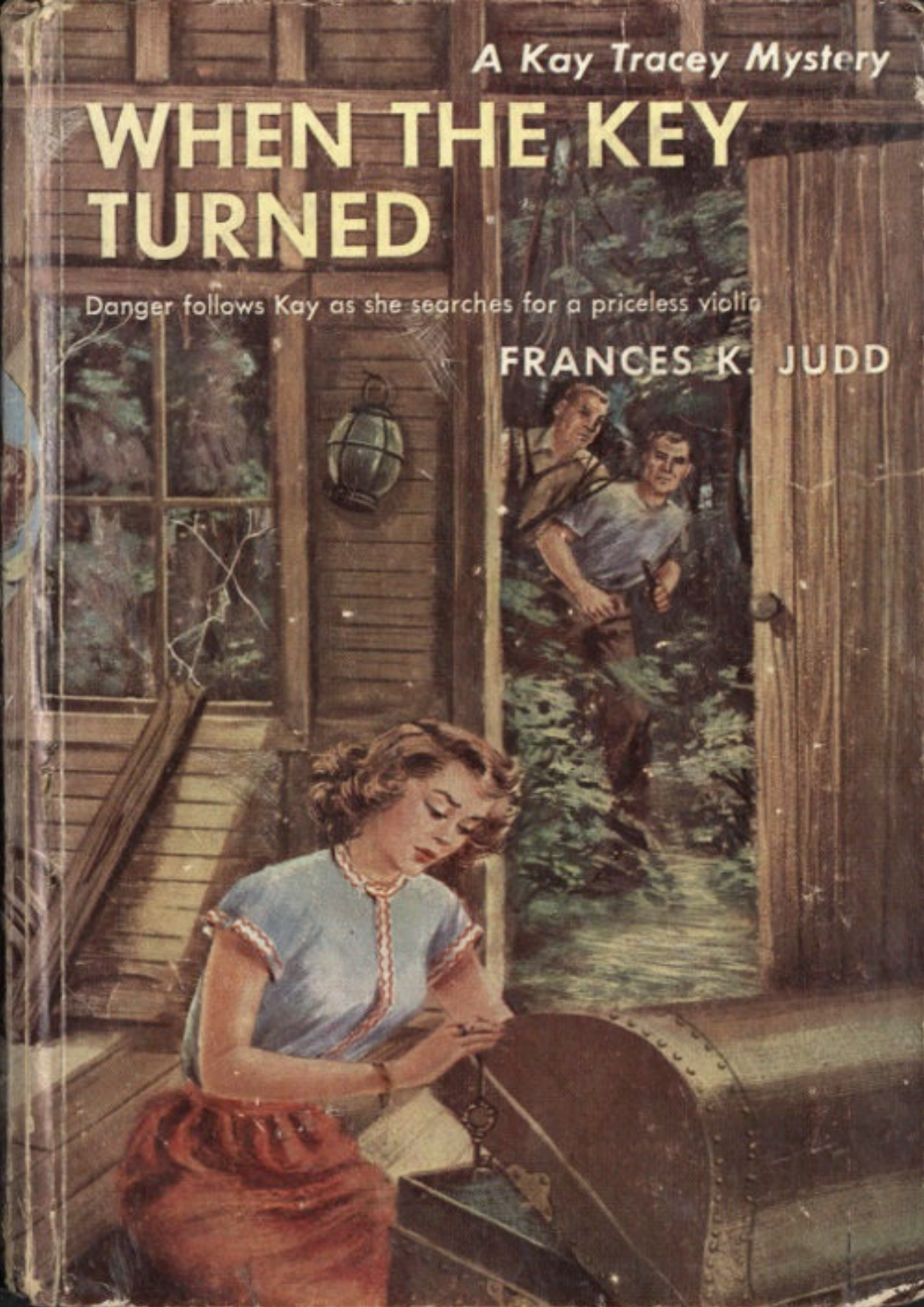


A Kay Tracey Mystery

WHEN THE KEY TURNED

Danger follows Kay as she searches for a priceless violin

FRANCES K. JUDD



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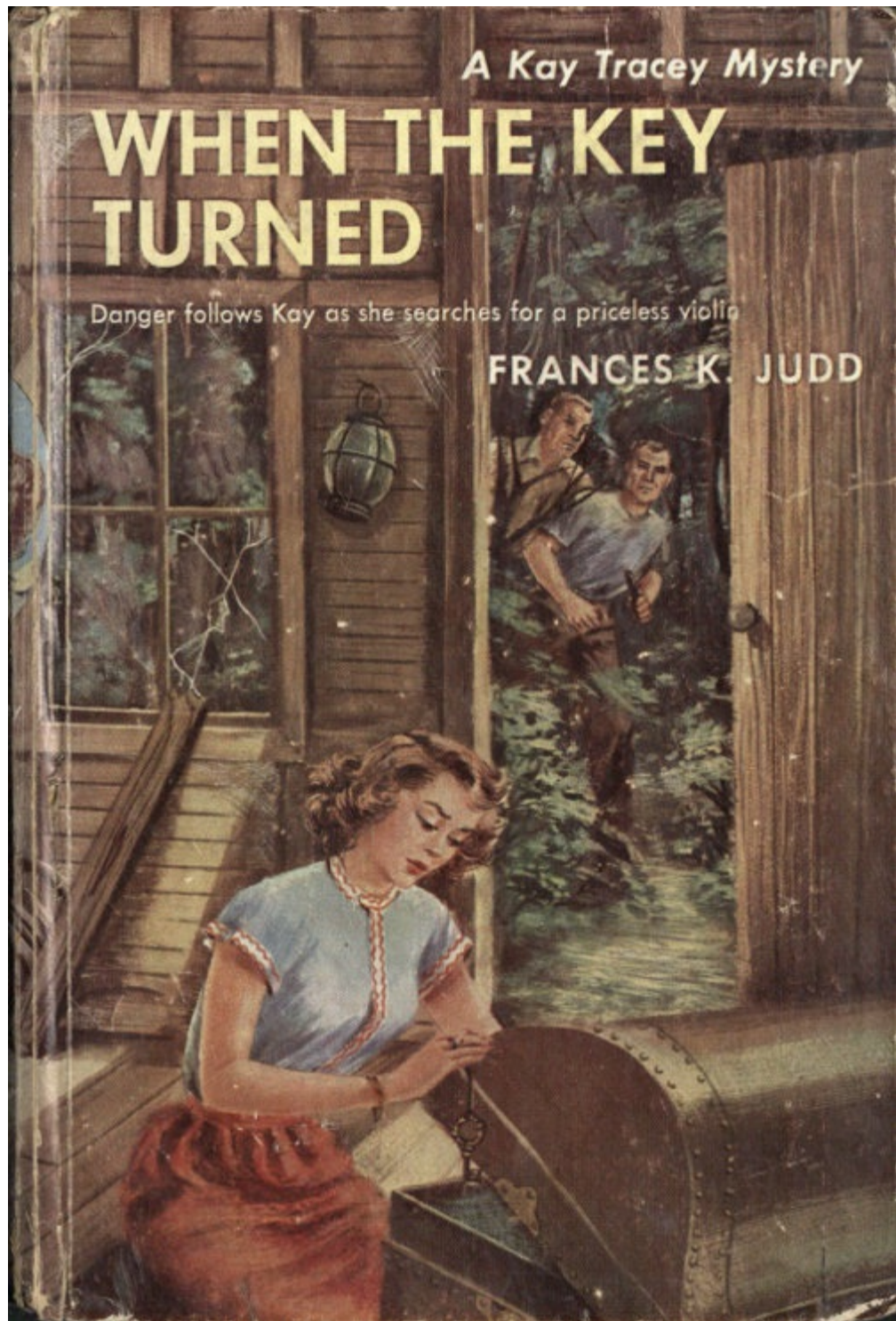
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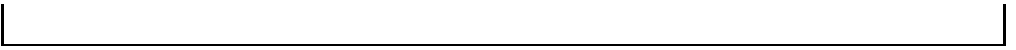
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The violin was Kay's only defence.

A Kay Tracey Mystery



WHEN THE KEY TURNED

Francis K. Judd

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WHEN THE KEY TURNED

CHAPTER I

THE STOLEN VIOLIN

“I hope I shall not fail in the competition! My fingers feel as cold as icicles!”

As she spoke, Kay Tracey, an attractive girl with golden-chestnut hair, held out her shapely hands in a gesture which caused her companions, Wilma and Betty Worth, to smile broadly. The three girls were walking down the hallway of Carmont High School toward the auditorium where try-outs were to be held for the newly-organized orchestra.

“Oh, you’ve never failed in anything in your life,” laughed Wilma, the dark-eyed Worth twin. “Why, Ethel Eaton hasn’t a chance against you!”

“I should say not,” agreed her sister Betty. “In my opinion, Ethel isn’t in your class as a pianist even if she has been taking lessons from that expensive teacher Señor Gonzalez, and bragging about it to everyone.”

“Of course I shan’t weep if I lose,” laughed Kay. “I am sure the try-outs will be judged fairly.”

“I am rather worried myself about the competition,” Wilma confessed uneasily. “I’ve been told one of the new

girls, Rosa Lusardi, is a wonder with a violin.”

“Even so, the orchestra can use at least two expert violinists,” declared Kay comfortingly.

Both she and Wilma were talented musicians. Betty was learning to play the accordion.

As they reached the door of the auditorium the girls heard music from within and knew that try-outs were in progress. Entering quietly, they saw the music director, Mr. Ward, at the piano. On the stage stood a frail, dark-haired girl wearing a faded gingham dress. She was playing a violin, and the perfect tones filled the room.

“There she is now,” whispered Wilma. “Rosa Lusardi. Isn’t she marvellous?”

Kay nodded, but did not speak until the music ended. Then she led the applause in which Wilma and the other students joined.

“That was well played, Rosa,” said Mr. Ward, obviously impressed. “Have you had many lessons?”

“Just from my father,” replied the girl with a charming smile. “He has taught me since I was a child.”

“You have a very fine violin,” said the director. “May I see it, please?”

“Certainly.” Rosa offered the man the instrument, adding apologetically, “It is not one such as my father owns. He has a

Stradivarius.”

“A genuine Stradivarius?” Mr. Ward echoed in astonishment.

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“Yes. It has been in our family for three hundred years.”

“You are to be envied,” declared the teacher.

Again telling the girl that she had played well, he called the next contestant to the stage.

“Rosa is certain to win a place,” whispered Wilma. “But somehow I wouldn’t mind losing to her. I have never heard a young person play better.”

Soon it was time for Betty to perform. She gave a good rendition. After that Wilma played her selection on the violin, and, perhaps inspired by Rosa’s brilliance, executed the number with more feeling than usual.

“Ethel Eaton next, please,” called Mr. Ward.

The girl arose. With a confident, scornful smile directed at Kay she seated herself at the piano and played a brilliant selection with numerous runs.

“She has improved,” Betty whispered to her friends. “But you are better than she, Kay!”

When Ethel finished, she started to leave the stage only to have the instructor call her back.

“Just a minute, please. I have a piece here which I should like to hear you play.”

“I thought we were to choose our own selections!”

“In the case of a pianist the ability to read music at sight is very important. I am sure you won’t mind.”

Ethel did not like the idea but she sat down again. After two false starts she managed to stumble through the piece. She left the stage muttering to herself something about unfair tactics. 4

Kay’s name was called next. Not the least bit nervous, the girl seated herself at the piano. With confidence and ease she played a well-known air. Mr. Ward nodded approvingly and placed before her the same selection he had given Ethel. Fortunately Kay could read music quickly and played the simple number without a flaw.

“Very good, very good indeed,” said the director as the girl left the stage.

There was only one more contestant, so Kay and her chums decided to wait until the results should be announced. Wilma and Betty could not convince Kay that she must have won. Ethel seemed to believe she had defeated her rival for she went about wearing a self-satisfied smile.

At length Mr. Ward arose to read off his list of names. A silence fell over the auditorium. Among those chosen were Betty, Wilma and Rosa Lusardi, but the teacher hesitated as he came to the position of pianist.

“This contest was very close,” he explained. “However, after due thought I have chosen Kay Tracey because of her ability to read music well.”

A flurry of handclapping greeted the announcement. After it had subsided the man dismissed the young people.

5

Ethel indignantly rushed over to him, protesting because she had not been chosen a member of the orchestra. The teacher listened politely but remained firm in his decision. The girl then turned to her small group of friends and said loud enough for all to hear:

“The try-outs weren’t fair! Kay Tracey had an advantage because she played the selection after I did! Naturally she was familiar with the melody then and could read the notes faster!”

Kay and the Worth twins paid no attention to her, for by this time they were accustomed to Ethel Eaton’s lack of good sportsmanship. The girl was always a poor loser.

The three chums hastened to the railroad station to catch a train for their homes in Brantwood. Ethel caught it too, but this evening she refused to notice Kay and the twins. During the entire ride she sat alone at the opposite end of the car to them, sulking over the result of the recent competition.

Arriving in Brantwood, Kay said goodbye to Wilma and Betty and went on to her own home. As she entered the house she rushed up to her mother, a youthful looking woman of early middle age, to hug her and tell her the good news.

“Splendid, my dear,” smiled Mrs. Tracey happily. “Now let me know all about it. But first tell me, you didn’t see Bill on your way home, did you?”

“Why no, Mother, I didn’t.”

“I am eager to locate him. A very excitable man has called here twice this afternoon and said he would return at five o’clock. He wishes to talk with Bill about a legal matter.”

“It’s possible Cousin Bill might have stopped at the athletic club for a game of handball. He often does.”

“I’ll telephone there,” Mrs. Tracey declared, putting aside her work.

While she was absent from the living room the doorbell rang. Glancing at the clock, Kay saw that it was exactly five.

“Dear, will you answer it, please?” called her mother. “That may be Mr. Lusardi now.”

“Lusardi,” Kay thought, repeating the name to herself. “Why, that is Rosa’s name. I wonder if the two are related.”

She opened the door to face a short, squat man with long, shaggy black hair.

“Is Mr. Tracey here now?” he questioned eagerly.

“No, he isn’t. Are you Mr. Lusardi?”

“Yes, Pedro Lusardi. I come here three times already.”

“My cousin surely will be home soon,” Kay replied. “Won’t you step inside and wait?”

“Yes, I do that.”

As she escorted the man into the living room Kay casually inquired if he were related to Rosa Lusardi. Instantly a broad smile spread over the man’s face.

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“Rosa is my daughter,” he declared proudly. “You know her?”

“Yes, we attend the same school, Mr. Lusardi. I am sure you will be pleased to hear that she won a place in the high school orchestra today.”

“Rosa play the violin very well.”

“Indeed she does. I heard her tell the director that you had taught her. She also mentioned that you own a Stradivarius violin.”

The innocent remark proved ill-chosen, for it served to excite Pedro Lusardi. Waving his arms and striding up and down, he cried out:

“The violin, yes! I came to speak of him to your lawyer cousin. When my father die he give the violin to me because I have more music talent than my brother Anthony. Now Anthony he refuse to believe my father gave the instrument to me. He say I only claim so! Anthony say the violin must be sold and that I give him half the money.”

“Well, that is complicated,” replied Kay. “It would be a shame for a genuine Stradivarius to leave the family, especially when you have such a talented daughter who might inherit it.”

“I tell Anthony that! He say he need money. So I go to a good lawyer—I do anything——”

At that moment the front door opened. Bill Tracey, a young attorney who made his home with Kay and her mother, entered the room. After the girl had introduced him to the client she quietly went out. 8

“I don’t imagine Cousin Bill will fancy this latest case,” she thought. “However, for Rosa’s sake I hope he will take it.”

As Kay was passing through the hallway the telephone rang so she paused to answer it.

“Is my father there?” inquired an agitated voice.

“Who is this speaking, please?”

“Rosa Lusardi. I recognized your voice, Kay, and I thought you knew mine.”

“Your father is here. Shall I call him to the telephone?”

“No. Just tell him to come home at once.”

“I hope nothing is wrong,” said Kay, alarmed at the girl’s strange tone.

“Our valuable violin has been stolen by a man who broke into the house! He tied me up and left me, but I managed to work off the gag. Our pet poodle Snowball has been badly beaten! He is dying, I fear. Oh, tell Father to send help——”

“Keep up your courage, Rosa!” The information had dismayed Kay, so that it required an effort of will for her to keep her own voice steady. “I’ll have someone there just as quickly as I can!”

CHAPTER II

HELP FOR ROSA

After taking down Rosa's address Kay hung up the receiver and started toward Cousin Bill's den, where the young lawyer was in conference with Pedro Lusardi. Midway there she stopped short. Rosa's father was so very excitable. Might it not be wiser for her to go to the Lusardi home herself and get more details before bothering the man?

The family car stood in the driveway. Kay knew her mother would not mind if she used it. Without taking time to tell anyone where she was going, she sprang into the automobile and drove rapidly to the Lusardi house.

When she rang the doorbell there was no answer, but from within Kay could hear the pathetic whimpering of a dog. Boldly she pushed open the door.

Rosa Lusardi, her dark hair streaming over her eyes, sat bound to a chair by the telephone table. The gag had slipped from her mouth but she did not have the use of either her hands or her feet. The telephone receiver dangled loosely from its cord, and Kay realized that the girl had succeeded in knocking it from its hook with her head.

"Rosa!" cried Kay in distress, rushing toward her friend.

“I am all right,” the girl murmured. “See if you can do something for poor Snowball.”

In a far corner of the room lay the writhing little poodle. Kay saw at a glance that there was nothing she could do to relieve the dog’s sufferings; he must be rushed to a veterinary. Finding a knife in the kitchen she cut the cords which bound Rosa.

“Who did this to you?” she asked indignantly.

“I don’t know. He was a short man, rather stout, with a red scar across his face and chin. He nearly killed poor Snowball!”

The girl knelt beside the poodle and gathered him in her arms.

“We’ll take the dog to a veterinary,” Kay said quickly. “I know a very good one on Wacker Avenue.”

The pet was placed in a basket and tenderly carried to the automobile. As the girls drove toward the animal hospital, Rosa related all that had occurred.

“I came home after school as usual,” revealed the girl in a tense voice. “As I opened the door I heard Snowball barking. Before I could figure out what was wrong, this cruel man sprang at me. He tied me up and left me in the chair by the telephone. Next he seized father’s violin which was lying on the piano. Snowball seemed to realize he meant to steal it, and began to bark, so the man kicked him and beat him with a cane. Oh, it was dreadful to watch!”

“Don’t think about it,” Kay urged kindly. “Tell me more about the man who stole the violin. You are certain it couldn’t have been your uncle?”

Rosa gazed at her friend in astonishment.

“Uncle Anthony? Oh, no! This man did not resemble him at all.”

“Had you ever seen him before?”

“Not to my knowledge. He had a cruel, vicious face.”

“As soon as we take Snowball to the dog hospital we’ll report the theft to the police,” Kay declared grimly.

“Yes, we must get the violin back,” replied Rosa, her gaze upon Snowball. “Father will be so worried. We haven’t very much money, and the Stradivarius is worth a small fortune.”

As Kay listened to the girl’s story, a deep determination came over her. She would do everything in her power to help Rosa recover the violin and trace the man who had injured Snowball.

More than once the courageous girl had aided unfortunate persons. This was not only because Kay was kind, but also because she was a fine amateur detective. She had amazed Brantwood with her accurate deductions and sharp sleuthing ability in the first case she had tackled. Now people came to her for help whenever they had a baffling mystery that they were unable to solve.

At sixteen Kay was an unusually alert girl, generous and loyal to her friends. Her most devoted chums were the Worth twins, Wilma and Betty, who were as unlike in appearance as in disposition. Fair-haired Betty always enjoyed a good time, and secretly considered her dark-haired sister too serious. Wilma liked to study, spending many hours reading and composing poetry.

Kay too was studious, but her school work came easily for her. From her father, a newspaper editor who had died many years before, she had inherited not only a brilliant mind but a crusading spirit which often led her into adventure. Now as Kay and Rosa drove toward the dog hospital, the Tracey girl made up her mind she would never rest until the stolen violin had been recovered.

“There is one thing I forgot to mention,” declared the Lusardi girl, eager to impart information. “From where I was tied at the telephone table I saw the man drive away in a tan car. He came this same direction too.”

“You didn’t notice the make of the car or the licence number?”

“No, but it was an expensive looking automobile, and new.”

“Could you recognize it again?”

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“I am sure I should.”

The car reached the dog hospital and the girls carried Snowball into the building. The veterinary examined the pet and gave him something to relieve his pain.

“Will he live?” Rosa inquired anxiously.

“I shall do everything in my power to pull him through, Miss,” the man replied with sympathy. “It will take some time to determine the extent of any internal injuries.”

Snowball was left with the doctor. Then Kay suggested to Rosa that they drive at once to the police station.

“Yes,” agreed the other soberly. “We have lost too much time already.”

As the girls drove down the street, Kay was so deeply absorbed with her thoughts that she failed to see a car approaching from the right.

“Look out!” cried Rosa in alarm.

Just in time to avoid a collision, Kay slammed on the brakes. Then she saw to her amazement that she had nearly driven into the Worth car. Betty and Wilma, with the latter at the wheel, were on their way to a grocery store to shop for their mother.

“Why Kay!” exclaimed Betty, thrusting her head out the window. “My, but that was a close call!”

“And it was my fault too,” acknowledged Kay. “I admit I wasn’t paying enough heed to my driving. I was thinking—oh, by the way, you girls haven’t noticed a tan car, have you?”

“Several of them,” answered Betty, smiling.

“We saw one parked down by the railroad station only a minute ago,” added Wilma reflectively. “A brand new car—a big sedan.”

Rosa asked a number of questions and became convinced that the automobile might be the one in which the thief had driven away. Thanking the Worth twins for the information, the girls gave up their visit to the police station for the moment and headed the car toward the railroad depot. As they approached, Rosa caught sight of the big tan sedan which had attracted the interest of Betty and Wilma.

“Yes! Yes!” she cried excitedly. “I believe that is the same machine!”

Kay parked alongside. The street was quite deserted, with no one in the vicinity of the big automobile. Finding the car unlocked, the girls carefully examined its interior but the violin was not found.

“I didn’t expect it would be here,” declared Kay, glancing toward the railroad station. “It’s my guess that man has taken a train out of town.”

Entering the depot, the girls went to the ticket office and learned that a train had departed not twenty minutes earlier.

“Can you tell me if a short, stout man with an ugly scar across his face bought a ticket here?” Kay asked the ticket agent.

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“He probably was carrying a violin case,” added Rosa eagerly.

“No such person bought a ticket from me. But come to think of it, I saw a man drive up just before train time and board the express.”

“Is that his car standing outside?” Kay inquired, pointing through the window.

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Then it must have been the same man!”

“He was carrying a long, black case,” recalled the agent. “I am not certain whether it was for a violin.”

Requesting the use of the telephone, Kay called police headquarters and was assured that an officer would be sent at once to check up on the tan car. Nervously the girls paced the station platform as they waited.

“The police may be able to capture the fellow by telegraphing ahead of the train,” Kay remarked thoughtfully. “However, I am afraid to send such a wire myself. Cousin Bill has often told me that false arrest is a very serious matter. If we should make a mistake the man might sue us.”

“He wouldn’t get much by suing me,” returned Rosa with a rueful smile. “But I agree, we are sensible to wait.”

Nearly fifteen minutes elapsed before two policemen arrived at the station. After Rosa and Kay had told their story the officers inspected the big tan sedan. Comparing the licence number with a list which they had in a little black book, one of the men announced that the car had been stolen.

“This automobile belongs to James Franklin on Cleardale Drive. It was taken early this afternoon from in front of the Golden Pheasant Restaurant.”

“James Franklin?” repeated Kay thoughtfully. “That name sounds familiar. Is he the wealthy explorer and traveller?”

“That’s right,” returned the policeman. “He has a fine estate near Cleardale Park.”

The two officers prepared to tow the automobile away, and upon learning that they intended to take it directly to Mr. Franklin’s home, Kay asked if she and Rosa might ride along. She explained that it was barely possible the owner might furnish a clue which would lead to the identification of the missing thief.

“Come along if you like,” the policeman agreed.

The James Franklin mansion overlooked Cleardale Park, and was one of the show places of Brantwood. Large trees shaded the smooth expanse of lawn. The great white house with its tall pillars was both dignified and impressive.

The servant who came to the door stared coldly at Kay and Rosa. Observing that they were accompanied by policemen, and noticing his master’s tan sedan in the driveway, he instantly assumed they were in custody. He made a cutting remark to that effect, only to become confused when set right by one of the policemen.

James Franklin, a stout, pleasant looking man with iron-grey hair, made up for his servant’s lack of courtesy by

cordially inviting the girls into the luxurious living room. He readily identified the tan car as his own, declaring it had been stolen while he was dining at the Golden Pheasant Restaurant. He had not observed the thief drive it away, and so could add nothing to the description already provided by Rosa.

After being invited to call again, the girls left the mansion, returning in Kay's car to the Lusardi home. During their absence Rosa's father had returned. They saw him standing on the porch looking very bewildered, but his face brightened at sight of his daughter.

“Ah, you come at last, Rosa!” he cried, rushing to her. “I am very much worried when I see the house. Everything is so upset. And I cannot find my violin——”

“Oh, Father, I don't know how to tell you!”

Tears came into Rosa's eyes but she forced herself to reveal what had happened. A shocked expression came over Pedro Lusardi's face.

“My violin—gone?” he echoed blankly. “But it cannot be so! Mr. Tracey tell me just now my Stradivarius is worth much money—far more than we dreamed! Oh, call the police!”

CHAPTER III

ETHEL ENTERS THE CASE

Kay assured Mr. Lusardi that the police already had been notified, and that everything possible would be done to recover the stolen property. Rosa assisted her father into the house, and after she had talked with him a few minutes he became calm.

“Maybe your lawyer cousin help me find the violin,” he said hopefully to Kay.

“I shall tell him about the theft as soon as I reach home,” the girl replied warmly.

Eager to ask her Cousin Bill’s advice, she quickly took leave of Rosa and her father, promising to let them know as soon as she might have any encouraging news. As it was past the dinner hour when Kay reached home, she apologized for being late and then startled her relatives with the reason for her tardiness.

“It seems you may have lost a client, Cousin Bill,” she said with a smile. “With no violin you’ll not have any law case against Anthony Lusardi. I guess it will be up to you to locate the stolen violin.”

