

THE MURMURING PORTRAIT

Frances K. Judd

A KAY TRACEY MYSTERY



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Title: The Murmuring Portrait

Date of first publication: 1938

Author: Frances K. Judd

Date first posted: Mar. 3, 2019

Date last updated: Mar. 3, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190307

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

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A masked intruder was in the library!

A Kay Tracey Mystery

THE MURMURING PORTRAIT

Francis K. Judd



GARDEN CITY BOOKS
Garden City, New York

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Printed in the United States of America

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THE MURMURING PORTRAIT

CHAPTER I

A SCARE

“This side road looks as if it might lead to an interesting spot for a picnic, girls,” declared Kay Tracey as she stopped her automobile along the main highway. “Shall we try it?”

“Yes, let’s,” agreed Betty Worth eagerly. “We’re not likely to find any good place along this well-traveled route.”

“If we don’t eat soon I’ll collapse from hunger,” complained Wilma Worth good-naturedly.

Kay Tracey, the Worth twins, Wilma and Betty, together with three other members of the Carmont High School basketball team were on their way to Fremont, where they were to play a game. It had been Kay’s idea to start out early and enjoy a picnic lunch on the way.

The winding side road proved to be very beautiful, but the girls could not decide upon a site.

“It’s after one o’clock now,” warned Wilma anxiously as the car crept along. “If we’re to reach Fremont in time for the game we won’t dare go much farther.”

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“It looks as if we’re about at the end of the road anyway,”

said Kay, indicating a large sign board directly ahead of them.

She stopped the car, and read the warning which had been painted in huge red letters:

“BRIDGE OUT. TAKE DETOUR.”

“Now what shall we do?” asked Wilma gloomily. “We’ll have to turn back.”

“It will be another hour before we have our lunch,” Betty sighed. “I’m in favor of going on. The detour looks interesting.”

“It’s a dusty, rough road, and we don’t know where it leads to,” Wilma protested.

“I can see rugged hill country ahead,” Kay declared eagerly. “We might go on for a short distance. Then, if we don’t come to a place where we can eat our lunch, we’ll turn back.”

The other girls were all in favor of Kay’s suggestion, so Wilma was overruled. However, before they had traveled far it became evident that the detour was not a short one. The road twisted and turned in serpentine fashion and was so bumpy that Kay dared drive no faster than ten miles an hour. High bushes lined either side of the roadway, while tall trees blocked out a view of the surrounding country.

“This is certainly wild enough territory,” declared Betty with satisfaction. “I imagine there are some nice picnic places back there behind those trees.”

“Probably,” agreed Kay, “but I can’t stop until we reach the end of this detour. There is scarcely room enough for two cars to pass each other.”

Presently the girls saw a wider stretch ahead, though deep ditches on either side of it made it impractical for Kay to turn the car. She kept going straight on until they came to a bisecting road.

“Turn down there, Kay,” pleaded one of the twins. “I think I see just the place we’re looking for.”

A moment later the car drew up under a huge oak tree. To the right the girls observed a pleasant hillside, a shady dell, and a stream which meandered lazily along its rocky bed.

“Oh, this spot is ideal!” cried Kay. “It was worth all the trouble we had in getting here.”

“I wonder where we are, anyway?” questioned Wilma as she climbed from the car and looked about.

“This is unfamiliar country to me,” acknowledged Kay. “Come on, let’s eat!”

While Betty and one of the other girls climbed over the fence and went in search of a suitable picnic ground, Kay, Wilma, and the remaining members of the party picked up the baskets and thermos bottles.

“As usual, we’ve brought enough food along to feed an

“We may need it to fortify ourselves against the Fremont girls!” said Dora Dean.

Betty came running back to report that she had found just the ideal spot. She led her companions to a shady hillside overlooking a stream.

“Oh, it’s lovely here!” declared Wilma dreamily.

While Kay and the others spread out the luncheon cloth, Wilma climbed a low cliff nearby. Perching herself on a flat rock, she gazed dreamily into space.

“If I read the signs correctly, Wilma is getting ready to compose a poem,” Betty predicted with a grimace. “Watch me stop her!”

“I think it would be nice to hear a poem about this beautiful site,” declared one of the girls. “I wish I could compose one.”

“Wilma does have talent,” Betty admitted. “Once she won a prize for writing poetry, but when she gets into a dreamy mood she seems to forget that the world is moving about her. She should be down here helping us to unpack the sandwiches.”

“Oh, don’t bother her,” Kay said.

Betty paid no heed. Cupping her hands to her mouth she called to her sister, “Oh, Wilma, aren’t you afraid of snakes up there on those rocks?”

Her twin sprang up so quickly that the other girls could

not keep from laughing. She glanced nervously about her, then came sliding down from the cliff.

“Do you suppose there are any snakes around here?” she shuddered.

“It looks like good snake country,” Betty said mischievously. “And I’ve heard that the reptiles like to coil themselves on the rocks as they take their sunbaths.”

“Oh, let’s go somewhere else,” murmured Wilma nervously. “I’m more afraid of snakes than of anything else in the world.”

