recognized the mud-bespattered figure.

“Help me up!” the older girl snapped as she struggled to regain her feet. “Don’t stand there staring!”

Kay quickly assisted Ethel, and brushed off some of the grime from her clothes. It was obvious that the girl had not been injured in the fall. However, she began to cry hysterically.

“What made you scream?” Betty demanded. She thought that Ethel was acting very childish indeed.

“I was attacked!” Ethel maintained. “A man dashed up from behind me and threw me to the ground! If you girls hadn’t come when you did I’m sure he would have robbed me.”

“You still have your purse,” Kay reminded her. “Are you certain it was a man?”

“Of course I am! Kay Tracey, if you’re hinting that I’m making up a story——”

“I’m not insinuating a thing,” Kay returned quickly. “However, you were directly ahead of us and I’m sure we didn’t see a man. I do recall there was a dog, however.”

“A great big police dog,” Betty interposed. “The one owned by the school watchman.”

“A dog!” Ethel cried furiously. “How dare you suggest it was only a dog that struck me!”

Kay smiled as she reached down to pick up the girl’s books from the ground. She did not care to argue the point with Ethel, for the two had never been on friendly terms. Nevertheless, as she noticed the tracks in the soft earth she could not refrain from bringing them to the other’s attention.

“It *was* a dog, all right,” Betty smiled. “That’s a good joke on you, Ethel!”

“I suppose you’d have thought it a good joke, too, if I’d been bitten!”

“Rudy wouldn’t bite anyone,” Kay laughed. “He’s so old he has lost all his teeth.”

“I’ll have him shot for attacking me,” Ethel muttered angrily as the girls hurried away.

The three chums were still chuckling over the incident when they reached the station.

The girls forgot all about Ethel after they had boarded the train. As they walked down the aisle Kay, who was in the lead, suddenly caught sight of a girl she knew. With a cry of delight she hurried over and gave her a hug.

“Sissy Weller! I haven’t seen you in months!”

Kay immediately introduced Betty and Wilma to her friend, and the four were soon chatting animatedly. Sissy was an unusually pretty girl, though somewhat timid for a person of eighteen years. Her clothes were of too old a style for one so young. Kay had often felt like snipping off the girl’s long, stringy flaxen tresses, and fashioning the remaining hair into a more youthful coiffure. Yet everyone loved this orphan who had come from the Heather Home for Children to live with the genial Wellers. Since their death life had been hard for the girl, who had gone to New York to look for work. With the passing of the months Kay had lost track of her friend entirely.

“I’m afraid Sissy has had a pretty hard time since leaving home,” she thought to herself as she noted the girl’s shabby dress and worn shoes. Aloud she said:

“Tell us all about yourself, Sissy. What have you been doing in New York?”

The girl hesitated a moment, then said frankly:

“Not much of anything. Work is so hard to find in New York. I was a salesgirl in a department store for a while, but that didn’t last long. Next I had a job as waitress in a restaurant, and finally ended up with washing dishes there. But I couldn’t stand the hours, and finally had to go to bed sick.”

“Oh, Sissy, not really!” said Kay. “You shouldn’t have taken on such work.”

“It’s better than going hungry,” the orphan replied, smiling faintly.

“Surely you could have gone to your friends for aid,” Kay declared.

“I fear I haven’t many, now that Mr. and Mrs. Weller are dead.”

“You have us,” Wilma said staunchly. “We’ll help you find work.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I won’t have to impose upon you,” Sissy returned more cheerfully. “I’ve secured a good position, and that’s why I’m returning to Brantwood.”

“Oh, I’m so glad!” Kay cried. “Tell us about it.”

“I’m to serve as companion to a Mrs. Barling. She wired me to come at once. Do you know her, Kay?”

“Only slightly. She’s a fine old lady of about sixty, I understand, and has a great deal of money. However, she’s considered somewhat eccentric and difficult to please.”

“I shan’t mind that. I’ll work my very hardest to keep the position! It means everything to me!”

The train slowed down as it neared the Brantwood station, and the girls helped Sissy to carry her luggage into the vestibule.

“Is someone to meet you here?” Kay inquired of her friend, as the porter set the heavy suitcases down upon the platform.

“I’m afraid not,” Sissy admitted. “However, I don’t mind carrying my grips.”

“The Barling homestead is a long way from here,” Kay informed her. “I pass by there on my way home and will be glad to help you with your things.”

Wilma and Betty lived in another section of town, so said good-bye to Sissy at the station. Then she and Kay, each carrying a suitcase, wended their way toward the Barling homestead, located on the outskirts of Brantwood.

“It’s a lonesome sort of place,” Kay commented, as the two girls arrived at their destination. They halted at the gate to survey the rambling stone residence, which looked

impressive and dignified with age. “I imagine the house must be almost fifty years old. It’s well kept up, though.”

“I hope Mrs. Barling will like me,” Sissy murmured nervously.

“She can’t help but do so,” Kay assured her, lifting the iron knocker at the entrance.

After a long wait the door was finally opened by an elderly woman whom Kay recognized as Eliza, Mrs. Barling’s eccentric housekeeper. At sight of her Sissy was overcome with shyness, so Kay quickly explained their mission.

“Why, there must have been a mix-up somewhere,” the woman declared, staring blankly at Sissy. “Mrs. Barling isn’t here. She took a suitcase and left this morning on the train.”

“Left?” Sissy murmured, aghast. “Then she wasn’t expecting me?”

“She wasn’t expecting you to come here today, that’s certain, Miss. She said she was going to meet you some place, I don’t exactly remember where.”

“But I’m sure her wire said for me to come to Brantwood,” Sissy declared anxiously. “Oh, I do hope I’ve made no mistake!”

“Have you the message with you?” Kay asked.

“No. I threw it away.”

“If we only knew where Mrs. Barling had gone we might send her a wire,” Kay said, frowning slightly. “You’re certain you can’t recall the place, Eliza?”

“No, Miss, I can’t. I’m not sure she even told me.”

The situation was a perplexing one indeed, and Sissy seemed incapable of dealing with it alone. She stood helplessly by, while Kay made arrangements for her to stay at the Barling homestead until word should be received from its mistress.

“I’m afraid something has happened, and that I won’t get the position after all,” Sissy whispered to her friend as they entered the drawing room. “Oh, isn’t this the most magnificent place you ever saw?” she exclaimed in awe-struck tones.

The interior of the house was highly imposing, for Mrs. Barling had spent considerable money furnishing and decorating it. Rare and priceless paintings hung from the walls; the mantel over the fireplace displayed a number of fine pieces of bric-a-brac; the furniture was rich and old; the windows were guarded with long velvet drapes, the heaviest the girls had ever seen.

“Oh, I do wish you could stay here with me until Mrs. Barling arrives,” Sissy said wistfully to Kay after they had been escorted to the bedroom which had been prepared for the girl. “Do you suppose the housekeeper would object?”



“I’m sure she wouldn’t,” Kay murmured instantly. “And I think Mother would give her consent, too.”

She was quick to see that Sissy stood somewhat in awe of old Eliza. Moreover, the vast, dark rooms of the ancient house only added to her timidity. By remaining there, Kay felt that she might help the girl overcome her feeling of shyness.

The housekeeper readily consented to both girls staying. Kay telephoned her mother, and received permission to remain overnight in the event that Mrs. Barling should not return that evening.

At six o’clock Eliza served the girls a plain but tasty meal in the stately dining room. Sissy, however, was too nervous to enjoy the food. Even Kay had to admit to herself that the silence of the great house was oppressive. For some reason which she could not explain, she, too, felt ill at ease.

After dinner the girls went to their rooms. When they had chatted for a while Kay took out her school books and attempted to study; but try as she would, she could not keep her mind on what she was doing.

“Oh, I’m not in a mood for work tonight,” she said at length, closing a book with an impatient snap. “If you’ll lend me a pair of your pajamas, Sissy, I think I’ll retire. I’m pretty sleepy.”

Kay occupied the bedroom adjoining the one Sissy had. Her head had barely touched the pillow that night when she fell asleep. But her slumbers were troubled.

Suddenly Kay's keen ears detected a sound—a strange metallic click which appeared to come from the living room. Slipping into a robe Sissy had lent her, the girl crept to the top of the winding stairway, but could see nothing. Quietly she stole down the long flight of stairs.

Heavy velvet draperies barred the entrance to the living room. Cautiously Kay drew aside a fold of the rich material and peered curiously into the darkness beyond. At the sight that met her eyes she drew back in amazement. In the flickering light of a candle a ghostly figure in white was working the dials of Mrs. Barling's big and hitherto hidden wall safe!

## CHAPTER II

### AN UNEXPECTED MESSAGE

That the spectre was a very human one Kay was instantly convinced. The girl's first impulse was to dart into the room and accost the prowler, but on second thought she decided it would be wise to have a witness to the strange proceedings.

"I'll get Sissy," she decided.

Backing away from the curtain, she tiptoed silently up the stairs. Softly opening the door to Sissy's bedroom, she whispered the girl's name. There was no response. Kay moved over to the bed to awaken her friend.

"Why, she's gone!"

She stared at the empty place, scarcely believing her eyes. Then, before she had recovered from this shock, she was startled by the loud crash of a heavy object. Simultaneously with the noise, which seemed to come from the rear of the house, a shrill cry rang out. Kay darted into the hallway, and distinctly heard someone groan. Then all was quiet.

She hurried in the direction of the commotion, puzzled, though not frightened, by the many queer happenings in the old house. By nature she was calm and courageous, and not very easily upset.

In many ways the sixteen-year-old girl was like her father. Roger Tracey had led a thrilling life as a newspaper man, and had risen to the rank of editor while in his early thirties. At the time of his death he was known far and wide as a fearless writer who was always ready to champion a worthy cause.

Kay slightly resembled her mother, Mrs. Kathryn Tracey. Her pretty face had character and personality. She gave little thought to her appearance, but her deep brown eyes, light, curly hair, and lovely fresh skin were the envy of all her friends.

She was extremely popular, and from a host of school acquaintances had chosen the Worth twins, Wilma and Betty, as her special chums. These sisters were as unlike as two persons could be. Blue-eyed Betty, who was of a humorous turn of mind, was the namesake of her mother. Dark-haired Wilma, named in honor of her father, William, was inclined to have a melancholy and somewhat romantic outlook upon life. Her readiness to burst forth into poetry upon the slightest provocation was often a source of deep annoyance to Betty.

Kay and her mother shared their home with the well-beloved Bill Tracey, a young attorney. "Cousin Bill," as he was known to Kay, delighted in teasing the girl, particularly about her keen interest in mysteries. She had found out "The Secret of the Red Scarf," thereby aiding a deserving young boy to find his long-lost sister.

Kay's second case, entitled "The Strange Echo," centred about the resort, Lost Lake. While there she explored a mysterious valley with her chums, Wilma and Betty, and after many exciting experiences she found the true solution to the peculiar echo which had troubled the inhabitants for a long time.

Now, as Kay raced for the back stairway in the old Barling homestead, she hardly knew what she would find. Unfamiliar with the long winding halls, she could not locate the electric light control switch. Groping her way along in the dark, she was guided only by the sound of muffled groans.

When she finally reached the very top step she located the light switch and pressed it. There, in a crumpled heap at the foot of the stairs, lay Sissy.

"Are you hurt?" Kay cried, hurrying toward the girl and assisting her to her feet. Even in these anxious moments she noted that her friend wore a white nightgown. The scene she had witnessed in the living room flashed before her. A figure in white—could it have been Sissy? Sternly Kay put the thought aside.

"I—I guess I'm more frightened than hurt," Sissy admitted as she arose with Kay's help. "I must have fallen down the entire flight of stairs."

"But what are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I guess I must have been walking in my sleep."

“I’m thankful that you weren’t badly hurt. Come, I’ll help you back to your bed.” Kay had decided not to speak of what she had seen and heard in the living room a short time before.

As they reached the head of the stairs the girls saw a figure slowly coming toward them. To their surprise it proved to be old Eliza in her white nightdress, looking like a ghost haunting the gloomy homestead.

“Dear me, what *is* the matter?” she asked irritably. “Such a clatter I never did hear!”

“I’m sorry I awakened you,” Sissy murmured contritely. “I fell down the stairs. I’m afraid I was walking in my sleep.”

“Humph! That’s a fine thing to do, I must say. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Just some bruises. I’ll be all right.”

“Then get back to bed before you catch your death of cold.”

With this brusque speech the old housekeeper turned her back on the girls and hobbled off in the direction of her own bedroom. Kay stared thoughtfully after her.

“I wonder if she could have been the figure in white that I saw?” she mused. “I am convinced it was either Sissy or Eliza, but which one? I dare not question them, though.”

Kay continued to puzzle over the situation as she tucked Sissy into bed, and returned to her own room. She fully

intended to remain awake for a while; instead, she fell asleep almost at once, and it was morning when next she opened her eyes.

Suddenly she became aware that someone was knocking on a door. At first she thought it was the one to her bedroom, but realized that the sound was coming from the lower floor. Someone was pounding at the entrance with the iron knocker. Drawing on her robe, she ran to the window and saw a messenger boy standing outside.

“Just a minute,” Kay called to him and hurried downstairs.

She opened the front door and signed the slip for a telegram, which was addressed to Eliza. By this time Sissy and the housekeeper had descended the stairs.

“A telegram for me?” the woman asked nervously. She drew back a step as Kay handed her the yellow envelope. “Oh, I’m afraid it’s bad news.”

“It’s probably from Mrs. Barling,” Kay declared. “Open it.”

Somewhat reassured, Eliza slit the envelope and studied the message.

“I haven’t my glasses with me. Tell me what it says.” She handed the paper to Kay.

“It’s a night letter from Mrs. Barling,” the girl explained after a hasty glance at the name attached. “She’s upset because Sissy failed to meet her.”

“I didn’t know I was to meet her,” the orphan girl wailed. “She’s coming back to Brantwood, isn’t she?”

Kay shook her head regretfully and read the message aloud. It appeared that Mrs. Barling, bewildered because Sissy had failed to appear at what she termed the “appointed” place, had decided to continue her journey by automobile and visit some friends in the East. Unfortunately, the machine had been side-swiped by a truck and had gone into a ditch. Although Mrs. Barling had not been seriously injured, the accident had left her considerably shaken up. She had therefore made up her mind to take a rest, for a while at least. The woman concluded her message by instructing Eliza to close up the house and return to her son’s home until she should be notified to come back.

“Oh, it’s all so mixed up!” Sissy wailed. “Mrs. Barling must have thought that I had changed my mind about accepting the position. Oh, Kay, can’t we send her a telegram and tell her I’m here?”

“Mrs. Barling didn’t attach any address, Sissy. I don’t know how we can get in touch with her.”

“This is a pretty howdy-do, I must say,” Eliza said crossly. “I’ll have all the work of shutting up this big place, too. It must be that Mrs. Barling has decided to stay away for the winter or she wouldn’t order the place to be closed.”

Sissy had been trying to hide her bitter disappointment. Suddenly she sagged into a chair, and burying her face in her hands gave way to heart-rending sobs.



“Don’t cry,” Kay comforted her. “Perhaps we’ll find some way of getting in touch with Mrs. Barling.”

“I don’t see how,” Eliza cut in morosely. “I haven’t an idea where she might be. She has lots of friends, but she’s never stayed with any of them for a visit.”

“I’ve lost the position,” Sissy wailed. “Oh, I’m so discouraged. Luck is against me, that’s all! I’ve tried so hard, but something like this always happens just when I think I’m going to have a wonderful opportunity!”

“We’ll find a new position for you if we can’t locate Mrs. Barling,” Kay promised rashly. “Let’s forget all about the message now and prepare breakfast. I’m sure everything will appear brighter after we’ve had something to eat.”

The girls insisted upon helping Eliza with the meal. She was grateful for their aid, for she was not as agile as she had once been. While Kay was filling the tea kettle with water, she noticed a postcard on a shelf above the sink. On it was the picture of a summer resort, and the girl glanced at it curiously.

“Where did this come from, Eliza?” she asked.

“Oh, Mrs. Barling sent it to me last summer from the Hotel Majestic when she was at Clearwater,” the housekeeper informed her. “It was so pretty that I kept it.”

Kay made a mental note of the name, though at the moment she did not dream that it would ever be of any use to her. She forgot all about it when Eliza announced that breakfast was

ready. Sissy, though still downhearted, gradually grew reconciled to her situation. After she had enjoyed three of Eliza's excellent pancakes she became almost cheerful again.

After the dishes had been washed and stacked neatly away, Eliza escorted the girls through the house, proudly pointing out to them some valuable pieces of art which her mistress had brought with her from her numerous trips abroad.

"Every time I close up this place I hate to come back again for fear some of these things will have been stolen," the housekeeper declared. "I've told Mrs. Barling time and time again that she should have a caretaker on the place when she is away, but she won't hear of it."

"Some of these beautiful objects must have cost a small fortune," Kay commented.

"They did, and if anything were to disappear Mrs. Barling would never get over it." Eliza looked troubled. "I dislike having the responsibility of closing up the place alone."

"I don't blame you," Kay agreed. "I've never seen so many lovely treasures." She indicated one on a high shelf. "Isn't that jade elephant magnificent?"

"Mrs. Barling brought it with her from India five years ago," Eliza said.

Thinking that the girls might like to examine the piece more closely, the housekeeper stepped onto a low stool and reached up to take the curio from its nook.

“Wait, I’ll get it,” Kay offered, fearing that the elderly woman might overtax herself. “It’s too high up for you.”

Eliza laughed and insisted. By standing on tiptoe she managed to reach the elephant, but as she stretched her arms upward, an expression of acute pain flashed across her face. She gave a stifled gasp, and would have fallen, had not Kay leaped forward in time to save the woman.

“It’s my heart!” Eliza gasped, fighting for breath as she collapsed in the girl’s arms. “Oh, I can’t breathe! Help me, help me!”

## **CHAPTER III**

### **A MAN AT THE DOOR**

Kay assisted Eliza to the nearest chair, but did not betray any nervousness as she did so. She snatched up a newspaper which lay on the table, and helped the housekeeper regain her breath by fanning her with the sheet. Sissy, however, was too frightened to do a thing.

“Run to the kitchen and get a glass of water,” Kay cried.  
“Phone for a doctor, too.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” Eliza murmured weakly, but the girls paid no attention to her.

The housekeeper was lying on a couch when a physician arrived. She was feeling much better, but still breathed with difficulty. The doctor left some medicine, then called Kay aside.

“She must do no work of any kind for some time,” he ordered. “She must have a complete rest with nothing to worry or distract her.”

Kay frowned thoughtfully.

“That might not be easy to arrange, Doctor. You see, Sissy and I do not live here. Eliza will have to be alone unless she

goes to the home of her son. Mrs. Barling wired this morning for her to close up this place.”

“Eliza must do no work of any kind,” the doctor emphasized. “Under the circumstances, the wise thing for us to do would be to send for her son. If she is carefully moved it should do her no harm to leave this place and make the journey to his home.”

“I’ll arrange everything,” Kay promised the physician.

Kay knew she would have to assume full charge of closing up the mansion, and the responsibility troubled her. Sissy, while more than willing to be of assistance, could not be expected to take the initiative in anything.

After phoning to Eliza’s son, Kay went to her own home to explain to her mother what had happened. Mrs. Tracey returned with her daughter to the Barling residence to nurse poor Eliza, while Sissy and Kay busied themselves with packing the housekeeper’s clothing.

The former sorted out the garments she thought the woman might need in the country, while Kay glanced hastily through a desk in her room to see if there were any business matters that might require immediate attention. As she laid out the milk and telephone bills, a long envelope attracted her attention. Without the slightest intention of prying into its contents, she could not help but read the inscription:

“Canadian National Railway Bond—\$1000.00”

In the same pigeon-hole there was another envelope of a similar type which doubtless contained valuable securities.

“I wonder how Eliza could ever have accumulated so much money,” Kay mused. “Surely she couldn’t have saved it out of her salary.”

She recalled unwillingly the strange sight she had witnessed the previous night. Could it be possible that Eliza had been rifling Mrs. Barling’s strong-box? The girl, not wishing to dwell upon such an unpleasant thought, dismissed it at once from her mind.

Shortly before luncheon Mrs. Tracey returned home, and in a little while the housekeeper’s son arrived in his car, anxious about his mother, and glad to take her away. After her luggage had been stowed in the back of the automobile, and she was carefully seated in front and tucked in with blankets, the woman turned to Kay and Sissy.

“It’s good of you to take charge of things,” the housekeeper said gratefully. “I don’t know what Mrs. Barling will think when she returns home.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Kay said kindly. “We’ll attend to everything.” She hesitated, then added, “If you have any valuables or money in the house that you wish me to look after——”

For the moment Eliza was startled.

“Oh, there’s nothing that won’t be safe until I get back. Just be sure to keep the place locked. Here are the keys to the interior of the house and this one is for the front entrance.”

“We’ll see that everything is made secure,” Kay promised, taking the keys.

The automobile drove away, and the girls were left alone.

“I wish Mother could have stayed,” Kay remarked to Sissy as the two were returning to the living room. “I can’t say I like to have the responsibility of locking up the place alone.”

The two girls set to work with a will, but were interrupted several times by three or four peddlers who came to the door, while the telephone rang twice. To Kay’s annoyance, Sissy insisted upon regarding these ordinary happenings as matters of grave concern.

“I’m so afraid the house will be robbed,” she fretted.

“Everyone in Brantwood must know by this time that both Eliza and Mrs. Barling are away.”

The Tracey girl prided herself upon never worrying unnecessarily; yet, in spite of her resolution, she discovered that Sissy’s attitude was having a decidedly bad effect upon her. Once, as she went downstairs to answer an insistent ringing of the doorbell, she was forced to admit to a feeling of uneasiness.

A dapper man of middle age politely doffed his hat when the girl opened the door, and thrust an engraved card into her

hand. Before she could protest, he had stepped over the threshold.

“Barnes is the name,” he announced blandly. “Of the firm of Barnes and Oswald—dealers in fine antiques.”

“We’re not interested in buying anything,” Kay told him coldly.

The man smiled disarmingly.

“My dear young lady, did I ask you to buy anything? I am here at Mrs. Barling’s request. She has asked me to look over some of her antiques with a view to selling them for her.”

“Mrs. Barling isn’t here now,” Kay explained, then bit her lip. Why had she made such an admission?

“So Mrs. Barling isn’t here, eh? Well, I’ll just look around by myself, then.”

Before Kay could prevent him, the man had moved past her, and had entered the living room. Coolly he appraised the paintings, handled the bric-a-brac, and fingered the jade elephant.

“Mrs. Barling did not give me permission to allow anyone to examine her things,” said the Tracey girl firmly. “I must ask you to leave.”

The caller pretended not to hear her. Only when Kay repeated what she had said did he pay the slightest attention to her words.



“Well, I’m ready to leave anyway,” he smiled impertinently.  
“I’ve seen all I care to.”

After Kay had closed the door she stood watching at the window, relieved to see that the man did not linger about the grounds. She was still annoyed at herself, however, for having disclosed the fact that Mrs. Barling was not at home.

“Is that dreadful person gone?” Sissy called from upstairs.

“Yes, thank goodness,” Kay told her, slowly climbing the steps. “I can’t make up my mind whether Mrs. Barling told him to come here or not. At any rate, I watched him so closely that I’m sure he didn’t take any of the art objects.”

“He may come back later—” Sissy began, but she was cut short.

“It will do him no good, for every window and door in the house is going to be locked.”

“I’ve found two of them upstairs that can’t be locked, Kay. They’re warped, I’m afraid.”

Kay went to investigate, and found that Sissy was right. An examination of the windows on the lower floor likewise revealed that the lock of one of them at the rear of the house was broken.

“We must have them fixed, even though I have to pay for them myself,” Kay decided. “If anything should be stolen from the house, Mrs. Barling might hold us responsible.”

In answer to a phone call from the girl, Charlie Lester, a local carpenter, soon arrived. He was an excellent workman, but was inclined to pry into other people's affairs. From Sissy he drew an account of her visit to Brantwood, and gleaned the information that the house was to be closed during the autumn months.

"He'll spread the news all over town," Kay remarked regretfully after the man had left, but said no more as the orphan girl was very upset over her indiscretion.

The girls spent half an hour draping sheets over the furniture, and then discovered that a faucet in one of the bathrooms leaked. The porcelain tub would be discolored, Kay knew, unless the water were turned off. She could not locate the main connection, so was forced to send for a plumber.

Mr. Clymer was a pleasant individual, and joked with the girls as he repaired the leaky fixture, and later showed them how to cut off the main supply of water.

"So Mrs. Barling is going away for the winter," he remarked casually. "That's what I heard uptown this morning."

Kay was convinced that the news had spread all over Brantwood, and she became more worried as time went on; so much so, in fact, that when a knock sounded on the back door a half hour later, she actually jumped. Then she laughed at herself.

"I'll answer it," Sissy offered excitedly.

She swung open the door, and came face to face with a tramp wearing clean, but ragged, clothes. Involuntarily Sissy drew back a step, although the man did not have an unpleasant look.

“I’ll not hurt you, Miss,” he said in a low voice, noticing the girl’s fear of him. “I only want something to eat and a job.”

Sissy was on the verge of closing the door, when Kay, hearing the man’s request, stepped forward.

“We may as well give him some of the food in the icebox,” she remarked in a low tone to her friend.

“There is some delicious ham we could put into sandwiches for him.”

“I don’t like his looks,” Sissy whispered nervously. “He stares at me so strangely.”

Kay smiled as she went to get the food, all the while feeling that the other girl was overly nervous and suspicious. However, as she returned to the porch with a well-filled plate of tempting sandwiches she studied the man more carefully.

Somehow, in spite of his ragged clothing, he did not look like a tramp. Kay decided that he must be a worthy person temporarily out of employment. His hat was pulled low over his eyes so that she could not see his face clearly. One thing did disturb her, however; the man kept staring at Sissy in a most brazen fashion, scarcely heeding anything else.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have given him the food, and kept him here,” Kay thought, watching him keenly. “For some reason

or other he's unusually interested in the Weller girl."