“That might not be so difficult,” replied the young lawyer dryly. “From what Pedro Lusardi told me this afternoon, I suspect his brother Anthony is behind the theft.”

“Rosa was certain the man who took the violin bore no resemblance to her uncle.”

19

“He might have been hired to do the job,” said Cousin Bill. “I wonder how much that old violin is really worth?”

“I wish I knew myself,” replied Kay.

“To tell you the truth, I wasn’t much interested in the case when Pedro Lusardi talked with me this afternoon,” the lawyer went on, gazing into space. “But this theft throws a different light on the matter.”

“I wish you would become interested in these people,” Kay urged wistfully. “I believe Rosa and her father are deserving of help.”

Mr. Tracey promised that he would talk with the police and make private inquiries regarding Anthony Lusardi. Kay said very little, but she was not inclined to agree with her cousin that Rosa’s uncle had been responsible for the theft.

The next day the Lusardi girl appeared at school as usual but in a very depressed mood. She confided to Kay that she would be unable to attend orchestra rehearsals.

“But why, Rosa? You know we were counting on you.”

“I am disappointed too,” the girl replied. “You see I have no

violin now. Since my father lost the Stradivarius he has to use my instrument to continue his broadcasting.”

“Oh, I didn’t know your father played over the air.”

20

“He hasn’t been doing it very long,” Rosa answered.

Wilma Worth, who chanced to be standing close by, overheard the girl’s remarks. Scarcely stopping to consider that she would sacrifice her own opportunity to be in the orchestra, she turned to Rosa and said:

“You needn’t give up rehearsals, because I shall lend you my violin. It isn’t as good as yours, but I think you can play it all right.”

“Oh, I couldn’t take your instrument,” protested Rosa quickly. “It wouldn’t be fair to you for me to borrow it.”

“You are a better player than I. Anyway, it may be only for a few days. I’ll practice the pieces at home and be ready to slip back into my place whenever your father’s violin is recovered.”

Rosa continued to refuse, but in the end Wilma convinced her that she must accept the loan. Kay praised her chum for the generous offer as did many of the other members of the orchestra. Wilma, however, made light of the affair and quoted one of her favourite poems:

“Weep not for precious chances passed away,
Dwell not on pleasures on the wane,
Each night burn all distasteful records of the day,

At sunrise let your soul be born again!”

The story of how Rosa’s father had lost his violin spread throughout the school. Ethel Eaton made a point of learning every detail. Provoked because Kay and Bill Tracey had become involved in such an interesting case, the girl determined that she too would have a part.

21

Through her father, who had no idea what lay behind such a request, Ethel learned that Anthony Lusardi lived in Hamilton some miles from Brantwood. During the absence of her parents, she put through a long distance call to his residence. Assuming an important air, she informed Rosa’s uncle that the valuable Stradivarius violin had been stolen.

“Why do you take such an interest?” the man inquired irritably. “It happens that I already know of the theft.”

“I—I thought you should be warned,” stammered Ethel, confused by Mr. Lusardi’s cool manner. “The violin will never be recovered if Bill Tracey is allowed to handle the case. He is incompetent.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need any advice. I know how to handle my own business.”

With this rather rude response Anthony Lusardi hung up the receiver.

Not feeling the rebuff in the least, Ethel sought to plant germs of distrust in Rosa’s mind. The next day at school she slyly suggested that Bill Tracey was not considered a reliable lawyer.

“If I were you, Rosa,” she declared, “I’d have nothing to do with him—or with Kay either!”

22

“Why, the very idea!” exclaimed Rosa indignantly. “Kay has helped me a great deal. She is my very best friend. You should be ashamed to say such things!”

Ethel subsided into injured silence, but secretly she remained angry because her words had carried no weight. She made up her mind that she would find some way of getting even with Kay! She had never forgiven her rival for winning the place of pianist in the high school orchestra.

Rehearsals were held each afternoon after classes were dismissed. Several days later Mr. Ward stated that he was highly pleased with the progress being made, and announced that a public concert would be given within a few weeks.

“I’m sure it will be a success,” said Kay.

“I hope so,” replied the instructor.

Both Rosa and Kay were kept busy with their studies and basketball and orchestra practice. However, they found time to visit the dog hospital each day. Snowball was making slow but steady improvement, and the girls looked forward to the time when the poodle could be taken home.

“It is costing so much to keep him at the hospital,” Rosa told her friend. “We can’t really afford it. I am afraid too that our fine violin never will be recovered.”

“Cousin Bill is doing all he can,” responded Kay. “And

23

that reminds me, he requested that I bring you around to his office this afternoon at five. Are you free?”

“Why, yes.”

“I think my cousin wishes us both to talk with Detective Kenley who is working on the case.” Kay glanced at her wrist watch. “We’ll have just time to get there if we hurry.”

The girls found that the detective had arrived a few minutes ahead of them. He was a tall, quiet-spoken man with twinkling grey eyes. Rosa showed her astonishment when he asked many technical questions about the missing violin, and ventured a remark that he must be a musician.

“Oh, no,” replied the man, smiling. “I can’t even play a mouth organ! But I do know something about musical instruments, especially old violins. Many years ago I learned how to detect deceptions. An old pawnbroker taught me some of the tricks of that trade, and gradually I have added to the knowledge. I pride myself that now I am able to tell the value of an instrument almost at a glance.”

“I imagine you have had some rather unusual experiences,” suggested Kay, hoping he would relate a story or two.

“Well, yes I have. I once recovered a hundred-thousand-dollar Stradivarius for the owner. I traced the violin all the way to Italy.”

“Is a genuine Stradivarius worth a hundred thousand dollars?” Rosa gasped, scarcely able to believe her ears.

“This particular one was worth every bit of that amount. However, certain violins which are called by the Stradivarius name may have very little value. Dishonest violin makers have built such clever imitations that only an expert can detect the difference. They sell their cheap wares for large sums, while actually the violins have very little merit.”

“I am sure Father’s violin is a real Stradivarius,” said Rosa. “It has a beautiful rich tone, and has been in the family several generations. He once was offered five thousand dollars for it.”

“That’s interesting,” remarked the detective alertly. “How recently was the offer made and by whom?”

“It came several months ago from a dealer named Isaac Rowan.”

“Oh, yes, I know the man by reputation. He does buy violins now and then, but usually only when he has a customer. The police do not think well of the fellow.”

“Rosa tells me that man who stole the violin was short and stout, and that he had a scar across his chin,” Kay volunteered eagerly.

“Rowan is a short man,” said the detective thoughtfully, “but he has no scar on his face.”

Mr. Kenley asked Rosa several questions concerning the man who had entered her home, carefully noting down a detailed description.

“Well, I guess that is all,” he said finally. “I’ll try to trace the fellow, and I’ll keep watch of the pawn shops to see if the violin turns up.”

After leaving Mr. Tracey’s law office, Kay walked home with Rosa.

“Will you come in?” the girl asked politely as they paused by the front steps.

Kay meant to decline for the hour was late, but just then she heard the strains of a familiar opera aria. Realizing that Pedro Lusardi must be practising for his radio programme, she had an urge to hear how well he played.

“Poor Father is having such a time accustoming himself to my violin,” Rosa sighed apologetically as she led Kay into the house. “He is a very temperamental musician. You must not judge his playing by what you hear now.”

As the girls entered the living room, Pedro Lusardi ended a musical passage with an angry crash of discords.

“This violin, I cannot endure him!” he cried, running his hand wildly through his hair. “It is enough to drive me mad!”

“There, Father,” said Rosa soothingly, “I thought your playing sounded very nice.”

“Nice, nice!” mocked the man. “Music must have fire—passion—feeling!” He sagged into a chair and buried his head in his hands. “My playing is inferior. Unless I do better the broadcast company will tell me to go.”

“We’ll get your Stradivarius back again, and then everything will be all right,” his daughter told him comfortingly. “This afternoon I talked with Detective Kenley——”

She broke off, for the doorbell had rung. With an anxious glance directed toward her father, Rosa excused herself to answer it. She returned to the living room a moment later followed by a slender young man in a grey suit.

“Father, Mr. Gardella wishes to see you,” said Rosa uneasily. “He comes from the radio station.”

With an effort her parent pulled himself together and greeted the man.

“I am afraid I have some rather unpleasant news for you, Mr. Lusardi,” said the newcomer, speaking crisply as if he wished to hurry his errand.

“Unpleasant news?” faltered the violinist.

“Yes, the truth is, your radio work hasn’t been up to standard the past ten days. We spoke to you about it and——”

“I will do better—I promise you——”

“Sorry, but I am afraid we can’t give you another chance. We must think of our public. I came to tell you that your services will not be required any longer. I have no doubt but that you’ll be able to find work with another company.”

“They will not take me without long try-outs! You do not understand!” Pedro Lusardi’s voice rose to an

excited pitch. “I cannot lose the work—my Rosa will starve!”

He turned toward Kay, his eyes beseeching her to plead his cause.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOST KEY

“Mr. Gardella,” said Kay quickly, “I am sure you wouldn’t discharge Mr. Lusardi if you knew what has happened. Did he tell you about his violin being stolen?”

“Why no,” replied the radio official in surprise.

Kay related the incident, adding that Rosa’s father was having difficulty in accustoming himself to an inferior instrument.

“It is so,” sighed Pedro Lusardi. “The tones are not true on Rosa’s violin. They offend my ear.”

“Well, of course I didn’t know your Stradivarius had been stolen,” admitted Mr. Gardella slowly. “That throws a different light on the situation.”

“Then you will not discharge me? No?”

As the caller hesitated, Kay mentioned that her cousin, Bill Tracey, was making every effort to recover the violin.

“Bill Tracey?” inquired Mr. Gardella, his face lighting. “Why, I know him well! And I feel confident that with such an able lawyer on the case, the violin soon will be located. Just forget

what I said, Mr. Lusardi. We'll be glad to give you another chance."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," the musician mumbled gratefully.

29

Kay was very pleased because she had been able to help Rosa and her father, but she feared that unless the instrument were recovered soon, Mr. Gardella might reconsider. Determined to do everything possible to assist Cousin Bill in tracing the valuable lost violin, she requested Wilma and Betty Worth to accompany her one evening after school to the home of James Franklin.

"I don't see what you hope to learn from him," Betty complained good-naturedly as they drew near his mansion. "He has said he did not see the man who stole his limousine."

"That is true," acknowledged Kay. "But I thought I would ask permission to examine the automobile."

"Didn't the police do that?" questioned Wilma in surprise.

"Yes, but as I recall they didn't make a very careful inspection. It's just possible some clue was overlooked."

The Worth twins felt that Kay was far too hopeful, but since they had never visited the handsome Franklin mansion they went with her willingly enough. The girls were fortunate in finding both the bachelor sportsman and his charming mother at home. After a pleasant chat Kay explained the real purpose of her call.

“Why certainly, look at the car if you like,” said Mr. Franklin, smiling tolerantly. “It hasn’t been used since the day it was stolen.”

He led the girls to the garage where two other automobiles stood, and backed the big tan sedan out into the driveway so they would be able to examine it by daylight.

“I am afraid you will find nothing,” he said, obviously amused. “Criminals have a little trick of destroying useful evidence.”

A careful inspection of the car interior seemed to bear out the man’s words. Disappointed, Kay admitted she could locate no clue. Finally she lifted out the cushion from the front seat and noticed a scrap of paper torn from a newspaper.

“This might be something,” she declared.

Her heart leaped as she saw a pencilled name written across the margin of the paper. Apparently the thief had jotted down Pedro Lusardi’s address!

Turning over the piece of old paper, she observed that the other side bore an advertisement of a steamship sailing. A tiny check mark appeared opposite the *Caslonia* which was scheduled to leave for European ports on the tenth of the month.

“I wonder if this has any significance?” she mused, reading the advertisement aloud.

“The *Caslonia* is a very good boat,” contributed Mr. Franklin.

“A group of middle-aged artists have taken over nearly half of the first class cabins. It happens that I plan to join the party.”

“Oh! Then perhaps you dropped this advertisement in the car.”

31

“No,” replied the man in a puzzled tone. “I never saw it before.”

“It’s barely possible the thief who stole your car plans to make his get-away on the *Caslonia*,” Kay said, thinking aloud. “Do you agree, Mr. Franklin?”

“Yes, it does appear logical. It may be well for us to watch the boat.”

“You will be in an excellent position to do that, since you are taking passage,” Kay said quickly.

“Unfortunately, I might not recognize the man if I were to see him. I am afraid you girls will have to visit the ship before sailing time and assist me!”

“Is that an invitation?” laughed Kay.

“It certainly is.”

“Then we’d love to come,” the Tracey girl declared, her eyes dancing. Secretly she wondered if it might be possible to go to New York at that time.

Just then Mrs. Franklin came into the garden, and after talking with the girls for a few minutes, insisted that they remain to

dinner. Both the explorer and his mother proved to be entertaining as they told of travels in many foreign lands. It was growing late when Kay and the twins were driven to their homes by the family chauffeur.

School work prevented the girls from devoting very much time to the problem of the missing violin. Kay thought about the matter a great deal, especially while she was busy with orchestra rehearsals, which went on as usual. Each day Ethel Eaton became more sullen over the matter of the place of pianist and to the annoyance of Kay and her friends repeated again and again that “try-outs had not been fair.”

32

“Mark my words, Kay, she’ll attempt to get even,” Betty warned her chum. “I advise you to be on your guard.”

One afternoon the three girls went to the auditorium early so that Kay could run over a new selection before the rehearsal should begin. To their surprise they discovered the piano locked.

“That’s funny,” remarked Betty. “Mr. Ward doesn’t lock it up usually, does he?”

“No, and I don’t believe he did it this time,” said Kay with sudden suspicion. “I remember seeing Ethel slip in here alone not half an hour ago!”

“It would be just like her to do such a thing and hide the key!” Wilma cried indignantly. “She’s so jealous of your playing, Kay.”

Betty hastened to the director's room to make inquiry, but returned in a minute to report that the piano had not been locked by him.

"I feel almost certain Ethel took the key," announced Kay. "She'll have a good joke on us unless we find it before rehearsal."

"Probably she has it in her pocket," Betty said gloomily.

"That would be too dangerous," returned Kay, glancing thoughtfully about the auditorium. "My guess is that it's right here in this room."

33

The girls began a systematic search, and finally Betty, peering into the deep pot of a large palm, gave a cry of delight.

"Here it is! I've found it!"

"And I've discovered something too," exclaimed Kay, highly elated.

She held up a pocketbook which the Worth twins instantly recognized as Ethel Eaton's property.

"Proof positive that she was in here," Betty said grimly. "Let's report her."

"No, I have a better idea," chuckled Kay. "Why not slip the key into her pocketbook? Then we'll suggest to Mr. Ward that it might be worth while to search in Ethel's bag."

In a few minutes the members of the orchestra began to

arrive. The girls were amused to observe that Ethel too came into the auditorium, seating herself not far from the piano, and grinning from ear to ear as Kay and the twins pretended to look for the missing key. Presently Mr. Ward appeared. He became deeply disturbed because the piano could not be opened.

“Do you suppose the key might be in this pocketbook?” suggested Betty, indicating the purse which lay on the front row of seats.

“Why, that’s my handbag!” cried Ethel, hurriedly coming forward to claim it. “Of course the key isn’t in it!”

34

“Then why not prove that it isn’t,” suggested Wilma sweetly. “You know, we noticed the purse lying near the piano when we came into the auditorium.”

Ethel turned away, but paused as the music teacher requested her to open the pocketbook.

“All right, I’ll show you!” she cried angrily. “You see, it isn’t _____”

“Why, there it is—the key!” exclaimed one of the orchestra members who stood nearby.

Ethel stared in astonishment and then raised accusing eyes to Kay and the Worth twins.

“You must have put it there,” she muttered.

“Ethel, give me the key, please,” said Mr. Ward sternly. “And do not come to the auditorium again. Your conduct since the orchestra try-outs has been disgraceful!”

Mumbling to herself, the Eaton girl fled from the hall. However, instead of acknowledging that her punishment had been just, she immediately plotted a new and more effective way of getting even with Kay.

While the rehearsal was going on she visited an Oriental shop, made a purchase, and gleefully returned to the school just after the members of the orchestra had been excused. Slipping unobserved into the now darkened auditorium, she placed a package of powder on the keyboard of the piano and closed the lid over them.

35

In the morning Kay went to school early to practice alone. As she opened the piano, she was overpowered at once by a strong, sickening odour. The next thing she knew, the janitor was leaning over her, trying to press a cup of water to her lips.

“Where am I?” the girl murmured stupidly. “Oh, yes—now I remember.”

“I found you lyin’ here when I came in,” the man told her anxiously. “Let me help you to a chair. I reckon you ought to ask to be excused from classes.”

“No, I’ll be all right in a minute. I guess I must have fainted.”

Kay preferred that the janitor should not suspect the truth, but she had no doubt but that someone had played a rather cruel trick on her. While she could produce no evidence, she

believed Ethel Eaton had been the person behind the act.

A faint odour lingered in the room even after the windows had been opened. During orchestra rehearsal that morning nearly every student complained of a headache. Even Mr. Ward declared he did not feel well. Kay could have explained the reason but she wisely kept the knowledge to herself.

Later that day after classes were over, Rosa Lusardi sought Kay in the locker room. The girl appeared troubled, and upon being questioned, confided that her uncle, Anthony Lusardi, had sent a telegram saying he would arrive in Brantwood some time that afternoon.

36

“I am afraid he will make trouble for Father,” she told Kay nervously. “Uncle Anthony has a temper when aroused. And he is very provoked because the violin was stolen.”

“Surely he can’t blame your father.”

“It isn’t fair, but he does. Oh, Kay, I wish you could come home with me. I have more confidence when you are along.”

Although Kay had planned upon going to the public library, she immediately decided instead to accompany her school friend. Arriving at the Lusardi home, the girls heard excited voices. In the living room were Rosa’s father and his brother embroiled in a bitter argument.

“It was the fault of your daughter!” the angry visitor was shouting. “She could have prevented the theft!”

“Oh, but I couldn’t!” exclaimed Rosa, rushing in and instantly

defending herself. “The man sprang at me and I was unable to fight him off. I tried——”

“For all I know you may still have the violin!” Anthony Lusardi accused the girl. He took a step toward her, indicating the instrument case which she carried. “What is this?”

“It is a violin which belongs to a friend. I borrowed it so I could practice.”

“A likely story!”

With a sneer, her uncle tried to jerk the case from Rosa’s hand.

37

“Don’t!” she cried, holding tightly to Wilma’s violin.

Angered, the man struck her hard across the cheek. Rosa staggered back, but still she clung to the case.

“Father!” she pleaded frantically, “don’t let him take it!”

Mr. Lusardi seemed too dazed to move, so Kay sprang to the aid of her friend.

“You keep out of this!” the man shouted at her furiously. “Hear me?”

When Kay did not heed the command he shoved her with such force that she toppled backwards on the davenport.

38

CHAPTER V

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The situation might have become increasingly serious had not Detective Kenley arrived upon the scene at just that moment. Appearing in the doorway, he gazed about in amazement.

“Well, what is going on here?”

“Oh, Detective Kenley!” gasped Kay, straightening her rumpled hair. “I am so glad you came! This man—Rosa’s uncle—has been making all sorts of accusations.”

“My violin has been stolen and I intend to find out about it!” Anthony Lusardi muttered, avoiding the detective’s steady gaze.

“*Your* violin!” cried his brother. “It is *my* violin.”

“Let’s discuss this quietly,” suggested the detective. “I heard you were in town, Mr. Lusardi. I came here to ask you a few questions about your connection with John Gluber, the secondhand dealer.”

“I do not know what you mean.”

“I think you do, Lusardi. Gluber has run afoul of the law

several times, but so far I admit we've been unable to prove anything against him. However, we're fairly certain he handles stolen goods."

"I have had no business connection with John Gluber," replied Anthony Lusardi coldly. "For that reason I can give you no information."

39

"Suit yourself," Detective Kenley smiled as he shrugged his shoulders.

The questioning had disturbed Anthony Lusardi more than he had cared to admit, so he soon made a pretext for leaving the house. A few minutes later Kay said goodbye to Rosa and walked with Detective Kenley toward her own home.

As the two discussed at length the scene which had just taken place, the detective remarked that he believed Anthony Lusardi knew more about John Gluber than he would say. Kay inquired the address of the secondhand dealer, and learning that the place was only ten miles distant from Brantwood, made up her mind to drive there at the first opportunity.

The following afternoon she induced Wilma and Betty to go with her upon what she jokingly termed "a sleuthing expedition". John Gluber's place of business was an ancient house with many windows and unsightly wings, a large dwelling set far back in a grove of pine trees. A sign at the entrance of the lane read:

ANTIQUES
FURNITURE, MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

BOUGHT AND SOLD

“Now we’ll pretend we wish to buy a good violin,” Kay said to Wilma and Betty as she drove toward the house.

“But we’ll not explain that we’re looking for Mr. Lusardi’s Stradivarius!”

“How would you recognize the violin if you should see it?” questioned Wilma doubtfully.

“Rosa told me that her father’s instrument had two long scratches across the back. They form a cross.”

It was nearing dusk as the three friends rang the doorbell. After a while a short, pale girl, who appeared to be about Kay’s age, came to admit them.

“You wish to see some of our antiques?” she inquired politely.

“Yes, but I am not certain we have come to the right place,” replied Kay. “Is this the Gluber house?”

“You have made no mistake. This is Mr. Gluber’s place, but he is away just now. I can show you anything you might care to see.”

The chums followed her into a large room which was cluttered with miscellaneous objects. The frail looking girl asked in a low voice:

“Are you interested in furniture?”

“No, we should like to see a violin. Preferably an old one.”

“Mr. Gluber has some very fine instruments. I will show you what we have.”

The girl, who said her name was Mamie, led the visitors to a glass case, and one by one removed three violins. Kay carefully examined each in turn, satisfying herself that the instruments did not bear the tell-tale scratches which would stamp them as Mr. Lusardi’s stolen Stradivarius.

41

As Wilma was playing a few notes on one of the violins, the girls were startled to hear a loud moaning cry which seemed to come from the upper floor.

“Goodness, what was that!” exclaimed Betty nervously.

“I didn’t hear anything,” murmured Mamie.

“It sounded to me as if someone were in pain,” declared Kay, listening for the wailing to be repeated.

Mamie did not answer although the words seemed to distress her. She quickly displayed the remaining violins, then assured the girls she had shown them everything. It was clear that for some reason she wished them out of the house.

“I love to poke around in a place such as this,” Kay announced, pretending to be deeply interested in the collection of lamps, firearms, dishes and clocks. “You don’t mind, Miss?”

“Why no,” stammered the girl nervously, “only it’s getting

late.”

“We have lots of time,” said Betty mischievously.

More to have an excuse for remaining than because she really had use for the article. Kay bought an old mantel clock. She had scant hope it ever would run accurately. While she waited for her change, the strange moaning sound was heard again.

“Please go now,” Mamie pleaded. “I—I can’t explain, but you must leave.”

42

“Why, of course,” agreed Kay instantly.

Taking her purchase, she left the house with Wilma and Betty, but once outside she announced her desire to learn why Mamie had been so eager to be rid of them.

“You wait in the car for me,” she told the twins. “I intend to find out about that moaning noise.”

Quietly the girl tiptoed back into the house. The showrooms were deserted, but she could hear Mamie moving up the creaking stairs toward the third floor. Waiting until the sounds had died away, Kay noiselessly followed.

Presently she found herself just outside an attic room door which was partly open. Within was Mamie, bending over an old lady who lay upon the bed, her wasted limbs covered by a ragged blue quilt.

“Oh, my money, my money,” she was wailing, as she clutched one of the girl’s hands. “Ask John Gluber for it!

Make him give it back to me!”

“Now don’t take on so, Grandmother,” said the girl soothingly. “I can’t ask Mr. Gluber for your money because you haven’t any. We are desperately poor. If he didn’t give us our board and room for my services we’d be forced to go to the poorhouse.”

“No! No!” moaned the old lady.

“It is true,” insisted the girl. “Mr. Gluber said that every penny of our money is gone.”

Without waiting to hear more, Kay stole quietly down the stairway. No longer was there any mystery about the strange moans. Yet there was mystery in the old lady’s remarks about John Gluber and her money. Could there be a possibility that the secondhand dealer had cheated Mamie and her grandmother?

43

Kay became so absorbed in her thoughts that when she reached a landing near the main floor she turned the wrong way and followed a stairway which led to the basement. This particular passageway was seldom used and for many months several loose and rotting boards had gone without repairs.

Suddenly Kay became aware that she was descending into darkness. At that same instant her foot plunged through an open space in the flooring. She sought frantically to save herself, but failed.

With a muffled cry of horror she plunged full force through the hole, falling into a dark pit beneath the stairs. As her head

struck the cement floor she lapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER VI

THE PIT

While Wilma and Betty were becoming more and more alarmed over Kay's prolonged absence, an old car rattled into the yard, heavily loaded with furniture and bric-a-brac. The driver, a stocky man who the girls thought must be John Gluber, alighted, and after glancing curiously toward them, went into the house. Climbing the stairs to the attic room, he began speaking rather curtly to the woman lying in bed.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Speer?" were his first words.

"Just about the same. The misery has come back in my hip. I lie here a-thinkin' and wishin' I could have proper hospital care. I want to ask you——"

"Not now," broke in the man impatiently. "I've work to do. Mamie, you better cook my supper for I want to unload and then start to town."

"Yes, Mr. Gluber," replied the girl, hurrying away to the kitchen.

The man tramped heavily down the stairway. Returning to the yard, he began unloading the secondhand goods he had bought that day. After he had stacked the furniture in the

crowded showrooms he tossed the old quilts and burlap bags, which had been wrapped around the bric-a-brac, down into the pit beneath the cellarway. They completely covered Kay, who still lay unconscious in the basement hole. Gluber then washed his hands at the kitchen sink and sat down to eat.

“Who are those girls waiting outside in the car?” he demanded gruffly, jerking a thumb toward the window.

“I don’t know their names,” answered Mamie. “They came to look at violins.”

“Violins, eh?”

“Yes, but they bought a clock instead. I can’t see why they keep staying here.”

“I don’t like it. I wish they’d go.”

After the man had finished his supper he drove away in his car, taking a back road. Later, while Mamie was washing the dishes, she thought she heard someone moving about in the display room and went to investigate. She was greatly surprised to see Wilma and Betty there.