“Betty knows it, too,” laughed Kay. “I think she’s trying to tease you.”

“I don’t like snakes myself,” commented one of the other girls uneasily. “Maybe we should try to find a different place.”

“But we have everything all ready now,” Betty protested. “I’m sorry I said a word about snakes. I don’t believe there are any around.”

“We must be careful to keep away from the rocks and the tall grass,” Kay added. “But we certainly haven’t time to look for another place.”

The girls began removing food from the baskets, carelessly allowing their purses to lie on the ground. They had no suspicion that someone might be within hearing distance of their voices.

A sad looking tramp, who called himself Monty the Mole, had fallen asleep on a shelf of rock not far from the picnic site. In climbing the cliff Wilma had failed to see him, and the man had remained hidden from the view of the others.

Monty had been awakened from a sound sleep by Betty's warning shout to her sister. Out of sight he had listened to everything that was said.

Presently he crept along the ledge until he could look down on the girls preparing to eat. The sight of so much good food made him painfully aware that he had eaten almost nothing that day. His eyes focused themselves also upon the pocketbooks scattered about.

“So the girls are afraid of snakes!” he chuckled. “Well, Monty my boy, this is where you get a free meal and some spending money!”

Noiselessly the man crept back along the ledge. On the other side of the cliff he had noticed several harmless reptiles coiled up in the warm sunshine. He succeeded in scooping up four of them before the others fled into the crevices.

Dropping the tiny snakes into his pocket, Monty retraced his way until he was directly above the spot where the girls were seated. They were having such a jolly time they failed to hear the slight sound made by his shoes crunching on the rock.

“I think I'll have another chicken sandwich,” declared Wilma. “Goodness, this outdoor air gives one an appetite.”

She reached out a hand to select a sandwich from one of

the plates. Monty the Mole chose just that moment to hurl his snakes over the cliff. The reptiles dropped squarely on the lunch, one of them barely missing Wilma's arm.

"Snakes!" she screamed in terror.

The other girls, equally amazed, sprang to their feet.

"The place is alive with them!" cried Kay. "They're dropping down from that tree!"

The branches of a maple hung directly over the lunch cloth, so it was a natural assumption that the snakes had been coiled around the limbs. The thought did not occur to any of the girls that the reptiles might have been hurled by a human hand. Monty, having accomplished the mischief, promptly ducked back out of sight behind a rock.

"Run!" screamed Wilma. "Those snakes look poisonous!"

The girls darted toward their car which was parked by the roadside.

"Let's drive away from here and never come back," pleaded Wilma with a little sob in her voice.

"We've left everything," Kay said ruefully.

"Let the snakes have the lunch," retorted Wilma. "I'm sure I'd not touch the food anyway after they've crawled over it."

"Neither would I," added Betty. "Ugh! Why did I have to select a place like that?"

“Someone should go back,” said Kay quietly. “Even if we don’t care to save the lunch, we can’t afford to lose the thermos bottles and our purses.”

“Oh, I forgot all about our money!” gasped Wilma in dismay. “But I’d rather lose my purse than return to that dreadful place.”

“You girls wait here and I’ll bring the things,” Kay offered after a slight hesitation.

“You might be bitten by one of those snakes,” Wilma protested. “Don’t do it, Kay.”

“I’m not very much afraid, now that I’ve had time to think about it. I don’t believe those reptiles are poisonous.”

“You can’t be sure,” Wilma shuddered. “While you’re gathering up the things, another one might drop down on you from the tree.”

“Maybe those snakes didn’t come from that maple after all,” said Kay thoughtfully. “Nearly all reptiles stay on the ground.”

“But I saw them fall from above,” Wilma insisted. “One almost struck my arm. Please don’t risk going back, Kay.”

“I must,” replied the Tracey girl firmly. “We can’t afford to lose our money. I’ll be careful.”

Before her friends could protest further, Kay had started to walk back hastily toward the picnic site. By this time

Monty, delighted at the success of his scheme, was stuffing his pockets with food. One by one he looted the purses. He had just picked up the bag belonging to Kay, when he caught sight of the girl coming toward him through the trees. With the purse still in his hand, he turned and ran into the woods.

Kay stopped short as she glimpsed the fleeing tramp. Instantly it occurred to her that he had been responsible for breaking up the picnic. One glance toward the site assured her that he had stolen all the purses.

“Stop, thief!” she shouted indignantly, and with no thought for her own safety, she darted into the woods after the man.

CHAPTER II

TRAILING THE TRAMP

Despite her best efforts, Kay could not catch up with the fleeing tramp. He ran in zigzag fashion, keeping himself screened as much as possible by the trees. The girl caught brief glimpses of him, but finally lost him completely. For several minutes she wandered about trying to pick up the trail again.

In the meantime, Betty and Wilma had grown alarmed over their chum's prolonged absence. Conquering their fears, they induced the other girls to go with them to the picnic site. Upon reaching the place by the cliffs they noticed at once that their purses and considerable food had disappeared.

"Someone has stolen our things!" cried Betty indignantly.