This conviction grew upon her as the man began to ask several questions. He wanted to know Sissy's name. Did she really live in this great house, or was she only a visitor there? And where was the mistress of the mansion?

After the orphan had answered some of the questions Kay gave the girl a warning look, as she felt the tramp was trying deliberately to draw out information. Hastily the girls closed the door and left the man to finish his meal alone on the porch.

"Such impertinence!" Kay exclaimed. "He didn't even thank us for the food."

"He seemed too interested in asking me questions. Why do you suppose he wanted to know all about me?"

Kay shook her head doubtfully. She wished that she knew the answer herself. The girls watched the porch closely lest the person outside prove to be a thief and attempt to break into the house. However, he soon took his leave.

"Why, he didn't eat half the food," Sissy observed, as she brought in the plate from the porch. "He couldn't have been very hungry."

"I suspect he didn't come here just for something to eat," Kay returned briefly.

The girls refrained from mentioning the tramp as they resumed their household duties. Much to their relief, there

were no further interruptions, and very soon the major part of their work was completed. Then they went downtown.

“I want to stop at the post office and get some stamps,” Kay suggested as they passed the building. “It will take only a minute.”

The orphan girl waited on the sidewalk while Kay ran inside. A man was standing at the special delivery window, his back turned toward the door. At first the girl did not recognize him. Then, with a start, she realized that it was the same person who had called at the Barling residence and had asked for food. The tramp, intent upon his business at the window, did not see Kay.

“I want a special delivery stamp,” he ordered gruffly.

The man drew a fat wallet from his breast-pocket and stripped off a bill from a thick pack. As he offered it, the clerk asked:

“Is this the smallest amount you have?”

“The very smallest,” the man returned.

Kay did not wait. Bewildered by what she had just witnessed, she quietly slipped out by a side entrance.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TELEGRAM

On their way back to the Barling homestead the girls discussed the incident. It provoked them a little to think they had been so easily bluffed. Kay was somewhat troubled as well, though she refrained from confiding this fact to Sissy. She could not imagine why the man had asked for food, unless he had used that method as a ruse to secure information of some kind. And what was it that he wished to learn?

When Kay and Sissy reached the house the girls found Wilma Worth sitting upon the veranda.

“I thought you’d never come,” she greeted them. “I’ve been waiting here for half an hour.”

“How did you know I was supposed to be at Mrs. Barling’s?” Kay inquired curiously.

“Oh, it’s all over town about how you helped Eliza and are closing up the house for her. I came over to help you.”

“Good! We need assistance. While you’re here you might solve a few of the mysteries that have been puzzling us.”

“Mysteries?” Wilma asked with interest. “If there’s anything along that line that you can’t solve, then it

must be a mighty unusual one! What sort of a case are you interested in this time?"

"It seems to be a regular conglomeration of things," Kay laughed. "Ghosts, and tramps, and I don't know what all."

As the girls conducted Wilma into the house, they related the many strange happenings of the past hours. The newcomer was far more interested in the fascinating interior of the living room than she was in the story Kay told her. She moved about from object to object, admiring and exclaiming over each of them.

"Such beautiful, rich curtains!" she cried. "Note how they sway in the breeze."

"There's no draft in the house," Kay pointed out. "Those swaying curtains are just another of the strange things in this place. I believe you're not a bit interested in the mysterious side of this mansion."

"Oh, but I am," Wilma affirmed. "It's all so romantic! It makes me think of poetry.

"How strange the tale would be  
Could these grey walls but talk,  
Of curtains swaying crazily—  
Of ghosts that nightly walk."

"Why, that fits this old place perfectly!" Kay cried. "Who wrote it?"

"Oh, I just made it up myself," Wilma said modestly.

She was on the verge of plunging into a more ambitious creation when the door bell at the rear entrance rang.

“Again!” Kay groaned.

“Oh, permit me to answer it this time,” Wilma pleaded grandly.

She was gone a long time, and Kay was about to start for the kitchen to find out what was wrong, when Wilma reappeared.

“Now that’s funny,” she remarked. “I believe I have just met your mysterious tramp.”

“What!” Kay demanded.

She ran to the window in time to catch a glimpse of a retreating figure. It was that same strange man!

“What did he want?” she demanded quickly.

“He seemed to want to talk to someone, as far as I could make out. He said he thought he might have dropped something on the porch when he was here before.”

“Just an excuse for coming back!” Kay exclaimed indignantly.

“I think he enjoyed speaking with me,” Wilma smiled dreamily. “Poor wanderer. I feel so sorry for him. It makes me think of a poem——”



“You’re wasting your sentiment this time,” Kay interrupted. She was too troubled to care to listen to any poetry. “That so-called tramp has a wallet full of money. What did he talk about, Wilma?”

“Oh, just of things in general. The weather——”

“And Sissy, I’ll venture,” Kay cut in impatiently. “Did he ask any questions about her?”

“Well, yes, I believe he did. He wanted to know who her parents were and where she’d been living. He said he thought she was such a pretty girl.”

Sissy dimpled at this compliment, but Kay’s face did not change expression. Knowing Wilma’s weakness for telling things to people, she was satisfied that this time the strange man had gleaned all the information he was seeking.

“Well, I guess it’s too late to do anything about it now,” she said with a resigned sigh. “I can’t figure out why that person wants to know all about you, Sissy. You have never seen him before, have you?”

The orphan shook her head.

“I’m positive I’ve never seen him before today.”

“It’s beyond my comprehension. You must be very careful, Sissy. Don’t leave the house by yourself.”

A great deal of work remained to be done, and Wilma obligingly offered to assist with it. The afternoon dragged

slowly on, until Kay, closing the windows of one of the bedrooms, caught a glimpse of a man apparently hiding near the lilac bushes; at least, he was standing in their shadow, intently watching the house.

“It’s the tramp!” Kay told Wilma and Sissy excitedly. “I’ve had enough of his snooping. I’m going to call Cousin Bill at once.”

She ran to the telephone and soon had the young attorney on the wire. At first he was inclined to laugh at her fears, but when he had heard all the details, he said that he would be over immediately.

Greatly to Kay’s chagrin, the tramp had disappeared before Cousin Bill Tracey drove up in his sedan. However, the other girls supported her story so staunchly that the lawyer agreed that they had excellent cause for alarm. He went out into the yard to look at the large shoe imprints in the soft earth near the lilac bush.

“From your description of the man, I think I should be able to locate him,” Cousin Bill assured Kay. “I’ll tell the police to keep an eye on him. Don’t give it another thought.”

The girls were now more cheerful, for Cousin Bill had a way of smoothing out all difficulties. After he had left they attended to several last-minute details, such as packing away woolen clothing in mothproof containers and cleaning out the refrigerator.

“It’s a shame to throw away all this delicious food,” Sissy declared. “There’s enough here for a party.”

“A party!” Kay exclaimed, struck by a sudden thought. “Why not have one? We could invite Betty and some of the boys over to dinner. Mother would come over, I’m sure.”

“Splendid!” Wilma cried. “It would be an excellent way to enjoy these eats.”

“Mrs. Barling might object,” Sissy suggested timidly.

“Why should she?” Kay demanded. “We’ve done enough for her today. If we were to turn in a bill for our work I’m sure it would amount to the price of several meals.”

“Which boys shall we invite?” Wilma asked.

“Oh, Jack Howard, perhaps, and Fred Bryan. They’re good sports and won’t mind a meal of leftovers.”

“And Ronald Earle,” Wilma added with a teasing laugh. “You know you want him to come, Kay Tracey.”

“Well, yes, Ronald is fun,” Kay acknowledged, a tell-tale flush spreading over her cheeks. “Do you mind asking them for me, Wilma? Sissy and I will start preparing the dinner.”

“I’ll round up everyone,” Wilma promised, laughing.

Kay had suggested inviting guests to dinner because of Sissy. Although the orphan had tried to conceal her worries, Kay had come upon her several times and found her quietly

weeping. A little party might cheer the girl's drooping spirits. Sissy brightened as plans for the meal went forward, though she could not completely throw off her feeling of despondency.

Mrs. Tracey could not come to the party, but Cousin Bill dropped around and had as much fun as the young people. He was a great favorite with them, for he was always jolly and told good stories. Everyone helped with the cooking, and even Sissy laughed when Ronald made a mistake and sugared the steak instead of salting it. The biscuits and cocoa were left entirely to Kay to prepare, for none of the others were willing to assume the responsibility.

"Kay is the star cook!" Ronald said praisingly. "Boy, I could eat all of these biscuits myself."

The group was just finishing dinner when Mrs. Tracey appeared. She offered to wash the dishes, but the young people would not consent to this. Instead, everyone fell to work with a will, and in a short time the kitchen was in order again.

"You must ask Sissy to stay with us until she can find work," Mrs. Tracey whispered to her daughter when they were alone for a minute. "Poor child! She is so discouraged."

"I thought this little party might cheer her up, but I'm afraid it hasn't." Then she smiled and hugged her mother. "I have already asked her to stay with us! I knew you'd want me to."

At Kay's request Mrs. Tracey went over the entire house to see that nothing had been overlooked.

"Everything is just fine," she said. "I feel sure Mrs. Barling will be pleased with what you have done."

Kay tested all the windows on the first floor to make sure they were locked, and then announced that everyone might leave. Cousin Bill and Mrs. Tracey went on ahead. Sissy hung back as the rest of the party began to file out. She cast a pathetic glance about the luxurious living room. Kay squeezed the girl's hand sympathetically.

"I know how you feel, Sissy," she whispered, "but I'm confident you'll find another home."

Arm in arm the two girls went out, and locked the door. Just as the young people were descending the porch steps, a messenger boy came hurrying up the walk.

"A telegram!" Kay gasped. "Oh, I hope it's from Mrs. Barling saying she's coming back."

"And after all that work we did getting the house closed up!" Wilma exclaimed.

The lad looked from one girl to another, and stated that he had a message for Sissy Weller.

"For me!" the orphan said in surprise. "Mrs. Barling must have remembered that I was to come here after all."

With hands that trembled she tore open the envelope, and read its contents by the beam of Ronald's flashlight.

"Is she coming back?" Kay questioned eagerly.

There was a long silence. Sissy seemed to be going over the message a second time.

"This must be some sort of a hoax," she murmured at last. "It isn't from Mrs. Barling at all."

"But who else would send you a wire at this address?" Kay inquired in bewilderment. "No one knows you're here!"

"It's from a lawyer named Samuel Bramley. Oh, it must be a joke!"

"Tell us what it says," Kay urged.

In a voice that was strangely quiet and tense, Sissy read:

"Beg to inform you that you have fallen heir to vast fortune. Arrange to establish identity."

## CHAPTER V

### A LOST KEY

“Why, how wonderful!” Betty Worth cried in delight.  
“You’re an heiress, Sissy!”

The orphan did not seem to realize what it was all about. She appeared dazed, and repeated over and over that it must be a joke someone was playing on her.

“I’m certain it’s no hoax,” Kay declared, studying the telegram. “I’m convinced I’ve heard Cousin Bill speak of an attorney by the name of Samuel Bramley. I notice his address is given as Ware City.”

“What was that sentence about establishing identity?”  
Ronald questioned.

Kay read it aloud, and added, “That shouldn’t be difficult to accomplish.”

Sissy looked troubled.

“But I don’t know much about my real parents. Oh, I can’t believe yet that I’ve perhaps inherited a fortune!”

“Well, it seems that you have,” Kay laughed in delight.  
“We’re all so happy about it, too. I just felt that some good luck was due to come your way.”

“How does it feel to be an heiress?” Ronald asked teasingly.

“If I had a little of the money in my purse right now, it would be far easier to believe,” Sissy smiled wistfully.

“Who could have left me anything?”

“You’ll find out,” Kay said. “It *is* sort of strange when you stop to think about it, though. In the first place, how did anyone know you were here in Brantwood? And how did this lawyer obtain your address?”

“There you go, delving into another mystery,” Wilma laughed. “If anyone should leave me a fortune I shouldn’t worry about the whys and wherefores—I’d just go out and spend the money and ask no questions.”

“I’ve never met a man by the name of Bramley in my life,” Sissy declared, “and I’ve never been in Ware City.”

An explanation for the surprising telegram had occurred to Kay, but the idea seemed so very naive that she hesitated to express it aloud. At any rate, the matter could soon be cleared up, for Sissy must lose no time in calling upon Samuel Bramley.

A miraculous change had suddenly come over the young people. A few minutes before they had been quiet and subdued. Now everyone was laughing and talking, and congratulating Sissy upon her good luck.

“An event like this requires a celebration!” Kay announced. “Everyone come to my house for the evening. We’ll sing and dance.”



The invitation was accepted at once. A few minutes later the merry group poured into the Tracey living room, and astonished Mrs. Tracey and Cousin Bill with their startling news.

“Sissy needs a good lawyer,” Kay said, her eyes twinkling. “One who will represent her interests faithfully. How about you, Cousin Bill?”

“At your service,” he responded promptly, bowing solemnly. “If you wish me to, I’ll write Bramley tomorrow and ask for all the details of the matter.”

“That’s splendid!” Kay cried. “And as a reward for your kindness I’ll give you the first dance. Come on, everyone!”

The rugs were rolled back, and Mrs. Tracey obligingly seated herself at the piano. She was a versatile musician, and played the latest song hits as well as classical music. To Ronald’s chagrin, Cousin Bill swept Kay away in the first dance.

“I do hope there’s no mistake about Sissy’s fortune,” Kay commented, as the two skillfully whirled about to avoid colliding with another couple. “That’s why I wanted you to handle the case. If there’s anything wrong, I know you’ll ferret it out for me.”

“Unless you beat me to it,” the lawyer chuckled. “If Sissy can establish her identity I’m sure everything will be all right. Samuel Bramley is a very responsible lawyer.”

“I don’t know anything about Sissy’s early life, except that Mr. and Mrs. Weller adopted her from the Heather Home for

Children.”

“That institution was forced to close its doors several years ago. I hope Sissy has some papers that will show very definitely who her parents were.”

“I’ll ask her about everything tomorrow,” Kay promised her cousin. “I don’t want to ruin her fun tonight by forcing her to think of business matters.”

In truth, Kay was a trifle uneasy. Perhaps Sissy would not be able to establish a right to the money. Unless she could obtain proof of her parentage, an awkward situation would be almost certain to develop.

“Here comes Ronald to claim you,” Cousin Bill teasingly interrupted the girl’s thoughts. “If I don’t give you up, that young fellow will challenge me to a duel!”

From then on Kay passed blithely from one partner to another, until she finally was forced to declare that she was too weary to dance another step. Mrs. Tracey appeared at this time and served a fruit juice punch. At a late hour the party broke up, all loud in their praise of Kay as a hostess.

Sissy had gratefully accepted the invitation to remain with the Traceys until her affairs should be straightened out. “I’ll never be able to repay you for your kindness to me,” she declared the next morning at the breakfast table. “If I should receive a fortune, it will be due to your earnest efforts.”

“Why, I’ve not had a thing to do with it,” Kay laughed. “Cousin Bill, please don’t forget to write that letter this

morning to the lawyer in Ware City.”

“I’ll get it off the first thing,” her relative promised. “You may supervise the job if you like.”

“No, I’d not be able to understand the meaning of those long legal terms you use. Besides, I have something else to do. I must return Mrs. Barling’s house keys to Eliza, who is staying with her son at Lynhurst.”

“Driving over?” he laughed. Then, to tease her further, he added, “Yes, you may take my car.”

“It’s a pleasant day, and I thought Sissy might enjoy the ride.”

“I should indeed,” the orphan girl replied politely. “I’ll feel relieved when Eliza has the keys in her possession again.”

“I don’t care for the responsibility of looking after them,” said Kay. “By the way, Cousin Bill, did you learn anything more about that tramp?”

“Not a thing. I told the police to watch for him. He’s probably left town by this time.”

“I wonder,” Kay murmured under her breath, but Bill Tracey did not hear her.

Shortly after the young lawyer had gone to his office, the girls set out for Lynhurst. A pleasant drive through the countryside soon brought them to the place where Eliza was staying.

“The house looks deserted,” Sissy commented, as Kay parked the car at the curb.

The blinds of the little cottage were drawn. When Kay knocked at the door there was no answer. A woman sweeping the front porch of a neighboring house watched the two girls curiously.

“There’s nobody at home,” she called to them. “The folks who did live there moved away two weeks ago.”

“Oh, dear,” Kay murmured in perplexity. “Eliza must have given us the wrong address. Poor soul, she was in such distress she couldn’t think straight.”

The woman was unable to offer any information which might help them in their search for the housekeeper. Discouraged, they turned away.

“I suppose I must keep the keys until Mrs. Barling returns,” Kay remarked uneasily. “I think I’ll turn them over to Mother, for she’s better at looking after things than I am.”

On the trip back to Brantwood the girls discussed Sissy’s plans for the future. Kay questioned her concerning her parents.

“I know absolutely nothing about them,” Sissy confessed. “I was placed with the Wellers when I was a child, and they told me nothing about my father or mother. I doubt if they knew anything about them.”

“Some institutions make a point of never revealing the parentage of an adopted child,” Kay said thoughtfully.

“Especially when the parents aren’t very respectable,” Sissy added moodily. “They feel that it often handicaps the child.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” Kay said hastily. “It’s a pity you have no papers or clothing to prove your identity.”

“I’m afraid I’ll never be able to establish a claim to the fortune. Oh, Kay, I don’t care so much about the money, though I certainly need it. What I want to do is to learn about my people. I’d be so happy if I were sure they were important and respectable!”

“I feel certain they were, Sissy. You’re such a well-reared, refined person that your parents must have been the same as you are.”

“It’s good of you to say so. Oh, I’d give anything to prove it! I’m so sick of being a person without a family.”

“You won’t be for long,” Kay assured her. “Wait until Cousin Bill communicates with Mr. Bramley. After you get your inheritance you’ll have plenty of friends!”

“Yes,” Sissy admitted ruefully. “I want to have friends, but I don’t care to have to buy them. If I ever do get the money I’ll spend it wisely and won’t allow myself to be taken in by people who are interested only in my wealth.”

Kay parked the car in the driveway of the Tracey property. Then the girls went into the house where they found Mrs.

Tracey busy with some sewing.

“How did you find Eliza?” she inquired.

“We didn’t find her at all,” Kay returned, and went on with an account of their trip. Remembering the keys in her possession, she added, “I wish you would keep them safe for me, Mother, especially the one to the front entrance.”

“Why, certainly. Give it to me now and I’ll put it away for you.”

Kay opened her purse. It was as usual filled with a vast array of articles. She looked through it several times, but to no avail, so in exasperation she finally emptied its contents onto the table. The keys were gone!

“That’s funny,” she said in alarm. “I’m certain I dropped them into my pocketbook when we left Lynhurst. Don’t you recall it, Sissy?”

“I know you had them when we stepped into the car. Perhaps you lost them there.”

A careful search of the automobile floor as well as the spaces between the cushions did not reveal the missing keys.

“What shall I do if I can’t find them?” Kay thought to herself.

Mrs. Tracey came out at that moment to aid in the search.

“At least the Barling house is locked up,” she commented. “Don’t get excited, Kay. We’ll locate them.”

“If anything should be stolen from the house I’d be held responsible,” Kay said. “I’m going right back the way we came and see if I can find those keys.”

The search proved fruitless. Although the girls returned to Lynhurst by the same route and retraced every inch of their way, the missing articles could not be located. At length Kay was forced to give up the hunt.

For days she went about with a crestfallen air, declaring that she had betrayed Eliza’s trust. She placed an advertisement in the local paper, but even the offer of a reward did not bring her any results.

“You’re taking the matter entirely too seriously,” her mother chided. “After all, it isn’t a question of life or death. The keys will surely turn up some day.”

Sissy, too, shared Kay’s mood. Although Cousin Bill had dispatched his letter to Samuel Bramley, no word had been received from the lawyer. The orphan girl was on the point of giving up hearing from him, when late one afternoon the jovial Cousin Bill phoned the girls to come to his office at once. When they arrived, he said:

“I have good news, and know you wouldn’t have wanted to wait until I should come home this evening to hear what it is,” he chuckled, thrusting a letter into Sissy’s eager hands. “It’s from Mr. Bramley. He says he has business in this

vicinity and will drop in at Brantwood within a few days to hear your story.”

“I won’t know what to say to him,” the Weller girl stammered.

“Cousin Bill will arrange everything,” Kay laughed. “He’s made a life study of answering questions without giving incriminating information!”

The girls chatted with Cousin Bill a few minutes longer, then took their leave. As they emerged from the office building they saw Ethel Eaton standing outside. Kay spoke pleasantly to her, and would have passed hurriedly on, had not the other girl joined them, declaring that she was returning home on the same bus they were taking.

“Why this sudden burst of friendship?” Kay thought in amusement. “I’ll bet Ethel has something up her sleeve!”

The Eaton girl seated herself beside Kay in the bus, coldly ignoring Sissy, who tried to pretend that she did not notice the snub. At first the conversation was along general lines, but gradually the older girl succeeded in bringing up the subject which she really wished to discuss, namely the orphan girl.

“I can’t understand what you see in her,” Ethel whispered.

Kay frowned discouragingly, but the annoying girl refused to take the hint.



“Wilma told me that you had invited her to stay at your house, too.”

“Yes,” Kay returned briefly.

“She’s a little nobody,” Ethel said scornfully, in a tone louder than she had intended. “You will lose your friends if you keep her.”

“Not my *friends*,” Kay said significantly, her face flushing angrily.

Ethel realized that she had said more than she should. Without a word of apology or even a glance in Sissy’s direction she arose, dropped her coin in the farebox, and left the bus.

“Oh, Kay, I couldn’t help hearing what she said,” Sissy cried. “And it’s true! I *am* a nobody!”

“It *isn’t* true!” Kay denied loyally. “Don’t pay any attention to what Ethel says. She just loves to be horrid.”

At the next stop, which was their own, Kay was glad to get out, for Sissy was on the verge of bursting into tears. She was naturally high-strung, and the excitement of the past few days had been too great for her. Ethel Eaton’s unkind words had been the final touch. Before the two girls reached the Tracey home Sissy was crying, and nothing Kay could say would comfort her.

Dinner was waiting for them when they arrived. To Mrs. Tracey's alarm, their visitor could not eat a thing. Excusing herself, the girl went up to her own room, from which came the sound of her pitiful sobbing.

"The child is ill," Mrs. Tracey said anxiously. "I must call Doctor Rolph."

Sissy objected strenuously when told this, but Mrs. Tracey firmly overruled her. In the end the girl was put to bed, and the physician was called in. After he had finished his examination and left his orders, Kay and her mother followed him downstairs to the living room.

"There's really nothing I can do for the girl," he told them frankly, "although good nourishing food and plenty of rest should help her. Obviously she has had too much excitement and seems morose and down-hearted. I understand she is an orphan."

"Yes, her life has been a very hard one," Kay explained. "She was adopted from the Heather Home for Children by Mr. and Mrs. Weller, but since their death has been forced to earn her own living. Now, when it appears that she may be the heiress to a large fortune, she fears she will be unable to establish her identity."

The doctor nodded.

"I don't wonder that she's in a run-down, nervous condition. You mentioned the Heather Home. As it happens, I know of a man who was formerly connected with that institution. He

might be able to provide my little patient with information which would be of help to her.”

“Oh, what is his name?” Kay demanded eagerly. “Where can we reach him?”

“His name is Cornwall—Martin Cornwall, if I remember correctly. At one time he practically financed the Heather Home, which was his absorbing interest in life. He is an elderly man now, and somewhat eccentric. The last time I heard from him his wife had died, and he was staying at a place called Watch Hill.”

Kay asked a number of questions concerning the man, but Doctor Rolph had not seen Mr. Cornwall in many years and could tell nothing further about him.

“If Sissy cares to, we’ll go there and talk with him,” Kay declared enthusiastically. “Will she be able to make the trip tomorrow?”

The doctor considered for a moment. “Yes. Ordinarily I’d advise against it, but this case seems to be a little different. If Sissy wants to establish her identity, it would be well to do so at once, for that would do more toward restoring her good health than anything else.”

He took his satchel from the table, bowed politely to Mrs. Tracey, and left the house. Kay hurried upstairs to tell Sissy what she had just learned. The girl listened intently to the story, but her face did not brighten when she was told of the proposed trip to Watch Hill.

“I want to find out about my parents, yet I’m almost afraid to do so,” she said. “What if it should develop that I’m a nobody!”

“Oh, try to forget what Ethel said,” Kay pleaded. “Isn’t it better to be certain of a thing than to go through life worrying about it?”

“You’re right, Kay. I’ll be ready to go to Watch Hill whenever you say so.”

“Good! If you’re feeling well enough we’ll do it tomorrow. I’m sure you have no cause for worrying. Something tells me that the adventure will turn out to your decided advantage.”

## CHAPTER VI

### A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

Since the following day fell upon a school holiday the girls took advantage of it to make their trip to Watch Hill. They packed a delicious lunch, and boarded the early morning bus which ran between Brantwood and the town nearest to the Cornwall mansion, about fifteen miles distant.

“Hillcrest Road!” the driver called, bringing the machine to a stop.

“Can you tell me where a Mr. Cornwall lives?” Kay inquired, preparing to alight.

“At Watch Hill, which is over a mile from here, Miss. Just walk along this road till you come to a lane, then follow it and you’ll see a big house.”

The girls were a bit dismayed at the looks of their route. Wide enough for only one vehicle, it was unimproved; full of ruts and stones. To make matters worse, a recent rain had left innumerable puddles.

“If I’d known the house was so far from the bus stop, or the road was like this, I’d have asked Cousin Bill for his car,” Kay remarked as the two girls trudged along, jumping mud-holes and avoiding ankle-twisting depressions.

Presently they heard the sound of an automobile. Glancing back, they saw coming toward them a car which jumped about crazily in the roadway. The driver, a young man, waved his hand frantically at them.

“Wait!” he shouted.

“Is he trying to threaten us, or what?” Sissy asked nervously. “Perhaps we have no right to trespass.”