“We are looking for our friend,” the former explained. “Have you seen her?”

“The girl with the beautiful golden-brown hair? Why no, didn’t she leave with you some time ago?”

“She seems to have disappeared,” Betty answered.

“We’ve been waiting for her in the car all this while.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what could have become of her, unless she went away with Mr. Gluber!”

“I wonder if she did,” Wilma said, frowning thoughtfully.

Satisfied that Mamie had not seen Kay, the twins returned to the auto. After some discussion they decided that it would be useless for them to wait longer.

“I think she might have told us she intended to ride to town without us,” Betty declared. “Still, she may not have had time to let us know.”

Long after dark that night Kay regained consciousness. For a considerable time she lay perfectly still, wondering what in the world had happened to her. Then as her mind cleared she recalled falling into the pit. She pushed aside the quilts and burlap bags covering her and sat up.

“Help! Help!” she called, but the only answer was the echo of her own voice.

Struggling to a standing position, she groped about in the darkness. Alas, there seemed to be no means of escape from the prison.

“Help! Help!” she shouted again.

This time her cries were heard by the timid Mamie, who lighted a lamp and came to the cellar stairway.

“Who is there?” she called down into the dark pit.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Kay Tracey. “Only please help me out of this black pit!”

The lamp shook in Mamie’s trembling hand. Conquering her fear, the girl managed to stammer that she would get a step ladder. A moment later she returned with it and lowered it into the hole. Kay emerged from the darkness, well aware that her clothing was mussed and her face streaked with dirt.

“I can guess what you must be thinking!” she gasped, “but I want you to know that I am not a thief or anything of the sort. I returned to the house on an errand and fell into that pit. I guess I must have been unconscious for a while.”

As Mamie continued to eye her doubtfully, Kay decided that it would be wise to tell the girl her story.

“I was curious to learn what that moaning sound could be. I followed you upstairs and saw your poor grandmother lying ill on the bed. Both of you must have a great deal of trouble to bear.”

Kay’s words seemed to touch Mamie’s heart and reassure her as to the Tracey girl’s sincerity.

“Yes, our lot here is not a happy one,” she sighed, “though I can stand our position better than can Grandmother. She has always been accustomed to having everything she needs, and I can’t seem to make her realize that our money is gone. We owe Mr. Gluber a great deal as it is.”

As Kay made no response, Mamie went on after a moment.

“My grandmother is almost sixty-five now. She came here as housekeeper but wasn’t able to do the work, so I have taken over all her duties.”

“Not very easy for you,” returned Kay.

“No, but I am glad to do anything I can to make Grandmother’s life bearable. If I only could provide her with a few of the luxuries she craves!”

“Tell me,” Kay said after a moment, “have you ever heard of a man named Anthony Lusardi?”

This was such a random shot that she scarcely expected Mamie’s reply.

“Anthony Lusardi? Oh, yes, he often comes here to see Mr. Gluber on business.”

Kay, feeling that she had stumbled upon valuable information, wished to ask Mamie some questions about the relationship of the two men, but was afraid to do so for fear of making the girl suspicious. After explaining that she was acquainted with Rosa Lusardi, Kay left the house.

“It looks as if I must walk to the bus line,” she thought ruefully, for Mamie had told her that the twins had long ago given up their watch for her. “Perhaps it serves me right for being so nosey; but I did learn a lot!”

Setting off through the grove, she finally came to the road. It had grown so dark the girl could not see where she was going, several times stumbling over rocks and stumps

along the edge.

Since there was almost no traffic at this hour of the evening, Kay soon abandoned hope of getting a ride to the main road. No cars approached her or overtook her. She felt weakened by her recent experience and her head throbbed until it became increasingly difficult for her to keep on.

Hours seemed to have elapsed, when far ahead of her Kay saw a dark object. Coming closer, she observed that it was a truck parked at the side of the road. She could not see the driver, for he had slumped down out of sight behind the steering wheel and was fast asleep.

Wearily the girl trudged on toward the vehicle, forcing herself to quicken her step. Perhaps she could get a ride into town! Or, if the truck had been abandoned, she might crawl into the rear of it and snatch a few minutes' sleep.

Then suddenly Kay stopped short. She was close enough now to see a man dozing behind the wheel, but that was not the sight which had electrified her. From the opposite side of the truck a masked figure had appeared. The man thrust his hand into the cab and slyly removed a wallet from the driver's coat.

“Stop, thief!” cried Kay, running forward.

The trucker awoke. Before he was aware of what had happened the masked man had retreated, the purse in his possession. He started to run toward his own automobile parked some distance down the road, its dimmed headlights throwing a slight glow on the fleeing figure.

“Hey, you!” shouted the truck driver, when he discovered his wallet missing.

He leaped from the cab and ran after the thief. Kay saw that he never would overtake the fellow. There was just one thing to do. Impulsively she ran to the truck. Seeing that the keys had been left in the ignition lock she started the motor. By this time the thief had nearly reached his car.

“I must block his way with the truck!” she told herself tensely. “It is the only possible means to prevent his escape!”

CHAPTER VII

A REWARD FOR KAY

With no thought for her own safety, Kay quickly guided the heavy truck down the road. The thief had started his motor and was ready to turn his car around. But he was too late. The daring girl steered directly in front of him and the fenders of the two automobiles locked.

“Quick!” shouted Kay to the amazed truck driver. “Catch him before he gets away!”

Thus spurred to action, the man ran to the coupe, threw open the left side door, and clutched the masked thief by the collar. As the two struggled, Kay abandoned the big machine. Rushing into the fray, she snatched the stolen wallet which lay on the seat.

This done, she pulled the black mask from the thief’s face. In the darkness she caught a fleeting glimpse of a cruel countenance violent with anger. It was marred by a jagged scar along the nose and across the chin.

Before Kay could recover from the shock of what she had seen, the man suddenly threw the car into reverse gear. Both she and the trucker were thrown to the ground. Before they could pick themselves up the automobile had started down the

road.

“No use trying to follow him,” Kay declared, brushing the dirt from her clothing. “You could never overtake him in the truck.”

52

“No,” admitted the driver, staring gloomily after the disappearing coupe. “The scoundrel got away with my wallet, too.”

“Oh no, he didn’t,” chuckled Kay. “I seized it just an instant before he backed up and threw us off.”

“You don’t say, Miss! Why, that *is* luck! How in blazes did you get inside my truck anyway?”

“I was walking down the road when I saw the man crawling into the cab,” Kay explained, giving up the pocketbook. “I noticed that you were asleep and I suspected he meant to rob you.”

“Well, I’m much obliged, Miss. If it hadn’t been for you I’d have lost the money sure, and it belongs to my employer.”

“Was there much in the wallet?”

“Six hundred and seventy-five dollars!”

The man switched on the headlights of his truck and counted the bills.

“Not a bill missing,” he announced, closing the purse. “It makes me feel weak all over when I think I might have lost it.

I oughtn't to have fallen asleep, but I'd been driving twelve hours and was all in."

"I don't believe your truck is badly damaged," Kay said, turning to look at it. "A little paint will fix it up."

"Oh, it doesn't matter anyway, Miss. Say, you've not even told me your name!"

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"Kay Tracey. I live in Brantwood and attend Carmont High School."

"My name's Henry Corbin. I truck for the James Franklin Butter and Egg Company."

"James Franklin!" Kay exclaimed. "You don't mean the James Franklin who has a fine mansion near Brantwood!"

"Sure. He's a wholesaler of butter and eggs and has one of the biggest businesses in the country."

"I was under the impression that he was an explorer!"

"Oh, Mr. Franklin goes just about everywhere, but he made his money in the butter and egg business."

"I'm not carrying any eggs this trip," the fellow grinned. "Anyway, Mr. Franklin wouldn't complain about a few broken eggs after you saved all that money."

The headlights of another car could be seen far up the road, so Henry Corbin hastened to get his truck parked safely again. He and Kay were surprised to observe the approaching

automobile slow down. When it came to a standstill close by the girl recognized it as her Cousin Bill's machine.

"Here I am!" she called, running toward the young lawyer.
"Are you looking for me?"

"I've toured twenty miles of country trying to find you, Kay," her relative said sternly.

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"I'm sorry, Cousin Bill. You see, I ran into something interesting out at the Gluber place, and then I had an accident."

Henry Corbin came over to the coupe. After being introduced by Kay, he told the lawyer of the service she had rendered.

"Why, that's great," praised Cousin Bill. "I am glad the money was saved."

A few minutes later as they were riding home, Kay told her relative all the details of the experience with the highway robber, mentioning that his face bore a long scar. She also related her misadventure at the Gluber home.

"You should not take such risks, Kay," Cousin Bill chided her sternly. "It is all very well to gather information, but do not neglect your own safety in doing so."

"I never dreamed Mr. Gluber had a deep, dark pit under the stairway," protested Kay. "I did learn something important, Cousin Bill. Mamie told me that Mr. Gluber has had dealings with Anthony Lusardi!"

“Then I was right all along. I believed from the first that Rosa’s uncle might have had something to do with the theft of the violin. I’ll advise Detective Kenley to look into that particular angle of the case.”

Though the adventures of the night had left Kay tired and worn, she attended school as usual the following day. At early morning orchestra practice Mr. Ward declared that he was highly pleased with the progress being made by the young people. He assured them they were now ready for their first public appearance and would give a brief concert during the afternoon assembly period.

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“I hope everything goes well,” Kay said anxiously to Wilma and Betty. “It would be just like Ethel Eaton to play another of her tricks.”

“We’ll keep close watch to see that she doesn’t,” Betty said emphatically. “Be sure to check up on the piano stool at the last minute, Kay. She might try to saw off the legs or something like that!”

The three friends well remembered the time Ethel had weakened the props of various pieces of furniture being used in a class play. Punishment had been meted out to the girl. Since that time her acquaintances were inclined to be wary and suspicious of her.

Despite fears to the contrary, the concert went off splendidly. Kay played the piano even better than she had in rehearsal. Taking their inspiration from her, the other members of the orchestra gave a brilliant performance. One selection called

for a difficult violin solo. Rosa's masterly playing of it drew rounds of applause from the students. Ethel Eaton, however, assumed a bored attitude, and during the entire concert she pretended to study French verbs. Kay's one regret was that Wilma could not take part in the performance because she had lent her violin to Rosa.

"It isn't fair for her to lose out after she has practiced so faithfully," the girl thought. "That Stradivarius of Mr. Lusardi must be found!"

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When the concert was over, the orchestra members began gathering up their instruments and racks. A message was given to Kay that she was wanted outside in the hallway. Wondering who would come to see her at the school, she hurried into the corridor. There stood Henry Corbin and his employer, James Franklin.

"How do you do?" said Kay. "You wish to see me?"

The sudden ringing of the assembly bell caused pupils to pour from the auditorium. Ethel Eaton, certain that Kay must be involved in trouble, drew a group of girls close to the visitors so they could hear every word that was being spoken.

"Miss Tracey," said James Franklin in a tone which carried to all ears, "I am sure you know why I have come here to see you. Henry Corbin has told me that at great personal risk to yourself you saved his wallet from a thief. On behalf of my company I wish to thank you, and to give you this little token of our appreciation."

With a warm smile he handed Kay a sealed envelope.

CHAPTER VIII

RUMOURS

“Oh, thank you,” smiled Kay. She felt conspicuous because so many pupils were standing near. “Really, Mr. Franklin, I did very little. I can’t possibly accept a reward!”

“You saved nearly seven hundred dollars for my company, Miss Tracey, and it is only just that we should show our appreciation,” returned Mr. Franklin warmly.

“But really, I——”

“Have some fun with it,” the man interrupted with a laugh. “We won’t be satisfied unless you accept it.”

The man was so insistent that in the end Kay felt obliged to take the reward. She thanked him graciously, though she felt almost as if she were dreaming.

Immediately a group of friends clustered about Kay to ask her eager questions. What had she done to earn the reward? What had Mr. Franklin given her? What would she do with the money?

Observing that Ethel Eaton was standing nearby, Kay was very careful how she answered the inquiries. She

did not open the envelope, so could truthfully say that she did not know how much money had been given to her.

“Maybe it isn’t money at all,” Ethel suggested spitefully. “I shouldn’t be surprised if it’s only a letter of appreciation!”

“Oh, the envelope *must* contain money,” declared another. “I heard the man tell her she could have fun with it or put it in the bank.”

Since Ethel was so eager and so unfriendly, Kay deliberately decided to wait until after classes to open the envelope. Ronald Earle, one of the students, was driving homeward at dismissal time and offered Kay and the Worth twins a ride to Brantwood.

“Oh, Ronald,” cried Betty as she climbed into the car with her friends, “Kay has just received a reward and she won’t open the envelope to find out how much it is! See if you can make her do it!”

“I don’t mind opening it now,” Kay laughed. “There were too many curious eyes around me before.”

Never suspecting that Ethel Eaton was walking toward the car, the girl removed five ten-dollar bills from the envelope. They were in a neat, flat stack. Passing the car at that instant, Ethel glanced appraisingly at the money.

“Only ten dollars,” she told herself. “That wasn’t much of a reward after all!”

“I’m sorry Ethel saw the amount, for nothing ever

escapes her eagle eye,” remarked Kay a little later.

“However, it doesn’t matter greatly. I hope she doesn’t tell everyone in school about it.”

Feeling certain that the secret would not be kept, Betty could see no harm in mentioning to Rosa Lusardi that Kay had received fifty dollars from Mr. Franklin. It was not long before many students had heard of the generous reward.

“But it’s not true!” Ethel Eaton protested indignantly to her friends. “Kay received only ten dollars! It’s just like her to claim it was a larger amount.”

“Maybe she *did* get fifty dollars,” the others insisted.

“I know better. Why, I saw her open the envelope myself. It contained exactly ten dollars.”

Kay, hearing about Ethel’s remarks, was intensely annoyed, though she made no denial. Betty, however, had no peace while such a tale was being circulated, so she told everyone the truth of the matter.

“I can’t see how you remain so calm through it all, Kay,” she said more than once to her chum. “Why don’t you speak to Ethel?”

“Oh, now and then I feel sorry for her. She tries so hard to be in the limelight and her methods of doing it are usually so crude.”

“Kay is right,” agreed Wilma. “In the words of the poet:

“Be kind to all dumb animals
And give small birds a crumb.
Be kind to human being too,
They’re sometimes pretty dumb.”

“I agree with that last line,” declared Betty feelingly. “It must have been written especially for Ethel!”

Kay was too concerned with more important affairs than to waste time worrying about her rival. At her request, Cousin Bill had arranged for another interview with Detective Kenley. As the three talked over the latest developments in the Lusardi case, Kay gave a description of the thief who had robbed Henry Corbin. She mentioned especially the scar on his face.

“Did the man resemble this fellow?” inquired Mr. Kenley, taking a picture from his pocket.

Kay studied it closely for many minutes.

“Yes, there is a resemblance,” she said at last, “but I cannot make a positive identification. It was very dark when I saw him and I caught only a fleeting glimpse. Who is this man, may I ask?”

“Tom Topper. His personal history would fit very nicely into this particular case. At one time he was a talented musician, but some years ago he was in a disastrous accident. As a result he received disfiguring scars on his face and injuries to the tendons on his left hand. After that he was not able to play a violin well and took to questionable methods of earning a living.”

“Has he a police record?” inquired Bill Tracey.

“Tom Topper is a clever fellow and so far has managed to evade arrest. However, it is generally known that he manufactures cheap violins in rather large quantities and sells them as creations of the old masters.”

“Possibly Rosa could identify this photograph,” Kay suggested after a moment. “She saw the thief at her home very clearly.”

Word was dispatched to the Lusardi residence, and Rosa came at once to the lawyer’s office. She glanced at the picture of Tom Topper.

“Yes! Yes!” she cried excitedly. “I believe this is the man.”

“Then I’ll spread my net for him,” said Detective Kenley grimly. “He’ll not be easy to trap, though.”

Kay was eager to return to the Gluber house in the pine grove to complete her own investigation. Since she believed that Mamie Speer was in a position to aid in the capture of the violin thief, she wished to ask the girl to assist in getting evidence.

Without telling anyone of her plans, Kay drove out to the old house one Saturday afternoon, selecting an hour when she thought Mr. Gluber might be away on a buying trip. Mamie was very glad to see the girl again. She became especially friendly and talkative after the visitor had arranged Mrs. Speer’s pillows and had offered to bring from home a folding breakfast tray and a rack to hold books.

“I don’t know why you are so kind,” Mamie declared gratefully. “I wasn’t a bit nice to you when you were here before. I wish I could do something to make up for it.”

“I should like to ask a favour of you.”

“What is it?”

“I am very eager to trace a valuable missing violin, a Stradivarius. This particular instrument can be identified by two long scratches across the back which form a cross. If Mr. Gluber should ever bring such an instrument here I would appreciate hearing about it at once.”

Mamie drew back slightly as if the request was not to her liking.

“I’d be afraid,” she said.

“Why?”

“The—the man might discharge me.”

“A great many violins fall into Mr. Gluber’s hands,” Kay went on quickly. “All you have to do is to inspect the instruments as they come into the shop. If you should find the violin there will be a fifty-dollar reward for you.”

“Fifty dollars! My, that is a large sum. It would buy many comforts for my grandmother.”

“See, I have the money,” Kay declared, taking her reward

from her pocketbook. "I will give you ten dollars now if you wish."

"No," refused Mamie, "wait until I have earned it."

"Then you will look closely for the marked violin?"

"Yes, but I am afraid Mr. Gluber might be very angry if he should learn about it."

Before leaving the house Kay went upstairs once more to bid old Mrs. Speer goodbye.

"I wish you would come more often," the invalid said wistfully. "Since we've moved out here in the country, Mamie and I never have any visitors."

"I'll try to return soon," Kay promised. As she was about to leave the bedside she recalled something which she wished to mention to Mamie. "By the way, I don't suppose a man by the name of Tom Topper ever comes here to see Mr. Gluber?" she asked.

"Tom Topper!" exclaimed Mrs. Speer before her granddaughter could speak. "That dreadful fellow! I hope he never comes again!"

"Then he has been here?"

"He came once and frightened me nearly out of my wits! That was before I had taken to my bed. He forced his way in as bold as you please and rummaged around in the storeroom. He knocked over several pieces of good glassware and

wouldn't pay for the damage. Mr. Gluber was very much put out about it. Mamie, if that man ever comes here again don't let him in!"

"No, of course not, Grandmother."

Kay did not ask anything more about Tom Topper, for she saw that the old lady was becoming excited. Taking her leave quickly, she went downstairs with Mamie.

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As the girls reached the front hallway the doorbell rang. Mamie glanced curiously out the window, then hastily drew back.

"It's that horrid man now!" she cried in a hoarse whisper.

"Not Tom Topper!"

"Yes, it is! But I shan't let him in!"

Kay stepped to the window, remaining hidden behind a curtain as she studied the man on the porch. She recognized him instantly as the individual whose photograph had been shown to her by Detective Kenley. She also believed he was the fellow who had tried to rob the truck driver.

"Perhaps it might be wise to let him in, Mamie," she began, but the girl shook her head.

"No, he would only cause trouble. Anyway, I promised Grandmother I wouldn't."

The doorbell kept ringing but Mamie did not answer it. After

a while the caller returned to his car.

“I must go home now,” Kay declared quickly. “Don’t forget to watch for that Stradivarius, Mamie.”

Slipping out of the house, she ran to her car. Tom Topper did not see her for the man was backing his automobile around in the yard. He turned and drove southward.

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“I’ll follow him,” Kay told herself as she started her car and followed Tom Topper. “I hope I meet a policeman somewhere on the road, for I must not let that fellow get away!”

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CHAPTER IX

THE HIDDEN SHACK

Tom Topper did not keep on the main highway very long. When he came to a narrow side road he turned into it, driving at such a reckless speed that Kay dropped farther and farther behind.

After the man had travelled about a mile, he came to a wide river. Abandoning his car by the bank, he located a green boat which had been hidden in the brush. By the time Kay drew up in her machine Tom Topper was midway across the stream, obviously making for the opposite shore.

“Oh, dear, it looks as if he will escape after all!” Kay told herself in disappointment.

She searched the banks of the river for another craft but could find none. The only thing she could do was to note down the licence number of the man’s abandoned automobile. As a matter of routine she carefully examined the interior of the coupe but could find no evidence to use against the thief. She decided that instead of waiting for Tom Topper to return it would be better for her to notify the detective.

Accordingly she remained only long enough to note that the fellow was heading toward a deserted, marshy

peninsula on the far shore. Then she backed her car in the narrow road and sped to the main highway, stopping at several farmhouses before she finally located a telephone.

The girl was disappointed to learn that Detective Kenley was not in his office. She called her Cousin Bill, only to be told that he too was out. In desperation she gave the operator Ronald Earle's number. When he answered she could have laughed aloud, so great was her relief.

"Ronald, I need your help," she told him earnestly.

"At your service, Kay. I have the afternoon free."

"This may sound like a strange request, but I will explain everything when I see you, Ronald. I wish you would drive as fast as you can to Riverton and hire a motorboat. I'll meet you there."

The town was located two miles down the river. Kay begrudged the time it would take to drive the distance, but she knew she could not expect to find a place closer where boats were for hire.

Ronald arrived only a few minutes ahead of Kay at the Riverton dock. He had engaged a motorboat and was ready and eager to take off for ports unknown.

"What's up, Kay?" he inquired as she stepped into the craft.

"We are trailing Tom Topper, a man Detective Kenley wishes to arrest," the girl explained, instructing Ronald to steer upstream. "I think the fellow is hiding on a peninsula

about two miles from here.”

“If it’s the place I think you mean, that particular point is almost impossible to reach except from the river, Kay. The land is marshy and overgrown with a jungle-like foliage.”

“Tom Topper would seek just such a place, Ronald. We can’t let that man get away!”

The boat was a high-powered one and covered the two miles in good time. As they drew near the peninsula Ronald throttled down so as not to give warning of their coming.

“I don’t see any sign of Topper’s green boat,” Kay declared, peering intently along the shore. “Probably he has hidden it somewhere.”

“Isn’t that a green object?” asked Ronald, pointing beyond the beach.

“I believe it’s a boat!”

“Then stand by for a landing.”

Ronald skilfully brought the boat to shore, carrying Kay through the shallow water so she would not get her feet wet. They tied the painter to an old log and then gazed about them with interest.

The peninsula, which had become a refuge for birds and wild fowl, was covered with a dense growth of trees and bushes. After searching for some minutes Kay and Ronald found a path which led to a tumbledown shack, and paused to look at

it from the shelter of the trees.

“Tom Topper must live here,” Kay declared, as she noticed smoke curling from the chimney. “How do you think we should approach him?”

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“Suppose we steal over and look in a window. It’s just as well to get the lay of the land before we make any moves.”

Kay nodded and the pair moved stealthily toward the shack. Finding a window at the rear, they peered through the rain-spotted glass into the dingy interior.

A strange sight met their eyes. Tom Topper was walking slowly about the room, holding a violin in his arms. For just an instant Kay thought that it might be the missing Stradivarius; then she noticed that the instrument was a crude, home-made affair. Other violins were stacked against the walls, while several, not yet completed, lay on a workbench.

Besides these musical pieces there were a number of other articles carved from wood. One in particular which drew Kay’s attention was the figure of a queer looking boy perched on the window sill just back of the work bench. As she was wondering what purpose the strange dummy served, Topper laid down his violin and went over to the figure.

“How are you today, old fellow?” he asked, grinning in a foolish way.

“Pretty well, Tom, old Topper!” came the shrill response.

Ronald and Kay wondered if their ears had deceived

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them. As the man made another remark to the dummy they realized that he was the voice for both the questions and the answers.

“He evidently fancies himself to be a ventriloquist,” Ronald whispered, fascinated by the sight.

After a minute or two Tom Topper gathered together his tools and started work on a violin he was making. Soon losing interest, he seized another instrument. Tucking it under his chin, he played a squeaky scale.

“Terrible! Terrible!” he muttered. “If I only had a good pair of hands!”

He tried the scale again but the sounds were even more discordant. Enraged, the man hurled the violin into a corner of the room and sank down on his cot.

“You can’t help feeling a little sorry for him,” Ronald began.

He broke off as Kay gripped his arm. Whirling about he saw that the girl was gazing in fright at a large brown bear which was ambling down the path toward them.

“We’re trapped, Ronald!”

The animal blocked the trail completely. Beyond the shack the bushes were so dense a person could not possibly escape that way. The cabin alone offered safety.

Before Kay and the young man could decide what to do, the door opened and Tom Topper emerged, a whittling

knife in his hand. At sight of the bear he uttered a terrified cry. Instead of retreating into the cabin he ran down the path directly toward the animal. As he moved past it, he gave the beast a vicious stab with his weapon.

“Now we’ll have trouble!” Ronald exclaimed fearfully.

The enraged bear did not try to pursue the man, who ran down to the beach, but came straight toward Ronald and Kay.

“Into the cabin!” cried the young man. “We’ll be safe there!”

The two fled into the shack and closed the door only to discover that the key to it was missing. Ronald shoved a table and a chair against it. Kay had gone to the window and was watching Tom Topper.

“Ronald, he is taking both boats!” she exclaimed in alarm. “Towing ours behind his own! We’ll be stranded here!”

Her companion did not try to reply. The beast, enraged by the knife wound, had reached the door and was trying to break it down. Time after time the great animal hurled his powerful body against the weak timbers.

Kay ran to Ronald’s side and both braced themselves against the table. Soon it became evident the door never would withstand the repeated blows.

“Get up on the window ledge, Kay!” Ronald gasped as he saw the boards splintering.

Before the girl could obey there came a mighty crash!

The infuriated bear lumbered into the cabin. Kay seized a violin as a weapon while Ronald grasped one of Tom Topper's whittling knives.

“Edge toward the door!” the young man cried. “If you can squeeze past, run for your life!”

Kay had no intention of deserting her companion. She could not have reached the door anyway for the animal barred the way. Suddenly it made a lunge toward Ronald. The young man struck at the beast with his knife, but with one swipe of its paw the bear sent the weapon flying into a far corner of the room.

Next Bruin brushed a stack of violins from a low wall shelf and overturned a chair. Kay and Ronald thought they saw a chance to escape, but as they moved toward the door the bear whirled upon them unexpectedly.

With all her strength the girl struck out with the violin she was holding. It shattered in her hands, but did not harm the big animal. Now she and Ronald both were without weapons.