"What has become of Kay?" asked Wilma, looking about her anxiously.

"She probably set out to catch the thief," Betty declared. "That's exactly what she would try to do!"

Kay Tracey was an unusually courageous girl as her friends well knew. She lived in Brantwood with her widowed mother and Cousin Bill Tracey, a talented young

lawyer. With Betty and Wilma Worth she attended Carmont High School, commuting back and forth daily from Brantwood.

Kay was always keeping her family and friends guessing as to her latest adventure. She had an unfailing capacity for being drawn into the middle of a mystery, with complete disregard for personal safety. This resulted naturally from her kind nature and willingness to help people who came to her in trouble. Kay had a fine mind for detecting the clues of a seemingly unsolvable mystery and had often amazed and delighted Brantwood residents with a surprise solution. In her sleuthing efforts she was always assisted by Cousin Bill and the Worth girls.

Wilma and Betty thoroughly enjoyed sharing their friend's good times. Although twins, they were very unlike in every respect save in their love of mystery. Dark-haired Wilma was serious-minded, studious, and inclined to quote poetry. Betty, on the other hand, was a decided blond and a tease.

Neither of the girls was as pretty as Kay. At sixteen, the Tracey girl had unusual poise for one so young. Her deep brown eyes and golden-chestnut hair accented a lovely face. Yet no girl ever gave less thought to her appearance than did Kay. She was far too deeply absorbed in her various activities to think very much about herself.

“Kay may be in danger trying to catch the person who stole our things,” Wilma declared anxiously.

“Yes,” Betty agreed soberly, “we ought to look for her. I

imagine she went into the woods. You can see where the grass has been trampled.”

“Oh, I hate to go in there,” shuddered Wilma. “If I should see another of those horrid snakes I’d faint.”

The other girls were not eager to enter the woods either, but when Betty picked up a half-eaten sandwich just at the fringe of trees, they could not doubt but that it had been dropped by the person Kay was pursuing. They must find her.

Making their way gingerly, the chums set off through the woods. Wilma immediately called attention to a footprint apparently made in the soft earth by Kay’s shoe.

“She went this way, all right,” Betty declared.

Anxiously the girls pressed on, but they found no additional clues. As they came to a patch of tall weeds and grass, Wilma lost her enthusiasm for the pursuit.

“I don’t believe Kay took this direction,” she declared. “Let’s try another.”

“I’ll go on alone,” Betty offered. “I’m sure she came this way.”

Leaving her sister and the other girls way behind, Betty continued her search. She had not gone far when she heard her name called. Whirling around, she was surprised to see Kay emerging from among some trees.

“Oh, here you are!” she exclaimed in relief. “We were

afraid something had happened to you.”

“Something did happen,” Kay replied grimly as she joined her friend. “A tramp ran off with our money and some of the food. He disappeared in this woods.”

“If that isn’t the worst luck,” Betty murmured.

“We must find that man,” Kay said determinedly. “He can’t be far away.”

“I’d be almost afraid to face him,” Betty declared nervously. “He might have a gun.”

“I doubt it, Betty. The fellow is a coward or he wouldn’t have run away when he saw me coming. I intend to track him down.”

Kay started on again, Betty trailing at her heels. A short distance farther both girls noticed a few crumbs on the ground. Then they came to a banana peel.

“He must have been through here!” Kay cried triumphantly.

The trail of food led the girls deeper into the woods. Soon, however, they came to a rocky clearing. The far side dropped off in an almost perpendicular cliff. Peering over it, Kay noticed a well-worn path which led downward to a small beamed opening, evidently the entrance to an abandoned mine. Kay motioned to Betty, who came quickly to her side.

“I believe that tramp is in that hole,” she whispered.
“Let’s steal down the trail and try to listen.”

The chums followed the steep path, taking great care not to slip. A slight misstep might mean a plunge many feet down the cliff.

As they drew near the mine entrance, Kay suddenly held up her hand, as a signal for silence and caution. Both girls flattened themselves against the rocks, listening intently. They could hear a man just inside the opening. He seemed to be munching food and muttering to himself.

The fellow was telling himself that it had been years since he had tasted such good food. No one save his mother could have made such sandwiches. A wonderful woman his mother. How kind she had been to him. If only he were a child once more, and back in his fine home!

“What is the man talking about?” Betty whispered in amazement. “Is he crazy?”

Kay did not reply, for the tramp had started muttering again. The girls heard him laugh softly as he spoke of himself as the handsome son of Montgomery Moleson.

“Now I’m just an outcast,” he babbled. “They call me Monty the Mole. I’m a homeless, friendless creature living from hand to mouth. And all this because I cheated my partner.”

“The fellow must be out of his mind,” Betty whispered in awe, “or else he’s had a most unfortunate experience in life.”

“Didn’t he call himself the son of Montgomery Moleson?” Kay asked thoughtfully. “It seems to me I’ve heard that name before.”

“It does sound familiar,” Betty admitted. “But I can’t remember where I’ve heard it either.”