Kay started to laugh, for she recognized the occupant of the auto as that of Ronald Earle. The girls were only too glad to wait for him, for they welcomed gladly any kind of a conveyance, even as dilapidated a car as this one.

“Surprise!” the youth shouted as the automobile came to a quivering halt.

“Your old machine has never looked so good to me as it does now,” Kay declared with a laugh.

“So it’s my *car* you’re so glad to see!” Ronald retorted good-naturedly. “I am flattered. Just for that I think I’ll not give you the part of your lunch you forgot.”

He produced a small box of sandwiches from the rear seat. In her haste to catch the bus Kay had left them on the kitchen table of her home. Ronald, calling at the house a few minutes after her departure, had been apprized of the fact by Mrs. Tracey. He had been quick to offer to follow the girls with the parcel, for he was always eager to find an excuse for including himself in any day’s adventure.

Ronald made room for the girls beside him in the front seat, and the car went careening down the road.

Presently they turned into the lane. At length the three young people reached the end of it and halted to survey an old mansion which was just visible through the trees. It stood on a small hill, and from a distance looked almost like a feudal castle.

“This must be Watch Hill,” Kay declared with interest.

“Since this seems to be as far as we can drive in the car, I guess we’ll have to walk up that path.”

Ronald said he would remain in the automobile while the girls talked with Mr. Cornwall. He felt that he could contribute nothing to the interview, so settled himself comfortably, expecting to have a long wait. However, shortly after they had vanished into the woods they reappeared, their disappointed faces disclosing that the call had not been a successful one.

“Wasn’t he at home?” Ronald asked in surprise.

“We couldn’t find anyone,” Kay told him. “We rang every doorbell, too.”

“It’s such a strange-looking place,” Sissy added in awe. “So desolate. I’m afraid now that I’ll never find out what I want to know. At every turn I seem to meet defeat.”

“We can come some other day,” Kay told her. “At any rate, we’ll not allow this little disappointment to ruin our outing. Let’s find a nice spot for our picnic.”

Ronald suggested a site near a brook he had noticed. It was found to be ideal. The lad then brought over the hamper and spread the food onto a large flat rock overlooking the stream.

Sissy was inclined to be downcast, but the others were so light-hearted and gay that she soon began to enjoy herself, and forgot her worries for the time being.

“Well, I suppose we should think about starting for home,” the Tracey girl remarked reluctantly after they had finished their delicious repast. “I hate to leave Watch Hill without having accomplished what we came after, but——”

She broke off suddenly, for her keen eyes had noted a slight movement in the thick bushes near the place where they were sitting. A dapper looking man with piercing black eyes stepped into the open. A slight sneer played over his heavily-lined face as he regarded the astonished young people.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hope nobody minds our trespassing,” said Kay.

“What are you doing at Watch Hill?” the stranger asked. This question appeared to be directed at the girls, and the man’s gruff manner began to annoy Kay.

“So you’ve been watching us,” she said indignantly. “Is this your property?”

“No, it isn’t, but——”



“Then what right have you to question us? Are you a detective?”

This last was pure guesswork, for the man did not have the appearance of a sleuth. Kay was a little taken aback when the answer came in the affirmative.

“Yes, I’m a detective—Otto Tagg is my name. I have been employed by Perry Cornwall to watch this place.”

“Perry Cornwall,” Kay repeated musingly. “Is he Martin Cornwall’s son?”

“His nephew,” the detective informed her shortly.

“And he lives at the mansion?” Kay inquired.

“It’s none of your business where he lives!” Otto Tagg said impatiently. It angered him because the young people were skillfully getting information from him, without their offering him any in return. “The important thing is that Martin Cornwall has disappeared! If you don’t want to find yourselves in any serious trouble you’ll explain just why you are snooping about here!”

The young people were startled momentarily at this bit of news.

“We’re not snooping, as you call it,” Kay returned indignantly. “We came here to see Mr. Cornwall on business. We had no idea that anything had happened to him.”

“That’s your story, anyway,” the detective retorted rudely. “Why did you come here to see the old man?”

Before Kay could answer, the bushes parted and a young man of perhaps twenty, well-dressed and of quiet demeanor, stepped out to face the detective.

“Just a minute, Tagg. What’s the meaning of all this?” he asked.

“They’re suspicious persons,” the detective explained. “I caught them snooping around here.”

“Nonsense! It’s perfectly obvious these young folks are merely enjoying a picnic. Tagg, you’re entirely too aggressive!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the detective said in a whining voice. “I was only doing my best to track down the kidnapers.”

“Thus far you have bungled everything.” With a nod of his head the young man dismissed the crestfallen detective. He turned to the girls and Ronald, politely apologizing for Tagg’s conduct.

“It really doesn’t matter,” Kay assured him. “Are you by any chance Mr. Cornwall’s nephew?”

“Yes, I am Perry Cornwall.”

“We came here to see your uncle on business,” Kay explained. “Is it true that he has mysteriously disappeared?”

“He left home some time ago, and no word has been received from him since,” Perry said, his eyes growing troubled. “I left my studies at Franklin College to take charge of the search. The neighbors fear my uncle has been kidnaped.”

“Did he have many enemies?” Sissy asked timidly.

Perry, a bit annoyed, was immediately disarmed as he turned to regard the girl, for she was very pretty, and her manner sweet.

“He was always well liked in his community, as far as I know. In many ways my uncle was a peculiar man. I’ve hesitated to notify the police that he is gone, thinking that he might have left on a journey without letting anyone know.”

“You did employ Otto Tagg?” Kay inquired.

“Yes, and I’ve regretted it. Thus far he has found no clue as to the strange disappearance, and he antagonizes everyone he meets.”

Perry accompanied the young people as they carried the empty lunch hamper to the automobile. Meanwhile he told them more about himself, mentioning that at the present time he was residing near Carmont. Kay in turn explained why she and Sissy were so eager to interview Mr. Cornwall.

“I know my uncle kept many of the records pertaining to the Heather Home,” Perry returned, turning to glance at the orphan with added interest. “It’s quite possible they are somewhere in the house.”

“Oh, if only we might search for them,” Sissy murmured hopefully.

Perry hesitated.

“I have the keys to the mansion. Perhaps I can arrange matters so that you may look around.”

He would have said more, but at that moment was interrupted by a farmer who was driving a cow down to the stream. The man politely doffed his hat to Perry.

“Any news of your uncle?”

“No. We’ve been unable to find a single worthwhile clue.”

“It’s my idea that he was kidnaped by someone who knew he carried large sums of money on his person,” the farmer volunteered.

“My uncle was careless about cash,” Perry acknowledged sadly.

“Just a week before he disappeared he lost a wallet containing six hundred dollars,” continued the farmer.

“How do you know that?” Perry inquired in surprise.

“Because I found it. Mr. Cornwall gave me twenty-five dollars for returning it to him.”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Perry said thoughtfully. “If I had known my uncle made a habit of carrying such large sums on

his person, I'd have warned him against it.”

“Well, I just thought I'd tell you about it,” the man responded, moving on. “I hope old Mr. Cornwall turns up safe and sound. Folks around here think a heap of your uncle.”

“There may be something to what he says,” Perry remarked thoughtfully. “Uncle Martin did keep a great amount of cash in the house. He had it hidden in such queer places—in secret drawers, panels, and I don't know where else. I came out here today intending to see if I couldn't gather up his securities and loose cash, and deposit them in a bank for safekeeping.”

“I should think it would be risky to leave valuables in the house,” Kay commented, “particularly since the country people seem to be aware that Mr. Cornwall kept money on the premises.”

“I'll do something about it today. While I'm looking for the money I'll be glad to hunt for any papers which might pertain to Miss Weller's adoption.”

“Oh, I'll be so grateful!” Sissy exclaimed, her face lighting up in a smile.

“Would you care to see the mansion?” Perry asked cordially.

“Indeed we should,” Kay said quickly.

The young man led the way up the path. The ancient homestead stood in a small clearing, and from its veranda

one could look down upon the village in the valley. Perry unlocked the front entrance and all four went through the doorway. He conducted them to a spacious, paneled living room.

“I’ll just glance through Uncle Martin’s desk while you are here and see if I can find any records concerning the Heather Home,” he said. “You might look around this old place, which I think you will enjoy.”

Excusing himself, he went to the library in the room adjoining. Ronald and the girls wandered about the drawing room, admiring the fine old woodwork, and the rich texture of the heavy velvet hangings which draped the windows and arched doorways.

“I wonder if old Mr. Cornwall ever hid any of his money behind these panels?” Kay said jokingly to Ronald.

“If he did, I’ll wager you’ll find it before we leave!” the lad teased. “Now, Miss Sherlock Holmes, which panel would you suggest?”

“Oh, the thirteenth from the right-hand corner of the north wall,” Kay returned glibly. “No, upon second thought, I’ll try the one by the bookcase. It doesn’t look quite like the others.”

Ronald and Sissy followed her intent gaze.

“Why, it doesn’t, for a fact!” the young man exclaimed. “Kay, when it comes to discovering things you’re the world’s

champion.”

Unable to resist the temptation, Kay moved over to the panel and ran an exploratory hand over its smooth surface. It gave forth a hollow sound when she tapped it.

“There’s a cavity here, all right,” she declared tensely. “I wonder how the panel opens?”

Ronald and Sissy crowded eagerly beside her, offering suggestions. Kay pushed and pressed, but the board stubbornly refused to budge. So intent was she upon her work that it never occurred to her to glance toward the heavy draperies concealing the exit into the hallway. Had she looked in that direction she would have been startled to have beheld a pair of piercing eyes.

“It’s coming!” Kay cried, as she gave the panel a deft thrust with her hand. “Won’t Perry Cornwall be surprised when we show him this hiding-place!”

Suddenly Sissy uttered a little choked cry, while Ronald seemed to freeze in his tracks. Realizing that something was wrong, Kay turned her head, to behold Otto Tagg towering behind her.

“I’ve caught you this time, young lady!” he sneered. “Get away from that panel!”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SECRET PANEL

Taken by surprise, Kay obeyed the command involuntarily. Then, recovering herself, she faced the detective courageously.

“So you came here on business?” Otto Tagg demanded sarcastically. “A very profitable business, it would seem!”

“How dare you insinuate that I would steal!” Kay cried furiously.

“Ah, so you admit that you were looking for money.”

“I admit nothing, Mr. Tagg. Because I happened to locate this panel—” She broke off as the detective rudely pushed her aside and thrust his hand into the opening. “What are you doing?” she demanded sharply.

“Since you’ve so obligingly opened the compartment, I’ll have a look inside.”

“You have no right to do that! No one but Perry Cornwall \_\_\_\_\_”

Her voice trailed off, for the young man in question was standing in the doorway. Unobserved, he had left the library and entered the room in time to hear Kay’s last words.



“What is going on here?” he asked, regarding the detective with distrust.

Otto Tagg sprang back from the panel, though he managed to retain a certain degree of arrogant assurance as he faced his employer.

“I caught this girl opening a secret panel, Mr. Cornwall,” he said.

“It appears to me you are the one who is guilty,” Perry returned coldly.

“I was only trying to protect your interests,” Tagg retorted. “I caught this girl red-handed. I suspected from the start that she came here after money.”

Perry’s eyes narrowed as he faced the man.

“I know very well why Miss Tracey and her friends came here today, and it was for a very good reason, too. Tagg, you’ve caused no end of trouble since you’ve been on this case.”

“I’ve had no cooperation,” the detective snapped. “I was engaged to look after things here and I mean to do so. I feel it my duty to examine this cache, and I shall—in private!”

“I’ve had enough of your insolence, Tagg,” Perry said, striving to control his temper. “Consider yourself dismissed from the case!”

The detective's face fell, and he burst forth into a torrent of protests, to which Perry refused to listen. Tagg cast a baleful glance at Kay as he angrily marched toward the door.

"Just wait," he muttered. "Someone shall pay for this!"

"I'm glad he's gone," Perry said in relief as the door slammed behind the man. "It isn't the first time I've caught him snooping. Now I shall hire a city detective who may make some progress on the case."

"I really did open the panel," Kay explained, "but I had no intention of looking inside."

"I do not doubt you for a moment, Miss Tracey. In fact, I am grateful that you located the secret hiding-place for me. Shall we look inside?"

He moved over to the spot and thrust his hand into the opening.

"It's empty," he announced in disappointment. "Well, I suppose if my uncle ever kept any money here he later moved it to a safer place."

After replacing the panel the young people joined Perry in a brief search of the house, but no other hiding-places could be located; nor did they find the missing records from the Heather Home for Children.

"I guess my case is hopeless," Sissy said listlessly. "It isn't likely that Mr. Cornwall would keep those records after so many years."

“They may be here somewhere,” Perry tried to cheer her, “if we only knew where to look for them.”

“Perhaps they are still at the Heather Home,” Kay commented thoughtfully. “They may have been left there after the institution closed. Tell me, Perry, do you know how to get to that place?”

The young man’s face lighted, for he was eager to help Sissy.

“Why, yes, I’ve frequently heard Uncle Martin speak of the place. It’s near a town called Brookside.”

“Isn’t that a long way from here?”

“By the main traveled road, yes, but I know of another highway that cuts off at least fifteen miles.”

“Then let’s go there tomorrow!” Kay cried, turning to Sissy. “We may stumble upon a valuable clue.”

Perry sketched them a map of the route, and told them about the isolated life his uncle had lived.

“I can’t imagine what has become of him,” he said, worried. “If he had merely gone away on a journey I’m certain he would have left word with someone.”

“Have you called the hospitals?” Kay asked.

“Yes, all of them. My uncle had an appointment to meet me here at the house two days ago, yet he never kept it.”

“It does look as if something might have happened to him,” Kay agreed. “If I were you I’d lose no time in securing the services of a good city detective.”

“I’ll telephone for one right away.”

Perry went to the instrument and took down the receiver, but there came no response. He was still trying to attract the operator’s attention when Kay noticed a severed wire lying on the floor.

“Someone has cut the line!” she cried, pointing to the cord.

“I should have noticed that before!” Perry exclaimed, bending down. “Oh, there’s no question about it now. Uncle Martin has been kidnaped! I’ll get out the car and notify the police at once.”

He hastily locked up the mansion, and the young people hurried with him to the garage. As Perry flung open the double doors everyone gasped in amazement. The place was empty!

“They’ve stolen the car, too!” Perry exclaimed indignantly. “Now I’m stranded here with no way to get word to the police.”

“We’ll be glad to give you a lift to Brantwood or Carmont,” Ronald offered him cordially.

Young Cornwall accepted the invitation gratefully. He was too troubled to be very talkative during the ride, but made a special effort to be agreeable, telling his companions a few

facts about his own life. His parents were dead. Before entering college he had attended the Sabre Military Academy. Usually he spent his summer vacations traveling abroad.

Kay had taken an instant liking to the modest youth, and could not help but reflect that he had much in common with Sissy. She felt certain that the two orphans were attracted to each other, and maneuvered to seat them side by side in the car.

“I know it’s none of my affair,” Kay remarked to Perry Cornwall as they drew near Brantwood, “but before notifying the police or engaging a detective I wish you would speak with my Cousin Bill Tracey. I think he might be able to help you, for he is a clever lawyer.”

Perry was reluctant to trouble the young man, but when Kay assured him that it would be no imposition, he accepted the offer gratefully. Accordingly, Ronald drove directly to Bill Tracey’s office. The attorney, after listening to a complete account of all that had transpired at Watch Hill, offered considerable useful advice, suggesting that Perry obtain the services of the firm of Bellis and Fort.

That evening Kay and Sissy made plans for their excursion to Brookside. Since Kay’s scholastic standing was unusually high Mrs. Tracey agreed that her daughter might miss a day’s school work. She, too, felt that it was vitally important to learn something of Sissy’s identity before the Ware City lawyer should arrive.

The next morning found the girls on their way to Brookside. Sissy's drooping spirits had revived, and she chatted gaily during the ride. The young friends reached the town without any trouble, but though they cruised about for almost an hour, they could find no one who was able to direct them to the Heather Home for Children.

"I do hope Perry didn't make a mistake as to its location," Kay commented, stopping the car at the curb. "Here comes a man who looks intelligent. I'll try again."

The girl waited until the stranger drew up alongside the automobile, and then made her inquiry. The man stared at her in surprise.

"The Heather Home?" he echoed blankly. "Why, didn't you know? It burned down more than a year ago!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### A CLUE TO THE PAST

“You say it burned!” Sissy echoed in a hollow voice, as she struggled to keep back the tears. “Then all the records must have been destroyed!”

“I guess everything went up in smoke,” the stranger informed the girl, regarding her curiously. “It was a very mysterious fire.”

“In what way?” Kay interposed quickly.

“Well, it started at night and no one knew what caused it. The place had been closed for years.”

“Do you think the fire was of incendiary origin?” Kay quizzed.

“Well, I’d not like to say that, but it broke out under pretty suspicious circumstances. I live near the place, and saw the first flames shoot up. Before I could give the alarm the entire building was blazing, as though someone had poured gasoline on it and then ignited it.”

“Was the building completely destroyed?”

“Yes. There’s nothing left but a pile of old brick and some charred boards.”

“Then I’m afraid our trip has been a waste of time,” Kay said. “That is, unless there happens to be someone living here in town who was formerly connected with the Home.”

“All the officials moved away years ago,” the stranger said. “But say!” he broke forth. “Jenny Steel lives in a cottage on the edge of town!”

“And who is Jenny Steel?”

“She was a nurse at the Home until the time it closed down. Poor old Jenny is getting along in years now.”

“Where can we find her?” Kay asked quickly. She felt that this was a clue worth following.

The stranger told her how to reach the place, and after thanking him for the information the young people drove away in search of the old lady’s home.

The cottage was small, but neat and attractive. In response to their knock a pleasant-faced woman with a scarf about her head bade them enter.

Kay gave her own name, and then introduced Sissy to Jenny Steel. The old nurse scrutinized the orphan girl intently. As she did so, Kay’s heart leaped high with hope. If only Jenny might recognize Sissy and perhaps recall who her parents were!

“My dear, haven’t I seen you before?” the nurse asked slowly. “You resemble someone—your name is Sissy Weller?”



“Yes,” the orphan told her eagerly. “I was adopted from the Heather Home when I was a baby.”

“Why, of course!” Jenny Steel suddenly beamed. “I remember you now—you were one of the sweetest little youngsters in the whole place.”

Sissy was trembling with excitement as the girls seated themselves opposite the nurse. They both sensed that the woman was on the verge of disclosing valuable information, and they were impatient for her story.

“Can you tell me anything about my mother and father?” Sissy questioned hopefully. “All my life I’ve prayed that some day I’d find them.”

The old lady shook her head sadly.

“Your dear parents are dead, my child.”

Sissy was prepared for the blow, for this information was in accordance with what she had always been told. But even so she had dared to hope her mother and father were alive. She was too shaken at the moment to go on with the questioning, so Kay came to her rescue.

“We’ll be very grateful to you for any information you might be able to give us,” she told Jenny. “Do you happen to recall when Sissy was brought to the Heather Home?”

“Indeed I do, for the circumstance was most unusual. She was a wee mite then—not more than two or three years of age. Everyone loved her. Of course, we gave her special care

and attention—she was distantly related to Mrs. Cornwall, you know.”

“Related to Martin Cornwall’s wife?” Kay demanded alertly.

“Yes. I’m not certain of the relationship, however, for it wasn’t a very close one. I believe the Cornwalls originally planned to keep the child themselves. Then Mrs. Cornwall was taken ill, and she and her husband were forced to go abroad for her health.”

“Then did they place Sissy in the Home?” Kay prompted.

“Yes. I’m certain that if they could have seen her they never would have brought themselves to part with her.” Jenny’s eyes rested tenderly upon Sissy, who was leaning forward in her chair listening breathlessly to every word.

“Then they never once saw her?” Kay inquired.

“No. Mr. and Mrs. Cornwall were preparing to sail for Europe when word came of the sudden death of Sissy’s parents. It was too late for the couple to obtain possession of the child before the boat left, so they arranged to have the Home keep her until their return. The Heather institution was very dear to Mr. Cornwall, and he was assured by those in charge that Sissy would be given excellent care.”

“I’m sure she received it,” Kay smiled. “But tell me, why did the Cornwalls never claim Sissy?”

“They remained in Europe longer than they had anticipated. Mrs. Cornwall later died there, and I understand that her

husband was very much broken up over her passing. Perhaps that was the reason why he failed to send funds to keep the Home in operation.”

“Did the institution have to close because of financial difficulties?” Kay asked, although Cousin Bill had already told her this had been the case.

“Yes. Mr. Cornwall was its chief benefactor. After he failed to send any more money the Home went bankrupt, and it could no longer continue in existence.”

“Were all the children placed with families?” Kay inquired.

Jenny Steel nodded.

“Yes, it was terribly hard for us to see them leave, but I have the satisfaction of knowing that all the babies were placed in good homes. Sissy was one of the very last to be adopted, for the officials kept hoping that word of some kind would be received about her from Mr. Cornwall.”

“I was finally adopted by the Wellers,” Sissy murmured.

“Yes, you were about four years of age then, and those good people adored you.”

“They were always kind to me,” Sissy whispered brokenly. “I loved them as I would have my own parents.”

“Sissy is very eager to learn her real name,” Kay said after a moment of silence. “Can you tell us who her parents were?”

“That I do not know. The records of all the children were kept in the office.”

“And what became of the documents?” Kay inquired.

“Oh, they were destroyed when the Home was burned to the ground. Such a pity, too!”

“Then there’s no possibility of proving who I really am,” Sissy murmured in discouragement.

“I wish I could help you, my dear, but I can’t. However, you must not be down-hearted. I believe there must be some other way of establishing your identity.”

“Mr. Cornwall should be able to help us,” Kay remarked, “but unfortunately he has mysteriously disappeared. It’s strange that he never once inquired about Sissy after his return from Europe.”

“Oh, he did. He was pretty much broken up by the turn affairs had taken. He had left with the trustees, before he sailed for Europe, enough money for the operation of the Home. After the institution closed its doors it developed that someone had misappropriated the funds, and this was the reason for its being in such dire straits.”

“An official?”

“The truth of the matter never came out, but the failure of the Home was a great blow to Mr. Cornwall. First came the death of his wife, then the loss of the child, and finally the

failure of the institution. All these hardships wrought a great change in the man, and he became an eccentric recluse.”

“Was there no one who could remember that Sissy had been placed with the Wellers?”

“Oh, yes, but when Mr. Cornwall tried to reach the people, he could not find them.”

“Why, everything jibes!” Sissy cried. “Shortly after I was adopted by the Wellers they took me with them to Cuba on a business trip. We lived in Havana until I was ten years of age.”

“I suppose by that time Mr. Cornwall had given up hope of ever finding you,” Kay commented.

She was about to ask another question when the doorbell rang. Jenny answered it to admit a group of friends whom she introduced to the girls. Kay and Sissy remained a few moments longer to find out if any of them could be of help, but it was obvious they knew nothing of the subject in which the girls were interested. Shortly thereafter Kay and Sissy took their departure.

“At least I feel better about things,” the orphan remarked cheerfully, as she and Kay drove back to Brantwood. “If I’m a relative of Mrs. Cornwall, my parents must have been all right!”

Kay halted the car at the curbstone before Mrs. Barling’s home.

“I thought I saw a light in one of the windows. It doesn’t seem to be there now, though.”

“You must have imagined it,” Sissy protested. “Since you lost the key you’ve been watching the place night and day.”

“Well, I feel responsible, somehow,” Kay said with an uneasy laugh. “I can’t help but think that I saw something gleaming just now.”

“Perhaps Mrs. Barling has come home.”

Kay parked her car and switched off the headlights. She was always ready for an adventure.

“Come on,” she urged. “Let’s find out what it’s all about.”

## CHAPTER IX

### AN ANONYMOUS LETTER

No light was visible in the Barling house as the girls ran softly up the porch steps. Kay clanged the door knocker several times, but there was no answer. After a long wait she acknowledged that perhaps she had been mistaken about there being any illumination.

“If I only hadn’t lost that key we could go in and investigate,” she said in deep disgust as she and Sissy turned away. “Of all the stupid things I have ever done, that was the worst. Tomorrow I shall search for it again.”

The following day Kay almost forgot about the key, for she was engrossed in far more important matters. At the breakfast table Cousin Bill told the girls that he had received a letter from Samuel Bramley.

“When is he coming here?” Kay asked quickly.

“He’ll be here at ten o’clock.”

“Oh, I can hardly wait!” Kay declared in excitement.

“One would think you were the person who expected to inherit the fortune,” Cousin Bill teased. “I warn you not to attempt to grill Mr. Bramley the way you do some of your victims. Remember, he is a well-known lawyer, and in the

matter of cross questions and evasive answers should prove your equal.”

“I’m not afraid of any lawyer,” Kay laughed with a toss of her head. “However, I’ll be very demure and let you do most of the talking.”

Excited as she was over the coming interview, Kay had not completely forgotten the mysterious light she had seen in the window of the Barling house. While Sissy was making herself ready for the appointment with Mr. Bramley the Tracey girl slipped away to take another look about the grounds of the Barling homestead. The mansion was still securely locked, and everything seemed as it should be.

“I must have imagined there was a light,” Kay decided, as she returned to her own home.

Ten o’clock came, and the girls were ready and waiting for Samuel Bramley to arrive. At a quarter past ten he had not come, and at half past Sissy was in a state bordering collapse at the man’s non-appearance.

“He’ll be here,” Kay comforted the girl. “Don’t you think so, Cousin Bill?”

“Certainly. Doubtless he has been delayed on the road.”

At exactly eleven o’clock the doorbell rang and Kay flew to answer it. She deduced at once that the tall, heavy-set gentleman with the portfolio under his arm was Samuel Bramley. He apologized profusely for being so late, saying that he had met with a slight accident on the road.



Kay conducted him to the library, where he greeted Cousin Bill as a fellow colleague. Sissy could say nothing when the lawyer was presented to her, but merely inclined her head.