Steadily the bear came nearer, forcing the young people into a corner of the room. Slowly it raised up until it stood on its hind legs, towering above the frightened couple. Ronald tried to protect Kay with his body, but both of them knew his efforts would prove futile against such hopeless odds. The best they could do would be to battle courageously to the end!

CHAPTER X

A RESCUE

As the bear lunged toward Kay and Ronald a shot rang out. The huge animal pitched sideways, waved its paws, then lay still.

In the doorway of the cabin stood Detective Kenley. He coolly bent over the bear to make certain it was dead, then pocketed his revolver.

“Oh, Mr. Kenley, you have saved our lives!” Kay exclaimed gratefully.

“I think I did arrive just in time,” the man admitted, glancing about the room. “You’re not hurt?”

“No, we’re both all right, but in another minute it would have been a different story. How did you get here, Mr. Kenley?”

“I came through the marsh. Someone gave me a tip that Tom Topper has been hiding in this shack.”

“We followed him here ourselves,” Kay said, eagerly revealing everything she and Ronald had seen at the window.

“So this is the shop where the fellow manufactures his

violins,” the man remarked, picking up one of the mutilated instruments. “Just my luck that he was frightened away before I could question him.”

Thinking that possibly the stolen Stradivarius might be included in Topper’s collection of violins, Kay and the detective carefully inspected each instrument. They could find none which bore the significant scratches. Moreover, without exception all were extremely crude creations.

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“I rather doubt that Topper has the Stradivarius in his possession,” Mr. Kenley said finally. “At any rate, it’s fortunate for the Lusardi family that it isn’t here, for if such had been the case I fear there would be nothing left of it now.”

Kay turned her attention to the cupboards. She noticed a few dishes, a box of crackers, a blackened coffee pot and a packet of mouldy cheese. In a dark corner of the upper shelf stood a chipped teapot, which she lifted down.

“Well, here is something!” she announced in astonishment, as she removed the lid.

Detective Kenley and Ronald came quickly to her side. From the depths of the teapot Kay removed a small canvas bag which closed with a leather drawstring. Opening the pouch, she emptied the contents on to the table.

“Jewels!” exclaimed Ronald in awe.

There were several unmounted red stones which the detective declared looked like genuine rubies, and four rings, each set

with one or more large, sparkling diamonds.

“Stolen gems, I’ll warrant,” Mr. Kenley said, highly elated over Kay’s discovery. “This bears out some ideas the police have. Now we’re getting somewhere with our investigation! Anything more?”

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“That seems to be all,” replied Kay.

The man examined the cupboard himself but could find nothing of interest. He prodded the mattress of the bed and tested the flooring to see if any boards had been removed.

“I guess we’ve found everything there is,” he declared at last. “Suppose we start back to town.”

“Tom Topper ran off with our boat,” Ronald revealed. “I suppose that means we must walk through the swamp.”

“It’s the way I came,” said the detective, glancing anxiously at Kay’s low shoes. “It’s unpleasant going, though. You should have boots or stout hiking shoes.”

“I’ll manage,” Kay replied cheerfully.

Mr. Kenley knew the best trail out of the marshy peninsula, but his warning that it was unpleasant going proved only too true. Kay’s stockings became torn and her shoes caked with mud.

After a while they came to a bog which could be crossed only by means of a fallen tree. The detective went first and Kay managed to follow him without disaster. Ronald, however,

was not so fortunate. Midway across he slipped. His arms fluttered wildly, then to the dismay of himself and his companions he tumbled into the muddy water.

“Oh, Ronald, I’m so sorry,” Kay said as the crestfallen young man waded to shore. It was hard not to smile.

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“But cheer up! I’ve heard that mud baths are healthful!”

“I wish we’d get out of this place,” Ronald muttered in deep disgust.

“We’ll soon find easier going,” the detective said encouragingly.

Presently they came to higher ground, where the jungle-like growth of vines and bushes gradually gave way to more open country. Kay and Ronald breathed sighs of relief as they reached the Kenley automobile which was parked at the edge of a marsh.

“I wish you would take us straight home,” Kay requested wearily. “We can return to the boat-renting dock tomorrow for our cars.”

“Yes,” agreed Ronald. “Now nothing would suit me better than a trip to the dry cleaner!”

Mr. Kenley dropped the young man off at his home, then went on to the Tracey residence. Noticing Cousin Bill’s car in the driveway, Kay invited the man into the house, as she knew it would save him a trip to her relative’s law office.

While the girl made herself more presentable, Cousin

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Bill examined the bag of jewels and helped estimate their value. Both men agreed the gems were worth a large sum of money, and were of the opinion that Tom Topper must have stolen the rings. Kay returned to the living room just as the little bag was being locked into the family safe.

“If you prefer, turn the gems over to the police,” Bill Tracey urged the detective.

“No, I’m satisfied to leave them here. I’d rather the police had nothing to do with this case until I’m ready to make an arrest.”

Kay suffered no ill effects from her day’s adventure. Mrs. Tracey was shocked when she heard of her daughter’s narrow escape from death and warned her that never again must she venture into such isolated territory without taking proper precautions.

The following afternoon Kay and Ronald taxied to the boat dock at Riverton to get their cars. When the Tracey girl saw her automobile, standing exactly where she had left it, she gave a little cry of vexation.

“Oh, Ronald, will you look at that rear left tyre! Flat as a pancake!”

“It won’t take long to fix it,” he returned cheerfully. “Not if your spare is in good condition.”

“I had it checked at a garage just last week.”

“Then it should be all right. You sit down in the shade

somewhere and I'll have the tyre changed in a jiffy.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“No, you'll only get your dress dirty, Kay.”

Kay watched him work for a few minutes, then wandered down to the river's edge. A number of boats were tied at the dock. Suddenly her attention was drawn to a trim looking blue and white craft which seemed strangely familiar to her.

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“Why, I believe that is the motorboat Ronald rented yesterday! How did it get back here, I wonder?”

Observing that the man who ran the place was standing nearby, Kay went over to speak to him. After explaining that she and Ronald were the two who had failed to return the craft the previous day, she inquired how it had been brought back.

“A fellow named Topper—Tom Topper, fetched it here. He lives in a shack up the river. No harm was done this time, but you should be more careful when tying up a boat.”

Kay started to say that the craft had been stolen deliberately, but changed her mind. She could learn far more by letting the man believe it had been lost through carelessness.

“Tom Topper found the boat floating near the peninsula,” the fellow went on, “so he towed it down here late yesterday afternoon.”

“That was obliging of him,” Kay said dryly. “Did he return to

his shack?”

“No,” replied the boatman. “Topper said he was getting tired of leading such a lonely life. It seems he’s been annoyed many times by a vicious bear that keeps trying to break into his cabin. He told me yesterday he intended to abandon the place.”

Kay was not surprised to learn that the man had given up his hide-out. She wondered if he had seen Ronald and herself lurking by the cabin. However, she was inclined to believe that the fellow’s flight had been purely the result of repeated visits by the huge animal.

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“He’s almost certain to go back there to get the pouch of jewels,” she reflected. “I should like to see his face when he looks into the empty teapot!”

So deeply absorbed was Kay in her thoughts that she had failed to hear an automobile drive up to a gasoline pump not far from the boat dock. Ronald, however, had noticed the car and recognized the two passengers as well. Dropping his tools, he came around to the other side of the Tracey automobile.

“Kay!” he said in a low voice. “Isn’t that your friend Rosa? And she’s with Ethel Eaton!”

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CHAPTER XI

“777”

Kay turned her head quickly to glance at the automobile. Ronald had not been mistaken. The girl at the wheel was Ethel Eaton, and her companion was Rosa Lusardi.

“That’s queer,” she murmured, puzzled. “They’ve never been friendly at school.”

“Ethel is up to some trick, you may be sure of that,” said Ronald emphatically.

Just then the two girls chanced to look toward Kay so she walked over to speak with them.

“Well, this is a surprise,” she said, smiling at Rosa. “Out for a little spin?”

“N-not exactly,” stammered the girl, becoming confused. “We—we thought we’d rent a boat.”

“No objections, I hope,” Ethel said airily.

“None at all,” smiled Kay, refusing to take offence. “Hope you enjoy yourselves.”

As the two girls alighted from the car she rejoined Ronald.

“What seems to be in the wind?” he inquired instantly.

“I can’t figure it out. Ethel acts very sure of herself, while Rosa seems rather ashamed, as if she were doing something of which she doesn’t exactly approve.”

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“You ought to warn her not to get mixed up with Ethel Eaton.”

“I should like to, but I can’t.”

“Are they hiring a boat?”

“Yes. I wish I knew where they’re going. Not that I mean to be inquisitive, but I have a feeling Ethel may try to interfere in the Lusardi case.”

“You don’t think she is heading for the peninsula, do you?”

“Well, that thought was in my mind,” Kay admitted. “Still, I hardly see how she could have learned about Tom Topper unless Rosa told her. Even then Rosa doesn’t know the fellow is living in the shack.”

“Why not wait around and watch where they go? The tyre is fixed but I’ll pretend it isn’t.”

The young man busied himself with the tools again. Kay stood nearby, to all appearances engrossed in the work. Actually, she watched Rosa and Ethel out of the corner of one eye and listened to their conversation.

“Don’t you think we should give up the trip?” Rosa asked Ethel uneasily.

“No, of course not. Don’t be such a little coward!”

“I’m not afraid,” the other answered indignantly. “But it does seem to me the trip is dangerous. Why not invite Kay and her friend to go with us?”

“Oh, you make me tired!” Ethel exclaimed impatiently. “We’re going alone or we’re not going at all!”

82

The spoiled girl walked over to the man at the dock and haughtily inquired if he had a good motorboat for hire.

“Yes, Miss, I have several,” the man replied politely, “but I don’t like to rent them except to people who are used to handling them.”

“I’ve driven an automobile for years!” Ethel retorted coldly.

“Well, that’s not the same as running a motorboat, Miss.”

“I’ve handled motorboats too! Why, I was practically brought up on the water!”

“In that case I guess it will be all right,” the man said, a note of doubt still in his voice. “Take the one down at the end of the dock. I’ll start the engine for you.”

The craft, attached by its rope, floated a short distance from the dock. The man pulled it in and stepped aboard. Ethel attempted to do the same, but her movements were so slow

and awkward that she lost control of the rope. The boat swung outward again. With one foot on the deck and the other on land, Ethel could not save herself. She gave a shrill scream as she pitched into the water.

“Help! Help!” she sputtered, frantically splashing the water with her hands.

“Why don’t you stand up?” the boatman suggested in amusement. “It won’t come higher than your waist.”

83

“It was your fault that I fell in!” she said accusingly. “If you had pulled the boat close to shore the way you should have done——”

“See here, Miss, don’t you be blaming me,” came the angry answer. “It’s clear you’ve never been around boats.”

“I’d not rent one of your old tubs now for anything in the world!”

“The feeling is mutual,” replied the owner of the dock. “I wouldn’t let you have one.”

“Come, Rosa,” said Ethel with a toss of her head, “we’ll go home.”

As she hurried to the car, leaving a trail of water behind her, the girl avoided looking at Ronald and Kay.

“I almost wish Ethel hadn’t tumbled into the river,” the latter remarked after the Eaton car had driven away. “Now we can’t find out where they intended to go.”

As Ronald had promised to go on an errand for his father, he said goodbye and set out for the distant town of Claymore. Kay meanwhile returned home to find Betty and Wilma Worth waiting for her.

“We thought you might be induced to take us out to Tom Topper’s shack,” Betty said coaxingly. “How about it, Kay? We’re dying to see where you battled with the bear.”

84

“Yes, can’t we go with you this afternoon?” urged Wilma. “Or have you other plans?”

“I just came from Riverton,” Kay replied slowly, “but I don’t mind going back. You’ll have to ask Mother, though. She said she didn’t wish me to go to the place again, but perhaps she will change her mind.”

The three girls pleaded their case so eloquently that Mrs. Tracey could not refuse. Reluctantly she agreed Kay might return to the peninsula providing she would select the water route.

“Thank you, Mother, I’ll be careful,” the girl promised.

The boatman at Riverton appeared surprised to see the Tracey girl again so soon.

“I don’t know about letting you have a motorboat,” he said, shaking his head. “The last time——”

“I promise you the boat won’t get away again,” Kay said quickly. “If any damage is done I’ll pay for it.”

The ride up the river was a pleasant one. The girls kept the boat running at slow speed so they could talk and enjoy the scenery. Wilma trailed her hands in the water and looked so dreamy-eyed that Betty teasingly declared she must be in another of her “moods.”

Wilma smiled and quoted:

“My pity and my joys are grown alike;
I cannot sweep the strangeness from my breast,
The Moods have laid swift hands across my hair;
The Moods have drawn swift fingers through my
heart.”

85

“Wait until you reach the peninsula,” Kay declared, swinging the wheel of the motorboat. “That place will inspire you to poetry. It is as picturesque as it is rugged and primitive.”

“I hope we don’t run into another bear,” Betty said with a shiver, “or that fellow Tom Topper.”

“I wish we would meet him,” replied Kay thoughtfully. “Until he can be located I fear the Lusardi case will be at a standstill.”

Soon the boat approached the peninsula. Kay brought it to a safe landing and then hid it out of sight in a little cove.

“Oh, this place has atmosphere!” Wilma cried in delight. “I wish we had known about it before!”

Betty started up the path ahead of the others.

“Be careful—” Kay called anxiously.

Before she could complete the warning, the girl in front gave a startled scream.

“Maybe it’s another bear!” gasped Wilma, stopping short.

Kay darted up the path to be met by the terrified Betty.

“I almost stepped on a snake! Oh, it was this big—” She demonstrated the size with her hands.

“There aren’t any snakes in this country as large as that. Where did you see it?”

86

“Right before me on the path, Kay! I nearly stepped on the ugly thing! Oh, it gave me a shock!”

“I see no snake now.”

“Then it must have crawled off somewhere. Let’s go back to the boat, Kay. I’ve lost my interest in Tom Topper’s shack.”

“Well, I haven’t,” declared Wilma quickly. “Kay went to a lot of trouble to bring us here, Betty.”

“I guess I did act silly,” the girl acknowledged with a nervous laugh. “The snake might not have been as large as I thought.”

After a moment the three chums started walking toward the shack, Betty being careful to keep well behind the others. However, they had not gone far when Kay halted unexpectedly. Reaching down, she picked up an object from

the ground.

“What did you find?” Wilma inquired eagerly.

The Tracey girl displayed a small, shiny key. It was fastened to a cloth tag which bore the marking “777”.

“I wonder if Tom Topper could have dropped it yesterday when he ran from the bear,” she said, turning the key over in her hand.

“Maybe it unlocks a bank box,” Betty suggested, peering over her chum’s shoulder.

“No, it’s too large for that.”

“It might fit a chest,” declared Wilma, “or possibly a cupboard. It’s queer about the number ‘777’.”

87

“Yes,” nodded Kay thoughtfully, “if it weren’t for that I’d say it might be a trunk key. I wonder what it can mean.”

After a moment she suggested that they hasten to the cabin. Possibly the key might unlock a piece of furniture belonging to Tom Topper and give them further clues! They found everything as it had been left the previous day, save that a fur dealer notified by Detective Kenley had removed the dead bear.

“Evidently Tom Topper did not return here,” Kay observed after the girls had looked around. “And this key fits none of the locks. It is a mystery all right.”

The girls straightened the furniture and replaced the broken violins on the shelf. Since it seemed foolish to abandon the key when there was no one to claim it, Kay took it with her when they left the cabin. The conviction was growing in her mind that Tom Topper had lost the tag, even though it might not belong to him.

That evening at the dinner table she was telling Cousin Bill about her visit to the peninsula when the doorbell rang. Mrs. Tracey answered it, returning to the dining room with a special delivery letter for Kay.

“I wonder who could have sent it?” the girl murmured in surprise.

After opening the envelope her expression of astonishment deepened.

88

“No bad news, I hope,” Mrs. Tracey said anxiously.

“Why no, it’s from Mr. Franklin!” Kay exclaimed, a smile lighting her face.

“The gentleman who gave you the reward?”

“Yes. He says he expects Wilma, Betty and me to see him sail on the *Caslonia*! I’d really forgotten all about it. But I’d love to do it. It would mean so much to me to be there! Please, Mother, may I go?”

89

CHAPTER XII

ABOARD THE *Caslonia*

“I scarcely know what to say,” remarked Mrs. Tracey after she had read Mr. Franklin’s invitation. “I should be worried if you girls were to go to New York by yourselves.”

“Then why not come with us?” suggested Kay eagerly. “I heard you say only yesterday that you had a lot of shopping to do.”

“I should enjoy a trip to New York. It seems ages since we have been there.”

“Don’t hesitate on my account,” urged Cousin Bill. “As long as Brantwood boasts good restaurants I’ll not starve!”

In the end Mrs. Tracey was persuaded to make the trip with the three girls. A wire was dispatched to Mr. Franklin telling him the name of the hotel where the party would stay. Hardly had they reached the great city, and were unpacking in their comfortable rooms, when the telephone rang. The call was from the explorer who cordially invited the group to take luncheon as his guests at a fashionable downtown restaurant.

Dressed in attractive silk frocks, Mrs. Tracey and the

girls arrived at exactly the appointed hour of one o'clock. Mr. Franklin and his mother, the latter charming in a blue travelling suit which she had purchased for the ocean voyage, were waiting.

"I have reserved a table near the orchestra," said the host, escorting his guests into the elaborately decorated dining room. "Melville Manning plays here. I believe you will enjoy him."

As the gay group were making their selections from the menu, the orchestra began to play.

"Lovely music," declared Mrs. Tracey appreciatively.

Both Wilma and Betty noticed that Kay's interest focused upon one of the violinists. Presently she remarked to her chums in a low voice:

"Doesn't that fellow remind you of Tom Topper?"

"How could he?" asked Betty, smiling broadly. "Wilma and I have never seen that man."

"That's so. For the moment I forgot. If Melville Manning's violinist had a scar across his chin I'd be certain he was Topper!"

Mr. Franklin called a waiter and asked the name of the violinist.

"Enrico Calo," returned the man politely. "His engagement at this restaurant ends today."

“So? Hasn’t his playing been satisfactory?”

“Oh, yes, sir, but Mr. Calo has secured a position more to his liking.”

After a very enjoyable luncheon Mrs. Tracey and the girls said goodbye to their host and hostess, promising to meet them again that evening at the pier from which the great ocean liner would leave. The afternoon was spent with a round of shopping. For Kay there was little interest in new clothes, however, since all her thoughts were centred upon the sailing of the *Caslonia*. Would she discover Tom Topper aboard? If she should locate the man she must be prepared to act swiftly.

91

So eager was Kay to reach the dock that she persuaded Mrs. Tracey and the twins to start a few minutes early. As they waited at the gangplank for Mr. Franklin and his mother, the girls watched with interest the hustle and bustle about them; dockhands loading the great vessel; porters with cars of baggage; messenger boys running about everywhere.

Many passengers and visitors were going aboard. Kay scrutinized each person. Suddenly she gripped Betty’s hand, drawing her chum’s attention to a man who was boarding the boat, a violin case in his hand.

“Enrico Calo!” Betty observed in a low voice.

“Yes, for just an instant I thought the man was Tom Topper!”

At that moment Mr. Franklin and his mother arrived, apologizing because they had been delayed in traffic.

“You aren’t late,” laughed Mrs. Tracey. “We came early, as the girls are eager to go aboard and explore the ship.”

92

“They will have nearly an hour before sailing time,” smiled Mr. Franklin, leading the way up the gangplank.

While his tickets were being examined, Kay had an opportunity to glance about the deck. Seeing Enrico Calo talking with the chief officer, and awed still by the man’s great resemblance to Tom Topper, she manoeuvred so that presently she was standing close to the musician. She could catch only brief snatches of the conversation, but heard enough to learn that Calo was aboard the *Caslonia* because he had been engaged to play with one of the ship’s orchestras.

Mr. Franklin was ready now to escort his guests to the suite which he and his mother would occupy. Already several boxes of flowers and candy had arrived for the travellers. Burying her face in a huge bouquet of roses, Wilma murmured wistfully:

“Oh, I wish I were going to Europe on this boat! Leave-takings are always so exciting, but sometimes they give one a sad feeling too.”

After the luggage had been arranged to his satisfaction, Mr. Franklin conducted the girls over the ship leaving Mrs. Tracey to chat with his mother. He showed them the various dining saloons, the library, the swimming pool and the gymnasium.

“Could we see some of the rooms in the lower part of the ship, do you suppose?” inquired Betty curiously.

93

Mr. Franklin made arrangements with a steward who very courteously escorted the party below deck where they viewed the engine room and the huge laundry. As they were returning to the upper deck, the steward waved his hand carelessly toward a closed door.

“This is the orchestra practice room,” he said. “It is located down here so the passengers won’t be disturbed!”

Kay glanced with interest at the door. As they moved away she thought she heard someone tuning a violin.

“Perhaps Enrico Calo is in there,” she told herself. “I should like to talk with him if he is.”

When the steward led the group to another part of the ship she quietly slipped away and returned to the practice room. Listening at the door a moment and hearing someone move about, she boldly knocked.

“Come in,” called a voice.

Kay pushed open the door and entered. Enrico Calo, who was putting a new string on his violin, stared at the girl.

“This is the orchestra practice room, Miss,” he said with a slight accent. “You are lost?”

“Well, not exactly,” replied Kay. “I was just exploring the ship. You are a violinist?” she asked.

“You have not heard of me?” inquired the man. “I am Enrico Calo! For many years I played at the Trocadero

Restaurant.”

“You have a fine looking instrument there,” Kay remarked, glancing critically at the violin. “It looks a little like a Stradivarius.”

The man regarded the girl with new interest.

“You are a musician too?” he asked softly.

“I play the piano,” Kay answered, “but I am interested in old violins. May I examine yours?”

As the man hesitated, Kay feared that he would refuse. However, he grudgingly placed the instrument in her hands with a warning to handle it carefully.

“You must be very proud to own a violin such as this,” said Kay, but Enrico Calo did not reply.

Turning over the instrument to examine the back, Kay suddenly found it difficult to hide her astonishment. The finish had been marred by two long scratches—scratches which took the form of a cross!

“A very fine violin,” Kay murmured, striving to recover her poise. “May I ask where it came from?”

Before the musician could reply, the door opened and several players came into the room. Nodding carelessly to Kay, they began to unpack their instruments.

Enrico Calo took back his violin. Tucking it under his

chin he ran a few scales. Though Kay waited hopefully for an opportunity to repeat her question, she could not do so, for the room grew too noisy. She could not have made herself heard had she tried. At last, aware that time was slipping away, and that she would learn nothing by remaining, Kay reluctantly left.

“I ought to tell Mr. Franklin about the violin right away,” she thought. “He will advise me what to do.”

She quickly started up the passageway and turned to the right. After she had gone a short distance she took a branch-off to the left.

“This doesn’t look like the way I came,” Kay thought in alarm.

More time had elapsed than the girl realized. Before she had walked very far she was startled to hear a shrill whistle—a last warning that all passengers were to go ashore.

In panic Kay began to run, but she could not find a stairway leading to the main deck. There were no stewards to whom she could appeal for assistance. In desperation she tried to retrace her steps to the music room, but by this time she was hopelessly confused. The whistle sounded again.

Rushing down a passageway toward a porthole, she looked out and nearly collapsed. The boat was leaving the harbour!

CHAPTER XIII

A FORTUNATE MISTAKE

In sheer panic Kay started to run again. As she turned a corner in the passageway she collided with a stewardess carrying a tray.

“Which way to the upper deck?” Kay asked breathlessly.
“Tell me quickly!”

“Why, the corridor to the right,” answered the young woman, gazing critically at the girl. “What’s your hurry?”

“I—I’m not sailing,” gasped Kay. “I’m only a visitor. I want to get off the boat.”

“It’s too late,” said the woman coldly. “You must see the captain at once. Come with me.”

She led the contrite Kay down the corridor and up two flights of stairs straight to Captain Dowell. He was a dignified looking man with powerfully built shoulders and iron-grey hair. As he regarded Kay soberly, the stewardess explained that the girl had no ticket.

“So you were expecting to secure free passage?” he asked.

“Oh, no, Captain,” Kay assured the officer earnestly. “It was all a mistake. I became confused and couldn’t find my way to the upper deck. I am very sorry.”

“H—m,” said the captain, a twinkle in his eye. “Well, we’ll not put you in irons this time. But don’t repeat it. Passengers who overstay their limit cause us no end of annoyance.”

97

“Will I be able to reach shore?” Kay asked anxiously. “My mother will be very worried about me.”

“You’ll be sent back on the tender when we drop the pilot. That will be some time yet. Please remain in my quarters until you are notified.”

To be kept in a cabin did not fit in with Kay’s plans. She felt that she must talk with Mr. Franklin before leaving the vessel.

“Oh, please,” she requested as the captain turned away, “it is very important that I see one of your passengers—Mr. James Franklin. Do you suppose he could come here?”

“James Franklin?” repeated the captain, impressed by the name. He had invited the well-known traveller and his mother to share his table on the voyage. “Yes, I’ll have word sent to him at once.”

In a few minutes the explorer appeared at the cabin.

“Whatever happened to you, Miss Tracey!” he exclaimed upon seeing her. “Your mother was frantic when you didn’t return to our rooms.”

“I became lost, Mr. Franklin. I surely am sorry to have caused so much trouble for everyone. Mother and the twins left the boat, of course?”

“Yes, they finally decided you had gone ashore by yourself. They will be even more worried now.”

98

“The captain has promised to send me directly back to the pier on the tender. He’s provoked at me, Mr. Franklin, and I don’t blame him a bit.”

“Where did you go after you left us?”

Rapidly Kay recounted her adventures in the lower levels of the ship.

“Enrico Calo’s violin bore markings identical with those on the stolen Stradivarius,” she finished her story. “I didn’t get a chance to question him, as so many persons were in the room.”

“I’ll look into the matter right away,” promised Mr. Franklin before Kay could make the request. “Just leave everything to me.”

After a while a young officer came to tell Kay that the tender was waiting. As he escorted her to the ladder he teased her about what he termed her zest for adventure, but she did not mind. She climbed nimbly down the ladder, creating a minor sensation among the passengers who watched her descent.