Kay made a mental note that upon her return home she should ask Cousin Bill if he knew anyone by the name of Moleson. In his practice of law young Tracey was brought into contact with numerous individuals. He had a profound interest in the outcome of all criminal and civil cases. If anyone by the name of Moleson had figured in police records recently he would be sure to remember it.

Kay’s thoughts were rudely interrupted as she heard Monty say that he would get himself a drink at the spring, now that the coast was clear. The girls barely had time to crouch down out of sight when the tramp appeared at the opening of the mine.

He was a good looking fellow, but needed a shave and a haircut. He wore a faded sweater and wrinkled trousers. The man glanced about cautiously but failed to see the two girls. After yawning and stretching himself, he moved off down the trail.

The watchers did not stir until the fellow had disappeared from view.

“Now is our chance!” cried Kay. “Maybe he left our money inside the mine.”

Stealing along the trail to the entrance, the girls peered into the dark hole. For a moment they could not see anything. After a little while Kay’s eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, so that she could distinguish several

pocketbooks lying on the floor of the tunnel. All had been opened, and the money from them stacked in three neat piles. Evidently Monty had been counting it, for he had stacked the bills together, and placed the coins in two piles.

Kay lost no time in scooping up all the money. Betty was about to pick up the empty pocketbooks when she was startled to hear her name called.

“Betty! Betty!” came the cry from far off. “Where are you?”

“It’s Wilma,” Betty gasped. “She and the other girls are probably looking for me.”

“They must be near the spring where the tramp went,” Kay said in alarm. “That means he’ll be coming back here any minute.”

With one accord she and Betty hurried outside. They were not a minute too soon. Scarcely had they hidden themselves when the man, breathless from running, rushed up the path. Like a frightened animal he scuttled into his hole.

The two girls scrambled up the steep trail. They had just reached the clearing above when they heard the tramp utter a cry of rage.

“He has discovered that the money is gone!” Kay said, grasping Betty’s hand. “Hurry, or he’ll catch us yet!”

CHAPTER III

AN IMPORTANT GAME

The girls rushed across the clearing into the shelter of the woods. Once there, they paused to listen. As they could hear no one coming, both decided that Monty the Mole had been afraid to pursue them.

“Well, we have our money anyway,” Betty declared in relief.

“I don’t mind about the food,” Kay replied. “The fellow seemed to need it. He acted as if he were half starved.”

“It made me shiver to hear him talk to himself, Kay.”

“He’s a queer, unfortunate character,” Kay agreed thoughtfully. “I wish I could find out more about him.”

“I’d like to turn him over to the police!”

“I shouldn’t want to do that,” Kay said slowly. “The fellow played a mean trick on us and stole our money, but from what he said in talking to himself I judge he isn’t all bad. And he’s been punished for any wrong he may have done.”

Betty said nothing, but gave her chum a quick glance. She could tell that Kay had more than a passing interest in the

tramp's welfare.

“Let's see if we can find Wilma and the girls,” Kay suggested. “They must be somewhere close by or that fellow wouldn't have been so frightened when they called to us.”

18

The pair went on through the woods. They had gone only a short distance when they heard a noise in the bushes directly ahead. Wilma and her friends had circled back from the spring and were now searching for Kay and Betty.

“Let's give them a little scare,” chuckled Betty.

She uttered a low, wailing sound. Wilma heard the weird cry. Through the trees Betty and Kay caught a glimpse of her, standing tense and motionless as a statue.

“A perfect portrait of a frightened girl,” laughed Kay, “with the tree trunks as a frame.”

“Just watch me make the picture shake and murmur,” chuckled Betty. She repeated the moaning sound.

At that moment Wilma saw the girls coming toward her. Relaxing her tense pose, she ran to meet them.

“Betty Worth!” she cried indignantly. “You should be ashamed! Here we are worried half to death about you, and then you frighten us even more by making weird noises.”

“I'm sorry,” apologized Betty with a laugh. “The temptation was too great to resist. Where have you been? Down by the

spring?”

“Yes, we were searching for you.”

“Did you see a man while you were there?” Kay asked quickly.

19

Wilma shook her head.

“Well, he saw you,” chuckled Kay. “Or at least he heard your voice when you called Betty’s name.”

“How did you get the money? Tell me everything.”

By this time the other girls had come up, and they too were eager to learn what had happened. Kay related how she and Betty had traced the tramp to the mine entrance. After repeating a part of the strange conversation they had overheard, they asked if anyone knew of a person named Montgomery Moleson. No one could give any information.

Kay and Betty were highly praised for their courage. The pocketbooks were handed to their owners and the girls attempted to “unscramble” their money. It was a difficult task, for Wilma and one of the others could not remember just how much they had carried. At last the bills and coins were allotted to everyone’s satisfaction.

“It’s getting late,” Betty declared uneasily. “We must hurry on to Fremont.”

“What about our lunch?” asked Wilma plaintively. “I had only one tiny chicken sandwich. I’ll never be able to shoot

baskets on a diet like that.”

“Let’s stop at some tea room along the road,” Kay proposed.
“We’ll still have time if we hurry.”