“So this is the little lady who has fallen heir to the vast fortune?” the pompous fellow asked with interest. “A very tidy sum it is, too—in round figures two hundred thousand dollars.”

“It hardly seems possible,” the orphan said weakly, after she recovered her voice. “Are you sure there’s no mistake?”

“None in the least. All you have to do is to prove that you are Christine Cleveland.”

“Oh, but I’m afraid I can’t——”

“Miss Weller does not know her real name,” Cousin Bill interposed hastily. “However, within a few days my client expects to have documentary evidence to support her claim to the fortune.”

Kay’s cousin then outlined to Mr. Bramley the information the Tracey girl had secured from Jenny Steel. The man appeared to be impressed with the story as well as with Sissy’s unassuming manner.

“That coincides with the anonymous letter I received,” he declared. “Yes, Miss Weller, I believe you have a justifiable claim.”

Kay had said nothing up to this time, but at mention of an unsigned missive she could hardly restrain herself

any longer. Cousin Bill smiled at her impatience, for he had intended to get at the matter in due time. Mr. Bramley was very glad to reply to Kay's questions.

“The anonymous letter came to my office a number of days ago and gave me the first intimation that Miss Weller might be the missing heiress. However, before going into the contents of the message I'll have to explain to you about the money.

“You may have read in the papers that a certain bachelor, Christian Snyder by name, left his entire fortune to the daughter of Evelyn and Horace Cleveland of Crag Point.”

No one in the room had heard the story, so the lawyer hurried on with his tale.

“Mr. and Mrs. Cleveland died a number of years ago, and the child was sent to an orphans' home. The little girl had been named Christine after Christian Snyder, who had always had a keen interest in her parents. During his lifetime he tried unsuccessfully to locate the child. At any rate, his will leaves his entire fortune to her, in the event that she can be located.”

Cousin Bill asked Mr. Bramley a number of questions, and for some time the two men busily discussed various legal angles of the case. However, it appeared to the impatient Kay that they would never arrive at deciding whether or not Sissy's claim would be upheld in court. She was very glad when Cousin Bill invited the lawyer to remain to luncheon, for she felt this would give her an opportunity to say a few words to Sissy's advantage. She therefore seated herself

beside Mr. Bramley, a clever move which amused Cousin Bill very much.

“You did not explain to us about the anonymous letter,” Kay reminded the Ware City lawyer when the conversation again drifted around to that subject.

“You’re quite right, young lady. I have no idea who sent it, although the handwriting seems to be that of a man. The letter merely stated that if I were interested in finding the heiress to the Snyder fortune, it would pay me to investigate one Sissy Weller of Brantwood, and to address her in care of a Mrs. Barling.”

Sissy was so astonished at this information that she dropped her fork. Kay quickly covered up the girl’s embarrassment by directing Mr. Bramley’s attention toward herself.

“Now, I wonder who could have known that Sissy was staying with Mrs. Barling?” she mused.

Suddenly she recalled the tramp who had asked her so many questions about the orphan girl. Could it be he who had sent the note to the lawyer? She recalled that he had mailed a special delivery letter shortly after he had stopped at the Barling house.

“That man was not an ordinary tramp,” Kay reflected, recalling the wallet filled with bills. “I half suspect that he was not a tramp at all—that it was only a disguise he wore. But why should he be so interested that Sissy should

receive the inheritance, unless he knew who her parents were?”

It occurred to Kay that possibly the orphan might bear a striking resemblance to her deceased mother. If she ever should see the man at some future time, Kay decided to ask him if he had ever known Evelyn and Horace Cleveland.

“It will be my luck not to run into him again,” the girl thought. “And to think that I actually wanted Cousin Bill to have that vagabond sent out of town!”

Her attention then reverted to Sissy. The orphan girl’s face was deeply flushed, and Kay realized that she was embarrassed by Samuel Bramley’s steady, intense scrutiny. Obviously he was studying her in an effort to decide if she really were Christine Cleveland.

Although the girl answered the lawyer’s questions in a clear-cut manner, it was obvious that she was very nervous and ill at ease. Kay came to her rescue by again capturing the lawyer’s attention, and proved so entertaining at repartee that Mr. Bramley did not mind drifting away from the main topic of conversation.

“A very clever girl,” he remarked to Cousin Bill after luncheon. “Before I knew it, she had forced me to admit that I believed Miss Weller to be the missing heiress. With such a champion, your client should have no need of a lawyer!”

Kay did not mind being the cause of their laughter, for she realized that she had made a favorable impression

upon Samuel Bramley. She felt well repaid when the attorney, in taking his leave, promised her that as soon as a few legal matters could be adjusted he would get in touch with Sissy.

“Oh, by the way,” he said carelessly, “if you’ll give me Jenny Steel’s address I might drop down there and have a chat with her.”

After the man had left, Kay hugged her friend gleefully.

“Oh, we’ve won him over to your side, Sissy! I can tell he likes you.”

“It was you who did it,” the orphan insisted. “Every time I saw him look my way I felt terrified.”

“The fortune is going to be yours,” Kay predicted. “Jenny Steel will verify your story, and everything will be smooth sailing from now on.”

“There’s many a slip,” Bill Tracey began, then checked himself. He did not care to distress Sissy by suggesting that before her claim would stand a test in court it would have to be substantiated by more persons than Jenny Steel.

Mrs. Tracey, who had purposely remained in the background during the interview, now came forward to congratulate Sissy.

“I believe the fortune eventually will be turned over to you, my dear,” she said kindly. “I am so happy, for you deserve it.”

“Who deserves what?” a voice demanded. Everyone turned about, and saw Betty Worth, laughing gaily. Behind her was Wilma. “Doesn’t anyone around here ever answer any doorbells?”

“Goodness, we didn’t hear any ring,” Kay declared. “I guess we were too excited about Sissy’s good fortune. Glad the door was open.”

The twins demanded an explanation for the merriment, and were overjoyed upon learning that the interview had been successful.

“Oh, I wish we could do something to celebrate,” Kay cried enthusiastically.

“We really should, I think,” Mrs. Tracey agreed. “How would you like to have a party, Sissy?”

“Oh, I’d love it!” The girl’s eyes grew luminous. Then a shadow flitted across her face. “It’s kind of you, Mrs. Tracey, but I’m afraid—well, you see——”

“If you need a new frock I’ll be very glad to advance you the money,” Kay’s mother said quickly. She had seen the three shabby dresses which hung in Sissy’s closet.

“I need a great many things,” the orphan confessed. “Nearly everything I have is old and worn out.”

To cover up the girl’s embarrassment, Wilma looked at Mrs. Tracey and began to quote:

“One kindly deed may turn  
The fountain of thy soul  
To love’s sweet day-star, that shall o’er thee burn  
Long as its currents roll.”

It was now the woman’s turn to blush, so the practical, boyish Betty, to relieve the situation, burst forth in an original verse:

“Oh, we’ll buy her a gown of blue,  
And a diamond tiara or two;  
A duck and a drake  
And a big garden rake  
And a kitty without any mew!”

Mrs. Tracey wrote out a substantial check despite Sissy’s protest, and the girls set off in high spirits for Carmont’s leading department store. Arriving by train, they decided to go to their destination by way of a park. Presently Wilma drew the attention of the others to two squirrels scampering up the trunk of a huge tree, and the little group paused to watch their antics. Kay, who was a short distance behind the twins, let her gaze travel from the small animal to a park bench where a man sat reading a newspaper. Suddenly she gasped, and thought excitedly:

“He looks like the tramp who stopped at Mrs. Barling’s house! If I might only question him before he gets away!”

Without stopping to give any explanation for her action, Kay quietly slipped into the bushes. When her friends turned around an instant later she was nowhere to be seen.

## CHAPTER X

### SURPRISING NEWS

“It’s beyond my powers of comprehension where she could have disappeared to,” Wilma declared after they had searched about for several minutes. “Kay has a way of doing the most astonishing things.”

“But she always has a good reason for everything she does,” Betty added. “Here comes someone now.”

The figure approaching them through the park was not Kay Tracey. An instant later the girls readily recognized the person as Ethel Eaton.

“Have you seen Kay anywhere?” Wilma inquired, hurrying to meet the older girl.

Ethel made no attempt to hide the smile of superiority that flashed across her face. She pointed in the direction of the clump of bushes through which Kay had disappeared.

“Yes, I can tell you where she is. I just saw her talking with the most disreputable looking man I ever laid eyes on. They were sitting on a park bench. Very chummy, too, I must say.”

“I am sure Kay has something important to talk to him about,” Wilma returned stiffly. She was relieved to know what had become of her chum.



By this time Betty and Sissy had drawn near. Ethel, observing the latter, stared at her haughtily.

“I can’t understand the companions that some people select,” she said significantly. Sissy flushed at the implication, while Wilma and Betty grew even angrier when Ethel added: “I really thought that Kay had better judgment than to sit down on a park bench and talk to a tramp, but she has been choosing very shabby-looking friends of late!”

Betty was on the verge of making a bitter retort, when Wilma, gripping her sister by the hand, drew her away. With their arms locked affectionately in Sissy’s, they hurried off to search for Kay, leaving the crestfallen Ethel to reflect upon her cutting words.

“I can’t stand Ethel Eaton!” Betty said when they were out of earshot. “She delights in making trouble and loves to hurt people’s feelings.”

“I see Kay!” Wilma cried suddenly, pointing to the park bench where the girl was half hidden from view by tall bushes. “But she’s alone. Ethel must have made up that story about the tramp.”

The Tracey girl ran forward to meet her friends.

“Did you think I had been kidnaped?” she laughed. “I’d have stopped to explain where I was going, only there wasn’t time. Another minute, and I might have missed him.”

“Then you were talking with a man,” Sissy said.

Kay's eyes danced with excitement.

“Yes, the same one who called at Mrs. Barling's home and asked so many questions about you. Oh, I've learned a lot of interesting things!”

“Tell us all about them,” Betty pleaded.

“I've discovered that this same man whom we mistook for a tramp has really done Sissy a wonderful service. It was he who sent the anonymous letter to Samuel Bramley.”

“Really?” Sissy demanded. “But why should he be interested in me?”

“I didn't learn as much as I wanted to because the fellow seemed unwilling to talk. Before I had a chance to ask half the questions I had in mind, he suddenly walked away.”

“But you found out something,” Betty declared. “I know you well enough for that, Kay Tracey.”

“Yes, I did learn about the anonymous letter, and that was valuable information. But when I tried to inquire why this man was interested in Sissy all he would say was, ‘She is the living image of her mother.’”

“Then he must have known Mother before she died!” Sissy cried joyfully. “Oh, if he only could tell me about my parents!”

“I believe he could, but he won't say much,” Kay responded. “I tried to find out who he is, but he wouldn't tell me. Before

I could prevent him from doing so, he had hurried away and disappeared.”

“What a pity!” Wilma commented. “Perhaps you’ll see him again.”

“I hope so. I’ll keep watch here in the park, for he might return. Oh, Sissy, I feel confident we’ll find a way to establish your identity! Everything seems to be working out to your advantage.”

“This man may have some evidence that would definitely establish my claim,” Sissy agreed hopefully. “He must have thought I was the lost heiress, or he wouldn’t have notified Mr. Bramley.”

“That’s what I think!” Kay fairly danced down the street as she and her friends started toward the department store once again. “This is your lucky day, Sissy. Come, we’ll find you the prettiest party dress in all Brantwood!”

“Speaking of parties, do you intend to invite Ethel Eaton?” Betty inquired.

“She’s no friend of mine, but I suppose I’ll have to ask her if I send invitations to the rest of the class. She’ll doubtless decline, though.”

The girls reached the store, where they conducted Sissy to the dress department. They watched with shining eyes as the orphan selected the type of blue silk gown she had always wanted. When she finally emerged from the fitting room her friends exclaimed in delight.

“You look years younger!” Kay declared enthusiastically. “If you’d just arrange your hair differently you would look like a beautiful picture.”

“I have been dressing in too old a style,” the orphan admitted. “You see, I thought it would be easier to find work if I were to look at least twenty.”

“That won’t be necessary, now that you’re to be an heiress,” Betty declared.

Sissy was a willing subject in the hands of her friends. They led her from one department to another, purchasing slippers, sheer silk hosiery, costume jewelry, and a variety of garments which the girl needed. The shopping tour terminated at a beauty salon. When the orphan emerged from a booth some time later, her friends were amazed at the transformation that had been wrought. The girl was truly beautiful!

“I had no idea a new style of hairdress would make such a difference,” Sissy confessed, as they all started for the Tracey home. “The only thing that worries me now is the amount of money I’ve spent. If anything should happen to prevent me from getting the fortune, how could I ever repay your mother, Kay?”

“She’s not worrying about it, I know,” the Tracey girl laughed. “So you shouldn’t, either.”

A little farther on the chums met Ronald and Perry Cornwall, who paused to chat for a few minutes. Kay was surprised,

and secretly pleased, to learn that the latter planned to remain in Brantwood a few days as a guest of the Earle boy.

“You must both come to Sissy’s party,” she said impulsively. “It’s to be next Friday evening at my house. May I count on your being there?”

“You just bet you can,” Ronald returned heartily.

“I’ll try to come,” Perry added, “but it all depends upon what news I have of my uncle. I have engaged the detectives Mr. Tracey recommended, and hope to learn something favorable by Friday, at least.”

“Then perhaps we’ll see you,” Sissy said cordially.

“Unless I should receive really bad news you may be sure I’ll be present.” Perry’s eyes were warm and admiring as they rested upon Sissy. He had not failed to note the change in her appearance.

“Sissy has practically established her claim to the Snyder fortune,” Kay informed the boys. “That’s why we’re celebrating.”

“The Snyder fortune, did you say?” Perry inquired, surprised.

“Yes, a bachelor by the name of Christian Snyder left all his money to the daughter of Evelyn and Horace Cleveland,” Kay explained. “We feel absolutely sure Sissy is the missing heiress, and we’ve almost succeeded in convincing the lawyer of it, too.”

“Why, I know a Christian Snyder—rather, I did know him at one time,” Perry declared. “I wonder if they could be one and the same person?”

“Where did you meet him?” Kay asked eagerly.

“He was one of my instructors at the Sabre Military School. A fine man, and very well liked.”

“Did he live at Ware City at one time?” Kay questioned.

“I believe he did. It seems to me that he died about a year ago.”

“It all dovetails perfectly,” Sissy declared. “Oh, I wish I might have known Christian Snyder. It was so good of him to remember me in his will.”

“Mr. Snyder was an eccentric man,” Perry told the girls, smiling. “Except for a few close friends he didn’t seem to care much for people. He liked to be alone, and spent his summers camping in the wilds of Canada. He had a friend he often took with him—and say, that’s sort of significant, too!”

“What is?” Kay inquired alertly.

“Why, Snyder called this friend ‘Horry’.”

“Horry!” Kay was startled. “Then his real name must have been Horace!”

“That’s very possible,” Perry agreed. “Well, the information is interesting, but I’m afraid it won’t help Miss Weller to

establish her claim.”

“One can never tell,” Kay returned thoughtfully. “What you have told us may be a big help.”

“I know so little about my parents that I welcome any information at all regarding them,” the orphan said gratefully.

On the way back to the Tracey home the girls teased Sissy, declaring that Perry had developed a strong liking for her.

The invitations to the party had been sent out early in the week. Each mail brought a large number of acceptances, but only a few regrets. Kay was not in the least troubled about them, for in glancing over the list she saw that those not coming were limited almost exclusively to Ethel Eaton and her friends.

“If they think I’m offended they have another guess coming,” the Tracey girl laughed.

Each day, on her way to the station to take the train for Carmont, Kay would pass the Barling house. The blinds were tightly drawn, and there was no sign of life about the place. Despite the fact that everything seemed to be in perfect condition, the girl continued to worry about the missing key. She called at the newspaper office time and again, only to be informed that there had been no replies to her advertisement.

Friday evening found Sissy and Kay fully prepared for the gala party. The Tracey home had been decorated with autumn leaves and wild flowers. The girls had made fruit punch, and

prepared dainty sandwiches and little cakes with colored icing.

Shortly before eight o'clock the first of the guests began to arrive. After that there was a constant buzz of activity. Ronald Earle and Perry Cornwall were among those who came early. The latter received many coquettish glances from the girls, who admired his military bearing and his perfect manners.

Sissy likewise came in for her share of attention. She looked very sweet indeed in her gown of pale blue silk. Though she was not as striking in appearance as Kay, who wore a stunning red frock, she was greatly admired. Perry asked her for the first dance.

“They make a perfect couple,” Kay observed, as Ronald swept her away. “Sissy seems so happy tonight, too.”

In a few minutes the music ended. Ronald reluctantly released Kay and went to ask Wilma for the next dance. At that moment Mrs. Tracey came over to speak to her daughter.

“Everything seems to be going very nicely, Kay,” she said, “but I wonder what has happened to Cousin Bill? He planned to get here early, and was to bring the ice cream with him.”

“Isn't he back yet?”

“No. I'm beginning to think something may have happened to him.”



As the evening wore on and their relative did not appear, Kay and her mother became more and more concerned. They phoned several places to find out if anything were the matter, but were unable to glean any information. Finally, at midnight, Kay heard the sound of an automobile on the driveway, and rushed over to the window.

“It’s Cousin Bill!” she announced in relief.

“Hello, everybody,” the man greeted the guests in his hearty voice. “Sorry to be late with the ice cream, but I was detained. I have some exciting news for you. At six o’clock this evening a fire broke out at Carmont High School, and the left wing of the building was nearly completely destroyed!”

## CHAPTER XI

### FIRE!

“How did the fire start?” Kay asked excitedly.

“It broke out in the laboratory,” Cousin Bill related. “The room was locked up at four o’clock as usual, according to the principal. It’s generally believed that a careless student was responsible for what happened.”

“A bottle of inflammable fluid may have been set near a light,” Kay said thoughtfully, “or else someone left an alcohol lamp burning. Several of the chemistry students have been careless when making their experiments, and Mr. Dawson has cautioned them about it.”

“Aren’t you in one of his classes?” asked Helen Norton.

“Yes, and I was in the laboratory until late this afternoon,” Kay admitted with a laugh.

“When class was dismissed you were the last person to depart,” another recalled. “That looks bad for you, Kay.”

“So it does. But I didn’t leave any lamps burning, and I was careful to put all my materials away. That’s why I was so late getting away.”

“Are you perfectly sure you didn’t burn down the laboratory on purpose?” Betty chuckled. “You’d rather be studying other things than chemistry, according to your own admission.”

“Circumstantial evidence points to your guilt,” Bill Tracey chimed in. “Do you want me to go your bail when you are landed in jail?”

Kay laughed merrily, but an instant later grew sober.

“Laying all jokes aside, I was one of the last persons to leave the laboratory—at least as far as I know. I’m afraid someone will think I was responsible for what happened.”

“Ridiculous!” Betty exclaimed. “We’ll all stand by you if anyone should dare to insinuate such a thing.”

“Indeed we will!” the others instantly agreed.

Refreshments were served, and shortly thereafter the party broke up.

“I intend to sleep late tomorrow,” Kay declared, as she prepared for bed.

This she was not destined to do, for at eight o’clock the following morning Kay was awakened by her mother, who informed her daughter that she was wanted on the phone.

“It’s from Carmont High School, I think,” Mrs. Tracey told her.

With a sinking heart Kay took down the receiver. She heard the principal's clear-cut voice at the other end of the line.

“Miss Tracey, you doubtless have heard that there was a serious fire at the school last night. Classes will not be held Monday. However, I should like to have you call at my office this morning in regard to an important matter. Please ask Wilma and Betty Worth to come with you.”

“We'll take the first train,” Kay promised.

She hurriedly dressed, then phoned the twins. They, too, had received a call from Carmont, and were terrified at the prospects.

“You should not worry,” Kay assured them. “I think you're being asked to come because you are both members of my chemistry class. I was one of the last persons to leave the laboratory, so I'm the one under suspicion.”

At ten o'clock the three girls appeared before the principal in her small office. They had inspected the charred ruins of the left wing, and felt sick at heart at the amount of damage that had been done. It would require several months to repair the laboratory and classrooms.

The principal briefly questioned both Wilma and Betty. When the two girls assured her that they had left the laboratory immediately after chemistry class had been dismissed, she seemed satisfied with their story.

“You may go now,” she told the twins. “I wish to speak with Miss Tracey alone.”

Wilma and Betty were reluctant to desert their chum, but felt they could do nothing else. Kay's situation was an uncomfortable one, yet she evinced no sign of nervousness as she faced the woman.

"Miss Tracey," the principal began, "it has come to my attention that you were the last student to leave the chemistry laboratory yesterday."

"That is true."

"May I ask why you remained after the others had left?"

"I was interested in making an experiment. I was a little slow in putting my materials away."

"Your class teacher reports that when she returned to the main assembly hall you and several other students were still in the laboratory."

"Yes," Kay admitted.

"Did you leave an alcohol lamp burning, or do anything that might have started the fire?"

"No, indeed! As a matter of fact, I wasn't the last person to leave the laboratory."

Kay had not meant to divulge the latter information, feeling that it might incriminate another girl. But the words had slipped out involuntarily.

“Really?” the principal observed with keen interest. “Now we are getting somewhere. Tell me, Miss Tracey, who remained in the room after you left?”

Kay was distressed.

“Must I tell?”

“It is your duty, my dear child. I assure you that no one shall be accused unjustly, but I am determined to get to the bottom of this affair.”

“It was Ethel Eaton,” Kay said reluctantly. “She was working on her experiment when I went home.”

“Was she heating tubes of various liquids over an alcohol lamp?” the principal suggested, for the chemistry teacher had previously given an account of the day’s experiments. “Was that what she was doing?”

“Yes,” Kay admitted.

“And where was she working?”

“By the window, I think, but I’d rather you would question her.”

“It is generally believed that the blaze started by something setting fire to the curtains,” the principal said quietly. “That will be all, Miss Tracey. Thank you.”

Wilma and Betty were waiting anxiously in the hall outside for their chum.

“What did she say?” Betty demanded eagerly. “She didn’t accuse you of starting the fire, did she?”

“No, but she certainly questioned me closely. Before I realized what I was saying, I found I had involved Ethel Eaton.”

“That’s right. She was in the laboratory with you,” Wilma declared. “I had forgotten.”

The following week classes convened as usual. Little studying was done by the excited students, who gathered in the halls at every opportunity to talk over the latest news about the fire.

“Ethel denies she did it, but the principal discovered that she left the building less than half an hour before the entire wing was ablaze. The janitor himself let her out of the building at half-past five.”

Kay caught these words, spoken by a thoughtless student. Coincidentally, this same speech had been overheard by Ethel Eaton. She whirled angrily upon the surprised student.

“It’s a lie! I had nothing to do with the fire! Kay Tracey is the person who should be questioned. She shields herself by blaming others!”

“You know that isn’t true,” Kay cried, stung to a retort.

“I suppose you didn’t run tattling to the principal.”

“I certainly did not! She called me to her office, and I answered her questions.”

“You did your best to throw suspicion upon me, Kay Tracey! Oh, you thought you were pretty smart, but it didn’t work. No one can prove that I caused the fire!”

“I don’t care to argue about it,” Kay returned coldly. “But please remember that I never said it was your fault.”

In the course of the next few days the students observed that Ethel made frequent visits to the principal’s office; that upon her return from them her face would be flushed and angry. She told no one what transpired during those interviews, and Kay tactfully refused to take part in the speculation, though she was aware that her schoolmates exonerated her completely and blamed the Eaton girl alone. It was generally conceded that while no one could definitely prove it, circumstantial evidence indicated that Ethel had accidentally set fire to the laboratory.

There the matter rested. Kay was only too glad to forget all about it, for she had far more interesting matters to occupy her time. Several letters had been received from Samuel Bramley in regard to Sissy’s fortune. The lawyer had interviewed Miss Steel, and been visibly impressed by that lady’s story. Everything seemed to point to a successful culmination of the case.

One afternoon Kay received a telephone call from Cousin Bill, in which he asked her and Sissy to come to his office immediately.



“Mr. Bramley is here,” he said, adding in an undertone, “this time I think he intends to get down to serious business.”

Sissy could barely contain her excitement as she and Kay hurried to the office.

“I hope he turns some of the money over to me today,” the orphan declared. “I feel very guilty about the amount I owe your mother, Kay.”

Mr. Bramley greeted the girls more cordially than he had upon his previous visit. Sensing his friendliness, they hoped that he had the necessary papers with him. However, the lawyer was too wary for such a sudden move. After talking for some time about other things, he finally came to the subject of Sissy and the fortune.

“As far as I am personally concerned, I believe that Miss Weller is the real heiress,” he said.

“Unfortunately, her proof of identity is not sufficient to stand up under a court test.”

“But who would contest the will?” Kay asked.

“Thus far no one has come forward with any protest,” the lawyer returned. “Apparently there are no other possible heirs.”

“Then why can’t Sissy have the money without further delay?” Kay demanded impatiently.

“That’s what I have come to talk over. Within another ten days I hope to turn the entire fortune over to Miss Weller—

that is, all except a certain lumber tract.”

“That tract represents a major part of the fortune, if I’m not mistaken,” Cousin Bill commented. He had spent the afternoon going over the papers in connection with the transfer of the Snyder property.

“I agree that in years to come the land will prove to be very valuable,” Bramley conceded. “At present the sector yields but little return.”

“Why can’t the property be turned over to Sissy along with the rest of the fortune?” Kay inquired.

“Because it is owned by three persons,” the lawyer explained. “There is the Snyder share, and two other men have an interest in the rest of it. Everything is hopelessly involved. The one who has assumed full charge of the land during the past few years has mismanaged it. I have a suspicion that he has secretly been cutting down choice timber and pocketing the profits.”

“Can nothing be done about it?” Kay asked indignantly.

“Nothing has been done thus far. The man is very shrewd, and not likely to be easily trapped.”

“You didn’t tell us his name,” Kay said.

“He lives right here in Brantwood, I believe. His name is Oliver Eaton.”

Kay was so startled she almost fell from her chair. Even Cousin Bill looked astonished. The man whom Bramley had accused was Ethel Eaton's father!