The pilot was a friendly man who chatted about his work as the tender plied its way back to shore. He pointed out various

shoals and danger points, so that altogether Kay had a very interesting trip. Her greatest regret was causing her mother and the twins so much anxiety.

Even before the tender drew up to the pier, she saw them waving to her. As she alighted they ran to meet her.

“Oh, Kay,” murmured Mrs. Tracey, “how could you do such a thing? When we discovered you weren’t on shore we were frantic!”

99

“It was all a mistake, Mother. But in a way it was a fortunate mistake!”

“I’ll bet you had a thrilling time,” Betty said enviously.

“It was fun riding in the tender, but I don’t mean that. I think I may have traced the Lusardi violin!”

“I might have known it wasn’t carelessness which kept you aboard the *Caslonia*,” declared Mrs. Tracey, smiling. “Tell us about it, Kay.”

For the second time that evening the girl related her adventure, a story which did not end until a cab had brought them safely to their hotel.

“Kay has all the luck,” Betty complained good-naturedly. “I wish I had been left aboard too!”

“It wasn’t much fun while I was chasing up and down the corridors frantically,” returned Kay ruefully. “I do hope Mr. Franklin contacts Enrico Calo and learns more about his

violin.”

“Perhaps you should notify Detective Kenley,” suggested Mrs. Tracey thoughtfully.

“Suppose I telephone him now.”

“It would be a very good idea, I think.”

Kay placed a long distance call to Brantwood. In a moment she was connected with Detective Kenley, who praised her highly for the discovery she had made. He declared he would contact the *Caslonia* by radio and request that a complete investigation be made before Enrico Calo might be permitted to disembark.

100

Satisfied that she had done everything possible, Kay dismissed the matter of the Lusardi violin from her mind. During the remainder of her stay in New York she enjoyed herself thoroughly, being careful not to worry her mother with any further adventures.

Late the following afternoon Mrs. Tracey and the three girls boarded a fast train for Brantwood. For a time they sat on the observation platform watching the scenery and listening to the musical click of the rails. Wilma, her gaze upon the distant horizon, quoted softly:

““The weary sun hath made a golden set,
And, by the bright track of his fiery car,
Gives token of a goodly day tomorrow.””

“The day is fading,” observed Kay with a little shiver. “It

seems to be getting colder now that the sun has gone down. May I bring you a wrap, Mother?”

“Yes, please,” requested Mrs. Tracey. “I left my coat on the seat.”

Kay went through the car to their own section, which was located several cars forward. As she walked along trying to keep her balance in the swaying train, she saw two men emerge from the club section. Although she did not see their faces, something about their general appearance seemed familiar to her and she slowed her steps so that she would not overtake them.

101

The men passed through the vestibule and sat down in a seat near the end of the car. As they turned slightly so that their faces were exposed, Kay received a shock.

The men were John Gluber and Tom Topper!

“I was under the impression they were not even friendly,” Kay told herself, stopping short.

Her heart leaped with excitement at the thought that if she were to be cautious it might be possible to gather valuable evidence to be used against Tom Topper. But she must not be seen! While it was likely that the man would not recognize her, yet she would be wise in taking no chances.

Kay moved back into the short passageway near the door and listened. At first she could hear only a low murmur of voices, but as her ears became accustomed to the rumble of the wheels she suddenly caught a sentence.

“I tell you, you ought to get rid of the Speers!” Tom Topper muttered to his companion.

Fearing that she might miss the remainder of the conversation, Kay threw caution to the winds. Covering her face with her hand, she boldly entered the car and sat down in the seat directly behind the two men!

CHAPTER XIV

TROUBLE

The secondhand dealer and his companion were so engrossed in their conversation that they failed to observe Kay.

“I agree with you, Tom,” said Gluber, nodding to emphasize his words. “I’ve been a sap to keep the Speers this long. I think the girl broke some of my best glassware.”

“Tried to lie out of it, eh?”

“She claimed one of the customers damaged the stuff.”

“That’s a girl for you,” Tom Topper said angrily. “I was at the house one day when she smashed some of your expensive goblets.”

“You saw her do it?”

“Sure,” said the wily fellow, avoiding his companion’s gaze.

“Then that settles it. I’ll turn them both out.”

Kay found it difficult to refrain from breaking into the conversation, for she felt certain Topper was lying. She believed the man was trying to blame the Speers for one of his

own misdeeds.

“How about that sale at Marigold?” inquired John Gluber, abruptly changing the subject. “Are you going?”

“Yes, I thought I would. There ought to be some good stuff at the place.”

103

“I figure it will go cheap—unless you bid against me, Tom.”

“Maybe we could get together, eh?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Gluber with a grin.

“Suppose we meet there on Saturday and look over the stuff.”

“Sure, we can decide what we want, and then not bid against each other.”

The men began to talk of other matters which were of no interest to Kay. She quietly slipped away without being observed, and getting her mother’s wrap, hastened back to the observation car.

“It took you a long time, dear,” remarked Mrs. Tracey as she put on the coat. “We had just decided to come in search of you.”

“I had another adventure,” Kay confessed, her eyes shining. “You’ll never guess who is on this train!”

“An old school friend?”

“Tom Topper!”

“The man you hoped to find aboard the *Caslonia!*” exclaimed Mrs. Tracey in astonishment.

“Yes, only now I’m not sure Detective Kenley will wish to arrest him. Both he and Enrico Calo can’t be guilty of stealing the violin!”

“Dear me, the case has become complicated,” said the girl’s mother, frowning. “Do you suppose your friend Rosa was mistaken in her identification?”

104

“It is possible. However, she seemed positive that the man who took the violin had a scar across his cheek.”

“And Enrico Calo has no scar?”

“None that I could see,” replied Kay.

“Yet the violin in his possession bore the marks of the Stradivarius?”

“Yes, it’s all very puzzling. I wonder if it might not be a good idea to wire Detective Kenley to meet us at the station?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Tracey agreed quickly. “Then he may use his own judgment regarding Topper’s arrest.”

The telegram was dispatched to Brantwood, but as no reply was received, Kay did not know whether or not the detective would meet the train. While she waited in suspense, she sent Wilma and Betty through the car at regular intervals to make certain the two men were still there.

Finally when Brantwood was reached, Kay was the first person to step from the train. To her delight Detective Kenley came forward to greet her.

“I wired you because Tom Topper is on the train!” she told him eagerly. “Under the circumstances I didn’t know whether or not you’d arrest him.”

“I’d like to question the man, Miss Tracey. Your discovery that the violin is aboard the *Caslonia* puts matters in a different light.”

“Do you think now that Topper had anything to do with the theft?”

105

“It begins to look as if Rosa Lusardi may have been a bit mixed up,” the detective admitted. “I contacted the *Caslonia* and am having Enrico Calo watched. But it will do no harm to ask Tom Topper a few questions.”

“He was in that car a moment ago,” Kay added, nodding her head.

The detective thanked the girl for her assistance and boarded the train. Later, as she and the twins were getting into a taxi with her mother, she caught sight of him again. He came over to speak to her.

“Did you talk with Tom Topper?” she asked him eagerly.

The man shook his head. “No, I saw the fellow but he managed to slip away.”

“Do you think he fled because he knows you are a detective?”

“I couldn’t make up my mind,” Mr. Kenley replied, frowning.
“Well, goodbye. Thank you again.”

Kay and the twins returned to school the following day. During noon recess Rosa told them that nothing very important had happened during the time of their absence. She inquired about the New York trip, but the girls did not tell her of Kay’s experiences aboard the *Caslonia*, fearing that if Enrico Calo’s violin should not prove to be the stolen Stradivarius, the girl’s disappointment would be too great.

“I have one bit of news to report,” Rosa declared gaily.
“The members of the orchestra voted to have a picnic Saturday.”

106

“That’s fine!” cried Betty. “Where will it be held?”

“At a place called Marigold. I have never been there.”

“Neither have I,” said Wilma, “but I’ve heard it is a pretty section of the country.”

“Did you say the picnic is to be held this Saturday?” inquired Kay in a strange tone.

“Why yes. Will you be able to go?”

“Nothing could keep me away,” replied Kay, and with a laugh left the group before the girls could ask her any questions.

That evening she telephoned to Ronald Earle. After telling

him of the conversation she had overheard on the train, she asked if he would be willing to meet her near the picnic grounds and attend the sale with her. She would need a man's help!

"Sure, count on me," he accepted instantly.

"I thought you would be willing to go," Kay declared, highly pleased. "I'll manage to slip away from the outing. If you should think up any ideas as to how we can keep Mr. Gluber from turning the Speers out of their home, let me know!"

Later that day Ronald mentioned to a friend his plan of meeting Kay near the picnic grounds and attending the auction sale with her. As luck would have it, the conversation was overheard by Ethel Eaton. Provoked because she would not be invited to the outing, the girl went at once to Rosa Lusardi.

107

"If I were you I wouldn't go to Marigold," she tried to influence the girl. "Mark my words, you'll be sorry if you do."

"Why?"

"Kay Tracey has a scheme in mind which is likely to get you into trouble. That's all I can tell you."

"Kay is a very good friend of mine," Rosa replied warmly. "I am not worried."

"All right," said Ethel with a toss of her head, "go along if that's the way you feel about it. But don't say I didn't warn

you!”

Kay was troubled by far more serious matters than the silly gossip which Ethel Eaton spread about. She feared that any day now John Gluber would put Mamie Speer and her grandmother out of their home. Inducing Wilma and Betty to accompany her, she drove out one afternoon to the house in the pines to inquire if anything had happened.

She was not surprised to find Mamie packing up her few belongings. Old Mrs. Speer, reduced to a pitiful state, lay in her bed weeping and moaning that fate had always been against them.

“Mr. Gluber has asked you to leave?” Kay inquired quietly.

“Yes,” answered Mamie in a hushed voice, “he said I had broken so many dishes he couldn’t afford to keep us, and that Grandmother ate too much! I have never broken a valuable dish since I’ve been here! Poor Granny doesn’t eat enough to keep a bird alive.”

108

“Where will you go?” Wilma inquired sympathetically.

“I don’t know. We have no relatives or friends. Grandmother isn’t well enough to be moved anywhere. Oh, it all frightens me.”

“We’ll help you pack your belongings,” Betty offered.

“Nearly everything is ready to go except the glassware, which is downstairs in the storeroom.”

“I thought all the things on display belonged to Mr. Gluber,” Kay said quickly.

“No, Grandmother brought some very fine pieces here. Mr. Gluber tried to sell them for her, but only a few were bought.”

Kay and the twins were curious to see the antiques. Mamie proudly displayed a pair of ancient pewter candlesticks, a pressed glass sugar bowl, a set of fine goblets, and a chipped blue platter bearing a historical design.

“If only I could sell these things Grandmother and I would have a little money,” Mamie said earnestly, “but there seems to be no market for them.”

After staring at the antiques thoughtfully for a moment, Kay exclaimed:

“Mamie, there is an antique store at Layton and I know the dealer! Perhaps he would buy these articles from you.”

109

“I have no way of getting the things there,” the girl replied sadly.

“I could take them in the car,” Kay offered enthusiastically. She turned to Wilma and Betty, asking, “You wouldn’t mind riding over to Layton, would you?”

“We’d love to,” declared Betty promptly.

“It would be a great load off my mind if you care to take the things,” Mamie said in relief. “If I can’t sell them they’re

quite useless to us. After Grandmother and I leave here we shall have no place to store the dishes.”

“I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to sell them,” Kay cautioned the girl. “However, I’ll do my very best.”

Carefully the glassware was packed in boxes and carried to the car. With a candlestick in her hand Betty tripped over an uneven place on the sidewalk and nearly fell.

“O-oh, that was a close call,” she laughed nervously. “Lucky Kay was carrying the goblets.”

Saying goodbye to Mamie, the girls drove toward Layton. Noon found them still on the road, so Kay suggested that they stop at an attractive looking inn at the edge of the city.

It was fortunate that they decided to halt, for scarcely had they seated themselves in the restaurant than a sudden shower came up. The girls loitered over their meal, watching the rain splash against the window panes.

110

“It will be over soon,” Kay declared, studying the clouds. “We are in no hurry.”

“It’s much better to wait,” agreed Wilma. “The pavements will be slippery.”

As the girls stood at the window a heavy truck came down the road. Evidently the driver decided to stop at the Inn, for he suddenly applied the brakes.

“Oh, he’s skidding!” cried Wilma in horror.

The big machine slid sideways on the pavement. As the rear end swung around, it struck the Tracey car parked at the edge of the highway.

“Mamie’s glassware!” Kay exclaimed.

With one accord the three girls rushed out of doors to find how much damage had been done.

CHAPTER XV

BROKEN HEIRLOOMS

A glance into the rear of the car revealed a sad story. All the Speer treasures except the pewter candlesticks were broken!

“Oh, how dreadful!” gasped Betty in dismay. “It’s enough to make one cry.”

“What in the world are we to do now?” added Wilma, picking up one of the fragile pieces of glassware. “There isn’t a chance anything can be mended.”

“And Mamie was depending on us to sell the things for her,” Kay said gloomily.

She stared at the wreckage; then her gaze shifted to the truck which had pulled up not far away. She really couldn’t blame the man for the accident, which had been caused by the slippery pavement. As the driver alighted, he looked rather dazed.

“Any damage done?” he asked anxiously, coming to the car.

Wilma pointed dramatically to the box of broken glassware.

“Gosh, I’m sorry,” the man said, greatly upset. “I eased my

brake on careful-like, but first thing I knew I was skiddin'. I couldn't stop her."

"I guess it wasn't your fault," Kay admitted despondently. "But the glassware doesn't belong to us."

112

"Worth very much?"

"Yes, a great deal. The pieces were all antiques."

"Gosh, that *is* bad. I'd offer to pay, only it wasn't really my fault and I haven't much money. I only got this job truckin' last week, and I'm afraid the boss will fire me if he has to pay."

Kay felt sorry for the man, but thought she ought to take down his name and the licence number of his truck just the same.

"We may as well go home now," Kay said gloomily. "I feel actually sick."

"So do I," nodded Betty, climbing into the car. "What shall we do about the Speers?"

"I suppose we'll have to tell them," her chum replied ruefully. "I'd rather take a good beating than do it. Perhaps Mother will be able to mend some of the pieces but I doubt it."

"It begins to look as if Mrs. Speer is right," Wilma remarked with a sigh. "Fate seems to be against them."

"And us!" added her sister.

Mrs. Tracey was distressed when the girls showed her the broken glassware and was told how their plans to help Mrs. Speer and Mamie had gone awry. She shook her head over the pieces, declaring that they never could be mended satisfactorily.

“You will have to tell Mrs. Speer the truth and offer to pay for the damage,” she said to Kay.

113

“I doubt they will take any money from me, Mother. It will be difficult to determine the value of the antiques too.”

Before the box of broken glass could be carried to the basement the doorbell rang. Kay, never suspecting the trouble which awaited her, went to answer it. As she opened the door John Gluber stepped boldly inside without waiting to be asked.

“You’re just the person I’ve come to see!”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Gluber,” Kay murmured uneasily.

“I didn’t come here on a social call. I came to tell you a few pointed facts, young lady. Mamie told me you had been out to my place this morning.”

“Yes.”

“She said you carried off some of Mrs. Speer’s antiques, saying you would sell the things. Well, I’ll not have you horning into my business! Understand? I am here to get that box of stuff you carried away.”

As the secondhand dealer finished his little speech his eyes wandered toward the table. He saw the box of broken glassware which Wilma and Betty were trying to hide from him.

“What’s this?” he cried, moving over to the table.

“I am afraid it is all that is left of Mrs. Speer’s things,” Kay admitted reluctantly.

John Gluber’s face became convulsed with rage.

“You have destroyed priceless antiques!” he shouted.
“I’ll have you arrested for this!”

114

“Mr. Gluber, please take a sensible attitude,” said Mrs. Tracey in a quiet voice. “My daughter intends to pay for the damage. Her car was struck by a truck——”

“I don’t believe it,” the secondhand dealer interrupted impolitely. “Mamie tells me these girls have been out to my place before trying to stir up trouble.”

“Are you certain Mamie said that?” Kay demanded, her eyes blazing.

“Well, maybe those weren’t just her words——”

“No, I thought not!”

At that moment Gluber noticed the clock which Kay had purchased at the time of her first visit to the house. With a cry of triumph he rushed across the room and took it from the

shelf.

“Ah, stolen property! Now I *will* go to the police!”

“Mr. Gluber, that clock belongs to me,” Kay said indignantly. “I paid Mamie for it. She will tell you so.”

“We were with Kay when she bought it,” Betty added quickly, coming to her chum’s defence.

The three girls finally convinced Mr. Gluber they were speaking the truth, but not without a tiring argument.

115

Kay knew the man would never take a sensible attitude about the broken glassware. Drawing her mother aside, she whispered to her that she would drive out to the Speer home and explain the situation before the man could return there and distort the facts.

“Keep him here as long as you can, Mother,” she urged. “I’d rather he wouldn’t know where I have gone.”

While Mrs. Tracey sought to soothe Mr. Gluber’s ruffled feelings, Kay and the twins slipped quietly from the house. As they drove up the lane leading to the dwelling in the pines they noticed suitcases and boxes piled on the front porch.

“Mamie and her grandmother must be ready to leave,” Kay observed uneasily.

The old lady had left her bed. Dressed in hat and coat, she sat in a reclining chair in the living room. Her withered face lighted with joy as her grand-daughter opened the door to admit the girls.

“I told Mamie you would come with the money in time to save us!” she declared brightly. “How much did the antiques bring?”

Kay glanced at Wilma and Betty. She could not find words to explain what had happened.

“You weren’t able to sell our things?” Mamie asked quickly, sensing that something was wrong.

“It’s worse than that,” Kay admitted ruefully. “We were in an accident. All the glassware was broken.”

“Broken!” wailed Mrs. Speer. “You mean—we will receive no money?”

“I’ll pay you for the damage, of course,” said Kay hastily. “You can’t understand how bad I feel about it.”

116

She recounted how the accident had occurred. Mrs. Speer listened with a dazed expression and the girls wondered if she really could grasp the situation.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Mamie declared, lowering her eyes. “We can’t take your money, Miss Tracey.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” Kay replied briskly. “The important thing now is, where are you going?”

“We don’t know. Grandmother and I are waiting for Mr. Gluber. He said he would haul our things to town. But we have no place to go unless it’s to the poorhouse!”

“You are coming home with me,” Kay declared.

“Oh, no,” protested Mamie weakly.

“Yes, I insist. Betty, will you help me carry the luggage out to the car?”

With the matter practically taken from their hands, Mamie and her grandmother could not refuse to accept Kay’s hospitality. During the ride back to Brantwood they both were very quiet, but the girls chatted gaily, trying to coax the two into a cheerful mood.

Kay was relieved to see that John Gluber’s car no longer stood at the door. As she escorted the Speers into the house she called to her mother, who was busy in the kitchen.

“Oh, Mother, our guests are here!”

Mrs. Tracey hastily came into the living room, trying not to disclose her astonishment. She had expected no visitors. Yet, instantly understanding the situation, she smiled cordially.

117

“I am delighted that Kay persuaded you to come,” she said.
“Your room is waiting.”

Mrs. Speer and her grand-daughter were established comfortably in the guest chamber. Their gratitude repaid Mrs. Tracey for any annoyance she felt. She was more concerned about the future, as was Kay. The guests could not be turned away until a home could be found for them.

It was difficult for Kay to sleep that night. She kept tossing in bed, trying to think of something she could do to help Mamie and her grandmother.

“Both are in such poor health,” she thought. “Mamie isn’t physically able to hold a job even if I can get one for her.”

Presently, growing more restless, Kay put on robe and slippers and went downstairs. She tried to read but soon gave it up. Picking up the clock which had been bought at the Gluber place, she amused herself by tinkering with it.

“I don’t see why the silly thing won’t run,” she complained. “It looks like a perfectly good timepiece.”

Thinking that the main spring might be broken, she unfastened the screws at the back and took off the cover. She could hardly believe her eyes as she saw the reason why the clock would not keep time.

118

A small roll of green paper had been pressed against the works!

Clutching the clock in her arms, Kay ran up the steps two at a time. “Oh, Mother!” she called, bursting into her parent’s bedroom. “Just see what I have found!”

119

CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE DREAM

Mrs. Tracey stirred drowsily, then sat up in bed.

“Kay, why are you awake at this hour of the night?” she asked sternly.

“Mother, just see what I have found in this old clock!” the girl cried excitedly, switching on the bed light.

Mrs. Tracey, blinking, shaded her eyes with one hand.

“Oh, Kay, must you show me now? It’s the middle of the night——”

“Mother, this is an important discovery! I’ve found a lot of money!”

By this time the woman was thoroughly awake. Then, seeing the large roll of paper money in her daughter’s hand, she asked in bewilderment, “Gracious, where did you get that?”

“I just explained,” said Kay patiently. “I found the money stuffed in the back of this old clock.”

“How much is there?” Mrs. Tracey arose and pulled on her

dressing gown.

“I haven’t counted it yet.”

Kay began laying the bills out one at a time on the bed. They were in either one or five-hundred-dollar denominations.

120

“Exactly eighteen hundred dollars!” she exclaimed when she had finished. “And just think, I bought the clock for a dollar and a half!”

“Of course the money doesn’t belong to you, Kay.”

“No, I’d not think of claiming it. Just the same it would be hard to give all this money back to Mr. Gluber. Do you suppose the clock could have belonged to Mrs. Speer?”

“It is possible, I suppose. You said her things were mixed with his.”

“I’ll go and ask her now!”

Mrs. Tracey caught her daughter’s arm. “Not at this time of night, Kay. And if I were you, I would lead up to the subject gradually. Those poor people have had enough disappointments.”

“Yes, you are right,” Kay agreed instantly. “I’ll try to find out if the clock is hers before I say anything about the money. But at least I can tell Cousin Bill!”

“Yes, tell him,” Mrs. Tracey smiled. “I don’t blame you for

being thrilled over your discovery.”

The young lawyer shared the girl’s enthusiasm when he heard about the money, but he agreed with Mrs. Tracey that the news should be withheld from Mamie and Mrs. Speer for a little while at least.

“Undoubtedly they are good, honest people,” he declared wisely, “but it is always a temptation to claim money when one has nothing. I should question the grandmother before telling her the truth.”

121

In the morning Kay carried a breakfast tray to the old lady. Seating herself at the bedside, she wondered how to lead up to her all-important subject. Suddenly Mrs. Speer remarked:

“I had the strangest dream last night. It was almost as real as if I had lived it; in fact, it was similar to days in my early life. I thought I was on tour again.”

“On tour?” inquired Kay in surprise.

“Yes, in my young days I was a violinist.”

“You never mentioned that fact before, Mrs. Speer. How interesting.”

“Grandmother was a very talented concert performer,” Mamie said proudly from the other side of the room. “She made a good living from her tours.”

“The money I made all slipped away from me,” sighed the old lady. “But I started to tell you about my dream. I seemed to be

on one of my concert tours, playing before a large audience. Afterward the manager gave me some money. I decided not to put it into the bank but to hide it somewhere. In my dream I placed it in an old clock! Isn't that ridiculous?"

"Perhaps it wasn't a dream," said Kay in a strange voice.

"Oh, it was that all right. But as I said, it seemed very real."

"In your dream, how much money did you hide in the clock, Mrs. Speer?"

122

"Eighteen hundred dollars," replied the old lady without hesitation. Then she glanced at Kay with startled eyes. "Why, how did I know that? I don't remember dreaming anything about the amount!"

"Mrs. Speer, you actually did hide the money in a clock!" cried Kay in delight, jumping up and squeezing the old lady's hand. "And I found it last night! Wait! I'll show you!"

She ran into her own room, returning in a moment with the clock. Mrs. Speer immediately identified it as her own property.

"And here is the money—eighteen hundred dollars!" cried Kay.

"It seems almost unbelievable," the happy woman murmured, fingering the bills. "But I remember that I did hide the money somewhere that night of the concert. Yes, it was in this clock! How stupid of me to forget!"

“Brilliant, I should say,” laughed Mamie joyfully. “Oh, Kay, you’re a marvel to find the money for us! Now we’ll be able to have a place of our own again.”

“I’ll help you look for an apartment this afternoon,” Kay offered. “There are some very nice ones on Hilldale Drive.”

After luncheon she and Mamie spent an hour inspecting one building after another. Finally in a nice location they found a well furnished place which seemed suitable in every respect. Kay moved the luggage in her car and by mid-afternoon the Speers were settled in their new home.

123

“I haven’t felt so happy in years,” the old lady declared brightly. “Mamie, I wish you would get out the silver tea set.”

Kay remained to take tea, reflecting as she sipped the beverage that good fortune had brought a remarkable change in Mrs. Speer’s attitude toward life.

“By the way, whatever became of your concert violin?” the girl inquired presently.

“Mr. Gluber sold it for me,” replied Mrs. Speer. “Did he ever give us the money, Mamie? I can’t seem to remember that he did. In fact, I often said——”

“I think we more than used up the money in board and room, Grandmother.”

“It was a valuable violin,” protested Mrs. Speer.

“Not a Stradivarius?” inquired Kay quickly.

“No, but a very good make. Are you familiar with violins?”

“I never played one,” Kay answered readily. “I became interested in various types of violins because one which belonged to an acquaintance, Pedro Lusardi, was stolen.”

“Did I understand you to say Pedro Lusardi?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“I knew his father. We were on tour one winter together. He was a marvellous player and owned a wonderful old violin.”

“Pedro Lusardi inherited his father’s instrument. It was a Stradivarius.”

124

“Once the elder Lusardi allowed me to play his violin,” Mrs. Speer continued reflectively. “It had such a beautiful tone. According to present day prices I should judge it to be worth at least ten thousand dollars. What a pity that it was stolen.”

The old lady related various incidents connected with her life on the concert stage. Kay enjoyed herself so thoroughly that she lingered until long after five o’clock, barely reaching home in time for dinner.

“Everything worked out beautifully,” she told her mother and Cousin Bill. “Mamie and her grandmother are so happy in their new quarters. Since rent is low where they are, their money should last for some time.”

“And then?” inquired Cousin Bill.

“By that time I’ll have thought of something,” laughed Kay. “Perhaps I can find another clock with money stuffed in its works!”

The dinner dishes had been washed and put away when Mrs. Tracey heard the doorbell ring.

“Will you answer, please?” she requested her daughter. “Bill just went to the office, so if it is for him, say that he won’t be home until late.”