“Providing we don’t run into any more adventures,”
Betty added, laughing.

20

The girls quickly gathered up the baskets and carried them to the car. As Kay slipped into the driver’s seat she noticed that she had a long tear in her stocking where it had snagged on a rock. Betty’s skirt was peppered with cockle-burrs, and the other girls’ clothes were mussed.

“We look more like ragamuffins than a basketball team,” Kay laughed as she steered the car down the road.

Once they were on the paved highway, the chums spied an attractive tea room which offered quick service. They ate a light luncheon and drove on to Fremont without mishap, arriving at Franklin School a full half hour before it was time for the basketball game to begin.

“Hurry and get into your suits,” called Kay, who was captain of the team. “We want to warm up and try a few baskets before the game begins.”

“Where are we to dress?” inquired Wilma doubtfully.

“Wait here and I’ll find out,” Kay directed.

Just at that moment the Fremont basketball coach, Miss Kingston, arrived to escort the girls to the dressing room.

“Didn’t the school coach come with you?” the teacher inquired in surprise as she led the way upstairs.

“Our coach, Miss Dean, was taken ill suddenly,” Kay explained. “She didn’t wish to cancel the game so she sent us on alone.”

21

“Oh, I’m sorry she was unable to come,” Miss Kingston replied regretfully.

“This is the first game we’ve ever played without her,” Kay admitted.

After showing the girls to the dressing room the teacher left them to themselves. Kay quickly changed into her costume, and with Betty went down to the gymnasium. It was a fine, newly-equipped room with ample seating capacity.

The Franklin team was out on the floor, looking very striking in red and black uniforms. The girls were dribbling the ball and executing quick passes. Betty and Kay watched them as they worked out.

“They’re fast,” was the Worth twin’s terse comment.

“So are we,” replied Kay cheerfully.

“That tall, thin girl must be their center,” Betty mused. “She’ll be able to out-jump Wilma.”

“It will be a hard game,” Kay admitted, “but we’ll win!”

After a few minutes the Franklin girls left the floor. One of

the members of the team, a freckle-faced, boyish little person by the name of Sally Burns came over to offer the ball to Kay and Betty.

“Wouldn’t you like to try a few baskets before the game?” she invited with a friendly smile.

Betty and Kay gratefully accepted it, spending the next five minutes in strenuous practice. By that time the other members of the Carmont team were out on the floor. Kay retired to the sidelines so that her companions might have a better chance at the basket. Presently she discovered Sally Burns standing near her again.

22

“You have a very fine gymnasium here,” Kay remarked pleasantly. “It’s a wonderful place for basketball games.”

“Yes, we are proud of the place,” the other girl responded. “It was built and equipped through the generosity of the late Montgomery Moleson.”

“Montgomery Moleson!” exclaimed Kay.

“Why yes,” returned Sally, glancing at the girl curiously. “He died a number of years ago, you know. This Franklin School happened to be one of his pet hobbies.”

“Then Mr. Moleson lived here at Fremont?” Kay questioned alertly.

“Not in the city proper. The old Moleson house is located on Acorn Drive, which circles the ravine. It’s still something of a show place.”

“And is the house closed now?”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Moleson lives there alone, except for a servant. I heard last week that she is seriously ill.”

“Has she no children?”

“She had a son named Monty, but he died some time ago. I guess Mrs. Moleson has never recovered from the shock. Anyway, she has not left her home in years.”

23

“Is it a long drive to the Moleson place?” Kay inquired thoughtfully.

“Not more than three or four miles. You go through the center of town and take the first road to the right after you pass a traffic light. Were you thinking of going out there?”

“Oh, if we have time after the game I’d like to see the house,” Kay responded carelessly.

“The outside is not very impressive looking, but the interior is furnished with paintings and antiques brought from abroad. They’re said to be worth a lot of money.”

“I’d love to see them.”

“Very few persons ever have the opportunity,” replied Sally. “Even when she was well, Mrs. Moleson didn’t care for visitors. Now that she is ill I don’t believe anyone is admitted to the house.”

Before Kay could ask another question, Miss Kingston blew

her whistle to summon the referee and the members of the two teams. Briefly she warned the girls about playing too roughly and then told them to take their positions.

Kay and Betty were to play as forwards on the Carmont team, Wilma as center forward, and the guards were Enid Mack, Flo Hale, and Dora Dean.

Kay had hoped that her own guard might prove to be Sally Burns, but a stout, red-faced girl by the name of Mabel Gold was assigned to her corner.

24

“She’s supposed to be Franklin’s best player,” Betty whispered to Kay. “You’ll have to be on your toes to get away from her.”

Mabel Gold regarded her opponent appraisingly. She did not offer to shake hands.

The whistle blew. The referee tossed the ball into play. Wilma’s opponent tapped it directly into the hands of a waiting player. She dribbled away with it and passed it swiftly to a forward, who shot it neatly into the basket. A great cheer broke from the somewhat prejudiced gallery. The scoreboard read:

Franklin 2 Carmont 0

Kay and her teammates felt a trifle dazed. It was humiliating to have been scored against in the first minute of play; but they would not be caught napping again.