## CHAPTER XII

### AN UNPLEASANT ENCOUNTER

“I tell you all this in strictest confidence,” Samuel Bramley reminded the little group. “I have no actual proof that Oliver Eaton and his partner are stealing timber, but I strongly suspect them of it.”

“This isn’t the first time Eaton has been involved in questionable dealings,” Bill Tracey said. “I’ll make a special point of investigating the matter.”

A few minutes later the conference broke up. Bramley left the office, after promising to return within a few days. The girls remained to chat with Cousin Bill, then went to the Black Cat Tea Room for a late luncheon.

Scarcely had they seated themselves at a corner table than they saw to their disgust that Ethel Eaton and one of her friends were among the diners. Kay and her chums ate hurriedly. As they were preparing to leave the Eaton girl also arose and deliberately blocked the way to the exit.

“I have something I wish to say to you, Sissy Weller!” she said, her eyes flashing.

The orphan girl was too surprised to reply. Kay’s eyes narrowed, for she saw that her schoolmate meant to create a

scene.

“We’ll talk to you outside.”

“You’ll talk to me right here!” Ethel retorted stormily. “Who does this little nobody think she is, anyway?” She glared threateningly at Sissy.

The girl’s loud voice had attracted the attention of a man seated at a neighboring table. Kay noticed that he seemed very much interested in what was being said. His face looked vaguely familiar to her, but at the moment Kay was too provoked with Ethel to be able to recall where she had seen the person before.

“Ethel, what is the matter now?” the Tracey girl asked impatiently.

“You keep out of this!” came the retort. “You should be ashamed to associate with a girl who hires cheap, crooked lawyers. No doubt you’re helping them cheat my father out of his rights!”

The light suddenly dawned upon Kay. She realized now that in some way Oliver Eaton had learned of Bramley’s suspicions regarding his method of handling the timber sector. Possibly the attorney had gone to him and demanded an explanation.

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Ethel,” she said sharply. “Sissy isn’t a nobody—she’s a very worth-while person. Her lawyers are reputable, too. Bill Tracey is one of them!”

“I guess Bill Tracey isn’t much of a lawyer, or he wouldn’t involve himself in such a disgraceful scheme to rob my father,” Ethel scoffed. Then, with a muttered “Oh, you make me sick,” she hurried from the tea room, evidently ashamed at having caused such a scene.

“Oh, I’ve never before met such a horrid girl,” Sissy murmured. “You were wonderful to stand up for me, Kay.”

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper, but I couldn’t endure Ethel Eaton’s abuse.”

Recovering her poise, Kay glanced about the tea shop. With the exception of the man at the nearby table, she was certain no other person had heard the conversation. As she turned in his direction, the stranger suddenly arose and hurried toward the door.

Kay caught only a fleeting glimpse of his face, but was convinced that she had seen the man before. Yes, it was Tagg, the detective whom Perry Cornwall had discharged!

“Quick!” she called to Sissy. “We must stop him!”

When the girls reached the street the man had vanished.

“He was listening to every word Ethel was saying, particularly the part about the lumber sector,” Kay declared. “He’s just the kind of a person who looks for a chance to make trouble.”

“Oh, I don’t believe he could have heard much of the conversation,” Sissy ventured.

Kay permitted the matter to drop, for she could think of no way in which Otto Tagg might damage the orphan's case or bring embarrassment upon herself. Yet she could not help but recall his threat to her. It would be wise to keep vigilant at all times.

Sissy lapsed into a moody silence on the homeward trip. In vain did Kay try to convince her that she must not take Ethel's harsh words too seriously.

"I can afford to lose the land," said Sissy. "All I want is enough money to buy food and clothes," said the orphan.

"You'll get every cent that's rightfully yours," Kay declared firmly. "In business matters you're entirely too easy going, Sissy."

"I suppose I am."

"You're the type of girl that needs a guardian," Kay laughed mischievously. "If I'm not mistaken, Perry Cornwall would like to aspire to that position!"

"Oh, you know he wouldn't!"

"Don't talk so loudly, because here he comes now," Kay giggled, indicating a young man who was rapidly approaching.

Sissy blushed, and was so startled that she could not find words with which to greet Perry. In a moment, however, she recovered her composure and chatted pleasantly with him, inquiring if he had received any news of his uncle.

“Not a thing,” Perry reported, his face clouding. “I’m beginning to fear the worst has happened.”

“Don’t give up hope,” Kay said encouragingly.

“Oh, I’ll never do that until I have absolute proof that Uncle Martin is dead. Just the same, the suspense is hard to bear. I’d rather know the truth about him, even though it should hurt. He has been missing for so many days now I feel that if he were still alive we’d have heard from him before this. Each day I’ve been expecting a demand for ransom from some kidnapers, but I’ve received no communication.”

“It’s a strange case,” Kay mused.

“I feel that no one can solve it unless you can,” the youth said despondently. “Of course, it’s an imposition to worry you with my troubles. You’ve helped me a lot as it is.”

“I’ll be glad to do anything I can, Perry. I thought the city detectives surely would be able to work out the case.”

“Thus far they’ve uncovered no worth-while clue.”

Kay was lost in thought for a moment. Then she asked:

“When are you going back to Watch Hill, Perry?”

“I’m on my way there now. Ronald promised to drive me over in his car, and I’m to meet him in fifteen minutes. Would you girls care to come with us?”



“I was just thinking I might search the house again and possibly find some sort of a clue,” Kay said slowly. “Our first visit there was a very hurried one.”

“Even though you were in the house only a few minutes, you succeeded in locating a hidden panel.”

“An empty one, though,” Kay laughed. “This time I hope to discover something far more tangible.”

Sissy was delighted to be able to make the trip, for time hung heavily on her hands. The girls accompanied Perry to the place where Ronald Earle was awaiting his friend. He was delighted that Kay and the orphan girl were going along, and maneuvered to have the former sit beside him.

As the car neared Watch Hill, Perry uttered an exclamation of dismay. “We neglected to stop in town for the mail!”

“That’s so,” Ronald acknowledged ruefully, halting the machine. “We must have been talking as we drove past the post office and forgot all about it.”

“I suppose we could get it on our way back to Brantwood, only if there should be any news from Uncle Martin——”

“You’re eager to hear from him, of course,” Kay said. “Why don’t you boys drive back while Sissy and I walk on toward the house?”

“It’s only about three miles from here to the post office,” Perry told her. “We should be there in a few minutes. Shall I give you the house keys?”

“No, thank you! I’ve lost one already and I’m not taking any chances on losing another! We’ll just walk around the grounds until you return.”

After the boys had driven away, Sissy and Kay leisurely made their way down a lane and through a woods to the Cornwall mansion. Emerging from among the trees, Kay suddenly halted and stared toward the upper story of the great house.

“What is it?” Sissy whispered nervously. She could see nothing amiss.

“That window on the third floor!”

“Why, it’s open! Do you suppose Perry left it that way?”

“If he did, he’s more careless than I think he is! I wish now I’d taken the key he offered me.”

Sissy shivered.

“You couldn’t pay me to set foot in that place until Perry and Ronald get here. Let’s go back to the lane and wait.”

Kay did not take her eyes from the third story. She had heard scarcely a word of what Sissy had said, for her attention was riveted upon something white that was fluttering from the open window. Could it by chance be a signal?

“Sissy, I’m going over there and see what’s wrong!”

“Then I shall, too. I’ll not let you go near that house alone!”

Cautiously the two girls crept forward, darting in and out among the trees, and keeping themselves hidden from view as best they could. Save for the bit of material fluttering in the window, there was no sign of anything moving about the place.

Kay noted a tall tree with gently sloping trunk and gnarled branches that towered high above the third story of the dwelling. It grew so near the window that many of its leaves brushed against the pane.

“I could climb that tree and get a bird’s-eye view of what’s going on inside the house!” said Kay.

“You’d fall and break your neck! Don’t try it,” warned her companion.

Sissy clutched her friend’s hand, striving to hold the girl back. With a laugh, Kay shook herself free.

“I’m a regular monkey when it comes to trees!” she laughed. “You wait here.”

Slipping quietly from her hiding-place, Kay deftly raised herself to the lower branches of the giant growth, and gradually climbed upward. As she neared her goal, she perceived that the white material in the window was a curtain. It swayed gently.

“That’s strange,” the girl thought to herself. “There’s not a bit of breeze outdoors. What could make the curtain flutter? I wonder if——”

Kay pulled herself up to a thick limb, from which she could look directly into the third floor. She saw no one, yet felt the presence of a human being.

“Somebody is certainly in that house,” she said, shifting to a more comfortable position among the branches. “I’ll make this tree my lookout until I find out who it is!”

## CHAPTER XIII

### HAUNTING MUSIC

The next instant Kay pinched herself to make sure she was not dreaming. For from out of the stillness there suddenly came to her ears the sound of beautiful, haunting music! The strains appeared to emanate from the mysterious open window.

“What can it mean?” the girl wondered, amazed.

In another minute she might have learned what the melody signified, had not her attention been distracted by the sight of Sissy standing at the foot of the tree. She had followed Kay, obviously intending to join her up in the high branches.

“Stay down,” the Tracey girl motioned, but the other did not seem to understand.

The orphan reached the lower branches safely, but as she attempted to swing herself to a higher limb she suddenly slipped. With a cry of fear she clutched the empty air, then fell to the ground. Fearing that her friend might have been injured, Kay hastily descended the tree.

“Sissy, are you hurt?” she asked anxiously.

Slowly the girl picked herself up. A pitiful attempt at a smile spread over her face.

“I can walk, all right. I suppose I’ve spoiled everything for you, but I couldn’t help it. I don’t like this place, Kay. Let’s get away from here before anything terrible happens!”

“We can’t leave just yet, Sissy. Thank goodness, here come Ronald and Perry! I can see them through the trees.”

Relieved, the girls hastened to greet their friends, then told them all that had happened. To Kay’s deep satisfaction the boys eagerly entered the house to find out for themselves what it was that prompted the strange music.

Sissy walked with a slight limp. Perry, greatly disturbed when told of her mishap, suggested that she remain outdoors during the investigation. But the thought of staying alone terrified the girl, and she decided to accompany the others.

Young Cornwall unlocked the front entrance cautiously. In her nervousness Sissy brushed against a small vase standing on a hall table. Only a quick movement on Ronald’s part prevented the ornament from crashing to the floor. It was clear that the orphan would be more of a hindrance than a help in the projected search.

“Ronald, if you’ll stay here with the girls I’ll go upstairs and see what it’s all about,” Perry whispered to his friend.

Young Earle agreed to this reluctantly. He did not want to miss any excitement, but he realized that someone must remain behind to protect Sissy. Kay, with no intention

of being left out of what was going on, followed close at Perry's heels.

"I'm positive the music came from the window directly opposite the tall tree," Kay whispered.

"Almost the entire third floor is my uncle's music salon. Let's go up there."

As they mounted the steps, the two young people paused an instant to listen. From above they could faintly hear the mellow strains of music. It sounded as if someone were playing on a stringed instrument.

The door of the large room was closed. Perry turned the knob, and the two cautiously peered inside. At first, in the semi-darkness, Kay could distinguish nothing save a small platform which stood at the far end of the hall. A cold, uncomfortable draught swept through the room, and as her eyes moved toward the fluttering white curtains, the Tracey girl gleaned the explanation for their strange, waving motion. Somewhere another door or window was open, making a current of air.

The strains of music seemed to float from the direction of the stage. There, seated before a heavy drop curtain of rich blue velvet, they saw a man playing a golden harp. Never before had Perry or Kay heard such a haunting, elusive melody. They stood quietly listening, enthralled with the beauty and mystery of it all.

“Who can he be?” Perry whispered. “Even though he is a wonderful musician, he has no right to be in my uncle’s house!”

At first glance Kay thought she recognized the stranger; as he turned his face slightly toward her she was positive of her identification. He it was who had come disguised as a tramp to the Barling homestead!

“Don’t let him know we’re here,” Kay whispered to Perry. “Keep out of sight while I creep up closer.”

The music sounded strangely familiar. As Kay took up a position near the harpist she recalled where she had heard the mellow strains before. The man was playing a selection from the opera “Faust.” Lured by the spell of the liquid notes, the girl found herself visualizing the famous scenes. She could almost picture Mephistopheles emerging stealthily from behind the gently swaying velvet curtains.

Were they actually swaying, or was her imagination playing tricks on her? Kay focused her attention upon them. There could be no mistake. They moved rhythmically, as though propelled by an invisible hand.

“I must be witnessing a rehearsal,” Kay said to herself. “It would not surprise me if in another instant the Devil and his assistants should dart in!”

The long selection from “Faust” approached the end, rippling to a dramatic climax. The harpist was so imbued with the



spirit of the music that he took no notice of the moving draperies.

Suddenly the curtains parted. A long, thin arm plunged through the opening. The clenched fist gripped a gnarled, jagged club!

Stricken with terror, Kay screamed a warning. Too late! With a resounding crack a heavy blow descended upon the head of the unsuspecting man.

The music ended crazily as the player fell from his chair. The harp slipped from his pale, outstretched fingers and crashed to the floor in a jumble of discordant sounds.

With a low cry of pity Kay rushed toward the unconscious form. One glance at him assured her that he was the tramp who had called at the Barling house that day not so long ago. His face was white as death; a faint trickle of blood oozed from a wound in his head.

“Quick! Look behind those velvet curtains!” Kay cried to Perry. “Don’t let that fiend get away!”

The youth tore the drapes apart, but no one stood revealed. The person with the club had fled.

As the youth hesitated in perplexity, Kay darted to the hall door, and was just in time to catch a glimpse of a figure in black descending the stairs.

“Help! Help!” she screamed.

As she had hoped, her wild cry reached the ears of Ronald and Sissy, who had remained on the lower floor.

“We’re coming!” the lad shouted, bounding up the steps.

“Stop that man!” Kay cried. “Don’t let him get away!”

The warning came too late, however, for the dark-clad form swept like a whirlwind down the long flight, taking Ronald completely by surprise. The youth succeeded in grasping the fellow’s coat, but the culprit wrenched himself free.

Suddenly from the first floor, there came Sissy’s shrill, frightened scream, followed by the slamming of a door. Perry and Ronald raced for the living room.

“Which way did he go, Sissy?” they cried.

“I don’t know! I don’t know! He thrust me aside. I was so frightened I didn’t notice where he went.”

Kay rushed back to the music salon to do what she could for the unconscious musician while Ronald and Perry took up the pursuit. They hurried outside, but no one was in sight. The man had mysteriously vanished. The earth around the house was reasonably soft from a recent rain, but no footprints could be seen.

“He must be hiding among those trees,” Perry said excitedly, indicating the heavy growth near the house.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE TRAP-DOOR

“No use looking for him in there,” Ronald added glumly. “Those woods are so thick it would be impossible to find anyone.”

Disappointed at their failure, the boys returned to the house and hurried upstairs to assist the injured musician. There they found Kay bathing the man’s forehead and administering first-aid to him, but he seemed to display no sign of returning consciousness. Sissy was almost beside herself with fear that he might die, and her nervousness did not add to Kay’s efficiency. The latter was greatly relieved at the return of Perry and Ronald.

“Is he conscious yet?” asked the Cornwall youth anxiously.

“No. If we could carry him downstairs and place him on a couch——”

“We can manage it very nicely,” Ronald assured her. “He isn’t very heavy.”

Gently the boys lifted the man, carrying him between them. They found it difficult when they came to the stairway, but with Sissy and Kay assisting they finally managed to get the patient to the second floor and place him

on a bed. Kay, who was skilled in first-aid, worked over the stranger for several minutes, but to no avail.

“I can do nothing for him,” she was forced to admit finally. “I think he’s more seriously injured than we realize. It’s possible his skull has been fractured.”

On hearing this, Sissy began to weep softly, and held her handkerchief to her face to smother her sobs.

“We must get him to a doctor at once,” Kay announced.

Perry nodded. “We can’t bring the car up to the house on account of the trees, but I know a way to drive in through a neighbor’s property, and come cross lots. It won’t take us long to do that. And it will be better than trying to carry this man so far.”

Left alone in the silent house, the two girls caught themselves watching the clock. How slowly time passed!

“I feel sure the man will die,” Sissy murmured, shivering.

“His pulse is still strong,” Kay said, feeling his wrist. “If only Ronald and Perry can get him to the hospital in time!”

“And to think that he is the person who asked so many questions about me,” Sissy sighed in a half whisper. “I really owe any fortune I may receive to him. Who could have been so brutal as to attack him?”

“I wish I knew.”

“I have a feeling it’s the same person who kidnaped poor old Mr. Cornwall and killed him.”

“We don’t know that anything bad has happened to him, Sissy. You shouldn’t think of such horrible things.”

“After what occurred here today, it’s pretty certain in my mind that he has met a terrible death. For all we know, a madman may be at large around Watch Hill!” As she spoke, Sissy glanced about her apprehensively.

“Do you think he’s hiding under any of the furniture?” Kay asked.

“I suppose not, only——”

“If you feel uneasy, I’ll take a look around,” Kay offered.

“Oh, no, there’s no need of your doing that.”

“I’d like to search the music salon once more.”

“Don’t go up there again!” Sissy pleaded.

“Surely you’re not afraid to stay here a few minutes, are you, Sissy? Someone should watch this unconscious man.”

“No, but——”

“It will take me only a short while,” Kay declared. “If you need any help, just call me and I’ll come back instantly.”

As she reached the top step her attention was attracted to a door adjoining the music salon. Curious, she opened it and saw that it led into a bedroom.

“Nothing here,” she thought.

Just then, however, her eyes fell upon a man’s coat, shoes and trousers, which had been tossed carelessly upon the crumpled bedding.

“I wonder how long these things have been here?” she asked herself.

She lifted the shoes and looked at the soles, which were muddy. Then she searched the garments, but they offered no clue to the identity of their owner.

“These clothes have been worn recently,” she decided. “They can’t belong to Mr. Cornwall. It’s very evident that someone has been haunting this house for some time, and has been making use of this bedroom.”

Kay looked about a few minutes longer, but could find nothing further of interest. Fearing that Sissy might grow impatient at her absence, she hurriedly crossed the hall and entered the music salon. The first object to catch her eye there was the beautiful harp, which had fallen over upon its side. During the excitement, no one had thought of righting it.

Carefully, as though she were handling a sacred object, Kay raised the heavy instrument. She felt certain that it must have cost a great deal of money. Then, impelled by a sudden

curiosity, she ran one finger over a few of the strings. As the mellow notes issued forth, a slight clicking sound came from overhead, but Kay did not hear it.

Satisfied that the harp had not been damaged, Kay turned her attention to the blue velvet draperies. It required a certain amount of courage for her to draw them apart, for a strange sensation had taken possession of her. She actually imagined that someone was watching her movements.

“I never before suspected I had such a silly streak in me,” she thought.

Steeling herself for what might happen, she jerked the curtains apart. No one was there. The draperies screened an approach to the stage, and as Perry had said, one door led to the outside hall. It was doubtless through this exit the assailant had escaped.

Kay searched the floor for clues, but could find none. She then noticed a door which she thought opened into a closet, and flung it open. As she did so, something heavy thudded down upon her head. She staggered back, too stunned to utter anything but a choked cry. Then she gazed down at her feet, at which lay a crushed hat box filled with old magazines.

“I thought it surely was a club! I declare, I’m getting as jumpy as Sissy,” she laughed to herself, as she stooped down to pick them up.

Realizing that she must not subject the timid orphan girl to too long a wait, she hurriedly completed her investigation and turned to leave the room. At that moment the white curtains, fluttering in the open window, captured her attention.

“The country people will think that Watch Hill is haunted by a dancing, white ghost,” she conjectured. “Those swaying things almost baffled me. I think I’ll close the window.”

She moved forward to transfer the thought into action, when she halted abruptly. Had she heard a strange, sinister chuckle? She listened intently, but the sound was not repeated. However, from the driveway below there came the loud roar of an automobile motor. Perry and Ronald had returned to take the injured man to the hospital.

Completely forgetting the strange noise, Kay darted to the open window. It was indeed Ronald’s car, but the two young men were partially hidden from view by the tall tree near which they had parked.

“Hello, below!” she called, waving her hand.

Nobody heard her at first, so she leaned far out of the window in an effort to attract the boys’ attention. So engrossed was she that she did not hear a sound behind her; neither did she see a trap-door in the ceiling slowly open.

For the past ten minutes her every movement had been observed by the leering assailant of the injured musician. He



had been eagerly awaiting this opportunity to come into the room. With an evil chuckle he now swung himself down through the opening and dropped lightly to the floor directly back of Kay.

“I’ll be right down!” the Tracey girl shouted, for she had succeeded in attracting the attention of the two boys.

“Right you are, my little beauty!” a diabolical voice hissed in her ear. “And here you go!”

With a deft movement her assailant caught the unsuspecting Kay by her feet, and pushed her through the open window!

## CHAPTER XV

### A CLOSE CALL

Ronald and Perry, standing below, were horror-stricken to see Kay suddenly pitch forward out of the open window. They could not see anyone else and thought that she was losing her balance.

“Hold on! Hold on!” Ronald shouted, running forward.

After the first terrified cry Kay uttered no sound. She tried to struggle against the madman, but he held her in an iron grip. She dared not look down at the hard, yawning ground three stories below. Instead, she gazed upward, and her heart leaped high with sudden hope. Only a few inches away was a sturdy bough of the tree upon which she had rested when investigating the fluttering curtains in the window some time before.

“If I can only reach it!” she thought.

With a quick movement, which took her attacker by surprise, she stretched upward and outward, and grasped the limb. She hurled herself toward it, at the same time kicking at her enemy.

The man emitted an angry howl of pain and released her feet. Kay swung herself along the limb which

sagged low under her weight. Inch by inch she pulled herself toward safety.

“Hold on! We’ll get you in a second!” Perry cried encouragingly.

He started to climb the tree.

“No! No!” Kay shouted. “I’m safe now. Get that man who pushed me from the window!”

The two boys stared up at the third floor, and caught their first glimpse of the leering individual, who quickly sprang away from the window. Ronald and Perry hesitated, for they did not like to leave Kay in such a predicament.

“Go on, go on!” the girl urged them frantically.

Satisfied that she was able to take care of herself, the two young men raced toward the house, while the girl, gazing back into the music room, saw her assailant dart into the hall. She tried to call out this information to Ronald and Perry, but they were too far away to hear her. They had already entered the house.

Considerably shaken by her narrow escape from certain death, Kay paused for several minutes before climbing down from the tree. She wished that she might have obtained a better view of the man, for she was convinced that he was the person who had struck the musician. As Sissy had suggested, it was possible that the fellow likewise was entirely responsible for Mr. Cornwall’s mysterious disappearance.

Scarcely had Kay reached the ground than an unearthly shriek pierced the air.

“Help! Help!”

Kay recognized Sissy’s voice. Fearful that the pursued man might have attacked her friend, she raced for the house. There she discovered Sissy in the living room, crouching in terror by the door.

“Oh, Kay! This dreadful place is inhabited by lunatics!”

“Tell me what happened!”

“Perry and Ronald came in and rushed upstairs. I don’t know what was the matter with them.”

“Never mind that now, Sissy. Was that all that frightened you?”

“Oh, no! I came to the doorway to see what was wrong. A man jumped out of the hall closet right at me!”

“Which way did he go?”

“He pushed me out of his path and ran through the back door.”

“Then I must have come in by the front entrance just as he escaped,” Kay cried impatiently. “If I’d only stayed by the tree I might have caught him.”

Perry and Ronald returned to the lower floor, but reported a futile search of the upper story.

“Never mind hunting farther just now,” Kay said with an apprehensive glance toward the musician, who lay unconscious upon the cot. “We must get this man to the hospital at once.”

“Ronald and I stopped at the first house we came to and phoned for an ambulance,” Perry explained. “We thought it would be less strenuous for the poor fellow than to be bumping over fields and rough roads in Ronald’s car.”

“I think I hear an automobile coming now!” Kay exclaimed hopefully.

It was the hospital ambulance. Two attendants hurried to the house with a stretcher and gently carried the man to the waiting conveyance. Then, with the vehicle on its way again, the young people sat down to talk over what had happened and what they had best do. Kay wanted to continue their search for her assailant. This suggestion was followed, but so much time had elapsed since they had seen him that they could not find a trace of the culprit.

Near the back door Kay did notice several large footprints, which appeared to have been made that day. She insisted upon measuring them. A comparison of them with the shoes worn by Ronald and Perry proved that the tracks had not been caused by either of the boys.

“Do you wish to take our fingerprints, too?” Ronald teased the girl.

“Not this time. I just wanted to make sure that I was getting the culprit’s footprints and not yours.”

“But what good will that do you?” Ronald asked doubtfully.

“Maybe it’s just a waste of effort,” Kay smiled.

“However, I have an idea.”

A few minutes later she led her puzzled friends to the third floor bedroom. Perry was indignant when the girl showed him the clothing which had been strewn about the place.

“I’m sure those garments never belonged to Uncle Martin. Someone has been using this room while he has been away!”

“That’s what I thought,” the Tracey girl declared, picking up one of the shoes. “Now, if the measurements will only tally I may have a little added information.”

By this time Kay’s friends realized what her purpose was, and watched her admiringly. However, the girl’s triumphant smile faded suddenly.

“They don’t match. Now I am at a loss as to what to think.”

“We’ve had enough excitement for one day, in my opinion,” Perry said suddenly. He had noticed Sissy’s drawn, white face. “I move that we close up the house and go away from here.”

“I second the motion,” Ronald chimed in heartily.

“I’m terrified for fear that horrible man may come back,” Sissy confessed, smiling wanly toward Perry. “I’ll be glad when I can leave this place.”

Kay was the only one not ready to depart, but with three against her she did not offer any objection to the plan. Ronald locked the window in the music salon, and they all went downstairs. A brief search of the lower floor convinced the young people that no one was hiding there, so they went out by the front entrance and closed the door which had a snap lock.