Kay opened the door to find John Gluber standing there. When he recognized the girl, the lines of his face tightened. Realizing that the man had come to make trouble, she did not invite him into the house; nor did she open the door wide enough for him to push past her. 125

“Good evening, Mr. Gluber,” Kay said coldly.

“I guess you know why I am here.”

“No, I haven’t any idea.”

“I’ve come to collect damages for the glassware you broke—Mrs. Speer’s property. She said she’ll take fifty dollars and call it square.”

“Oh, Mrs. Speer sent you?” Kay inquired, deliberately leading the man on.

“Yes, she did. She was angry because you broke the things. You’re lucky to get off with paying only fifty dollars.”

“When were you talking with Mrs. Speer?”

“This afternoon,” the secondhand dealer answered shortly.

“At your home?”

“Certainly at my home!” Mr. Gluber snapped, wondering for the first time if he had been trapped.

“I happen to know that Mrs. Speer did not talk with you today,” said Kay evenly. “And I have a few questions of my own to ask. What did you do with the money derived from the sale of Mrs. Speer’s violin?”

“Her violin was just a mess of junk,” Mr. Gluber muttered uneasily. “Anyway, she got the money.”

“To whom did you sell the violin?”

“I don’t remember. Maybe it was to Tom Topper. I sell him violins now and then.”

“I think you remember the transaction very clearly,” Kay said daringly. “And a certain other one as well which concerned the Lusardi violin!”

126

John Gluber stared at the girl. His face had lost its colour. Gone was all his bluster.

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he muttered nervously.

“You and Tom Topper were involved in a transaction with

Enrico Calo!” Kay accused, carrying on her bluff. “You may as well admit the truth.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” the man protested in a frightened voice. “I never heard of Enrico Calo! I won’t listen to another word!”

Turning about hastily, the man fled into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVII

AN EXCITING PICNIC

Kay smiled as she closed the door, for her bluff had been most effective. She felt certain John Gluber would not have vanished so quickly had he not been guilty of the charges she had made against him.

“I was just guessing, but he gave himself away all right,” she chuckled, returning to the living room. “I’ll ask Detective Kenley to question the man and force him to tell the truth.”

Kay might not have felt so pleased could she have foreseen the events which were to follow. After leaving her home, the secondhand dealer went to a certain rooming house where his friend, Tom Topper, was staying.

“That Tracey girl is as smart as a whip,” he told the man. “Somehow she’s learned about Enrico Calo. If she talks to the police, we’ll end up in gaol!”

“We’ll have to silence her some way,” advised Tom Topper gruffly. “How about a bribe?”

The other man did not answer for a few moments.

“Maybe she would take it and maybe she wouldn’t. We’ll

have to be careful how we offer money.”

“Sure, I know, Gluber. I’ll do a little investigating and try to find out more about her. Then we’ll decide what’s to be done.”

128

This decision made, the two friends parted company. By making quiet inquiry around Brantwood Topper learned many facts about Kay but none which led him to think that the girl would accept a bribe. Finally when he heard that members of the Carmont High School orchestra would attend a picnic at Marigold, it occurred to him that the outing might provide an excellent opportunity for talking with the girl.

Unaware of the man’s secret plans, Kay and her chums motored gaily to the distant community, satisfied they were to have a delightful, carefree day. The weather was ideal, the picnic site almost perfect. A delicious luncheon was spread out near a waterfall, and everyone ate until the last scrap of food disappeared.

The outing had been planned as an all-day, all-evening affair with the young people attending a dance at Marigold in the evening. However, Kay and Wilma made up their minds they would steal away from the others and go to the sale which was being held at the country home of the late Judge Allen.

“I was hoping Ronald could be with us,” Kay remarked as the girls quietly left the group and went to their car. “A man along might be a good idea. Unfortunately he couldn’t make it at the last minute, but he’ll try to get to the dance before it is over.”

“Oh, well, we won’t need him,” declared Betty with a laugh. “Not unless you run into difficulties with Tom Topper!”

“I’m a bit scared,” said Wilma. “Something might happen.”

“He may not even be at the sale,” replied Kay. “In any case we’ll be very cautious.”

Having inquired the way, the girls set off at a brisk pace through the woods. As Kay chanced to thrust her hand into her sweater pocket she was surprised to touch a small, hard object. She brought to light the key marked “777” which had been picked up near Tom Topper’s cabin.

“I had forgotten all about having this!” she exclaimed.

“Keep it in your pocket,” said Wilma, smiling. “Maybe it will bring you luck.”

“I wish it would help me solve the mystery. So far I have gathered a lot of facts but they don’t lead anywhere.”

Following the well-worn trail through the woods, the girls presently emerged on a country road. From the next hilltop they could see the home of the late Judge Allen. The grounds were marked neatly by tall hedges and white painted fences. The house itself was large and rambling, with green shutters and a Colonial type door.

“That’s the place all right,” remarked Kay as the chums walked on. “The garden is full of cars.”

“It looks to me as if the sale were about half over.”

“Yes, we are late,” Kay agreed anxiously.

The girls attracted no attention as they joined the throng which had gathered on the front lawn. Inquiring from a woman who stood nearby, Kay learned that the sale was nearly over. Only a few odds and ends remained to be sold, and in a few minutes the buyers began to drive away.

“I don’t believe either Gluber or Topper is here,” Kay remarked in disappointment as she and Wilma looked over the audience. “We’ve had our trip for nothing.”

Actually the two men were inside the Allen mansion, paying for several antiques which they had bought in partnership. John Gluber, very well pleased at the many bargains he had acquired, was hopeful of taking home a fine carved chest which would cost him not a penny.

While inspecting an upstairs bedroom, the secondhand dealer had come upon the box. Knowing its value, he had instantly made up his mind to have it. Without telling even Tom Topper, he slyly had hidden the chest in a closet. Later, after the sale was over, he would return to the deserted house and carry away the treasure.

Scarcely had the two men turned away from the clerk’s desk, than Wilma and Kay entered the house. They wandered about, gazing at the antiques which had been sold and would be delivered later, all the while keeping an alert watch for Gluber and Topper.

“They don’t seem to be anywhere on the premises,” Kay commented in disappointment. “I wonder why they didn’t come?”

“Maybe they came and have left already.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I might ask the clerk if he has seen either of them,” Wilma offered after a moment.

While she hastened back to the next room, Kay went upstairs and roamed about, inspecting the various pieces of furniture on the second floor. Coming to a closet door she opened it with no thought that anything of value was inside.

As it happened, John Gluber came into the room at that moment. Kay failed to hear his footsteps behind her for she was gazing with interest at the box which he had hidden in the closet.

Observing the girl, the thief stopped short. Instantly the thought came to him that his little trick had been discovered. He could not afford to have Kay Tracey expose him!

Quick as a flash he tiptoed across the room and shoved the girl into the closet. Locking the door, he pocketed the key and went to seek his friend Topper.

“Now we are in for trouble, you blundering idiot!” the other exclaimed angrily when he was told what had been done. “She didn’t come here alone. I just saw that friend of hers—that dark-haired girl.”

“We’ll have to get her out of the way too,” said Gluber desperately. “If we could lock her up somewhere——”

“The cellar,” suggested Tom Topper instantly. “Everybody’s out of the house right now. We’ll hide in the dark hallway, and when she passes make a grab for her.”

Soon Wilma came along. Before she could scream, the two men had bound her arms behind her back and placed a handkerchief over her mouth. She was forced to the stairway and locked in the gloomy cellar.

“Even if the girls do scream and pound a bit, no one will hear ’em,” Tom Topper declared in satisfaction.

Hurriedly the men loaded their newly purchased antiques into a wagon and hauled them to Gluber’s place. During the long ride the secondhand dealer told his pal about the mysterious box which he had put in the closet.

“I found it in a secret compartment of an upstairs bedroom,” he explained. “A hiding place built into the fireplace. I’ll be disappointed if it doesn’t contain something worth while, because I know who occupied that bedroom!”

“Say, won’t the Tracey girl get into it?” Topper asked anxiously.

“Not a chance. The box is locked.”

“Anyway, she can’t get out of the closet until we go back and let her out,” the other chuckled wickedly.

“When we talk with her the next time she’ll not be so high

and mighty.”

The men took their time unloading the wagon, at supper, then slowly drove back to the Allen homestead. As it was dark by this time they felt certain no one would see them when they were ready to remove the box and release the two girls.

“I reckon they’re getting pretty uncomfortable by this time,” grinned Gluber. “Serves ’em right for prying into our affairs, eh?”

“Sure, that Tracey girl fancies herself quite the smart detective. Maybe she can detect a way of getting out of the closet!”

“I hope no one lets her out,” the secondhand dealer said anxiously. “But even so, we’d be in no danger. I’m sure she didn’t recognize me when I shoved her in and locked the door.”

The wagon rounded a bend in the road. Through the trees the men noticed a strange red glow.

“That looks like a fire!” exclaimed John Gluber.

He clucked to the horses, urging them to a faster pace. As the wagon rose over a low hill, the Judge Allen place became clearly visible against the dark sky. Tongues of flame were shooting from the lower floor windows.

“The house is afire!” cried Tom Topper, aghast.

“Looks like she’ll burn clean to the ground,” added his

companion in horror. “Those girls—maybe nobody let ‘em out—maybe they’re still locked up!”

“We’ve got to save ‘em!” shouted Topper. “Come on, John!”

Abandoning the horse and wagon, the two frightened men ran as fast as they could toward the burning building.

CHAPTER XVIII

FIRE!

The entire lower floor of the Allen homestead appeared to be in flames.

“We can’t go into that inferno!” exclaimed Topper, as he and Gluber rushed into the garden.

“We have to get those girls out somehow,” cried the antique dealer. “We can’t let ’em die in there!”

Wrapping coats about their faces, the men plunged through the front door and groped their way to the cellar. Unlocking the door, they shouted down the steps. There was no answer.

“Come on, we’ll get the other one,” Topper muttered fearfully as a timber fell directly behind him.

The men tried to reach the second floor where Kay had been left, but flames barred the way. Twice Gluber attempted to get through, but finally gave it up, staggered toward the front door.

“We’re too late,” he gasped.

“Let’s get out—of here—while we can,” Topper urged,

pulling his friend along.

Choking and coughing, they fought their way through the smoke and flames. When they reached the cool, fresh air, their faces were blackened, arms were burned and eyebrows singed.

From far down the road came a group of volunteer fire-fighters. Among them were pupils from Carmont High who had seen the flames while on their way to the dance.

136

“Folks are coming,” Topper muttered fearfully. “Let’s get away from here before any questions are asked.”

The two men ran toward their wagon, but before they could whip up the horses and escape, they were surrounded by young people.

“Have you seen Kay Tracey? And Wilma Worth?” they were asked.

“They were in the house,” Gluber admitted before Topper could warn him to remain silent. “We tried to save them, but it was too late.”

“Wilma and Kay in the house!” cried one of the girls’ friends shrilly. “Oh, no!”

“Don’t tell Betty,” murmured another quickly. “The shock will be more than she can bear.”

However, Betty Worth had heard the remark. With a little wail of anguish she ran toward the burning building. Had not

one of the boys overtaken her and held her arm, she would have rushed into the flames in a brave but foolhardy attempt to rescue her sister and her chum.

“Let me go, let me go!” she pleaded frantically. “I must save them!”

“No one can enter that house now,” the boy told her quietly. “It would be suicidal.”

The fire-fighters had gone to work with a will but their efforts were practically wasted, for the water supply was inadequate. Slowly the building burned to the ground until only a few blazing timbers were left standing upright.

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Sympathetic schoolmates led Betty slowly to the Tracey car which had been left parked by the picnic grounds. The girl could not control her weeping.

“How will I ever tell Mother?” she asked in a whisper. “And poor Mrs. Tracey—the blow will kill her.”

When the young people reached the automobile, one of Betty’s friends offered to drive it home for her. He opened the door, then gave a cry of astonishment.

“Well, for Pete’s sake, look here!”

Curled up on the seat, sound asleep, were Kay and Wilma!

“Oh, I was never so happy and relieved in all my life,” cried Betty, laughing and crying at the same time. “What a dreadful fright we all had!”

The commotion had awakened the two girls. They sat up, looking bewildered to see so many of their friends gathered about the car.

“Thank goodness, you are both still alive,” declared Betty, giving them each a tender kiss. “We thought you had been burned to death.”

“Is that why you were crying?” asked Wilma, rather pleased to have caused such a sensation. “It brings to mind a very beautiful poem about death——”

138

“Wilma, if you dare quote it, I’ll never speak to you again!” Betty said with a shudder. “You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

“I’m sorry,” replied her sister instantly. “Kay and I didn’t realize anyone would worry. We were so worn out by our experience we just climbed into the car and fell asleep.”

“What happened? Were you in the burning building?”

“John Gluber and Tom Topper locked us in!” Kay revealed tensely. “They thought we didn’t recognize them, but we did!”

“And they set fire to the house?”

“No, I think it caught by accident. Probably from a carelessly tossed match or cigarette.”

“How did you escape?”

“You’ll hardly believe this,” replied Kay. “Remember the key in my sweater pocket marked ‘777’?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it unlocked a box which I found in the closet. Inside it was a well-filled key ring. I think one must have been a skeleton key. Anyway, just as smoke began to seep through, I managed to unlock the door.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I didn’t know what had happened to Wilma. I thought she might be somewhere in the house searching for me. I shouted her name over and over. Finally she called to me from the cellar.”

139

“I thought Kay never would reach me in time,” Wilma took up the story. “She couldn’t get the door unlocked.”

“I tried almost every key on the ring before I found one which would fit,” said Kay. “But finally I did get the door open. We both ran through the smoke and escaped.”

“You weren’t even burned?” Betty observed thankfully.

“No, we were lucky,” admitted Wilma, “but I’ll tell you it was an unpleasant experience. While I was alone in the cellar I felt certain I had been left to die. It took a long time to free my hands and get the gag out of my mouth.”

“Tom Topper and John Gluber should be sent to gaol for life!” declared Betty indignantly. “Such a cruel thing to do!”

“I can’t figure out why they locked us up unless they were afraid I would discover some secret and reveal it,” said Kay slowly. “I wonder if the box had anything to do with it?”

“You mean the one you found in the closet? I suppose it burned.”

Wilma and Kay glanced at each other and smiled mysteriously.

Betty did not ask any more questions then for others were standing nearby. Later as they drove toward Brantwood she brought up the matter again.

140

“The box didn’t burn,” Wilma told her sister. “Kay saved it.”

“We saved it together,” Kay corrected.

“What’s in it?” Betty asked eagerly. “Anything valuable?”

“I don’t know. When I opened the lid, the first thing I found was that key ring. With smoke pouring under the door I assure you I was more interested in getting out of the closet than in discovering treasure!”

“Have you the box in the car?”

“Yes, it’s in the back.”

“Then let’s open it!”

Kay smiled wearily and shook her head.

“Wilma and I are both terribly tired,” she protested with a sigh. “Can’t we wait until later?”

“Of course,” agreed Betty instantly. “The box probably doesn’t contain anything of value anyway.”

“I’m not so sure,” Kay mumbled, as her head dropped over on Betty’s shoulder. In a moment she was sound asleep.

Although Ethel Eaton had not been a member of the picnic crowd, she had followed the young people to Marigold. She too had been drawn to Judge Allen’s home by the shooting flames which could be seen for a long distance. Arriving after nearly everyone had left the scene, she met a farmer, who believing that he spoke the truth, sadly told her that Kay and Wilma had been burned to death in the fire.

141

Without waiting to verify the story, Ethel jumped back into her car and sped to Brantwood. Arriving at the Tracey home, she pounded loudly on the door. Then, before it could be opened, she walked boldly into the living room where Kay’s mother was sitting alone.

“Excuse me for breaking in this way,” Ethel apologized, enjoying the dramatic situation. “I have some real bad news for you!”

“Bad news?” Mrs. Tracey echoed. “Don’t tell me anything has happened to Kay! She hasn’t had an auto accident?”

“It’s a lot worse than that. She and Wilma were both burned to death in a fire!”

For a moment Mrs. Tracey did not speak. She looked so dreadful that Ethel was afraid the woman would faint, and was sorry then that she had been so abrupt in breaking the news.

“No! No! It can’t be true, Ethel!” Kay’s mother cried at last.

“But it is! I came directly from the fire. It was at Judge Allen’s house!”

“Kay did plan on going there to attend a sale,” Mrs. Tracey moaned. “Oh, this is horrible. I must get Bill at once. He’ll know what to do.”

She went to the telephone, but sat staring at the mouthpiece as if she did not know how to place the call.

142

“Shall I telephone for you?” Ethel asked, frightened by the woman’s colourless face.

Before Mrs. Tracey could answer, there was a loud tooting of auto horns at the front door.

“Why, that sounds like our car!” exclaimed the woman, straightening in her chair.

Ethel, rushing to the window, scarcely could believe her eyes.

“I can’t understand it at all,” she muttered, deeply embarrassed. “They’re here now—Kay and Wilma—I was sure——”

Mrs. Tracey waited to hear no more. With a cry of joy she

rushed outside to greet the two girls.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MYSTERIOUS BOX

“Thank goodness, you are alive and unharmed!” cried Mrs. Tracey, clasping her daughter in her arms. “Ethel told me you and Wilma were in a fire!”

“We were,” Kay admitted ruefully, “but we managed to escape.”

The Worth twins were gazing rather critically at Ethel Eaton who had the grace for once to look ashamed.

“How did you know about the fire?” Wilma asked the girl pointedly. “Were you in Marigold?”

“Well, yes, I was,” Ethel acknowledged unwillingly.

Kay and the twins exchanged knowing glances and smiled. Thoroughly familiar with the girl’s prying ways they felt certain she had trailed the picnic crowd.

“Oh, you needn’t look at each other so wisely!” Ethel cried. “I went over to Marigold because I had something important to tell Rosa!”

“Something that couldn’t wait?” Betty asked coldly.

“Yes, it was! I was driving past the Judge Allen house when I saw the fire. A farmer told me what had happened, so I rushed right back here to tell Mrs. Tracey.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” Kay murmured dryly, but a warning glance from her mother caused her to lapse into silence.

The chums were provoked at Ethel because she had caused Mrs. Tracey so much needless worry. While she had not meant to shock Kay’s mother with news which was untrue, she had been very careless in not checking up on her information. Although the woman did not chide the girl, her quiet manner revealed the seriousness of her offence. Mumbling an apology, Ethel hastened home.

“If that wasn’t the height of nerve!” Betty declared indignantly after the caller had gone. “First she followed our picnic crowd to Marigold. Of course she wasn’t trying to find Rosa!”

“She meant to spy,” added Wilma with conviction. “She never has recovered from the blow of not being included in the orchestra.”

“I do hope Ethel doesn’t try to stir up trouble when we give our concert,” Kay said with a thoughtful frown.

The music instructor had announced that the orchestra would present a public concert at the school auditorium during the last week of the month. Tickets had been printed and already Kay and the twins had sold more than their quota.

“She’ll get over her silly grudge before that time,” Betty returned carelessly.

After the twins had gone home, Kay remembered the box which she had saved from the Judge Allen home. Carrying it into the house, she stored it in a downstairs clothes closet.

“I am just too tired to open it tonight,” she told herself wearily. “I’ll do it early tomorrow.”

Kay was so worn out from her experience at Marigold that she did not hear the alarm when it sounded at seven o’clock. Realizing that her daughter needed the rest badly, Mrs. Tracey waited until seven-thirty before awakening her. Then the girl barely had time to eat a bite of breakfast and catch her train for Carmont. There was no opportunity to examine the mysterious box.

During school hours Kay speculated upon the contents of the chest. Wilma and Betty too were eager to learn its secret.

“I don’t see how you can bear to wait so long,” Wilma sighed. “Haven’t you any idea what the box contains?”

“I have an idea—yes. But I am afraid to hope.”

“Tell us what you think,” urged Betty eagerly.

Kay shook her head. “No, but I’ll invite you home with me after school. We’ll open it together.”

The girls reached the Tracey house at four-thirty. Kay went at once to the closet where the chest had been left.

“Why, it isn’t here!” she exclaimed in astonishment.

“The box is gone!” echoed Betty incredulously.

“I am sure I put it here.”

“You were so tired last night, perhaps you forgot.”

“No, I left it here, all right.”

Deeply troubled, Kay sought her mother who agreed that the chest had been left in the closet.

“It was there this morning,” she told her daughter. “Sadie was cleaning here today. I wonder if she could have moved it?”

Sadie was a young coloured woman who came at weekly intervals to do scrubbing and heavy housework. While she was sometimes careless her honesty could not be questioned.

“I do remember that the girl said something about the chest taking up too much room in the closet,” Mrs. Tracey remarked thoughtfully. “I feel certain she must have moved it.”

Kay and the twins searched throughout the house but were unable to find the missing box.

“Sadie will be here again Thursday,” Mrs. Tracey declared. “I’ll ask her then what she did with the chest.”

Both she and Bill Tracey had been incensed because the two men, Gluber and Topper, had endangered the lives

of Kay and Wilma by locking them in the old Judge Allen house. The young lawyer insisted upon calling them to account for their actions. Accordingly, warrants for their arrest were issued, but when an officer searched for the men, neither could be located.

Tom Topper's cabin remained deserted, while John Gluber did not return to his home in the pines. Kay mentioned this fact one afternoon when she was calling at Mamie Speer's new apartment.

"You mean the house is empty now?" the girl questioned with interest.

"Yes, apparently Gluber is afraid to go back there."

"The house shouldn't be left unguarded. Some of his things might be stolen—and ours!"

"I thought I had wrecked everything that belonged to you," Kay said ruefully.

"Grandmother still has several nice pieces of furniture."

"An old spinning wheel which belonged to my mother," spoke up Mrs. Speer. "A fiddle-back chair and a trunk filled with odds and ends."

"Why not drive out there today and get the things?" suggested Kay. "You'll never have a better opportunity."

That very afternoon the four girls motored to the Gluber place in the Tracey car. They entered through a cellar window

which had been unlocked, and at their leisure gathered together the things which belonged to Mrs. Speer.

While the twins helped Mamie load the pieces of furniture into the car, Kay wandered about the showrooms. Before she left, she convinced herself that the stolen Lusardi violin was nowhere upon the premises.

148

Riding back to Brantwood, Wilma chanced to mention the exciting experience which she and Kay had gone through at the Judge Allen home.

“Oh, I read about the fire!” Mamie exclaimed. “I had no idea you girls narrowly escaped death!”

“It was too close for comfort,” Wilma declared with a shudder.

“I was sorry to hear that the house had burned. It was such a lovely old place.”

“You were familiar with it?” Kay inquired in surprise.

“Oh, yes, I had seen it many times. In fact, Grandmother’s sister Lillian spent many years as a nurse there.”

“You never mentioned that before.”

“Judge Allen’s wife was an invalid. She must have died seven or eight years ago.”

“Is your grandmother’s sister still living?”

“No, she passed away three winters ago in Florida. Her name was Lillian Laura Lawson. She fascinated me as a child, perhaps because I loved to say her name. Her initials were so interesting too—‘L.L.L.’”

The girls took Mamie back to her apartment and unloaded the furniture. While returning to her home, Kay saw Detective Kenley on the street, and stopped the car for a moment to talk with him.

149

“Anything new on the Lusardi case?” she inquired hopefully.

“I think we’ll clear it up soon,” he replied. “The *Caslonia* docks in New York next Friday, and we’ll have Enrico Calo brought to Brantwood at once for questioning.”

“Friday will be too late for the school concert,” Kay said, frowning.

“What has that to do with it?”

“Well, you see Rosa Lusardi has been borrowing Wilma’s violin and it’s a question whether or not they’ll both be able to play in the concert. I was hoping the Stradivarius would be found before Thursday.”

“Not much chance of recovering it that soon, I’m afraid.”

Detective Kenley bought two tickets for the concert, then said goodbye to the girls.

“It doesn’t really matter whether I play or not,” Wilma remarked, trying to appear indifferent. “Rosa is a much better

violinist than I.”

“It’s generous of you to say that,” praised Kay, “but the orchestra needs both of you.”

“I fear it will have to get along without me. I am almost certain Rosa’s father will need her violin at the radio station that night.”

Although Wilma firmly maintained that the concert meant little to her, Betty and Kay knew her attitude was only pretence; Wilma cared a great deal. Every evening after Rosa returned the violin, she would spend hours practicing at home. She played perfectly well all the pieces which had been selected as concert numbers.

150

Betty and Kay bought new silk dresses for the important occasion. Wilma declared that she would not require one.

“You shall have a new dress nevertheless,” declared her mother wisely. “Even if you aren’t in the concert you deserve the frock.”

Rosa Lusardi was deeply distressed at the thought of using Wilma’s violin in the concert. Since she could not play it as well as her own instrument, it hurt her to deprive her friend of its use.

“No, the concert would be a failure without you,” Wilma insisted. “You carry the lead in nearly every piece.”

Mr. Ward and the other members of the orchestra assured Rosa that her presence was absolutely essential to the success

of the musical evening. Finally the girl ceased to protest. The night of the affair arrived all too soon, and as Kay had feared, Rosa's father would need his daughter's violin at the radio station.

"Now don't you groan over my fate," said Wilma bravely. "Don't you recall what the poet said about music?"

151

"Music the fiercest grief can charm,
And fate's severest rage disarm,
Music can soften pain to ease,
And make despair and madness please."

"You may be in that concert yet," Kay told her chum hopefully. "Wear your pretty new dress and be sure to bring your music. Something may develop at the last minute."

"You are an optimist," Wilma sighed, but she promised to do as requested.

Ronald Earle had asked permission to escort Kay early to the school auditorium. When he arrived at the Tracey house, he was bearing a beautiful corsage.

"Oh, Ronald, you shouldn't have done it!" cried Kay.

"It wasn't anything," he said self-consciously. "I thought maybe the flowers would match your new dress."

"They do," Kay said, her eyes shining. "They're lovely, Ronald."

“If you had on my evening wrap your costume would be complete, dear,” declared Mrs. Tracey. “Why don’t you wear it?”

“Aren’t you going to use it?” asked her daughter.

“No, dear, you take it. You’ll find it hanging in the closet of the guest room.”

152

Kay ran upstairs to get the cloak. She was gone several minutes.

“Mother,” she said as she slowly came down the stairs, “guess what I found in that closet!”

“The cloak wasn’t there?”