“That’s the way we do it at Franklin,” murmured Mabel Gold

derisively.

The ball was thrown in again, but this time it did not fall into the hands of a Franklin player. Kay broke away from her guard, and leaping high into the air she received the pass from Wilma. She whirled about, avoiding Mabel Gold's outstretched hands. Although she was a long distance from the basket, she looped the ball toward it. Swish! The sound came as music to Kay's ears. The ball had cut neatly through the net, bouncing high on the floor.

“Good work, Kay!” praised Betty. “Now we've started! Let's keep it up!”

25

Mabel Gold's dark eyes smouldered with anger as she saw the new score go up on the board. As the referee prepared to put the ball in play once more the Fremont guard crowded close against Kay, deliberately holding her when the girl tried to break away.

“That's against the rules!” Kay cried, jerking free.

The referee had not observed the act nor had any of the other officials, yet Mabel Gold's unfair tactics caused Kay to miss the ball when Betty tossed it toward her. A Franklin player darted in and snatched it away before Kay could reach the spot.

For the next few minutes both teams fought valiantly to gain an advantage. Twice Franklin scored, then Kay made a free throw when Mabel Gold was penalized for rough play. The scoreboard read:

Franklin 6 Carmont 3

This discouraging state continued until Betty broke away from her guard and tossed the ball into the net, bringing the score to 6 and 5. A sharp blast of the whistle announced the end of the first half.

“You’ve done splendidly, girls,” Kay praised her teammates. “But this next half we must fight even harder.”

“That horrid guard of yours should be removed from the game,” declared Betty angrily. “She shoves and pushes, and I saw her try to trip you.”

26

“Why not report her?” asked Wilma.

“Oh, it’s petty to tattle. Perhaps she’ll play fair this half.”

Long before the girls had fully regained their breaths the whistle called them back to the fray. Kay’s hopes that Mabel Gold would change her childish tactics faded. The girl acted even worse than before, but the referee saw very few of the fouls she committed.

The final quarter of the game found the score tied with each team having 10 points. From start to finish it had been a hard fought battle. The girls were tired and no one seemed able to score.

Kay glanced at the wall clock and saw that only a minute remained until the end of the game. Somehow Carmont must gain one more basket! She must make a supreme effort!

It seemed to the Tracey girl that she was too tired to move. Yet when she saw the ball coming in her direction she dodged away from her guard and caught it firmly.

“Shoot! Shoot!” cried Betty.

Kay was too far from the basket for an accurate shot, but she knew that time was precious. Mabel Gold was bearing down on her from the left.

Kay took deliberate aim, for everything depended on her. Unfortunately she waited an instant too long. Mabel darted in and tried to seize the ball. Failing, she deliberately trampled on her opponent’s foot.

27

Kay gave a sharp cry of pain, but even so she released the ball. It sailed upward, struck the rim of the basket and wavered.

A tense silence fell over the crowd. All eyes were on the ball save those of the player who had thrown it. Kay had sagged to the floor and was writhing with pain as she sought to massage her injured foot.

28

CHAPTER IV

THE MOLESON MANSION

The ball wavered on the edge of the basket for an instant and then dropped inside. A shrill blast of the whistle announced the end of the game. Carmont had won!

Even the Franklin rooters cheered, for Kay's playing had been outstanding. But the cries quickly died away as the crowd realized that the plucky player had been injured.

"What is wrong, Miss Tracey?" inquired the Franklin coach, Miss Kingston, hurrying over toward Kay and Mabel.

"That last basket shouldn't count," said the Franklin guard in a shrill voice before Kay could speak. "I had my hands on the ball when she stepped on my foot! It was a foul and I'm entitled to a free throw!"

"Why, that's not true," gasped Kay, amazed at such an outrageous charge. "It was quite the other way around."

"It was Mabel who committed the foul," declared Betty indignantly. "She very nearly made Kay miss the basket."

"How dare you say such a thing?" demanded the girl coldly. "I didn't step on Kay Tracey's foot. She kicked

my ankle.”

“Girls,” said Miss Kingston firmly, “we will have no squabbling. The game is over.”

“Does that last basket count?” Mabel asked angrily.

“Certainly, if the referee says so,” replied the coach. “And I should like to see you in my office as soon as you shall have dressed, Miss Gold. Will you come now, Miss Tracey, and let me look at your foot.”

The guard left the floor looking decidedly crestfallen. Kay limped along after Miss Kingston. A first aid treatment relieved the injured foot at once. Thanking the coach, the Tracey girl joined her teammates.

She found them worrying that the unpleasant incident might have prejudiced the other Franklin players against them, but no one save Mabel seemed to begrudge Carmont the victory. While the girls were dressing, Sally Burns came to tell them that they were all invited to a party to be held in the gymnasium.

“I’m afraid I may not be able to stay,” Kay said regretfully. “I have another call to make while I am here at Fremont.”

“Where are you going?” Betty asked bluntly after Sally had moved on to speak to the other visitors.

“Perhaps to the Moleson Mansion,” said Kay, smiling broadly.