“Let’s stop at the hospital and see how that poor musician is getting along,” suggested Kay, as their car headed for home. “We’ll have time for a brief call. I cannot rest until I know he’s out of danger.”

In response to their inquiry at the institution, the young people were informed that it would be impossible for them to see the patient.

“The man has not recovered consciousness,” the nurse at the information desk told them. “He is gravely ill.”

This was news which produced an unhappy effect upon the little group. As Ronald drove Sissy and Kay home, few words were spoken among them.

Upon reaching the Tracey residence, the girls saw two automobiles parked at the curb. One of them belonged to Bill

Tracey; the other they recognized as Samuel Bramley's sedan.

“Oh, Kay,” Sissy cried, her spirits soaring, “do you suppose Mr. Bramley's here to turn over the property to me?”

“I can't imagine what else could have brought him.”

“That surely must be the reason why he came,” Sissy declared happily. “Thank goodness, I'll soon have my money, and this awful suspense will be over!”

Bidding their escorts good-bye, the girls hurried up the walk to the house. In many respects the day had been a harrowing one for them. Now Kay felt that if Sissy should receive her inheritance, everything would turn out all right after all.

It was a vain hope, however. As the two girls gaily flung open the door, neither of them had the slightest premonition of the blow that was soon destined to fall!



## CHAPTER XVI

### A SCRAP OF PAPER

Entering the living room, Kay saw at once that something was amiss. While standing in the hallway she had heard Samuel Bramley's voice raised in argument. Could the two lawyers be discussing some legal technicality?

"Please sit down," Cousin Bill said to the girls. His eyes were flashing. "Mr. Bramley has something to tell you, Sissy."

"Not very good news, I fear," the pompous lawyer said in a voice he forced to sound cheerful. "You see, Miss Weller, another young lady about your own age has recently turned up, and she claims to be the rightful heiress to the Snyder fortune."

"Up to this time, her claim has been far from established," Cousin Bill interposed. "She appears to be an impostor."

"Perhaps she is," Mr. Bramley admitted, "but you can understand the position in which I have been placed. This girl's claims must be investigated thoroughly before I can turn over any money or property to Miss Weller. Strange as it may seem, the two young women strongly resemble each other."

Sissy was too stunned by this news to utter a word. It was Kay who demanded suspiciously:

“Who brought this girl to your attention, Mr. Bramley?”

“She came to my office alone.”

“And her story convinced you that she had a rightful claim to the fortune?”

“On the contrary, she told me a very disconnected tale. However, as I have just said, she bears a remarkable resemblance to Miss Weller. To protect myself, I must be very careful how I dispose of the estate. Now, if Miss Weller had some written proof of her identity——”

“That’s just the whole trouble,” Sissy burst out despondently. “I haven’t proof of anything. For all I know, this other girl may be the real heiress.”

“Nonsense,” Cousin Bill checked her quickly. “We all feel that you’re rightfully entitled to the fortune. This other claim is a very awkward one. As Mr. Bramley says, it will have to be investigated. In the meantime, I’ll get to work to see if I can dig up a little documentary proof for your side.”

“I’ll do all I can to help you,” Kay said with feeling. “Sissy should have the money, and I’ll not sit back and let an impostor take it from her!”

The two lawyers smiled at the girl’s determined tone. Then Mr. Bramley arose to depart. When the door had closed

behind him, Sissy, who had been restraining herself with difficulty, burst into tears.

“Oh, I just felt that something dreadful like this would happen!” she cried. “Now what shall I do? I’ve borrowed money from Mrs. Tracey, and I shall never be able to repay her.”

Kay’s mother had entered the room in time to hear Sissy’s remark. She went over to the girl and embraced her warmly.

“My dear child, don’t give that trifling sum another instant’s thought. You have been a great help to me, and that has repaid me many times over.”

Sissy bravely blinked away her tears.

“I so wanted to be *somebody*—a person that really counted. It has all turned out just as Ethel Eaton said it would, and I’m just a nobody after all!”

“You’re a very charming person,” Kay assured her friend. “Money or the lack of it cannot alter that fact. Cheer up, Sissy. It’s a bad break for you, of course, but we’ll all do everything in our power to help you.”

“And when Kay takes up a case seriously, good results are bound to follow,” Cousin Bill said heartily. “If the girl Mr. Bramley spoke of is an impostor, as she doubtless is, she’ll betray that fact sooner or later.”

“If I only had some proof to show that I am Christine Cleveland!”

“I’m sure we’ll find it,” Kay declared. “We aren’t going to give up. Don’t forget that, Sissy.”

The Tracey girl was thinking of the injured musician, the tramp who had been responsible for bringing Sissy’s name to Mr. Bramley’s attention. He must surely know something about the orphan girl. If he only would recover consciousness and talk about the matter!

“I’ll call on him the first thing tomorrow,” Kay decided. “Perhaps he will be much better.”

That evening she telephoned the hospital to inquire about the man, and was happy to learn that he was indeed recovering.

“I wish to see him before he leaves,” Kay explained. “May he have visitors?”

“He will be confined here for some time yet,” the nurse assured her. “In about two days you may see him.”

The next morning was rainy, so the girls stayed at home. Late in the afternoon Perry called at the Tracey house. When he heard the trend matters had taken in regard to Sissy’s inheritance, he expressed his sympathy and did his best to cheer the orphan, although he was very much in need of encouragement himself.

Kay felt that both he and Sissy were depending upon her to help them solve their problems, and she was eager to be of assistance. Yet, unless the tramp held within his grasp the key to the mystery, she felt she could do very little indeed. Perry expressed a desire to talk to the injured man, so before he left

he arranged to take the girls to see the patient the following day.

Ten o'clock the next morning found the young people in the lobby of the hospital. The nurse at the desk looked distressed as Kay inquired about the person they wished to call upon.

"I'll have you talk with the head nurse," she said after an instant's hesitation. "I don't know what information the authorities wish to give out."

"He's not worse, is he?" Kay asked anxiously.

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that."

The attendant pressed a button. A few minutes later the young people were greeted by a woman they assumed was in charge of the institution.

"Are you the young lady who sent the patient to us?" she inquired of Kay.

"Yes. If he is well enough, we should like to talk with him for a few minutes."

"I'm sorry, but he left this morning."

"But when I phoned here I was told that he must remain for several days!"

"He should have done so. How he managed to escape without being seen by anyone I cannot understand."

“You mean he just walked off?” Kay questioned in amazement.

“Yes. For the first time this morning he was allowed to get dressed. He seemed quite like himself. While the nurse was preparing his breakfast tray, the man disappeared. We have tried to locate him, but thus far have failed. Perhaps you can tell us where he might be likely to have gone.”

“I have no idea,” said Kay.

“But surely you know his name, and where he lives?”

“He was a total stranger to me,” the girl explained.

“He left the hospital without paying his bill,” the woman continued. “When we accepted him as a patient we assumed that friends or relatives would be responsible for any expenses incurred by him. Otherwise, we should have placed him in a free ward.”

“To my knowledge the man has neither friends nor relatives,” Kay said. “However, under the circumstances I’ll pay the bill.”

She was relieved to learn that the fellow had been charged for only one full day of hospital care, so the amount incurred was not large. Kay had sufficient funds in her purse with which to take care of it.

“This certainly is a bit of hard luck,” the girl said to her companions as they left. “I have no idea now how I’ll ever find the musician.”

It also occurred to her that the severe blow he had received might have impaired his memory. In that event, even though she should manage to locate him, he might never be able to tell her what she wanted to know. Then, too, the tramp had acted strangely even before his injury. Might it not have been possible that at some previous time he had suffered a mental shock which now accounted for his actions? Recalling his unexplained visit to Watch Hill, the theory seemed a reasonable one to Kay.

“It’s possible this second blow has brought back to him his real past,” she mused. “Oh, it’s all a muddle! I don’t know what to think.”

Sissy was depressed by the fellow’s unfortunate disappearance, for she had pinned great hopes upon what he might tell her. If he could not enlighten her about her parents, then she doubted that anyone could do so.

Kay was baffled, but far from discouraged. The many strange angles to the case intrigued her interest. She felt that in time she would be able to piece together some of the seemingly irrelevant scraps of information she had gathered. For instance, what was the connection between the tramp-musician and Martin Cornwall? Why had the injured harpist invaded the closed house at Watch Hill?

“The next time you drive to your uncle’s place, I’d like to go along,” Kay suddenly said to Perry. “I am not completely convinced that I’ve searched the house thoroughly for clues.”

“I plan to go there this afternoon. I’ve engaged two colored women to clean, and I want to be on hand to look after things. I’d be delighted if you and Sissy would accompany me.”

So it was arranged. Shortly after luncheon the three young people arrived at Watch Hill. The colored maids were waiting on the back steps when the party arrived, eager to get inside and begin their work. Perry unlocked the door and showed the women where brooms, mops, and dust-cloths were kept.

Kay wandered upstairs to the third floor music salon. Nothing had been disturbed since her last visit there. She glanced up toward the trap-door in the ceiling, and shuddered a little. Perry had explained that it led into an overhead attic in which a large tank had once been stored. Now that running water had been piped to Watch Hill, the receptacle was no longer used. Kay decided to climb up sometime and investigate for herself.

She moved over to the window through which she had fallen several days before. An object on the floor attracted her attention. It was a button from a man’s suit. As she picked it up, she said to herself:

“I wonder if it was torn off when I struggled with that desperate maniac.” Dropping it into her pocket, she mused, “It isn’t much of a clue, but it may lead to something.”

Kay rejoined her friends downstairs. Sissy had taken charge of the two maids, and the cleaning was progressing rapidly.



Realizing that the little orphan girl was in her element when she could attend to household duties, Kay was relieved to find she would have to take no active part in the supervision. She accordingly roamed about the lower floor, searching nooks and corners in the hope of discovering another secret panel. The dust was so thick in the living room that she finally went into the library.

However, Sissy and the maids soon descended upon her, and she was forced to move again. Secretly Kay was a little amused at the orphan girl's industry. She would not allow the colored women to overlook a single corner, insisting that they move all the heavy pieces of furniture and dust behind them.

"I never saw so much dirt," she complained to Kay. "Mr. Cornwall needs a housekeeper to look after him. Why, I don't believe that desk has been moved once in the past ten years!"

She indicated a fine old mahogany secretary which the maids were trying to lift. As they raised it from its casters, a slip of paper fluttered to the floor. One of the women was on the verge of sweeping it out when Kay darted forward and snatched it from the débris.

"What is it?" Sissy asked curiously. "You're the greatest person for finding things I've ever known."

She glanced curiously over Kay's shoulder. The paper appeared to be a torn portion of a concert program, and bore the name of a London theatre. "Selections from 'Faust',

played by George Rubinoff, Harpist,” had been underlined in pencil, while directly above were penciled the words, “Very good.”

“Oh, it’s only an old concert program,” Sissy commented in disappointment.

Kay was elated with her find.

“I wonder if this is written in Mr. Cornwall’s hand?” she asked herself. “It may give me just the clue I need!”

Without attempting to explain her act, she hurried away to find Perry.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A TELL-TALE INITIAL

Sissy, trailing her chum to the living room a few minutes later, found Kay and Perry engaged in an animated discussion of the program.

“Uncle Martin frequently went to the London theatres, and was very fond of fine music, especially the opera.”

“Can you identify his handwriting?” Kay asked eagerly. “Were the two words ‘very good’ written by him?”

Perry studied the penciled notation.

“Yes, I think they were. It seems to me that I’ve heard him mention a harpist by the name of Rubinoff.”

“That’s all I need to know!”

“Now where are you going?” Perry demanded, as Kay dashed up the stairs.

“Follow me and you’ll see,” she challenged.

With Sissy bringing up the rear, they went once more to the salon. The golden harp still stood on the stage. As Kay went directly to the instrument, the orphan inquired, “What are you looking for?”

Inch by inch Kay was examining the harp.

“You don’t think that the man who was hurt here——”

“I’ve found it!” Kay cried triumphantly.

She pointed to the initials “G. R.,” which were painted on the instrument in such tiny letters that few persons would ever have noticed them.

“G. R.—George Rubinoff!” Perry exclaimed. “My, but you are a wonder, Kay.”

“I think we can be fairly certain now that the man whom we brought to the hospital was George Rubinoff,” Kay smiled, delighted with her discovery.

“But why was he disguised as a tramp?” Sissy demanded in perplexity.

“Perhaps he has lost all his money,” Perry suggested. “What I’d like to know is, how could he get into my uncle’s house with that big harp?”

This was a question Kay did not attempt to answer. Thoughtfully she began picking at the strings. Soon her clever fingers were playing a simple but harmonious melody. Sissy and Perry listened in awe to her strumming.

“You’re a born musician!” the orphan girl cried. “I wish I had your talent.”

“It’s nothing to be able to pick out a little tune, but it takes years of practice to become a real harpist. Here, you try it, Sissy.”

“Oh, I couldn’t!”

Nevertheless, the Weller girl was induced to take her turn at the instrument. At first she could make no headway on it, but after Kay had guided her friend’s fingers she was able to pick out a few measures of a popular song. Perry also was urged to try his luck, but after several rank discords he gave the harp back to Kay.

“You’re the only musician in the crowd,” he said. “Play that first piece again.”

The Tracey girl was only too glad to do so, for she found the stringed instrument fascinating, and decided to buy one for herself some day. Sissy and Perry listened to her rendition for a while, then moved away where they could talk alone.

Kay did not mind being left to herself, for she was absorbed in her attempts at playing. She gained confidence as she gradually learned the location of the notes, and struck the strings with greater force.

Suddenly the velvet curtains near the place where she was sitting began to sway gently. Kay watched, fascinated. Then, remembering what had befallen the harpist under similar circumstances, she sprang to her feet and jerked the drapes apart.

There stood the tramp-musician before Kay's startled gaze! His head was bandaged. He swayed unsteadily upon his feet, and stared at the girl in a startled, almost dazed manner. Then, mumbling incoherently, he turned and shuffled away. Kay ran up to the man and caught him by the arm.

"Wait! You mustn't leave!" she cried, looking frantically about for Perry, and calling his name.

Young Cornwall came running to her aid, and between them they assisted the bewildered musician to a nearby divan. He gave a tired sigh as his head touched the pillow.

"Are you George Rubinoff?" Kay questioned gently, leaning over the man.

For a long moment he did not speak. Then, recovering himself, he uttered a word which seemed wrung from his very heart:

"Once."

"Why are you here?" Kay asked him kindly. "You were at one time a famous harpist—now you wear the garb of—of a poor man."

Rubinoff smiled sadly. That was his only answer. Kay tried several methods of approach, but to each question the musician would merely shake his head in a bewildered manner. Was he dazed, or just pretending to be? Kay could not be certain.

"You are a harpist?" Rubinoff asked the girl presently.

“Oh, no!”

“You are very clever, however. I heard your music and watched you play.”

“How did you manage to get into the house?” Kay asked quickly; but again the man shook his head in a baffled way and failed to reply.

Just then Sissy drew near. The stranger watched her with interest, but gave no other sign of recognition. Unaware that Kay had failed in her attempt to glean any information from him, the orphan Sissy fell to questioning the man in an attempt to learn if he knew anything of her past.

“I’m sure you could tell me about myself if you only would,” she cried finally in exasperation. “I cannot understand why you are so stubborn. Kay has done a lot for you. She even paid your hospital bill!”

At this revelation, a different light came into George Rubinoff’s eyes. As he looked at Kay, the girl grew embarrassed, and wished that Sissy had not told him of her having assisted him. Moreover, she felt sure he was in possession of all faculties.

The orphan girl was in a talkative mood. Emotionally upset because she felt that the musician was withholding important information from her, she deluged him with a torrent of words, ceasing only when she had related to him the entire story of her unhappy life.

Rubinoff shifted uneasily upon the divan. Kay could see that he was deeply affected by the girl's recital. He looked even more troubled when Perry quietly explained to him about the strange disappearance of his uncle.

"Perhaps I owe you an account of myself," the man said unwillingly. "I met Mr. Cornwall in London several years ago when I was a well-known musician. Life looked very rosy to me. But I lost my sweetheart, and after that something went out of my playing. I could no longer earn money that way so after a time I came to America. Mr. Cornwall would often ask me to come here.

"I became a detective, and Martin did everything in his power to help me get a start. He employed me to investigate what had become of certain funds entrusted to the Heather Home for Children. I slept here on the third floor, and would keep my harp in this salon, playing upon it during my leisure moments. Even though my work as a detective has been sufficiently lucrative to establish me in a fine house of my own, I continue to look upon this place as my home. At present I am working on a special case. Mr. Cornwall engaged me to find for him the heiress to the Snyder fortune."

Kay had been listening with bated breath. Now she eagerly asked a question.

"Then does that explain the reason why you made so many inquiries about Sissy that day you noticed her at Mrs. Barling's home?"



“I came in disguise to Brantwood because of my work. When I saw Miss Weller on the train I observed her striking resemblance to a photograph of Mrs. Cleveland. I followed the girl.”

“And was it you who sent word of her whereabouts to Samuel Bramley?”

“Yes,” Mr. Rubinoff smiled. “I knew that the lawyer was searching for her.”

“How very kind of you,” Sissy declared warmly.

“Perhaps you can tell me what has become of my uncle,” Perry suggested hopefully.

The noted detective shook his head regretfully.

“I wish I could. His disappearance is as baffling to me as it is to you.”

“Do you suppose the person who took the Heather Home funds could have had anything to do with it?” Kay probed.

Rubinoff would not commit himself. The girl tried a different approach.

“Isn’t it possible that the man who attacked you might also have kidnaped Mr. Cornwall?”

“Quite possible, yes.”

Kay felt that her questions were not getting them anywhere.

“Have you no idea who it was that struck you from behind the curtain, Mr. Rubinoff?”

“None whatsoever. But I intend to find out! And when I do, I’ll land that fellow in prison for life!”

Kay realized it would be useless to quiz the detective further. He was better versed in the art of questions and answers than she, and meant to divulge no important information. If he actually had a clue as to the identity of his assailant, he doubtless did not care to entrust it to Kay and her friends.

“I guess I’ll never see my uncle again,” Perry commented in a discouraged tone. “I’ve had a good firm working on the case—Bellis and Fort—but thus far they’ve found no worthwhile clues.”

“Don’t be too impatient,” Rubinoff advised him quietly. “Everything takes time to work out.”

“It seems to me there’s been too much waiting already!”

The man regarded Perry curiously. He started to reply, but the words were never uttered, for suddenly a cry rang out from the lower floor.

“Stop, thief!”

A door slammed. Then there came a loud, pounding noise. By this time Kay and Perry were halfway downstairs, with the others following at a discreet distance. They found the library looking as if a whirlwind had swept

through it. A chair lay overturned, while the contents of a desk had been completely rifled.

An impatient pounding upon a closet door attracted everyone's attention.

"Help! Help!" came the muffled cry.

Perry turned the key in the lock and jerked the door wide open. The two colored women stumbled out into the room. Excitedly they told their story. A man had sneaked up behind them while they were cleaning the closet, and before they had realized his intention, he had imprisoned them.

"It was probably the same fellow who was here before!" Kay declared, crossing the room to examine the desk. "At first I thought he might be a demented person, but this visit makes it appear that he is looking for something in this house."

"I can't imagine what it could be," Perry said.

An object upon the rug attracted Kay's attention. Quickly she bent down and picked it up.

"A pocket-knife!" Perry exclaimed with interest. "The intruder must have dropped it."

Thoughtfully Kay turned the object over in her hand. She indicated a small engraved initial, the letter "T".

"Our most valuable clue to date," she smiled. "If you were to give me three guesses, I think I could name the thief!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A LOST BUTTON

George Rubinoff and Sissy reached the library in time to hear Kay's last remark. They forthwith joined Perry in urging her to tell them the name of the mysterious intruder. Smilingly she refused to accept the challenge.

Instead she turned to the two trembling colored women and asked them for a description of the man who had locked them up in the closet. As she had feared, the maids had been too terrified to notice much about the appearance of their assailant.

"He had big black eyes like a snake," one contributed.

"An' he wore a flashy suit wid a button gone from de coat," the other added.

"Not a very comprehensive description," Rubinoff smiled. "I fear it won't be of much use."

Kay thought otherwise. She had already made a shrewd guess as to the identity of the man, and now the clue of the missing button explained a number of interesting facts to her. She could hardly conceal her elation as she began to rummage in her purse.

"What are you looking for?" Sissy asked in surprise.

“Oh, I hope I’ve not lost it,” Kay said breathlessly.

“No, here it is!” Triumphant she displayed a small black coat button, and recounted tensely how it had come into her possession.

“But that doesn’t explain who the marauder is,” Rubinoff stated.

Kay deftly produced the pocket-knife bearing the engraved initial.

“I suppose ‘T’ might stand for a dozen different names, but to me it means only one, and that is Tagg—Otto Tagg!” said the Tracey girl.

“Great Scott!” Perry exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of that myself? The man was furious when I discharged him. How very like him to seek revenge!”

“I am convinced he is a vicious person,” Kay continued. “I believe it was Tagg who struck Mr. Rubinoff and also pushed me from the window.”

“Where did you find the button?” the musician questioned.

“Near the window through which I fell. In the struggle between me and my assailant it must have been torn off.”

The detective nodded thoughtfully. After a moment’s deliberation he decided to offer a little information of his own.

“I had not intended to speak of this, but now that Miss Tracey has produced so much evidence I may as well tell you what is on my mind. For some time I have been suspicious of Tagg, and have reason to believe that he is implicated in the loss of funds from the Heather Home.”

“Then his object in coming here must have been to destroy any papers or records that might incriminate him,” Kay said alertly.

“Exactly.” The detective smiled in unfeigned admiration at the girl’s powers of deduction.

“Tagg is the man we must get, all right,” Perry said angrily. “If I find that he has harmed my uncle, jail will be much too good for him!”

The desk had been hurriedly, if not thoroughly, rifled. Papers and letters lay scattered about on the carpet. Kay now began to gather them up to place them in some semblance of order.

“Can you tell if anything is missing, Perry?”

“I believe Uncle Martin kept but little of value in the desk—only a few unimportant records and personal letters.”

“They may have been the very documents Tagg was after, though. A letter which might appear unimportant to your uncle could prove to be damaging evidence against Tagg.”

“That’s true,” Perry admitted, looking through the papers Kay handed him.

“What can these be?” the girl queried, observing some envelopes bearing postmarks of several years past.

“I have never seen them before,” said Perry.

“May I look at them?”

“Of course.”

Kay’s face was a study as she examined their contents. Then she laughed softly.

“This must have been what Otto Tagg was after! In his haste he overlooked it.”

They all crowded about her, interested in her find.

“I haven’t been able to make out exactly what they mean,” Kay said, “but the missives seem to have reference to an automobile that was stolen from Mr. Cornwall.”

“Oh, yes,” Perry recalled, “my uncle told me he spent a great deal of money tracking down the thief.”

“That appears to be only part of the story,” Kay smiled, offering the letters for the others to inspect. “Tagg was the man who stole the car!”

“Tagg!” Perry cried bitterly. “And to think I employed him to try to locate Uncle Martin! What a chump I’ve been.”

“You couldn’t have known anything about this affair, for it was quite involved. Tagg stole the car, but before he’d gone

many miles with it he had an accident which resulted in the death of two persons. Then he fled.”

“Was he caught?” Sissy asked.

“Yes, according to the letters, but not for several months. Before that time Mr. Cornwall was charged with the crime of manslaughter.”

“Oh, how dreadful!”

“Uncle Martin never told me about it,” Perry said, “for I must have been away at school about that time. I do recall his being troubled about something, but he was never the type to annoy anyone with his worries.”

“Mr. Cornwall is one of the finest, most unselfish men I have ever met,” the detective interposed.

“What happened after Mr. Cornwall was accused of the crime?” Sissy demanded impatiently.

“Everything is related in the notes. He engaged lawyers to defend him, and spent considerable sums to clear himself. Tagg was later apprehended. He denied any part in the crime, but there was sufficient circumstantial evidence to convict him of manslaughter. He was sent to prison, but had served only a part of his term when he escaped. Some time after that he forged Mr. Cornwall’s name to a check.”

Perry read the contents of the envelopes, and as he did so his face flushed angrily.



“It’s maddening to think how easily I was taken in by that fellow! I have actually been employing a fugitive!”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Kay said. “Anyone could have made the same mistake.”

“I should have been a better judge of character. The scoundrel told me a smooth story. I met him up at Franklin. Probably he came to the college town for that purpose. I didn’t pay much attention to him at first, but he always seemed to be at every place I chanced to go to.”

“Did he talk to you about your uncle’s affairs, such as where he kept his papers, and the like?” Rubinoff inquired.

“Well, not right at first. After Uncle Martin vanished so suddenly, I guess I must have grown indiscreet. Tagg told me he was a detective and I was gullible enough to believe him. I finally engaged him to come here and investigate my uncle’s disappearance for me.”

“You played right into his hands,” Rubinoff commented.

“Yes, but gradually I began to see that something was wrong. When I found Tagg threatening Miss Tracey and snooping about the house I discharged him. I doubt that he has ever been a detective, and believe it was just a ruse on his part to get into the house. He wanted to locate some of Uncle Martin’s records that pertained to him.”

“Evidently he has been unsuccessful, or he wouldn’t keep coming back,” Kay remarked. “I’d lock those missives in a

safe place if I were you, Perry.”

“Oh, I shall. And I’d better dispose of Uncle’s files, too. He always kept a copy of each letter he answered.”

Kay was intensely interested. A little later, when Perry went through all the records, she induced the lad to permit her to read all the correspondence concerning Otto Tagg and the stolen car.

“If we find that man, this case will have been solved,” Perry said, his voice trembling with emotion. “It’s natural that he should hate Uncle Martin for having sent him to prison. If I find he’s harmed him in any way, I’ll spend the rest of my days tracking Otto Tagg down!”

Kay smiled as she laid aside the letters she had just read.

“I doubt if that will be necessary, Perry.”

“What do you mean? Don’t you believe Tagg is responsible for my uncle’s disappearance?”

“Somehow, I don’t feel entirely convinced of it. Your relative is a very clever man. If you’ll read these missives you’ll see that for yourself.”