“Yes, I have it, but I found something else! The missing box!”

“That *is* a relief, Kay. I suppose Sadie moved it up there when she was cleaning.”

“Did you find out what was inside?” inquired Ronald curiously.

“No, I knew we’d be late if I became inquisitive now. We really should be starting.”

“I wish Bill would hurry from the office,” Mrs. Tracey thought anxiously after Ronald and Kay went out the door. “I shall be provoked at him if he is late. I don’t want to miss one minute of the concert.”

In escorting Kay to the car, Ronald remarked that he had observed the Eaton car standing in front of the Lusardi home.

“I guess Ethel is taking Rosa to the concert,” he mentioned significantly. “Thoughtful of her, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Ronald, do you suppose she’s up to one of her tricks again?”

“Well, I thought of it.”

“If Rosa should disappear, our concert would be a failure. Everything depends upon her!”

153

“Maybe we’re only borrowing trouble, Kay.”

“I wish I could trust Ethel, but I can’t. I have an awful feeling she’s up to something!”

“In that case I have an idea,” suggested Ronald with a chuckle. “Why not drive over to the Lusardi home and make sure that Rosa gets to the concert?”

“The very thing!” cried Kay in delight. “But we must hurry, for it’s getting close to starting time!”

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CHAPTER XX

A PLANNED DELAY

When Kay and Ronald reached the Lusardi home no lights were burning in the house and Ethel Eaton's automobile had disappeared from the street. Ronald rang the bell but there was no response except the barking of the little dog Snowball which had fully recovered and was home again.

"We're too late," Kay said anxiously. "The girls have left, and Pedro Lusardi must be at the broadcasting studio."

"Maybe we're misjudging Ethel. There's a chance she took Rosa straight to the school building."

"Let's hurry there ourselves," Kay suggested, glancing nervously at her watch. "I have a hunch of trouble ahead."

Arriving at the school auditorium, the young people found that already it was nearly half filled. Going to the room where the orchestra members had been asked to appear at least twenty minutes early, Kay learned that everyone was there except Rosa.

"What can be keeping Rosa?" Mr. Ward inquired uneasily. "I should like to start the concert in exactly fifteen minutes."

“I’ll see if I can locate her,” Kay offered, quickly leaving the room.

Returning to the auditorium, she signalled to Ronald who was sitting close to the stage. Together they went outside.

155

“It’s just as we feared,” she told him tensely. “Ethel has done something to prevent Rosa from getting here! She wishes to ruin the concert.”

“Do you think we could find them?”

“We have just fifteen minutes. Let’s try.”

The two ran to Ronald’s car and started cruising up and down the streets near the school.

“I remember a side road not far from Rosa’s home,” Kay said hopefully. “Let’s try that.”

They had not travelled far on the little-used street when Ronald drew his companion’s attention to a red light far ahead.

“Looks like a parked car to me.”

When he slowed down, Kay laughed aloud in relief and delight as she recognized Ethel Eaton’s automobile. Ronald pulled up alongside and both sprang out. Rosa came running to them.

“Oh, I’m so glad you came!” she exclaimed joyfully. “Ethel

started to take me to the auditorium, but we ran out of gas. Is it terribly late?”

“It’s very nearly concert time,” Kay said briefly. She was gazing sternly at Ethel. “This isn’t the most direct route to the auditorium, you know.”

“Kay Tracey, if you mean to hint that I did this deliberately —” began the girl indignantly.

“Sorry, but we’re in a big hurry,” Kay called over her shoulder, steering Rosa to Ronald’s car. “You won’t mind the walk to the next filling station, Ethel! It’s only a quarter of a mile.”

156

“I think you’re downright mean to leave me stranded here,” the Eaton girl called angrily, but her voice was drowned by the exhaust of Ronald’s car.

The young people drove back to the school at top speed. The two girls slid into their places with the orchestra exactly at the stroke of eight o’clock. They hardly had time to catch their breaths, when at a signal from Mr. Ward the velvet curtains parted, and the concert began.

Excitement coloured Kay’s playing and Rosa’s also. Selection after selection was executed without a flaw. The audience was generous with its applause.

Then, just as the orchestra members were relaxing, a minor tragedy occurred; a string on Rosa’s violin snapped. In a moment she must be ready to play a solo, yet it was impossible to change the string in such a short time.

Kay was overcome with panic lest there be an awkward pause in the number. Then she had an inspiration. The piece was a medley of familiar airs; she would add one! While Rosa worked frantically at the string, Kay launched into a little English dance tune which was in the same key as the concert piece. The audience assumed the girl was playing a piano solo planned as part of the number.

Rosa presently had changed strings and was ready to play. She smiled confidently at Kay, then suddenly her expression changed. Pedro Lusardi was rushing through the audience carrying a violin.

157

For just an instant Kay thought that it might be the stolen Stradivarius, then she realized the instrument was Rosa's violin. The girl's father, having finished his turn at the radio station, and knowing that his daughter could not play her best on a borrowed instrument, had hastened to the auditorium.

The violin was placed in Rosa's hands, and while Kay continued the little English tune, Mr. Ward signalled to Wilma. The girl promptly came forward and slipped into the one vacant chair, contentedly tucking her own instrument under her chin. She would have her chance to play after all!

The exchange of violins accomplished, the concert went on again. Rosa played her solo number, then the full orchestra finished the brilliant finale.

"The evening has been a tremendous success," Kay thought happily as the curtains closed. "And best of all, Wilma had her chance!"

The audience clapped for many minutes. As the crowd broke up, many persons came forward to congratulate Kay. Her highest praise was spoken by Mr. Ward who quietly told her that he considered her beautiful playing and her quick wit responsible for the success of the concert.

Ethel Eaton did not share in the general enthusiasm. Reaching the auditorium late she had seated herself in a dark corner of the room, preferring not to be seen by the orchestra members. Directly in front of her sat Detective Kenley, who at the conclusion of the concert turned to speak to Pedro Lusardi.

158

“You may well be proud of your daughter’s playing,” he said heartily. “She is a talented artist.”

“Ah yes,” agreed the girl’s father, beaming. “But she play even better if she only have the Stradivarius!”

“That reminds me—Enrico Calo will be in Brantwood the fourteenth. I’ll bring him out to your place and we may get at the truth.”

Unknown to the two men, Ethel Eaton had listened to their conversation. She made a mental note of the date when Enrico Calo would be in town.

“I may have my chance to get even with Kay Tracey yet!” she told herself grimly. “We shall see.”

Cousin Bill and Mrs. Tracey joined Kay, and the three rode home together.

“You quite covered yourself with glory this evening,” the young lawyer declared. “Tired, Kay?”

“Yes, I am. It was a nerve wracking night. When Rosa failed to arrive I was certain the concert would be a failure.”

Kay was so exhausted it did not occur to her to open the box which had been saved from the fire. In the morning she thought of it, however, and when the Worth twins arrived at the house before school hours, she jubilantly told them they might help her examine the contents. 159

“Well, I think it’s time you find out what is in that box!” Betty declared severely. “For all you know, it might be the stolen violin.”

“It isn’t a violin. I am sure of that.”

“Do you know what it does contain?” questioned Wilma curiously.

“I have an idea. Mostly papers, I think. At least I could feel them when I located that bunch of keys.”

Wilma and Betty were a little disappointed, but they gathered close as Kay unlocked the box with the key marked “777”. She emptied the contents into her lap.

“Stocks and bonds!” cried Betty. She examined one of the folders and her face fell. “Oh, this company went out of business ten years ago!”

“And this bond on the General Lumber Company is

worthless,” Wilma added. “The concern went into receivership.”

“I’ll have Cousin Bill look over everything but I fear this paper is worthless,” Kay said, peering down into the box again. “Hello, here’s something!”

“What have you found?” demanded Betty, moving closer.

“The box has a false bottom!”

Kay worked with it a moment, then to her delight was able to lift out a section from the base. She held up three small booklets for her companions to see.

160

“Bank accounts!” she cried triumphantly.

“Probably closed out long before this,” Wilma said, refusing to become excited.

Kay opened the first book which bore the name of the Hanover Trust Company. Her cry startled Betty and Wilma.

“Girls, this account is in the name of L. L. Lawson!”

“You don’t suppose that could be Mrs. Speer’s sister?” Wilma asked incredulously.

“I wonder——”

“How much is in the account?” inquired Betty eagerly.

Kay sat staring at the figures.

“Five thousand dollars. And it was never withdrawn! There would be interest, too, which would raise the amount considerably.”

“Look at the other books!” squealed Betty, fairly beside herself now with excitement.

The other two accounts, both in the name of L. L. Lawson, were deposited in banks not far from Brantwood and totalled the sum of ten thousand dollars.

“That makes fifteen thousand in all,” Betty said in a low voice.

“And not a penny of it ever claimed,” murmured Wilma. “I wonder why?”

“Mamie never told us very much about Lillian Laura Lawson,” Kay said thoughtfully. “She did mention that the nurse died in Florida. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Mamie and her grandmother were the true heirs to all this money?”

161

“Oh, Kay, do you suppose they are?” cried Betty eagerly.

“I think they might be. All this time I’ve been puzzled about the key marked 777. How did it chance to be lying on the path near Tom Topper’s cabin? And if he lost it, how did it fall into his hands in the first place?”

Kay removed the key from the lock and studied its curious design. From the very first the 777 marking had plagued her. She wondered what significance it might have. Now all of a sudden she thought she had the answer.

Holding up the key for Wilma and Betty to see, she asked excitedly, “What does this look like to you?”

“Just a key,” replied Betty, surprised by the question.

“No, no! I mean the letters—the markings!”

“Well, you’re holding it upside down now,” Betty observed.

“That way it reads ‘LLL.’”

“Exactly!” cried Kay triumphantly. “Now we know why the key unlocked the box! The initials must stand for Lillian Laura Lawson, and all this property belonged to her!”

CHAPTER XXI

IDENTIFYING A VIOLIN

So thrilled were the girls over their various discoveries that they felt they must go at once to talk with Mrs. Speer and Mamie.

“You have my permission to be late for school, Kay,” Mrs. Tracey declared when they showed her the contents of the box. “I quite agree that the news is too good to keep! And I’m sure the principal of Carmont High will too.”

Wilma and Betty telephoned home, then accompanied Kay to the Speer apartment. They were so excited it was hard for them to tell a coherent story, but at last they made Mamie and her grandmother understand that fifteen thousand dollars stood in three different banks under Lillian Laura Lawson’s name.

“Then my sister did leave money!” exclaimed Mrs. Speer.

“Grandmother always thought so, but nothing of consequence was ever located,” Mamie added, her eyes wide with wonder. “It seems too good to be true!”

“Your sister left a will?” Kay asked Mrs. Speer.

“Yes, I was to inherit everything. But as I say, nothing was ever found. Lillian lived at Judge Allen’s home many years. She had her own room and was treated like one of the family. Then her health began to break under such strenuous work. Judge Allen insisted she take a long vacation, so she went to Florida for the winter—and never came back.”

“She contracted pneumonia and died very quickly,” Mamie took up the story. “A lawyer examined her effects which had been left at Judge Allen’s. Very few papers were found. Almost no money.”

“The treasure box must have been hidden somewhere in her room,” Kay said speculatively. “And possibly John Gluber stumbled upon it when he was roaming through the house at the time of the sale!”

“It’s lucky you had enough presence of mind to rescue the box from the fire,” Wilma observed with a chuckle.

“Fifteen thousand dollars,” Mrs. Speer murmured, tears coming into her eyes. “It will mean everything to us! I’ll be able to take the baths at Hot Springs! And Mamie shall go away to school!”

“Don’t plan ahead,” her grand-daughter said uneasily. “Something might happen—we might not get the money after all.”

“I don’t see how anyone can keep you from claiming it,” Kay reassured her. “That is, if you can prove your relationship to Lillian Laura Lawson, and that she left everything to you.”

“I have a copy of the original will in my trunk,” said Mrs. Speer, “and other papers as well.”

“I’ll ask Cousin Bill to help you,” promised Kay. “I feel sure he can collect the money.”

Later that afternoon, in company with the young lawyer, the entire party motored to the three banks, where they learned that the accounts in Lillian Laura Lawson’s name were genuine. After considerable red tape, Mrs. Speer’s claim to the estate of her sister was filed in court. She was assured it would be only a matter of routine, and that all the money would be turned over to her in a few days.

“Grandmother, don’t you think all our good fortune calls for a celebration?” Mamie asked happily as the group returned to Brantwood.

“Indeed I do! You must all come to our apartment to dinner!”

“Ronald Earle must be invited too,” Mamie whispered in her grandmother’s ear.

A telephone call brought the young man in a hurry, and Mrs. Tracey too was induced to join the merrymakers. The party was voted a great success.

As the Traceys entered their home some time later, they heard the telephone bell ringing. Cousin Bill answered and then reported:

“It was a call from Detective Kenley.”

“Has anything new turned up?” she inquired quickly.

“Enrico Calo just arrived in town. Mr. Kenley is taking him out to talk with Pedro Lusardi. He suggests we go over there.”

“I’d like to,” said Kay, “wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, we’ll go right away.”

Mrs. Tracey decided to remain at home, so her daughter and the lawyer set out at once. As they alighted from their auto at the Lusardi home, they saw that the other callers had arrived already.

Rosa, obviously nervous, admitted Kay and Bill Tracey. She led them into the living room where Detective Kenley and Enrico Calo had just been escorted. Before introductions could be made, the musician turned to glare at Kay.

“You were responsible for all this trouble,” he said unpleasantly.

The girl made no response.

“Now take it easy, Calo,” Detective Kenley said calmly. “If any mistake has been made it was done by me. We’ll ask you a few questions——”

“I told you once! I know nothing about your violin!” He angrily tapped a leather case which he carried in his hand. “This is my own instrument. A genuine Stradivarius!”

“Let me see it!” cried Pedro Lusardi excitedly.

“No!” Enrico Calo retorted defiantly.

Before anyone could interfere, Rosa’s father seized the violin case, jerking it from the musician’s hand. When he tried to open it he discovered that it was locked.

“Give me back my violin!” shouted Enrico Calo wrathfully, trying to recapture the instrument.

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“I open it if I have to break the case!” cried Pedro Lusardi. “Where is the key?”

“Father, try to be calm,” Rosa pleaded anxiously.

“Yes,” interposed Mr. Kenley. “There’s no cause for all this excitement. I am sure Mr. Calo will show us the violin.”

“I will let you see it,” agreed the musician in a mollified tone, “but not until I have told my story.”

He took the key of the violin case from his pocket and dropped it on the table in front of the detective.

“It is just as I told you at first. This is my own violin—a Stradivarius. I bought it from a man——”

“You say that! I do not believe you!” interrupted Pedro Lusardi, disregarding the warning signals sent by his daughter.

“Say, are you calling me a liar?” Calo demanded, his dark

eyes blazing. "I've stood for just about enough from you! First I was pulled off my job on the *Caslonia* and brought here when I didn't want to come. Now you insult me, calling me a thief and a liar! I was willing to co-operate before, but now I won't! I hope you never find your violin! I'm getting out of here!"

He reached to pick up the key, but Pedro Lusardi was too quick for him. Seizing the younger man's wrist, he held it firmly.

"Oh, no you don't, Señor Calo!"

"Let me go!" shouted the caller, struggling to free himself.

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While Cousin Bill and Detective Kenley stepped between the two men and sought to calm them, Kay darted forward and gained possession of the key. She knew that the only way to end the distressing scene would be to open the case and prove whether or not the violin belonged to Pedro Lusardi.

In the tussle, Calo had dropped the instrument case on the davenport. Seizing it, Kay inserted the key in the lock, turned it, and raised the lid. Nestled in the rich blue velvet lining lay a violin, one which at first glance certainly resembled the missing Stradivarius. The markings were the same as they had been described by Rosa and her father.

Before Kay could examine the instrument, Pedro Lusardi broke away from Bill Tracey's restraining arm. Rushing over to the girl he tore the leather case from her hand. He gave a triumphant cry.

“Yes, yes, this is my violin! It is my stolen Stradivarius!”

CHAPTER XXII

AN IMPORTANT MEETING

Lusardi tucked the violin under his chin and drew the bow across the strings. Then suddenly his expression of sublime delight changed to one of disgust and wrath. He tossed the instrument down on the davenport.

“No! I was wrong!” he exclaimed. “This look like my violin but it is not him!”

“You are certain, Father?” asked Rosa in disappointment.

“I never own such a cheap, squeaky instrument!”

“How dare you call my violin cheap?” Enrico Calo cut in furiously. “It is a genuine Stradivarius!”

“That is a big laugh,” countered Mr. Lusardi. “I give it to you—ha! ha! Rosa, he call this instrument a Stradivarius! Your own poor violin is better—much better!”

“I’m beginning to suspect this was all a plot to discredit me as a musician,” the orchestra man said, turning toward Detective Kenley. “Well, I warn you I shall sue! You cannot do this to me!”

“It was a mistake, I assure you,” the detective replied soothingly. “Naturally we’ll pay for the time you have lost _____”

“You will pay me all right!” the musician retorted coldly. “You will pay me what the court awards. Good day!”

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Returning the violin to its case, he picked it up, jammed on his hat and rushed from the house, slamming the door behind him.

Kay was dismayed at the turn events had taken. She blamed herself, for while anyone might have made a similar mistake it was her identification of the violin which had resulted in the strange mix-up. She was sorry now that she had ever ventured aboard the *Caslonia*.

“Well, that’s that,” remarked Detective Kenley with a shrug. “The fellow will sue us all right.”

“I’m going to try to explain matters to him,” Kay said impulsively.

Before anyone could offer an objection, she ran from the house. Enrico Calo was far down the street, walking rapidly, but she caught up with him before he reached the end of the block.

“Wait, please, Mr. Calo,” she pleaded earnestly.

The man turned his head, frowned and walked on. Refusing to be discouraged, Kay fell into step with him and began to talk

rapidly.

“Mr. Calo, I am sure you are a reasonable man and will understand that I didn’t intend to make trouble for you. Your violin looked exactly like the one Mr. Lusardi lost.”

“You thought I stole it!”

“No, I believed you might have bought it from a dishonest person. Mr. Calo, won’t you please help us try to find the lost violin? I shouldn’t be surprised if you’re the only person who could throw light on the mystery.”

170

The musician abruptly halted. “I?” he demanded. “How?”

“Tell me the history of your violin. Have you owned it long?”

The man hesitated a moment. Then, softened by Kay’s smile, he said in a friendly tone:

“Well, no, I haven’t had the instrument long. I bought it just before I sailed on the *Caslonia*.”

“From a secondhand dealer?” Kay questioned eagerly.

“Certainly not! From my cousin, Tom Topper.”

“Tom Topper!” Kay murmured, scarcely believing she had heard correctly.

“Yes, he makes violins, although I wouldn’t own any of his creations. This instrument was a special buy he made and he passed it on to me. A genuine Stradivarius.”

“You are certain of its quality?”

Again the musician hesitated before he answered. “Its tone has not been up to expectations,” he admitted reluctantly. “But I refuse to believe my own cousin would cheat me. That fellow Lusardi must have been wrong in saying it isn’t a genuine Stradivarius!”

“It seems rather queer to me that the two violins are identical even to the scratches across the back,” Kay remarked after a moment. “I wonder——”

171

She started to say that she believed Tom Topper might have stolen the original Stradivarius and then made a cheap copy for his cousin. Realizing any such remark would irritate Enrico Calo, she changed her mind, saying instead:

“I suppose you paid a large sum of money for the violin?”

“Yes, I did. I gave Tom Topper a thousand dollars cash. He wanted five thousand, but I couldn’t raise the amount. I had to make up the remainder by giving him some of our family jewels.”

“Jewels?” Kay inquired alertly, thinking of the leather pouch which she had found in Topper’s shack.

“Yes, my cousin promised I could redeem them later. There were several diamond rings and some unmounted stones. Tom bested me in the deal, but I craved to own a Stradivarius.”

From Enrico Calo’s description of the rings Kay felt convinced that the assortment was the same one she had

discovered. Yet having made one mistake she did not wish to make another.

Offering only a hint of what was in store, Kay invited Mr. Calo to her home, there to identify the jewels which had been placed in Cousin Bill's safe. It required little persuasion, for already there was a feeling growing in the musician's mind that his cousin had cheated him.

172

Bill Tracey and Detective Kenley were astonished when Kay returned to the Lusardi house with the man. Quietly she explained the situation. Calo was hurried off to Cousin Bill's car before new difficulties could arise with Rosa's father.

"Did you know your cousin well?" Kay inquired of the musician as they motored toward the Tracey home.

"No," the man admitted. "I never saw him but twice in my life. Then he wrote me in New York, saying he had a valuable Stradivarius for sale. I asked him to bring it there for my inspection. I tried it out and it seemed satisfactory. But later, after I had paid over the money and jewels, the tone didn't seem the same."

"Could another violin have been substituted?"

"I am beginning to think Tom Topper did pull a fast one on me! If he did——"

"Well, you may have a chance to get even with him," Kay said cheerfully. "Wait until you see something in my cousin's safe!"

Realizing it would be wise to make the man identify his property, Bill Tracey asked for a detailed list of the jewellery Calo had given Topper. It agreed perfectly with the cache Kay had found. When the safe was opened, Calo looked carefully at the bag of jewels and instantly declared they were his.

“Then we’ll turn them over to you,” said Cousin Bill.
“Tom Topper can’t be located. Everything points to the conclusion that he cheated you.”

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“I am grateful—most grateful,” the musician murmured, turning to Kay. “I hope you will forget what I said at the Lusardi home. I was excited.”

“I understand, Mr. Calo.”

“You are a clever girl to have found the jewels for me. I will not forget that! If you need my help for anything do not hesitate to call upon me.”

After Mr. Calo had gone, both Cousin Bill and Detective Kenley praised Kay highly. In his gratitude over recovering the jewels the musician had taken back his threat to sue. He now considered of no consequence the trouble to which he had been put.

“We slipped out of an unpleasant situation very nicely,” chuckled Cousin Bill.

“And we gained an additional clue,” added Detective Kenley. “It begins to look as if Tom Topper really might be our man!”

He shared Kay’s opinion that the original Stradivarius had

been stolen by Enrico Calo's cousin. The problem would be to find the elusive rascal. Both Bill Tracey and Mr. Kenley were inclined to believe that Tom Topper and his companion, John Gluber, had fled the state. So far all attempts to trace them had ended in failure.

For a reason she could not explain, Kay thought that the suspected thief might be hiding still somewhere near Brantwood. It seemed reasonable to her that sooner or later he would return to the cabin in the marsh, expecting to recover the hidden jewels. 174

One afternoon soon after Calo's visit, Kay induced Wilma and Betty to accompany her to the shack. The twins did not look forward to another trip into the isolated region, but were willing to venture there in order to help Rosa Lusardi and her unfortunate father.

"Mr. Lusardi has been crushed the past few days," Kay remarked as the girls directed their boat up the river. "He has apologized a dozen times for the way he abused Mr. Calo."

"I feel sorry for him," said Wilma. "His lost violin is almost like a child to him. He can't get over his grief."

"How is he doing at the broadcasting company?" inquired Betty curiously.

"Not very well, I am afraid," Kay admitted ruefully. "Rosa told me yesterday that the manager had spoken to him again. Mr. Lusardi just can't keep his mind on his music. He grieves over his violin all the time."

“I wonder if it ever will be found?” Wilma mused. “Everyone seems to think Tom Topper has escaped.”

“He’ll be caught some day,” Kay predicted confidently.

The girls left their boat on the beach and were moving toward the woods, when Betty paused, pointing dramatically to a footprint in the sand. Kay had noticed it too. 175

“A man’s shoeprint!” Betty exclaimed. “I am sure it wasn’t here before!”

“No, someone has been on the peninsula within the past day or two,” Kay declared, stooping to examine the mark.

“Otherwise that rain we had would have washed it away.”

“Do you suppose Tom Topper came back?” Wilma asked uneasily.

“That’s what I want to learn,” replied Kay calmly. “We’ll go to his cabin, but it may be wise to approach cautiously.”

They walked up the trail and came out into the clearing. There was no sign of anyone about. After peering through a window of the shack, the girls opened the door and went in.

“Topper has been here all right!” Betty cried, glancing around the room.

Nearly all of the violins had been removed from the workbench. A suitcase was gone, and articles of clothing had disappeared.

“Detective Kenley should have watched the cabin,” Kay said, frowning. “He was so sure Tom Topper wouldn’t dare return here.”

“It won’t be easy to catch the man now,” Betty remarked, moving slowly about the place. “He’s probably hundreds of miles away by this time.”

After a casual inspection of the cabin the twins were ready to leave, but not Kay. Feeling that their chum was a bit too thorough in her investigation, the twins ventured to suggest they return home.

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“Not yet,” pleaded Kay. “I know this is all very tedious, but I might stumble upon some clue. If you’re tired, why don’t you and Betty go on? I’ll come in just a few minutes.”

“All right,” agreed Wilma readily, “we’ll be at the boat.”

Left alone, Kay searched carefully for clues but found nothing of interest. Just as she decided to follow her chums, she was startled by the sound of a stick crackling outside the cabin door.

“I hope that isn’t another bear,” she thought nervously.

Kay glanced toward the window and her heart contracted. She caught a fleeting glimpse of a face pressed against the pane.

The girl did not know what to do. Since she had not recognized the man at the window, she could not guess if he were friend or foe. In any event she was without a weapon to defend herself.

“I’ll open the door suddenly, and then bolt for the beach,” she made up her mind.

Before she could act, the door was opened for her. A man’s gruff voice commanded harshly:

“March down the trail, young lady! And keep your eyes straight forward!”

CHAPTER XXIII

A DESPERATE PLIGHT

Kay's unknown foe stood partly behind the door, his face covered with a handkerchief. As the girl emerged into the open she daringly stole a glance at him, and decided he probably was Topper.

"Walk down the trail!" the man commanded sharply in a voice that seemed disguised. "Don't look back!" In a moment he added, "Turn to the left! And move along a little faster!"

Kay hesitated, for she knew that the branch-off trail would lead her away from her friends and any possible help.

"Go on!" she was ordered.

As the girl walked forward, she tried to think of some way she could leave clues so that Wilma and Betty might be able to follow her later. She dared drop nothing, for the man who trudged close behind her would certainly see her gesture and punish her for the act.

When the way became more difficult, Kay wondered where the scoundrel was taking her. As she tried to break off a branch from an overhanging bush she was ordered sharply to be careful.