“Did you say *Moleson*?” echoed Betty in astonishment.

“The Montgomery Molesons,” Kay Tracey added quite impressively. “I was talking with Sally a while ago and she told me several interesting things.”

After relating all the facts she had gleaned, Kay was delighted to see that Wilma and Betty were eager to visit the mansion. They too believed that Mrs. Montgomery Moleson might be the mother of Monty the tramp.

“Think how wonderful it would be to re-unite them,” Kay said dreamily. “Mrs. Moleson believes her son to be dead.”

“And perhaps it’s just as well that she does,” commented Betty doubtfully. “Monty the Mole might prove something of a shock to her. I can’t imagine anyone wishing to acknowledge him as a son.”

“He might look better when he’s washed and dressed up,” Kay declared. “I can’t believe he’s really bad at heart. Anyway, I think we should go out there and talk with Mrs. Moleson.”

The Worth twins were eager to make the trip. They consulted their teammates and learned that they wished to stay for the party. Kay promised to stop at the school for them on the return to Carmont but was told that it would not be necessary. One of the girls knew a Franklin student who had promised to drive them to Brantwood later that afternoon.

Kay and the twins said good-bye to their new acquaintances and sought to follow Acorn Drive until they reached the

Moleson mansion. As Sally had stated, the massive house was not attractive from the exterior. It had been built forty years or more ago when towers and cupolas were in vogue. The dwelling had not been painted for a long time and the shrubbery had grown out of bounds.

As Kay swung into the driveway, she observed that another car was standing on the gravel not far from the front entrance. The girls alighted and rang the bell.

In a few minutes the door was opened by a maid. She shook her head when Kay inquired if it would be possible for her to see Mrs. Moleson.

“Oh, no, Miss,” the girl replied gravely. “She is too ill to see anyone. The doctor is with her now.”

Kay started to turn away, and then was struck with another thought.

“You say the doctor is here?” she asked. “Would it be possible for me to talk with him?”

“Why yes, if your business is important,” the servant answered after a slight hesitation. “Come inside and I will call Doctor Evans.”

The maid led the girls down a long, gloomy hallway. As they passed several open doorways, Kay caught a glimpse of the luxurious interiors. The library itself was a pleasant room. The walls were lined with books, while over the fireplace hung a large portrait which caused the girls to stare in awe at it. Their inspection was a brief one, for the

servant soon returned, followed by Doctor Evans.

“You wish to talk with me?” the young physician inquired politely.

Kay waited until the maid had withdrawn, then introduced herself and her chums, telling how they happened to be in Fremont.

“I should like to inquire as to Mrs. Moleson’s condition,” she said.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything very encouraging,” returned the doctor gravely. “You probably know that she suffers from a heart ailment.”

“Is she expected to live?” Kay questioned anxiously.

The physician smiled. “I never give up hope for any patient. Mrs. Moleson is seriously ill and her condition is aggravated by the fact that she doesn’t care to live. Her husband passed away some years ago and her only child, a son, is dead, too.”

“That is why I wished to talk with you,” Kay said quietly. “I have every reason to believe that Mrs. Moleson’s son still lives!”

“Oh, you must be mistaken. He died—let me see—it must have been nearly three years ago. Anyway, before I came to Fremont to take over the practice of old Doctor Wendell, who died. He used to attend Mrs. Moleson, you know.”

“Was there proof of the son’s death?”

“As I recall the story, Monty Moleson lost his life in Africa,” the doctor said slowly. “I am not certain of the details. I doubt that Mrs. Moleson ever learned them herself although she tried for months to gain some definite information.”

“If it could be proven that Monty Moleson is still alive would the news be a great shock to Mrs. Moleson?”

“That I cannot say,” the doctor replied, frowning. “But if the man lives, it is our duty first of all to find him and bring him here. You see, Mrs. Moleson has no close relatives to whom to leave her fortune.”

“If the son could be located he would inherit everything?”

“I’m sure Mrs. Moleson would wish to change her will in his favor. But why do you believe that Monty is still alive?”

Kay related the adventure which she and Betty had experienced in the woods. Doctor Evans seemed impressed by the story.

“I believe the man may be Mrs. Moleson’s son!” he exclaimed. “You must find him at once and bring him to me. I will talk with him and if he proves to be the real Monty Moleson, we will try to break the news gently to his mother.”

“I rather dread going back to that gloomy old mine tonight,” Kay admitted. “I think I’ll return to Brantwood and ask my Cousin Bill to make the trip with me.”

“Cousin Bill?” the doctor repeated. “You don’t mean Bill Tracey?”

“Yes, he is my cousin.”

“Why, I know him well.”

The doctor told of several fishing trips on which he and the young lawyer had been guests. Then reverting to the original subject he said:

“There is no need for you to make the long trip back to Brantwood. If you like I can arrange for you to stay here tonight.”

“You mean in this house?” Kay stammered.

“Yes, I can manage it easily.”

“We’d like to remain,” Kay answered slowly, “only I thought I’d ask Cousin Bill to go with me to the mine.”