“Oh, you mean Uncle Martin wasn’t easily taken in?”

“Not by a person of Otto Tagg’s stamp,” Kay said. “Mr. Cornwall is the type of person who knows how to look out for himself—he’d not be easily trapped by anyone.”

“I don’t understand what you’re driving at,” Perry said in perplexity.

“Perhaps I don’t know myself,” Kay laughed, arising. “Do I smell the odor of food cooking? Unless I’m mistaken, Sissy is preparing luncheon for us in the kitchen!”

The orphan had fixed a nourishing soup she thought would be especially good for the detective. His pallor worried her, and throughout the meal she kept urging him to eat sufficient to regain his strength. Kay and Perry did not suffer from any lack of appetite. After the latter had finished his second piece of pie, he gazed at Sissy with an expression akin to adoration.

A few minutes later, as Kay was about to go to the kitchen to help wash and dry the dishes, she was interrupted by Rubinoff, who asked: “May I speak with you alone for a moment?”

Kay anticipated that the detective wanted to consult her about Mr. Cornwall’s disappearance. However, as they faced each other in the study he drew from his pocket a well-filled wallet.

“I can’t express how grateful I am to you for the way you have helped me. Allow me to reimburse you for my hospital bill.”

Kay started to protest, then thought she had better do as the man wished.

“The sum was trifling,” she said. “Ten dollars will cover everything.”

Rubinoff stripped two five-dollar bills from the roll. As he did so, a hard, metallic object fell to the floor. It was a key. Kay’s eyes fell upon it, and the detective, observing the look, felt impelled to explain why he had it in his possession.

“Just an article I found some days ago,” he said.

Kay’s heart leaped. It looked exactly like the one which belonged to Mrs. Barling’s house. If only she might obtain it! The detective made it unnecessary for her to offer a request.

“The thing has been cluttering up my wallet for days,” he said. “I think I’ll throw it away.”

“I’ll save you the trouble,” Kay smiled, triumphantly pocketing the key. “If I can’t find a door it will fit, then I can keep it as a charm!”

## **CHAPTER XIX**

### **A DISTURBING DISCOVERY**

“Look what I have!” Kay called out to the orphan girl.

“The key!” Sissy cried. “Oh, where did you locate it? I’m so relieved, because I was afraid someone might find it and break into Mrs. Barling’s house.”

Kay explained that George Rubinoff had recovered it, and Sissy was convinced that the key would fit the lock in the mansion. The animated discussion was brought to an end when Perry reluctantly drew attention to the clock. The hour was late.

“We must start for home at once,” Kay declared. “How time does fly when we are at Watch Hill.”

The Cornwall youth paid the colored women for their services, and went to bid Rubinoff good-bye, but the detective could not be located. Apparently, he had already left the house. Kay was reluctant to depart without talking again with the man; but after fifteen minutes’ delay she agreed that it would be foolish to wait in the hope that he might return.

“At least, he seems to be his normal self again,” she said. “It isn’t likely that he intends to stay away for good. He’ll keep

in touch with us until Mr. Cornwall is found.”

It was nearly six o'clock before the young people reached Brantwood, for everything seemed to conspire to delay them. Half a mile from a filling station they ran out of gasoline. Perry hailed a passing car and went to get some while the girls waited. A little farther on Sissy lost her hat. As a crowning mishap, a tire blew out.

“This certainly has been a bewitched day for us,” Kay laughed, as the three young people finally drew up at the Tracey home. “Still, in some ways it has been lucky, so I shouldn't complain.”

Mrs. Tracey came out to greet them at that moment. She cordially invited Perry to remain to dinner, and after some insistence on her part he accepted the invitation.

“Where's Cousin Bill?” Kay asked suddenly, noticing that his car was not in the garage.

“He won't be here this evening. He was called out of town on business.”

“To Ware City?” Kay demanded hopefully.

“No, it had nothing to do with Sissy's case.”

“Well, no news is good news.”

“I'm afraid that's not always the case,” Sissy remarked in a discouraged tone. “Now that another girl who resembles me claims the fortune, I may never get any of the money. I have

imposed on your hospitality too long as it is, and must leave shortly.”

Kay slipped her arm about the orphan’s waist.

“You’ll do no such thing, Sissy. We want you here, and we mean to keep you, too!”

“Of course,” Mrs. Tracey added heartily. “You must stay with us until you find a home. Don’t give the matter another thought.”

Dinner was not served until after seven. As the girls were drying dishes, Wilma and Betty came to the house to call. They perched themselves upon the kitchen table and listened round-eyed to all that had occurred during the day.

“You certainly manage to stir up more excitement than any other person I have ever known!” Betty said to Kay. “I know you’ll soon have Sissy’s fortune secure for her, too.”

“I hope so.”

“Just think of all the marvelous things you’ll be able to do with your money, Sissy,” Betty went on enthusiastically. “You can buy a castle, if you like, and establish yourself in it like a princess.”

Wilma, inspired by the thought, burst forth dramatically:

“You’ve heard of castles on the Rhine  
And castles in the air—  
Of warriors of the olden time

Who fought for ladies fair—  
But stranger far than tales of old—”

Betty giggled and composed the next line.

“Is Sissy and her bags of gold!”

“The story is so puzzling I fear I’ll never be able to capture that elusive old bag of treasure,” Sissy declared, scarcely knowing whether to laugh or to cry. “Sometimes I begin to doubt that I am the lost heiress.”

“Several people have said you are the living image of Evelyn Cleveland,” Kay reminded her. “That should prove something.”

The doorbell rang at this moment and Kay answered it. Ronald stood before her with news.

“I am sure Mrs. Barling is home,” he said.

“What makes you think that?” the Tracey girl asked quickly.

“As I passed her house a few minutes ago I thought I saw a light in an upper floor room. It gleamed through a slit in a curtain.”

Sissy and Kay exchanged quick glances. So Ronald, too, had noticed the mysterious illumination!

“If Mrs. Barling were home, surely someone would have seen her about the grounds,” Kay said with a troubled frown.



“That light tantalizes me. I’m going over there the first thing in the morning and let myself in.”

“Not without a key,” Betty reminded her friend impishly.

“Oh, but I have one now. Didn’t I tell you?”

Kay produced the article which she had received from George Rubinoff, and explained to her friends how it had come into the detective’s hands, then into her own. As the twins were ready to leave some time later, Kay urged them to return early the next morning, that they might go over to the Barling house with her and Sissy.

“We’ll meet you there at eight o’clock,” Betty promised.

“Nothing like an early start when you’re working on a mystery.”

The twins were never any too prompt. Somewhat to Kay’s surprise, however, they were waiting for her at the Barling grounds when she and Sissy arrived at the appointed hour.

“I believe nobody is at home,” Wilma said. “The place is as silent as a tomb.”

“I’ll ring the bell, anyway,” Kay decided.

There was no response, so after a brief wait the girl inserted the key into the lock. To her delight it turned.

“I knew it was the one I had lost! Come on, girls!” she cried.

Kay led the way into the living room, and cast a quick, anxious glance about her. To her relief everything seemed to be just as she and Sissy had left it.

“Ronald must have imagined he saw a light,” Betty said. “No one has been inside this house since it was closed up.”

“I’m not so sure about that!” Kay suddenly exclaimed. “Girls, the jade elephant is missing!”

“Why, so it is!” Sissy agreed, horrified. “Oh, do you suppose someone broke in and stole it?”

“And one of the paintings has disappeared!” Kay indicated a square of bright wallpaper that stood out in marked contrast to the surrounding faded area.

“It seems to me an expensive vase was standing over here on this table,” Wilma added.

“Yes, and it’s gone, too,” Kay cried. “Now that I can observe things closely I see that at least a dozen articles have been taken from this room.”

“What will Mrs. Barling say when she returns?” Sissy gasped. “We were responsible for closing up the house.”

“We’re in an awkward position, to say the least. Let’s go to the second floor and see if anything else has been taken.”

Kay’s face grew tense as loss after loss was revealed. It was evident that none of the windows had been broken or even unlocked. How had the thief entered?

“It’s really all my fault for having been so careless,” Kay said accusingly. “Oh, girls, this is an awful state of affairs.”

Sinking into a chair, she tried to figure things out. So many persons had visited the mansion the day it was closed up. First there was the antique dealer. Then had come the carpenter, the plumber, and George Rubinoff. Even though the key had been in the possession of the tramp-musician, Kay could not believe that he had entered the place surreptitiously.

“I hope we can keep the news of the theft quiet,” she said slowly.

“Yes,” Sissy agreed, fairly beside herself with anxiety. “But it may be weeks before Mrs. Barling returns.”

Kay nodded. She knew what her first move should be. Reluctantly she arose.

“Well, girls, I may as well do it,” she said.

“Where are you going?” Sissy asked, as Kay turned toward the door.

“To the police station. I shall make a complete report.”

“I guess that’s the best thing to do.” Sissy admitted reluctantly.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes, girls. I wish you’d wait here for me.”

“Perhaps you’ll need us to bail you out of jail,” Betty said in a feeble attempt at a joke.

Kay was gone nearly half an hour. At last the twins, who had been anxiously awaiting her return, caught sight of her coming down the street in company with a policeman.

“This might grow into a scandal,” Wilma remarked gloomily. “See who is standing across the street, taking it all in.”

“Ethel Eaton!” Sissy cried. “How that girl does like to make trouble.”

“And you can always depend on her to be around when something goes wrong,” Betty added.

A moment later Kay and the officer paused before the Barling house. Their entry was closely observed by Ethel. Finally, with a triumphant smile, she hurried down the street.

“She’ll spread the report that Kay has been arrested,” Betty predicted. “Just wait and see if she doesn’t.”

Kay, too, had noted Ethel’s keen interest in her activities, and had an idea that the girl would place the worst possible interpretation upon the incident.

In telling her story to the Chief of Police, Kay had held back nothing, nor had she made any attempt to shift the blame from herself to another. She felt certain the official believed her; yet his frown told her more plainly than words could that

he feared serious trouble might develop upon Mrs. Barling's return. A detective was immediately assigned to the case.

Kay conducted the man from room to room, pointing out the places from which the art objects had been stolen. While they were looking over the upper floor the doorbell rang loudly. Wilma ran to answer it, and returned almost at once with a look of great distress on her face.

“Reporters, Kay! They insist upon seeing you!”

“Don't let them in. We must hush up this story if we can.”

Wilma eyed her chum gloomily.

“It's too late to keep anything quiet now. Ethel Eaton has spread the news all over town. You'll have to talk to these men, Kay.”

## CHAPTER XX

### ETHEL'S REVENGE

Kay spent an embarrassing fifteen minutes sparring with the reporters. In vain did she plead with them to keep the story out of the papers until Mrs. Barling's return. The men replied that news was news, and that if Kay would not divulge the facts in the case they would obtain them from the police station direct. Finally the girl was obliged to give out a brief statement.

Once through with the reporters, she again turned her attention to the investigation. The officer assigned to the case made a routine examination of the house, listened attentively to Kay's account of all the suspicious persons who had visited the place, and returned to headquarters with the data.

"We'll round up these men and question them," the policeman assured her before he left. "One of them is probably the thief."

Kay assented to this procedure half-heartedly. The longer she considered the matter, the more inclined she was to doubt that Charlie Lester, Clymer, or even the antique dealer had put to their use the knowledge that the Barling house was vacant. The very fact that all circumstantial evidence pointed to their guilt caused her to grope about for a less obvious theory.

Tagg! Like a flash the name came into Kay's mind. There was nothing tangible to connect him with the theft, yet her sense of intuition told her that he might very possibly be the guilty person.

“He hates me, and would love to avenge himself,” she thought. “It would be an easy matter for him to learn that I was responsible for locking up the Barling place.”

The conviction grew in her mind. If only she could locate Otto Tagg! He had apparently vanished into thin air, it appeared.

“I'll not have much chance of finding him when a famous detective like Rubinoff has failed,” Kay mused ruefully.

A phone call from police headquarters informed her that Clymer and the two other men had been brought for questioning and released because of lack of evidence after they had denied any part in the theft.

“We're not convinced their stories ring true, however,” the Chief of Police told Kay. “They're being shadowed, and we hope to have something worth-while to report within a day or two.”

The afternoon papers carried an exaggerated account of the theft, and Kay's part in the affair was vividly played up. After reading the story the girl threw the sheet aside in disgust, convinced that the reporters had gleaned most of their information from Ethel Eaton.

Of this Kay became certain late that afternoon, when in making a trip to a grocery store she came face to face with the girl.

“Well, so you’ve broken out into print again, Kay Tracey!”

“Yes, thanks to your help,” the other could not refrain from retorting. “I think it was downright mean of you to tip off those reporters.”

“Oh, do you? Just an amusing way of my own of getting even. You needn’t think you can be my friend, and at the same time encourage Bill Tracey to cheat my father out of his timberland!”

“So that’s what’s the matter? Ethel Eaton, you force me to say that I think you’re trying to make trouble.”

“Oh, I know you think you’re better than I am—you and that weepy, clinging-vine of a Sissy. But when she loses out on her fortune, I guess you’ll both sing a different tune!”

“It may be your father instead who will lose out,” Kay smiled serenely. “Good afternoon, Ethel.”

When Kay returned home she carefully avoided mentioning to Sissy her recent encounter. The orphan girl was plunged into deep gloom over the theft of Mrs. Barling’s art treasures, and her friend did not care to add to the girl’s unhappiness.

“I wonder where Cousin Bill has gone,” she speculated. “Mother says his trip had nothing to do



with Sissy's fortune, but somehow I feel she may be mistaken."

The young lawyer had not returned at dinner time. The girls missed his good-natured banter, and the meal passed with only spasmodic attempts at conversation. The evening dragged on, and still Bill Tracey did not appear. At ten o'clock Kay and Sissy decided to retire. Scarcely had they disrobed than they heard the roar of a car on the driveway. Kay snapped off the light and peered out from behind the curtain of her window.

"It's Cousin Bill," she said. "I'm glad he's back."

She was half tempted to dress, but changed her mind and jumped into bed. However, a few minutes later Mrs. Tracey tiptoed into the room.

"Asleep, dear?"

Kay sat upright in bed.

"Bill is here, and he has some news for you."

"I suppose he has heard all about the theft."

"I really cannot say. Would you like to get up and talk to him?"

"Of course. I'll bring Sissy, too. It will take us only a second to dress."

A few minutes later the two girls entered the living room.

“Before you say anything, I want to tell you that the newspaper stories weren’t accurate,” Kay told her relative.

Cousin Bill stared at her blankly.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you know about the theft I’m implicated in?”

“No, but if you’re in a mood to confess I may as well hear the details. What did you steal?”

“I didn’t steal anything, but I may be blamed for not having prevented some other people from breaking into Mrs. Barling’s house.”

Kay then gave an account of the day’s happenings, feeling greatly cheered when Cousin Bill assured her that if the stolen property were not recovered before Mrs. Barling’s return, he himself would explain the entire matter to the widow.

“That’s one interview I’ll be glad to turn over to you, Cousin Bill. I tremble with apprehension whenever I think of trying to make Mrs. Barling believe my story.”

“She should be grateful to you for having assisted old Eliza when she became ill.”

“Perhaps. Just the same, she’ll surely be very much upset when she learns that her art treasures are gone. But let’s not talk about it now. Tell us, Cousin Bill, what is the news you have?”

“I was called out of town to see a client of mine. On my way home I stopped off for a few hours at Crag Point.”

“Why, that was where Evelyn and Horace Cleveland lived!” Kay exclaimed.

“Did you learn anything?” Sissy demanded eagerly.

Cousin Bill had meant to tantalize Kay by withholding his information a while, but one glimpse at the orphan girl’s tense face caused him to change his mind.

“I found out a great deal. I am hoping that what I have gleaned will help you to establish your claim, Sissy. Look at this.”

He drew a photograph from his pocket, and handed it to the girls.

“Why, it looks exactly like Sissy,” Kay declared, greatly impressed. “Cousin Bill, is this by any chance a picture of Mrs. Cleveland?”

“Yes, it is.”

“My own mother,” Sissy murmured, tears in her eyes. “How very beautiful she is.”

“You’ll look exactly like her in ten more years,” Cousin Bill declared.

“How did you ever get the photo?” Kay demanded impatiently. “Tell us the whole story.”

“Well, I stopped off at Crag Point and inquired about the Clevelands. It took me several hours to find anyone who remembered them. Finally I located a woman who said she had once lived next door to Evelyn and Horace Cleveland before they moved away. I secured the picture from her.”

“Did she remember Sissy at all?”

“No, the child had not been born at the time they lived at Crag Point.”

Sissy’s face fell at this information. But her eyes again sparkled with interest as Cousin Bill drew a letter from his pocket.

“Documentary evidence!” Kay cried triumphantly.

“This missive was written by Mrs. Cleveland to her neighbor. She sent it at the time her daughter Christine was born, and mentioned in it that her baby was perfect in every way save for a triangular-shaped birthmark on the top of her head.”

“Then that birthmark should definitely prove Sissy’s right to the fortune,” Kay declared happily.

“If she has the mark.”

“Oh, Sissy, it’s wonderful—why, what’s the matter?”

The orphan girl had sagged into a chair. Burying her head in her hands, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

“This ends all my chances,” she said between her tears. “I’m not the heiress, for I haven’t the triangular-shaped birthmark!”

## CHAPTER XXI

### ON THE TRAIL

“Dear me, dear me, this is too bad,” Cousin Bill said uncomfortably. “I thought when I secured the letter it would help Sissy to establish her right to the fortune.”

Kay tried to comfort her friend. “How do you know you haven’t a triangular-shaped mark on your head, Sissy?”

“I’ve never seen it.”

“Of course not. How could you look at the top of your head when your hair covers it? Here, let me see. I’ll wager the blemish is there.”

Sissy’s tears vanished as swiftly as they had come, and soon she was smiling again. She bowed her head for Kay to part the hair.

“Is it there? Tell me!”

At first the Tracey girl did not answer; then she gave a happy cry.

“Yes, here it is! The letter was right! Sissy, you are the heiress—Christine Cleveland!”

“Oh, I’m so happy!”

Sissy hugged Kay and Mrs. Tracey, but paused abashed before Cousin Bill.

“Don’t I get in on it, too?” the lawyer chuckled. “After all, it was I who found the letter.”

Sissy flushed. Then, upon a sudden impulse, she flung her arms about the man. Everyone laughed.

“Oh, I love you all! You’ve been so good to me, so wonderful! You’ve made all my dreams come true!”

“The fortune isn’t in your possession yet,” Cousin Bill reminded Sissy, “but I think we’ll have no trouble convincing Bramley now. I suggest we all drive over to Ware City tomorrow and look him up.”

“Kay simply cannot miss another day of school,” Mrs. Tracey interposed.

“Then you go in my place, Mother. If you don’t get back by evening I can stay with Wilma and Betty.”

The twins were overjoyed to have Kay as their guest, but Mrs. Tracey was troubled.

“I doubt if I’ll return by evening,” she told her daughter as they bade each other good-bye the next morning. “I’m sure you’ll be quite safe, but I worry about this unfortunate Barling affair.”

“There’s no need for you to do so, Mother. The story has been told now.”

“But if there should be any unpleasant developments——”

“Kay will prove herself more than a match for any trouble-maker,” Cousin Bill interrupted.

Mrs. Tracey smiled, and permitted her nephew to assist her into the car beside Sissy.

“I wish you could come with us,” the latter said wistfully to Kay.

“I’ll have a good time with my reading, writing and arithmetic!” her friend laughed.

Kay stood waving until the car was out of sight. Then, gathering her books together, she started for the railroad station to meet Wilma and Betty. All that day the Tracey girl caught herself wishing that she might have gone to Ware City. School was something of a trying ordeal, for everyone had read the account of the Barling thefts in the newspapers, and she could hardly concentrate on work. None of her friends thought that Kay was responsible for the unfortunate affair, yet it was only natural that they should ask her a great many questions about it. Nor did the troublesome inquiries end with the ringing of the closing bell. To Kay’s embarrassment a policeman was waiting for her at the Brantwood station when she and her chums left the train which had brought them from Carmont.

“Do you mind coming with me to headquarters?” the officer asked. “The Chief wants to talk to you again.”



Kay nodded, and glanced quickly about her. Ethel Eaton was only a few paces behind them.

“Such luck,” the Tracey girl complained to her chums.

Kay accompanied the officer, promising to see her friends at the Worth home in a short while. In exactly twenty minutes she joined the twins who were anxiously awaiting her in their garden.

“It wasn’t anything of importance,” Kay informed them. “Mostly routine questions. The Chief wants me to try to locate Eliza.”

“How will you be able to do that when you don’t know where she went?” Betty demanded.

“Let the police find her,” Wilma added.

“It’s really to my interest to trace her,” said Kay. “I think I have a clue. I did some telephoning from the police station.”

“Where *did* Eliza go?” Betty asked curiously. “She isn’t in Lynhurst, because you looked for her there.”

“A moving van company told me her son and his family had moved to Bellewood, and gave me the street and number. I’d like to drive over there this afternoon, if I can borrow a car.”

“Then we’ll go with you,” Wilma said. “If you have the address it shouldn’t take us long.”

Explaining to Mrs. Worth that they might be late for dinner, the girls set out for Bellewood. The town was not far away. However, a few miles from Brantwood they ran into a detour. In some unexplainable manner Kay failed to make the correct turn back onto the main road, so time was lost. When she discovered her mistake, she retraced her route, and compensated for her error by speeding up a little.

The sun was still high when Kay brought her car to a halt in front of the house which was their destination. When they rang the bell, an elderly woman came to the door.

“Yes, Eliza is here,” she said in response to a question, “but she is very ill and in no condition to see anyone.”

Kay and her chums expressed their sympathy at the woman’s poor health, explaining that they had driven all the way from Brantwood to see the housekeeper.

“You’re not Miss Tracey, are you?” the woman suddenly asked.

“Yes, I am,” returned Kay.

“Then please come in. Eliza has spoken of you often. If you promise not to excite her, I’ll take you to her room.”

Mrs. Barling’s housekeeper smiled warmly as the girls entered the bedroom, but her face was white and drawn. The woman who attended her slipped an extra pillow behind the patient’s back so that she might be more comfortable as she talked. At first Kay was careful to reveal nothing of the theft, but listened quietly while Eliza spoke of her mistress.

“Mrs. Barling was very lonesome after her husband died. She always said that the house seemed terribly empty. Now that she’s had the place closed up I guess she’ll never go back there to live again.”

In a careful manner that would not shock Eliza, Kay told the woman of the unfortunate theft from her mistress’s mansion. She was relieved that the housekeeper took the matter so philosophically.

“Well, it doesn’t surprise me very much, though it upsets me to hear about it. I’ve often warned Mrs. Barling that she shouldn’t leave her treasures unprotected.”

“I feel as if I were responsible for the loss,” said Kay.

“Indeed you’re not, Miss. I don’t know what would have become of the place if you hadn’t taken charge. Mrs. Barling will feel bad about her things being stolen, but it just couldn’t be helped.”

“I hope the police will recover everything before she returns,” said Kay.

Eliza nodded in agreement.

“At any rate, I’m glad that most of my valuables were locked up. My father left me a few stocks and bonds when he died. I’ve always kept them in Mrs. Barling’s strong-box.”

“But wasn’t that a rather inconvenient place for you?” Kay asked quickly, as she recalled the “ghost” she had seen one

night at the Barling home. Now she felt convinced that it had been Eliza.

“Mrs. Barling entrusted me with the combination,” the housekeeper explained. “I took my things from the box whenever I wished.”

Kay now broached the subject in which she was most interested.

“Tell me, Eliza, did you ever know a man by the name of Tagg—Otto Tagg?”

The housekeeper repeated the name thoughtfully, then shook her head.

“No, I believe I have never met him. Why do you ask?”

Kay made an evasive answer, which satisfied the woman. A little later the girls bade her good-bye, and left the house. They had driven only a short distance when Kay stopped at a filling station for gasoline. She paid the bill and was ready to go on, when she saw a familiar looking car parked just beyond the stand.

“Isn’t that Mr. Eaton in that car, girls?”

“It looks like him,” Wilma agreed. “I wonder what Ethel’s father is doing way out here in the country?”

“He’s having a private conference with someone. Am I seeing things, or is that Otto Tagg with him?”

Kay started her motor and drove the car directly behind the other automobile. She shut off the engine, but even with the comparative quiet could hear nothing of the conversation between the two men.

Feeling justified in trying to learn why the fugitive and Mr. Eaton were together, she decided upon a daring plan. She glanced quickly about. No one was in sight. Before the twins could protest, she left the automobile and crept quietly toward the other vehicle. Hiding behind the rear of the car, she could overhear part of the conversation. The men were discussing the Snyder timber tract!

“Now I’m sure I know the third party in the deal,” Kay said to herself. “It *must* be Tagg!”

In an attempt to catch even more of what was being said, the girl moved a trifle closer. The glass of the side window was down halfway. If she could get near the opening she might be able to learn more of the plot! Stealthily she crept around to the lowered pane and slowly raised herself to a crouching position.

Just at that instant Tagg turned his head!

## CHAPTER XXII

### AN ACCUSATION

Kay dodged behind the rear of the car just in time to escape detection. She breathed more easily after several minutes had passed and nothing happened. Tagg had evidently not seen her!

The voices of the two men had dropped to an inaudible murmur, but Kay had heard enough to cause her to suspect that they were plotting to defraud Sissy Weller of her share of the timber tract. She gathered, too, that they were soon going over to Mr. Eaton's home.

As the car drove away shortly thereafter Kay ran back to her friends to report what she had learned. Scarcely had she told her story than another machine drew up to the gas station.

"Hello," called a familiar voice. "I thought I recognized your car." Before them was the smiling face of Perry Cornwall.

Kay was very happy to see him, for she needed his advice at that moment.

"I've just located Tagg again," she explained to him hurriedly. "He is on his way to the Eaton home."

"You shouldn't follow him there alone," Perry warned her.

“But we mustn’t let him get away without our questioning him.”