Presently she became so taken up with thinking of some means of escape, she failed to watch the path closely. Suddenly, making a mis-step, she plunged knee deep into a bog. Her startled scream infuriated her captor.

“Now you’ve done it!” he muttered, backing into the bushes.

Kay tried to climb out of the sticky mud but could not. She was stuck fast. Her efforts to escape made her sink even deeper.

“Help!” she called frantically. “I can’t get out! Don’t leave me now! Please!”

The only response to her pleadings was a cruel laugh from far up the trail.

For an instant Kay was overcome with panic. Whenever she would try to move she would drop lower in the treacherous quagmire. Forcing herself to remain perfectly still she shouted for help, hoping that Wilma and Betty might hear her cries.

Meanwhile the Worth twins were waiting impatiently at the boat. When their chum did not come, they decided to go after her. Suddenly Betty held up her hand as a signal for silence.

“What was that?” she demanded tensely.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“It sounded like someone calling.”

Wilma shook her head, believing that Betty had been

mistaken. Then both girls were startled to hear a voice from quite deep in the marsh shouting feebly:

“Help! Help!”

“That sounds like Kay!” Wilma gasped, starting to run.

“It can’t be! We left her at the cabin!”

“Something may have happened. Come on, Betty!”

The two girls hurried up the trail, shouting Kay’s name. There was no answer at first. Then as they bore deeper into the marsh they heard her voice.

“Help! Help! Here I am! Hurry!”

Thoroughly frightened, Wilma and Betty sought to locate the direction of the cries. Kay kept calling at intervals but she seemed to be growing weaker. At last the twins found the left-hand trail and reached the morass where their chum was trapped.

“Kay!” Wilma gasped in horror.

“Thank goodness, you’ve come,” the imprisoned girl murmured. “I’m sinking deeper every minute!”

“Keep up your courage,” directed Betty excitedly.

She and Wilma reached out their hands to Kay, but their combined strength was insufficient to pull her from the deep mud.

Kay, aware of the danger to her chums were they to slip in was determined they should not save her at the risk of their own lives.

“It’s no use,” she told them. “You can’t get me out alone. Go for help.”

“Where?” asked Wilma desperately.

180

“Take the motorboat and if necessary bring men from Riverton.”

“It will take such a long time,” Betty murmured fearfully.

“While I’m waiting I’ll remain perfectly still. That way I shouldn’t sink any deeper,” Kay said bravely. “Hurry! There’s not a minute to lose!”

“We’ll get someone here as quickly as we can,” Wilma promised as she and Betty ran down the trail to the beach.

The last glimpse they caught of Kay was of her waving to them as they reached a bend in the path.

“How brave she is,” Wilma murmured, a sob in her voice. “I think she sent us away so we wouldn’t be in danger.”

“Then we must go back——”

“We can do no good by ourselves. Our only chance of saving her is to bring men with ropes and shovels. Oh, I pray the motorboat will start!”

The twins had paid little attention to the engine of their craft, for they had depended upon Kay to start the motor. However, Betty had observed how it was done, so after she had tried several times she finally got it running.

“It has taken us fifteen minutes already,” Wilma declared, nervously glancing at her watch. “I’m so afraid——”

Kay was sinking deeper even though she stood there perfectly still.

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The girls hurried down the river as fast as they could go. Before they had proceeded far, Betty noticed three men working along the right bank of the stream, so she swerved the boat in that direction. Switching off the engine, she shouted to them, trying to make them understand her cries.

As soon as they understood, the workmen assembled into the boat with their shovels. Reaching the peninsula, Betty switched off the engine and the twins led the way through the woods.

“We haven’t been gone long,” Betty said hopefully. “Kay should be all right. Kay! Kay!” she called.

There was no response. In a moment the party reached the place where the Tracey girl last had been seen. Kay had disappeared!

“We’re too late!” Wilma cried, tears streaming down her face. “She’s been buried alive!”

The men respectfully removed their hats, gazing soberly at the

place which the twins had indicated.

“Nothing to do now but dig,” said one of the men.

Wilma and Betty went a short distance away, too overcome with grief to say very much. It did not seem possible that their chum could be gone. Kay, who had thought of their welfare before her own: who have waved to them so bravely.

“I’ll never be able to tell Mrs. Tracey,” Wilma murmured at last. “She always was afraid to have Kay come here.”

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“I—I can’t believe it yet, Wilma. We were gone only a few minutes.”

The men toiled on. Presently one of them came to speak to the girls.

“Say, are you sure this is the place where your friend went down?” he asked dubiously.

“Why yes, of course,” answered Betty. “I remember the spot perfectly.”

“It’s mighty queer. My men have been working half an hour now. She couldn’t have sunk very deep into the bog in such a short time. Yet there’s no sign of a body.”

“But what could have happened to her?” Wilma asked, torn between hope and despair.

“Search me,” returned the man with a shrug. “This isn’t a

joke, is it?”

“A joke!” Wilma cried indignantly. “I should say it isn’t.”

“Well, then, the only way I can figure it is that your friend must have waded out by herself.”

“That would be impossible,” Betty argued. “Please don’t give up.”

“We can’t do any good here, Miss, but we’re needed back on the project. Can’t afford to lose more time. We’ll walk back. You needn’t take us.”

In vain Betty and Wilma pleaded with the fellow, but he insisted they could do no more. Presently the three men marched back to the river.

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Left alone, Betty and Wilma stared disconsolately at each other. They did not know what to do.

“Surely the men would have found her body if she had been in the bog,” Betty declared hopefully.

“We couldn’t have been mistaken in the place.”

“No, I remember that old oak tree. And here are the marks in the mud showing where Kay stumbled and fell!”

“It’s the queerest thing that ever happened.”

“Yes. Why did Kay come down this trail in the first place?” Betty asked thoughtfully. “We left her at the cabin. Could

someone have pushed her into the marsh?”

“We saw nobody.”

“I thought I heard a harsh laugh just after Kay screamed for help, Wilma. I wasn’t sure it was a human voice, but now I believe it was!”

“That makes the situation look even worse!”

“I’m not so sure about that. If Kay isn’t in the bog, then it’s possible the person who pushed her in may have taken pity on her and pulled her out!”

“She might even be at the cabin now!” cried Wilma, daring to hope anew.

“Come on,” Betty urged eagerly. “Let’s go there and see! She must be somewhere on the peninsula.”

Unaware that their guesses had been absolutely correct, the two girls hastened down the trail. At that moment Kay was not far from them and in urgent need of their help!

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CHAPTER XXIV

LOCKED IN THE TRUNK

Left alone in the marsh, Kay remained perfectly quiet, trying to keep calm. She could feel herself gradually sinking deeper into the muddy grave. It seemed to the girl that hours elapsed before she heard footsteps, though in reality only a few minutes had passed.

“Help!” she called weakly.

There was a rustle of bushes, then Tom Topper peered from them at the girl. Recognizing him, Kay at once abandoned all hope of rescue. Yet she said beseechingly:

“Please help me! Don’t leave me here to die!”

The scoundrel was moved by Kay’s plight. When he had abandoned her a few minutes earlier he had not realized that she was in such a dangerous situation.

In truth, he scarcely could be held responsible for his recent actions. Coming upon the girl in his cabin, the man had been greatly shocked, for he had believed her burned in the Allen fire. Fearing she would cause trouble for him with the police he had decided suddenly to take her prisoner. He considered that she had brought her unfortunate fate upon herself by

stumbling into the bog.

“I’ll save you on one condition,” he bargained with her.

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“Name it,” returned Kay desperately. She would have promised anything just then.

“You must agree not to prosecute John Gluber or myself. We didn’t leave you in that burning building on purpose and we don’t intend to go to gaol for it!”

“All right, I’ll promise,” said Kay with only a slight hesitation. “You will not be prosecuted for what you did to *me*.”

Tom Topper did not notice the slight stress which the girl placed in the word “*me*”.

“A verbal promise is no good. You’ll have to put it in writing.”

“All right, I’ll do whatever you say. Only get me out of here! I’m sinking deeper every minute.”

“I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

The man disappeared into the woods again. After what seemed to Kay a very long wait, he returned with a thick rope. He threw it to the girl who looped it about her waist. The man then tossed the other end over a tree, and securing leverage, was able to pull her out of the morass.

“Thank you, oh, thank you,” Kay gasped as she sank

exhausted to the ground. “That was the most horrible experience of my entire life!”

“You can’t stay here,” muttered Tom Topper anxiously.

“But my friends—” Kay quickly broke off.

“Your friends?” the man caught her up sharply. “So you sent someone for help! Well, we’re getting out of here. You’ll have to sign that paper.”

187

“Very well. I always keep my promises.”

“There’s paper and ink at the cabin. We’ll go there.”

Kay was a sorry sight as she trudged through the woods. Her clothing and shoes were caked with mud and decayed vegetation; her face was streaked with dirt; her hair blew wildly in the wind. She was so tired that every step she took was sheer agony.

At last they came to the cabin. Tom Topper approached cautiously, calling in a low voice:

“You there, John?”

His friend Gluber appeared in the doorway, staring at Kay in blank astonishment.

“Where did *she* come from?”

“I fished her out of the bog,” explained Topper briefly. “She’s promised to sign a paper saying we had nothing to do with her

being locked up in the Allen place.”

“That’s a mighty good idea, Tom. Bring her in.”

Kay was ushered into the cabin and the doors locked behind her.

“Is it necessary to do that?” she inquired, frowning.

“Sure, we don’t know what tricks you may decide to try,” retorted Topper.

“I told you once I would sign the paper and I mean it,” Kay replied coldly. “Please hurry and prepare it.”

188

The two men found paper and ink, wasting many minutes arguing about what should be written. From the way the document finally was worded Kay knew it would never stand in court, but she kept this knowledge to herself.

“Here, sign,” John Gluber commanded, handing her the pen.

Before the girl could attach her name to the paper a shout was heard from far down the trail.

“Kay! Kay!” someone called in a shrill voice.

At the same moment Betty and Wilma came into view through the trees. Kay sprang to her feet, upsetting the ink bottle. Before she could answer the call John Gluber had thrust his grimy hand over her mouth.

“Oh, no you don’t!” he said angrily. “Get a gag, Tom.”

A handkerchief was stuffed into Kay's mouth so tightly that she could not utter a sound. While Topper held her arms, his companion went to the window.

“Those girls are coming to the cabin.”

“Then we'll have to get rid of this one,” cried Topper, glancing about for a place where Kay could be hidden.

“Under the bed,” suggested John Gluber.

“No, the attic will be better.”

The man indicated a trapdoor in the ceiling, one which Kay had not noticed before. A ladder was set up quickly and pushed through the opening.

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“Climb up, and be quick about it!” Gluber ordered sharply.

Kay had no choice, so up she went. Topper followed close behind.

The girl barely caught a glimpse of the dark overhead room before a blindfold was placed across her eyes. Her hands were tied behind her, but fortunately loosely. Kay thought hopefully that she might be able to slip out of the ropes after she had been left alone. However, her heart sank as the man pushed her roughly into a closet and locked the door.

“Guess that will keep you quiet for a while,” he muttered as he went away.

A few minutes later Kay heard the Worth twins knocking on

the cabin door. By listening closely she could overhear part of their conversation.

“We’re looking for our friend Kay Tracey!” she heard Wilma say in an excited voice. “We thought she might have come to this cabin.”

“Haven’t seen anyone around here,” Gluber answered in a disguised voice. Evidently the men had not opened the door. “I’ve been sleeping most of the afternoon and so has my pal. Why don’t you try down by the river?”

Kay did not catch the response. It became quiet, so she decided Wilma and Betty had gone away.

“It’s queer they didn’t guess that anything was wrong,” she thought. “Maybe they’ll come back later.”

190

Kay hoped she would be released, now that her friends were gone. Minutes elapsed, but neither John Gluber nor Tom Topper came to set her free.

“If I am to get out of here it will have to be by my own efforts,” she told herself grimly.

Patiently the girl worked at her bonds. In a few minutes she was able to slip off the loose cords and free her hands. It was then a simple task to remove the gag and the blindfold.

“But still I’m not out of here,” the girl thought in despair. “How can I ever get the door open?”

Should she try to break it down, the noise instantly would

attract her captors. Her situation seemed utterly hopeless. Suddenly she thought of the keys she had found in Judge Allen's home! They were still in her sweater pocket.

Taking out the ring, Kay located the skeleton key which had served her so well upon the occasion of the fire. She fitted it into the lock and turned it. The key stuck, and for a moment the girl thought that it would not work. Then she heard a clicking sound and knew that the door would open.

Gently she pushed it, and with a sigh of relief stepped out into the attic. The room, dark and dirty, was without furniture save for one large trunk and a cast-off cot.

Kay tiptoed across the floor to the window. Raising it quietly, she peered out. Although she could not see Wilma or Betty, she figured they had not had time to leave the peninsula. If only she could reach them before they should go away!

191

As Kay leaned out the window, she decided it was a long drop to the ground. Were she to try it she might break an ankle.

Suddenly she was startled to hear the ladder beneath the trapdoor being shoved into place. Her enemies were returning to the attic!

Kay quickly tiptoed to the trunk. Without an instant's hesitation she lifted the lid, scrambled inside and lowered the lid again just as the two men stepped into the attic.

"Say, Tom, the window is open!" cried Gluber.

He rushed to the closet door and flung it open.

“Gone!” he shouted angrily.

“She must have escaped out the window,” Topper cried, looking into the yard below. “No sign of her, either.”

“This is a pretty mess, I must say!” his companion said angrily. “She didn’t sign that paper. Why didn’t you tie her up better?”

“I had only a minute and you know it! Her friends were almost here and I had to work fast.”

“Well, if we land in gaol it will be all your doing!”

“Sure, blame me,” the other growled irritably.

“The girl can’t be far away.”

“No, maybe we can catch her if we hurry!” Topper exclaimed. “Come on, let’s not stand here arguing!”

192

After the men had gone, Kay decided it would be safe for her to come out of her hiding place. She had been huddled in a very uncomfortable position, crouching over a queer-shaped object in the bottom of the trunk.

As she cautiously lifted the lid she was curious to see what the article was. Gazing down, she scarcely could believe her eyes. A violin case lay in the bottom.

After an instant of surprise Kay picked it up and opened the

catch. Within on a velvet background lay a very old violin. Turning it over, she saw on the back two long scratches which formed a perfect cross!

“The Lusardi violin!” she told herself triumphantly. “Just as I thought, Topper stole it! He hid it here and made a cheap duplicate which he sold to his cousin as a genuine old one.”

The girl’s thoughts were interrupted by an unexpected noise below. She heard the ladder fall into place beneath the trapdoor. Tom Topper and John Gluber were coming back!

Kay barely had time to slip the violin into its case, drop into the trunk again with it and lower the lid before the two men returned to the attic. In the darkness she hugged the precious instrument and hoped desperately that she would not be found.

“You must have imagined you heard something, Tom,” muttered Gluber. “If we don’t hurry we’ll never find that girl.”

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“I guess I was wrong,” the other admitted unwillingly. “Wait a minute. Since I’m here I’ll lock the trunk. Don’t want to take any chances on having that violin stolen!”

Without raising the lid, the fellow snapped down the fastener and locked it with a key. Then he followed his companion from the attic.

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CHAPTER XXV

WHEN THE KEY TURNED

While Kay was left in a desperate plight, Wilma and Betty hastened to the nearest telephone to call Bill Tracey. At the cabin they had observed far more than Tom Topper and his companion had believed.

“That one man was John Gluber, I’m sure,” Wilma declared excitedly to her sister as the twins raced toward the boat.

“Yes, and the other fellow must be Tom Topper! Oh, I’m afraid for Kay! If she escaped alive from the bog they have done something with her! We must bring help at once!”

The girls ran all the way to the beach and quickly launched their boat. Half a mile down the shore they saw a house from which they telephoned. Cousin Bill promised to get Detective Kenley and come to the peninsula at once.

“Don’t lose heart,” he told them hopefully. “We’ll find Kay!”

While the lawyer and the detective sped to the scene in a car, the twins returned to the peninsula and kept up a search for their chum.

“Somehow I have a feeling that Tom Topper lied to us,”

Betty said positively. “Kay may be a prisoner in the cabin.”

“Let’s go back there again.”

Before the girls could start away, they heard footsteps on the path. Quickly dropping out of sight, they saw Topper and Gluber coming down the trail.

“It’s funny, the way that girl disappeared,” one of the men muttered. “She must have started off through the swamp again.”

“Then let’s try the other trail,” his companion suggested. “It’s gaol for us if she gets away.”

The twins waited until the two crooks were out of sight before they emerged from their hiding place.

“I believe Kay *is* alive!” Wilma declared hopefully.

“Yes, those men must have seen her since she fell into the bog! But where is she? They can’t find her either.”

Before the girls could decide just what to do, Detective Kenley and Bill Tracey reached the beach, having come the last quarter of a mile on foot. They were breathless from running.

Hastily the twins revealed everything that had happened, struggling to keep from bursting into tears as they spoke.

“We don’t know whether or not Kay is alive,” Betty ended the

story. “She disappeared while we went after help, but from what those awful men said we hope she escaped.”

“Which way did they go?” questioned Mr. Kenley.

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“Down the left-hand trail leading into the swamp,” Wilma replied, indicating the path.

“I’ll go that way and try to round up the fellows,” the detective said crisply.

Bill Tracey and the twins returned to the cabin. As they drew near Betty chanced to gaze toward the attic window. She stopped short.

“Was that window open when we were here before?”

“I didn’t notice,” Betty admitted, glancing upward. “I was too worried about Kay.”

“Isn’t that something dangling from the sill?” inquired Bill Tracey. “It looks like a piece of leather.”

“It’s a blue patent leather belt!” exclaimed Betty. “Kay’s belt!”

“That’s right,” agreed Wilma, becoming excited. “And she had it on at the time she fell into the quagmire, so she must still be alive!”

“More than likely she was held a prisoner in the cabin,” Cousin Bill declared, going over the situation. “Probably her belt caught as she crawled through and escaped.”

“Yes, but in that case wouldn’t my sister and I have seen her on the path?”

“I think she’s still in the cabin,” Betty declared forcefully.

“We’ll soon find out,” Kay’s cousin decided.

197

They hastened to the cabin. It took them several minutes to locate the ladder and get it into position beneath the trapdoor in the ceiling. By that time Detective Kenley could be seen coming up the trail, and he was not alone. Topper and Gluber, sullen and angry, marched ahead of him, their wrists handcuffed together. The two were forced to enter the cabin.

“Why are you arresting us?” demanded the violin maker.

“What have you against us?”

“There are several charges against you,” answered the detective evenly. “You’ll receive a detailed account of them when we reach the police station. Right now I want to know what you’ve done with Kay Tracey.”

“I don’t know anything about her,” the fellow returned sullenly.

“Her belt is hanging from the attic window!” Betty said accusingly.

“Well, she crawled out that way,” the man admitted reluctantly. “She hid in the closet and——”

“You mean you imprisoned her there!” Bill Tracey said wrathfully. “If you don’t tell the truth——”

“I *am* telling you the truth,” Topper whined. “Here I pull the girl out of the swamp, and that’s all the thanks I get for saving her life.”

“You rescued Kay from the marsh?” Betty questioned in disbelief.

“Yes, I did. I brought her here but she decided to run away.”

198

“Why did you tell us you hadn’t seen her?” Wilma demanded sharply. “You were keeping her a prisoner or you would have admitted the truth.”

“We’re wasting time,” interrupted Cousin Bill. “Let’s have a look at the attic.”

“The girl isn’t up there,” John Gluber said harshly. “She went out the window just as we told you she did.”

Even as he spoke there was a tapping noise from the upper floor.

“Did you hear that!” exclaimed Bill Tracey, starting up the ladder. “Someone is in the attic!”

Leaving Detective Kenley to guard the two men, the twins hastily followed the young lawyer. Wilma flung open the closet door and saw the gag and the ropes which had bound Kay.

“Here! Here!” called a muffled voice.

“Did that voice come from the trunk!” exclaimed Betty, clutching her sister’s arm.

Bill Tracey nodded grimly. Moving across the room, he tried to lift the lid.

“Locked!”

Going to the trapdoor, he called down to ask Mr. Kenley if he had a skeleton key with him.

“Try these,” the detective responded, tossing up a metal ring. “I just found them in Topper’s pocket.”

Anxiously Wilma and Betty waited as Bill Tracey tried the keys. At last he discovered one which fitted the lock. As he turned it, the lid of the trunk slowly raised. Kay emerged, clasping the violin case in her arms.

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“Thank goodness, you’re alive!” exclaimed Wilma in joy and relief.

“We didn’t know what had happened to you,” Betty added, a sob in her voice.

Cousin Bill was so moved that he could not find words to express his feelings. His hands shook as he reached out to assist Kay from the trunk.

“What’s that in your arm?” he asked.

“The lost violin!” exclaimed Kay. “The Lusardi violin!”

“Say, that does look like a Stradivarius!” the lawyer observed in awe when he looked at the instrument. “Detective Kenley, bring your prisoners up here!”

“It’s easier for us to go down,” Kay laughed, leading the way to the ladder.

“This is a genuine Stradivarius violin,” Mr. Kenley said after he had examined the instrument. “I’ve seen too many of them to be fooled.”

“And you found it in the trunk, Kay?” Betty asked eagerly.

“Yes, it had been hidden there by Mr. Topper.”

“You can’t prove that,” muttered the man.

“We can prove every one of our charges against you,” Detective Kenley told the fellows sternly. “Now I’m warning you, Topper, the law will go easier with you if you make a clean breast of things. Come on.”

200

The man sat silent for a long while. Then, avoiding John Gluber’s sullen gaze, he said in a low voice:

“All right, I’ll tell you the truth. I stole Pedro Lusardi’s violin, but Gluber was to share fifty-fifty in any profit from the sale.”

“That’s a lie,” cried the secondhand dealer furiously.

He tried to strike the speaker, but Cousin Bill forced him to sit down again. The other man continued with his story:

“Our plans went wrong when the Lusardi girl came home and caught me in the house. Since then I’ve had to lie low. It’s been no fun. Hunted by the police, not daring to return to my home, I’m ready to give myself up.”

Kay asked both men a number of questions, making Gluber admit that he had intended to steal the box which had been saved from the Judge Allen home. The man had found the key marked “LLL.” Later, while roaming about the second floor, he had located the treasure chest in a secret compartment of the room formerly occupied by Lillian Laura Lawson.

Leaving Detective Kenley to escort the two men to gaol, Kay and her friends drove at once to the Lusardi home. When the violin was placed in his hands a happy smile spread over the musician’s face.

“This violin looks like mine!” he announced gaily.

“Wait! We see!”

201

He drew a bow across the strings and played a few measures of a selection by Ysaye.

“Yes! Yes!” he cried. “It is my own Stradivarius! Rosa! Rosa! We have our violin again!”

“We owe it all to these very good friends,” his daughter said, smiling at Kay. “How can we ever thank you? You saved father’s position at the radio station and——”

“Please don’t say another word,” pleaded Kay. “I enjoyed helping Detective Kenley and Cousin Bill find the violin. If it hadn’t been for Wilma and Betty I probably should be locked

in the trunk still! So you see everyone did something.”

“Even so, Kay, I think you deserve the biggest part of the credit,” said Cousin Bill soberly. “You found the first clues to turn suspicion on Tom Topper.”

“Yes, and you were wholly responsible for recovering Enrico Calo’s jewellery,” added Wilma generously.

“Not to mention Mrs. Speer and Mamie,” said Betty warmly. “It was outrageous the way John Gluber cheated them. He intended to steal their inheritance too! I doubt that anyone would have suspected the truth if you hadn’t become interested in their welfare.”

“Dear me, are my ears burning!” Kay laughed. “I think it’s time we all go home. I’m a sight in this dirty dress!”

202

The girl seemed to have suffered no ill effects from her day’s adventure, but Mrs. Tracey declared her daughter had been through enough to shatter an iron constitution. Despite objections on her part, Kay was put to bed, where she remained until nightfall. By that time Cousin Bill returned from the police station.

“Any news?” the girl inquired eagerly.

“Detective Kenley obtained a written confession from Tom Topper,” the lawyer told her. “John Gluber maintains his innocence, but Kenley thinks he will break down within twenty-four hours. In any event we have plenty of evidence against him.”

“You’re taking the case, I hope, Cousin Bill.”

“Yes, Mrs. Speer has asked me to represent her too. She and Mr. Lusardi will unite in prosecuting the two men. I’ll have my hands full for a few weeks, getting my case ready.”

“Oh, you’ll have no trouble,” Kay smiled broadly. “You always win.”

“Not always, but this time I shall! Thanks to your work the evidence against Gluber and Topper is conclusive. By the way, Anthony Lusardi showed up. He is sorry for all the trouble he caused and will not ask his brother to sell the violin.”

“Oh, I’m so glad,” said Kay.

The girl remained away from school one day. When she returned, she discovered that she had become a heroine. Rosa Lusardi had told everyone how her father’s violin had been recovered, dramatizing the events which had occurred on the peninsula. Everyone save Ethel Eaton congratulated Kay upon her clever detective work.

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In many ways Rosa and her father tried to show their appreciation. Due to Mr. Lusardi’s efforts the school orchestra was asked by a broadcasting company to play over the air. At the opening of the concert Kay was presented to the vast unseen audience as the girl who had caused the capture of two unscrupulous swindlers.

“Wasn’t it thrilling, Kay?” Wilma asked dreamily as the three girls rode home from the radio station. “Why, everyone in the

country will know your name now!”

“I didn’t expect so much notoriety,” Kay said, smiling at the recollection. “It was a nice gesture on Mr. Lusardi’s part.”

“When the announcer spoke of how you had saved the Stradivarius violin, little chills raced up and down my spine!” Betty declared, linking arms with her friend. “Tell me, have you ever had a more exciting moment?”

“Several of them,” was Kay’s surprising answer.

“You might supply us with a list,” said Wilma jokingly.

“I was thrilled when I discovered the significance of that key marked ‘LLL.’”

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“But surely that wasn’t your most exciting moment,” said Betty in quick protest.

“Not quite,” replied Kay, smiling broadly. “While I was in the trunk, almost smothered to death, I kept wondering if I ever should be found in time. Well, when the key turned in the lock, that was the greatest moment of my life!”

THE END

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[The end of *When the Key Turned* by Frances K. Judd]