“I’m enroute to Watch Hill now to meet Rubinoff. He telephoned me about fifteen minutes ago. Why not go there, pick him up, and then follow Tagg? If he’s going to Eaton’s house, it’s likely he’ll stay there for some time.”

Kay instantly agreed to the plan. If they should succeed in cornering the pseudo-detective it would be a very good thing to have an older man along, particularly a detective as shrewd as Rubinoff.

Watch Hill was found to be deserted when the group arrived there. Perry was certain, however, that the detective would keep the appointment he had with him.

“I think his memory is less clear since he was struck on the head,” Kay remarked. “Oh, I do hope he gets here soon.”

Thinking that the man might possibly be on the third floor of the building they all went up to the music salon. The place was empty, and the young people were about to leave the room when Kay observed that the open outside door was causing a draught which was noticeably swaying the blue velvet curtains.

“Every time I see those drapes move in that way I feel as if something were about to happen,” she declared.

“Oh, it’s nothing this time,” Perry said.

“Just the same, I’m going to take a look.”

The girl crossed the room and drew aside the heavy material.

“Well, of all things!” she exclaimed, dumbfounded.

At her feet lay the art treasures which had been taken from Mrs. Barling’s living room!

Perry and the twins hurried over to examine the cache.

“Rubinoff must have brought those things here!” the youth cried indignantly. “The man is either demented or a crook!”

“I don’t know what to make of this,” Kay admitted. “It’s the greatest surprise of my life.”

“Before very long, the police will be accusing me of the crime,” Perry said, looking worried. “What shall I do, Kay?”

Before the girl could answer him, footsteps were heard in the hall. Hastily drawing the curtains back into place, Kay motioned for her friends to hide. Rubinoff entered the room very slowly. He seemed to hesitate, then walked over to the harp, seated himself, and began to strum the strings.

There suddenly came a loud thumping on the outside door of the floor below. The musician did not appear to hear it, and Kay and her friends felt that they would be unable to answer the summons without disclosing their presence.

On and on the man played. At any other time Kay would have been thrilled with the beautiful music, but a certain sixth sense now warned her that something terrible was about to happen. Did she imagine it, or did she hear footsteps coming up the stairway?



Suddenly two uniformed police officers with drawn revolvers faced the startled Rubinoff.

“Hands up!” they ordered crisply.

Slowly the detective obeyed. “What is the meaning of this outrage?” he demanded impatiently.

“It means that you’re under arrest for stealing loot from the home of Mrs. Barling. You were seen prowling about the house. Where are your accomplices?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I am alone here—waiting for some friends of mine.”

“A likely story! We followed your accomplices here. Search the house, Jake.”

While one of the officers covered Rubinoff, the other addressed as Jake began a systematic search of the salon. He pulled back the velvet curtain, and revealed not only Kay and her friends, but the Barling treasures as well.

“Well, we’ve caught you with the goods!” he said triumphantly. “Step out—you—and don’t try any funny business.”

“We can explain everything,” Kay began. “We found this loot here. You can’t arrest us without listening to our story.”

“You can tell it to the Chief!”

“I’ve never before heard of anything so outrageous,” stormed Betty. “As if we’d steal anything!”

“We didn’t see the loot until a minute ago,” Wilma insisted. “Someone planted the stuff here to throw suspicion on us.”

Perry gazed suspiciously at Rubinoff, but the man did not speak. Kay, on the other hand, had trusted the detective, and had arrived at a different theory as to how the loot had reached the Cornwall mansion. She knew better than to try to make the two officers listen to her, and the harpist, too, realized the futility of arguing with them.

“Come along,” one of the policemen ordered impatiently. “We can’t stall here all day.”

It was humiliating for Kay and her friends to march down the stairs under guard, and be ushered unceremoniously into a private police car.

“How Ethel Eaton would enjoy it if she could see us now,” Betty murmured disconsolately, as they all rushed toward Brantwood.

“We’ll get everything cleaned up,” Kay said cheerily. “In the meantime, Otto Tagg may escape, and that would really be tragic!”

It was almost dark as the official auto drove up to the station house. Kay and her chums were glad that none of their acquaintances were near by to see them enter headquarters. Rubinoff throughout the ride had maintained a deep silence, though at times a faint smile of amusement had

seemed to flicker across his face. He threw off his lethargic demeanor as they entered the police station.

“Your Honor,” he said, addressing the Captain, “these officers, in pursuing their duties too zealously have made a very stupid error. I am George Rubinoff, and I can vouch for the honesty of my friends.”

Before the man spoke his name, the judge had recognized the noted detective. He turned sternly to the two policemen.

“What is the meaning of this? Why have you arrested Mr. Rubinoff?”

“We found the loot in the Cornwall house where we followed this man and his friends,” one of the officers stammered. “If we’d known he was working on the case—that he was Rubinoff——”

“We tried to explain,” Kay interposed, “but you wouldn’t listen to anything.”

“Miss Tracey has been endeavoring more than anyone else to aid in recovering the Barling loot,” Perry informed the judge. “Just as these officers interfered she was on the trail of a noted criminal.”

“Is that true?” the judge asked.

Kay nodded.

“Yes, I think I know who is responsible for Mr. Cornwall’s disappearance. I also suspect that Otto Tagg actually stole the

art treasures from Mrs. Barling's home and placed them in the Cornwall house so as to incriminate Perry and myself."

"We did receive an anonymous tip that the loot would be found there," one of the crestfallen officers admitted.

"Where can this man Tagg be found?" the judge asked.

"At the home of Oliver Eaton," Kay answered promptly. "I overheard the two men plotting about some land." She then told all that had transpired, adding that if Tagg could not be held for the robbery, he was still wanted on the old charge against him.

"Bring both men in for questioning," the judge ordered.

Twenty minutes later the two conspirators were ushered into the police station. At first they did not see Kay or her friends.

"You can't hold me!" Tagg cried furiously, struggling with the officers. "There's no evidence against me!"

His eyes suddenly fell upon the loot which had been brought from the Cornwall house. His jaw dropped.

"So you recognize it, eh?" one of the policemen demanded.

"Recognize what?" Tagg countered. "I never before in my life saw that pile of junk."

"What right have you to bring respectable citizens here on such a ridiculous, trumped-up charge?" Oliver Eaton

demanded coldly. “Who is responsible for this outrage?”

Then he saw Kay, and his face became convulsed with anger.

“You!” he shouted. “I might have known that you were at the bottom of this, Kay Tracey! But just wait until I tell my story! Then we’ll see who gets the last laugh!”

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A REVEALING FACT

As Kay and her friends had expected, Oliver Eaton and Otto Tagg entered a flat denial of all charges against them. The evidence in reference to the former was flimsy. However, a search of police records revealed that the ex-convict Tagg was wanted on the old charge of forging checks, and therefore would have to serve the remainder of his prison sentence. At first the scoundrel insisted that he was not Tagg. However, when an old photograph from the police files had been identified, he admitted that he was indeed the fugitive.

“You’ve got me, boys,” he said gruffly. “I’m ready to go back to prison, only first I want to make a phone call. I have a little business to settle up.”

His request was granted, and in the custody of an officer he was permitted to go to an adjoining room where there was a public telephone.

“Well, that settles Otto Tagg for good and all,” Perry said in relief to Kay. “Now, if they can only make him tell what he did to my uncle——”

The sentence was never finished. From the adjoining room came a hoarse shout, the clatter of a chair crashing against the wall, and the sound of running feet. Kay

was only a pace behind some officers who sprang for the door with drawn pistols.

But they were too late. Tagg had fled, and the policeman in whose custody the culprit had been placed lay upon the floor, a splintered chair beside him.

“He started to telephone,” the injured officer murmured, “and the next thing I knew the chair came down over my head!”

“Quick, men!” Rubinoff cried, leading the way. “He can’t be far away. We’ll get him back.”

Kay and her friends, freed of all charges, waited half an hour for the policemen to return. As time dragged on they knew that Tagg had succeeded in cleverly eluding his pursuers, and that days might elapse ere he would be apprehended.

“I suppose we may as well leave,” Kay said at length, and the others agreed.

Oliver Eaton had previously left the station, since he could not be held on suspicion alone. In departing, he had flashed Kay a significant look which told her that he would not forget the humiliation she had inflicted upon him.

“He means to make trouble for me if he can,” Kay remarked to her chums as they walked slowly toward the Worth home. “He’ll be careful to keep me from learning anything about the lumber tract deal, too.”

“I’m sure he’s almost as guilty as Tagg,” Betty declared feelingly, “only he has a better reputation and

he's too shrewd to show his hand. Kay, do you think he was responsible for planting the loot in the Cornwall house?"

"I doubt it. My theory is that Tagg did it to throw suspicion upon either Perry or myself. He hates us both. He probably tipped off the police, too."

"Well, he certainly stepped into trouble when he tried that little trick," Wilma said. "I hope the police catch him."

"So do I," Kay agreed. "If he remains at large I'll be afraid to go out alone on dark nights!"

"You know you won't," Betty laughed. "I really believe you like dangerous adventures."

Kay did not feel especially elated over the happenings of the afternoon. To be sure, the stolen art treasures had been recovered, but Tagg was still at large. Even should he be captured, he might not be able to explain what had become of Martin Cornwall. The mystery of that man's disappearance remained as baffling as ever.

Mrs. Worth had dinner ready for the girls when they reached the house. As they were eating dessert, Kay was summoned to the telephone. The long distance operator from Ware City was calling.

"Here is your party," she said mechanically.

Kay heard her mother's voice at the end of the wire.



“How are you, dear? I’ve been a little worried about you. . . . All right? That’s fine. . . . Everything is progressing nicely here, but it may be some time before Sissy’s affairs are settled. Why don’t you come over on the train tomorrow?”

“I’d love to, Mother.”

“Then we’ll look for you. Oh, by the way, I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything further about that unfortunate Barling affair, have you?”

“All the bric-a-brac has been recovered.” Kay thought it best not to worry her mother by relating any of the unpleasant details. The story could wait until she got to Ware City.

“I’m so glad you’re entirely cleared of any connection with it,” Mrs. Tracey said in relief. “Don’t miss your train tomorrow. Good-bye, dear.”

The next morning Wilma and Betty accompanied Kay to the railroad station. Since the journey would require several hours, they brought their friend candy and magazines. For some time the Tracey girl nibbled at the sweets and made a pretense of reading a story; yet try as she would, she could not keep her attention focused upon the printed page.

“Sissy’s troubles are nearly over,” she reflected, as the scenery passed by quickly, “but I’ve done almost nothing to help Perry find his uncle. Now that I’m going to Ware City I’ll be too far away to be of further assistance.”

She was annoyed to have to leave a mystery unsolved. Not only had she failed to aid Perry, but she had made no

progress in tracing the elusive Mrs. Barling.

“Of course, I never really worked on that angle of the case,” she thought. “Now that I’m leaving Brantwood, it’s too late for me to think of it.”

The train had stopped at a station longer than usual, but Kay did not notice this particularly, as she walked through the cars toward the diner. She was confronted by a porter.

“If yo’ is lookin’ fo’ de dinah, Miss, yo’ cain’t go in yet. We’s had some trouble, an’ a new cah is bein’ switched on heah at Clearwater.”

“Clearwater!” Kay exclaimed. “Is that the name of this place?” At once she recalled that this was the town where Mrs. Barling had spent some vacations.

“Yes, Miss, dis is Clearwater.”

“How long will we be here?”

“De conductor he say fifteen minutes.”

Kay thought rapidly and had an inspiration. In fifteen minutes she would have ample time to leave the train and inquire if Mrs. Barling were in the city. There was a possible chance that the missing woman might have returned to the summer resort.

“If yo’ is leavin’ de cah, don’ go fah, Miss,” the porter warned her.

Kay scarcely heard him as she swung herself down from the steps.

“To the Majestic Hotel, and drive as fast as you can!” Kay ordered the first cabman she saw.

Her watch warned her that she had only seven minutes before train-time when she finally reached the hostelry.

“Is a Mrs. Barling staying here?” she demanded of the astonished clerk.

“She did have a room,” the man informed her. “Her name is changed now, however.”

“Changed?” Kay caught him up. “What do you mean?”

From the railroad station several blocks away there came the long, shrill whistle of the train.

“Mrs. Barling came here to recover from an accident,” the clerk explained. “She met an old friend and they were married.”

“Tell me her new name,” Kay urged frantically.

“Cornwall!”

Another long blast of the whistle warned Kay that she dared not tarry. Without taking time to explain anything to the bewildered clerk, the girl ran from the hotel and leaped into the waiting cab.

“To the station!” she ordered. “We haven’t an instant to spare!”

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A TRICK EXPOSED

Kay had her fare ready as the cab rolled up to the station. The trainman had waved for the engineer to start. The girl ran, and made a flying leap for the hand-holds of the last car. With the aid of a porter she scrambled aboard.

“Yo’ fatha musta been a head brakeman, lady, de way yo’ swung yo’self aboard,” the colored attendant declared admiringly. “Yo’ is suah lively on yo’ feet! But don’ do dat no mo’. Yo’ wuz bustin’ de rules an’ takin’ a chance at bustin’ yo’ neck along wid ’em.”

“I don’t intend to try it again,” Kay gasped, struggling to regain her breath.

The diner had meanwhile been switched on, so Kay went in for luncheon, but was far too excited to do justice to the delicious food served her. Even now she found it difficult to believe the astounding bit of information she had gathered. Mrs. Barling married! And to a man named Cornwall! Could the hotel clerk have meant Martin Cornwall? If only she might have remained long enough to have asked one more question! Kay was still reflecting upon the strange situation when the train pulled into Ware City, where Mrs. Tracey and Sissy met her at the station.

“Everything is turning out splendidly,” the orphan girl told her chum glowingly. “Mr. Bramley says I have established positive proof that I am Christine Cleveland and am therefore entitled to the entire fortune. The other girl who claimed to be the heiress has left without a word—she’s frightened for fear she’ll be jailed for attempted fraud.”

“You’ll hear the entire story when you reach Mr. Bramley’s office,” Mrs. Tracey added.

“I owe everything to you, Kay,” the orphan declared gratefully. “It is wonderful of you to be here.”

A surprise awaited Kay at the lawyer’s office. As she entered the room, she observed that in addition to Mr. Bramley and Cousin Bill, another man was present. He was Oliver Eaton. Kay steeled herself to hear an assault of angry invectives hurled against herself. Instead, Ethel’s father addressed her in a polite tone of voice.

“I feel I owe you an apology, Miss Tracey,” he said. “I have just found out who Otto Tagg really is. I came here at once to straighten out the tangle concerning the timber land.”

“Has Tagg been captured yet?” Kay asked eagerly.

Oliver Eaton shook his head.

“Not that I have heard. He is a clever scoundrel, and I admit that I was fooled by him. He led me to believe that we were entitled to cut timber from the land.”

“Mr. Eaton has promised to make complete restitution to the estate,” Cousin Bill informed her.

“Yes, yes, indeed,” the man agreed, though somewhat ruefully. “I shall be glad to pay Miss Cleveland whatever you feel the cut timber is worth.”

Mr. Bramley offered papers for Mr. Eaton to sign, and after doing so, he left the office. Kay and the others then openly exulted over the good fortune which had come to Sissy.

“You’ll have so much money you won’t know what to do with it,” Kay declared. “Everything has turned out just as I hoped! Now, if only Otto Tagg can be caught and Mr. Cornwall located, everything will end well.”

“We must celebrate my good fortune,” Sissy declared. “Tonight I want you all to accompany me to a good show—or better still, the opera. I think *Faust* is being rendered.”

“Of course, we’d love to go,” Mrs. Tracey smiled.

“I should like it very much,” Kay said enthusiastically.

“I wish Perry and Ronald might be with us, too,” Sissy said a trifle wistfully. “Then it would seem just like a real party.”

“We could wire them,” Kay declared. “In fact, it’s really important that I see Perry tonight. I think I have a clue that may help him trace his uncle.”

The message was promptly phoned to the telegraph office. Then, in response to her friends’ eager questions, Kay related

to them everything that had taken place at the Brantwood police station, as well as her experience at Clearwater.

“I believe you’ve hit upon the solution to the mystery,” Cousin Bill said positively. “Of course, until we can find either Mrs. Barling or Martin Cornwall, it will be impossible for us to be certain.”

“Locating them shall be my next task,” Kay stated.

Within an hour a wire was received from Brantwood, conveying an acceptance to the invitation to the opera. Sissy was overjoyed to learn that Perry and Ronald would be present. To celebrate the occasion properly, she had secured choice box seats.

The curtain had just gone up on the first act as the group finally reached the theater. Even so, many persons looked in their direction as they took their seats in the box. Sissy and Kay in their evening dresses made an attractive picture, long to be remembered.

The music was beautiful, and the acting superb. Kay listened enthralled, scarcely aware of the passing of time. As the performance approached a dramatic climax, the orchestra swung into the strains of the familiar song which heralds the entrance of Mephistopheles. The selection was the one Kay had heard George Rubinoff play on his harp, and she leaned forward tensely in her seat.

“Don’t look so excited,” Ronald whispered teasingly. “The man with the club won’t appear in this scene!”



Kay laughed gaily, and relaxed. For an instant she actually had felt as if something dreadful were about to happen—something having no connection whatever with the opera *Faust*.

To relieve her feeling of mental strain, the girl glanced over the audience. A swaying curtain in another box caught her eye. She shivered a little. As an usher carefully drew aside the velvet hangings, a man and a woman entered and took their seats.

“Am I dreaming?” Kay asked herself, scarcely trusting her own eyes.

The woman was Mrs. Barling!

“Her companion must be Mr. Cornwall,” the girl thought jubilantly as she recalled the information given her by the hotel clerk at Clearwater.

She was tempted to divert Perry’s attention to the couple. However, he appeared to be so absorbed in the stirring rendition of the opera that she decided to wait. After all, should the man not be his uncle, the disappointment might spoil the youth’s evening for him. Kay decided it would be better for her to investigate the matter alone.

Unobserved by her friends, Kay quietly left her seat and made her way down the long corridor. The final scene of the first act came to an end amid thunderous applause just as Kay reached the box in which the two old

people were seated. She waited an instant, then drew aside the velvet curtains.

“Mrs. Barling, I believe?” the girl smiled, addressing the distinguished looking lady in a black evening gown.

“Dear me, if it isn’t Kay Tracey from Brantwood! Do come in! I’d like to present my husband, Mr. Cornwall—Martin Cornwall.”

Kay murmured an appropriate response to the introduction, although she scarcely realized what she was saying. She exulted inwardly to think that at last success was to be hers. She had found Perry’s lost uncle! How relieved everyone would be when she should reveal the whole truth of the matter. She was already planning the glorious reunion.

“Mrs. Cornwall, I must speak to you and your husband after the opera,” Kay said hurriedly. “I dislike troubling you, only the matter is of vital importance to you.”

The couple looked slightly puzzled. However, Mrs. Cornwall smiled graciously.

“Certainly, my dear. We’ll meet you here after the final curtain.”

The warning bell announced the end of a brief intermission, so Kay had no opportunity to say anything further. She returned forthwith to her friends.

“Whatever became of you?” Sissy demanded in a Whisper. “You vanished so mysteriously.”

Kay had decided not to divulge her good news until the performance should end. It was a difficult resolution for her to keep. Throughout the last act she moved restlessly in her seat, eager for the moment when she might tell of her discovery. Finally the curtain was lowered, and the audience arose to depart.

“Perry, I have a wonderful surprise for you,” Kay began.

Sissy, who had not heard her remark, interrupted her with a little cry of alarm.

“Oh, I’ve lost my bag! The new one Mrs. Tracey helped me select this morning!”

“It must be in the box,” Cousin Bill declared.

“You had it just a few minutes ago,” Perry added.

“We can’t leave until I’ve found it,” Sissy said anxiously. “It was such a frightfully expensive purse.”

The group began a search for the missing article. Almost ten minutes had elapsed when Mrs. Tracey located the little beaded bag in an obscure corner.

“What was the surprise you had for me?” Perry then asked Kay.

“I’ve found your uncle!”

Perry stared as if in disbelief.

“Where is he?” the young man demanded.

“Right here in this very theater. If you’ll come with me I’ll take you to him.”

As the group left the box, Kay hastily explained how she had located Mrs. Barling and her husband.

“It seems almost fantastic to me,” Perry declared.

“Kay, are you certain it wasn’t some other Martin Cornwall?”

“I’ll let you be the judge of that,” Kay smiled confidently.

Upon reaching the Cornwall box, the girl drew aside the velvet curtains. She stared incredulously at the vacant chairs. The place was empty!

## CHAPTER XXV

### KAY'S EXPLANATION

Perry was too discouraged to speak. Kay tried to cheer him by saying:

“Perhaps it isn’t too late to find them. They may still be in the foyer.”

With the others following at a more dignified pace, the Tracey girl and Perry hurried to the lobby and hopefully surveyed the departing crowd, but the Cornwalls were nowhere to be seen. Almost immediately, though, Kay caught sight of George Rubinoff and unceremoniously left her companion. The detective made a very distinguished figure in full dress, but Kay was too troubled to think of his appearance at the moment.

“Oh, Mr. Rubinoff, have you seen Mr. Cornwall?” she cried eagerly. “I must reach him before he leaves the theater.”

“You don’t mean you saw him tonight!”

“Yes, just a few minutes ago.”

“I’ve been on his trail for days,” the detective said, “but have had no luck at all. I believe Otto Tagg is somewhere in the vicinity, too.”

At that instant Kay got a glimpse of Mr. and Mrs. Cornwall leaving the theater, and ran to overtake them.

“We waited some time for you in the box,” the woman explained. “When you failed to come we decided you had changed your mind about wanting to speak to us.”

George Rubinoff joined the group, and after he had greeted the Cornwalls Kay asked him to search for Perry as well as her friends. A few minutes later the detective returned with them.

“Uncle Martin!” the youth exclaimed joyfully at sight of his relative. “How glad I am to see you alive!”

“I’m very much alive,” Mr. Cornwall chuckled, “and married as well.”

Explanations were quickly made. The man declared he had meant to mystify no one by his sudden disappearance. He had taken his automobile and driven to Clearwater. There he had met Mrs. Barling, an old friend, and they had found such happiness in each other’s companionship, that on the spur of the moment they had decided to be married.

“Everyone thought you had been kidnaped,” Perry told his uncle. “That is, everyone except Kay Tracey. I guess she never did accept the obvious theory.”

High praise was bestowed upon the girl for the clever manner in which she had located Mrs. Barling at Clearwater.

“You have succeeded where I have failed,” Rubinoff complimented her. “Now, I’ll be very grateful to you if you’ll tell me how to track down that scoundrel Tagg.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Kay laughed.

Nevertheless, that night after retiring Kay gave considerable thought to the problem, for it was the only one which yet remained unsolved. She had explained Mr. Cornwall’s so-called mysterious disappearance, and now, with Mrs. Barling as his wife, his life at Watch Hill would no longer be a lonesome one. Sissy’s claim to the Snyder fortune had been definitely established. From a hint the girl had dropped, Kay felt sure that soon Sissy and Perry would announce their engagement. The timid orphan’s happiness was now definitely assured.

“Oh, I hope Tagg will be caught,” Kay thought, “for unless he is he may come back to avenge himself upon the Cornwalls and possibly upon Sissy and myself. I have a feeling that sooner or later he’ll show up at Watch Hill!”

The following morning Kay and her friends returned to Brantwood, where Wilma and Betty Worth joined them. Then all of them motored to the country to see Mr. and Mrs. Cornwall established in their new home. As they crossed the porch, Kay’s attention was drawn to several fresh shoe imprints. Had someone entered the house since her previous visit there?

Perry led the way to the drawing room, but Kay did not follow him. She had noticed some more of the tell-

tale impressions upon the hall carpet, and they seemed to lead up the stairway.

“Those footprints are exactly the same as the ones I found outside the house the day Tagg escaped,” she thought. “I wonder if he’s been here again?”

Without explaining to her friends what she had in mind, Kay softly mounted the steps and followed the trail leading to the third floor salon.

“This is one day I’m not expecting anything exciting to happen,” she told herself as she opened the door.

Suddenly she heard a slight sound, and glanced toward the velvet curtains. There, on a couch, half-hidden by the luxurious hangings, lay Otto Tagg! Hounded by the police, and exhausted by sleepless nights, the man had returned to the house which he thought to be deserted, and had fallen into a deep sleep.

Silently Kay glided forward. A chair had been pushed against the draperies. On a sudden inspiration she climbed onto it and reached up to unfasten the hangings.

A slight sound betrayed her presence. Tagg leaped to his feet. As he did so, Kay brought the billowing curtains down upon him. The heavy material enveloped him in its folds, and though he struggled and tore at them, he was securely wrapped.

“Help! Help!” she cried.



Perry and the other members of the group came running. They quickly overpowered Tagg, who fought like an animal brought to bay.

“Call the police!” Kay ordered.

Again Tagg made a desperate attempt to flee, but Rubinoff slipped a pair of handcuffs over the man’s wrists. When the officers arrived to take the culprit away, he was willing to admit that his game was up. Not only did he confess that he was the one who had struck Rubinoff, but before he realized that Kay had forced him to do so, he had admitted that he had been responsible for bribing another girl who resembled Sissy in order to claim the Snyder fortune. Tagg did not deny his part in the timber thefts. He also said that he had stolen the art treasures from Mrs. Barling’s home and planted them in the Cornwall house, hoping to incriminate Perry and his friends. It was also he who had taken the funds intended for the Heather Home.

After Tagg had been taken away everyone gathered about Kay. They congratulated her upon the courageous way in which she had captured the criminal.

“And now, everybody listen——”

It was Betty’s voice. She had climbed upon a chair and was addressing the little group in the manner of an announcer.

“Wilma and I are giving Kay a party!”

“A party!” the chorus echoed.

“Yes, a victory party to celebrate her success as a detective.”

Kay protested, but the plan carried.

THE END

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[The end of *The Mystery of the Swaying Curtains* by Mildred A. Wirt Benson (as Frances K. Judd)]