“I might act as substitute,” smiled the doctor. “To tell you the truth, I’m eager to talk with the fellow. You’ve aroused my curiosity.”

Kay and the twins were delighted with the physician’s plan because it would give them an opportunity to see the many fine portraits in the Moleson home. Upon telephoning their parents and explaining matters, they received permission to stay at the mansion over night.

Early the next morning the party set out for the locality

where Monty the Mole last had been seen. Doctor Evans drove the girls there in his car, following Kay's directions to the spot. Parking the automobile along a side road, the four set forth through the woods.

"From what you have told me, Monty seems to be an eccentric character," the doctor commented as they drew near the mine entrance.

"Yes," Kay acknowledged, "I think it might be wise to move cautiously. He may not realize that we are friends."

"You're quite right," agreed the doctor.

Kay led the way down the steep path. Drawing close to the opening in the rock, she paused a moment to listen. She could hear no sound from within the hole.

"Wait here," she whispered to the others. "I'll creep along the ledge and look inside."

CHAPTER V

A DEFINITE CLUE

Before Doctor Evans or the Worth twins could urge Kay to be careful, the girl had daringly thrust her head and shoulders into the dark opening. She could see nothing for a moment. A small, shadowy figure suddenly whisked past her, its soft fur brushing her legs.

“O-oh!” Kay squealed, cringing back against the wall. “What was that?”

“A fox,” laughed Doctor Evans who had seen the animal scurry from the hole.

Recovering her courage, Kay moved deeper into the mine tunnel.

“Monty doesn’t seem to be here,” she reported. “I’m afraid he’s gone off somewhere.”

“He has eaten up all the food or else taken it with him,” Wilma added, looking about. “Probably he’ll not be back. If that isn’t just our luck!”

Doctor Evans made no comment and the girls were afraid he might believe that they had led him on a wild chase.

“Monty can’t have gone very far away for he has no means of transportation,” Kay declared after they had searched the tunnel thoroughly. “Perhaps he’s down by the spring.”

“Let’s go there,” urged Betty.

The young physician glanced anxiously at his watch as he followed the girls along the steep trail. The trip had taken longer than had been expected. Now that they had failed to find the tramp, he was eager to return to his practice. While he did not doubt Kay’s sincerity, he felt that very likely she had been mistaken in believing the man to be Monty Moleson. At the spring there was no sign of the man.

“We may as well drive back to Fremont,” the doctor suggested. “Perhaps the police can help us locate this Moleson.”

Kay did not like to admit failure. Far below she caught sight of two fishermen busily whipping the stream for trout. Eagerly she pointed them out.

“Perhaps those men noticed which way Monty went,” she said. “If you can spare a few more minutes I’ll run down there and ask.”

“We may as well all go,” agreed the doctor after a slight hesitation. “It won’t take very long.”

The two fishermen waded toward shore as the party paused on the bank of the stream.

“I beg your pardon,” said Kay, “but has either of you noticed a man walking along here?”

One of the fishermen shook his head. The other spoke quickly. “I remember seeing a ragged looking fellow up there by the spring only a short while ago.”

38

“Did you notice which way he went when he left?” asked Kay eagerly.

“I think he walked down to the railroad bridge. He stopped to eat his lunch. After that I lost sight of him.”

Kay thanked the man for the important clue, and with the doctor and her chums hastened on toward the railroad right-of-way which ran through the valley between dense groves of trees. Doctor Evans’s interest in the search had revived and he said nothing more about returning to Fremont just then.

“There’s no one standing on the bridge now,” Betty observed in disappointment as they gained their first clear view of the structure.

“Monty must be somewhere close by,” Kay said hopefully.

The group went on to the bridge. Wilma peered over the railing to make certain that Monty was not hidden from view beneath the trestle.

“Here’s a clue!” cried Kay from the other side of the bridge.

She indicated crumbs of food lying on the flooring.

“Monty ate his meal here all right!”

“How can you tell the man was the one we are after?” questioned Doctor Evans doubtfully. “Some other person may have passed this way.”

“These look like chocolate cracker crumbs,” Kay pointed out. “We had some in our lunch baskets.”

39

“Perhaps he’s back in the woods somewhere,” Betty ventured, turning to gaze toward the fringe of trees.

“To find him there would be like looking for a needle in a haystack,” declared Wilma.

“I’m really afraid we’ll have to give up the search,” said the doctor regretfully. “I don’t like to be away from a telephone very long at a time. Mrs. Moleson might take a sudden turn for the worse.”

“We may as well go back,” Kay agreed in a discouraged voice.

They crossed the trestle and started down the tracks. Just then the arm of a block signal dropped to give warning of an approaching train. From around the bend there came a long, slow-moving freight. Doctor Evans and the girls stepped aside, waiting for the cars to pass.

“That ancient engine hardly has power to pull such a heavy load,” remarked Wilma.

In approaching the trestle, the train slowed down even more.

The engineer leaned from his cab and waved to the girls. Then he turned his head quickly and blew the whistle.

Kay and her companions were startled to see that a man had darted from the woods directly across the tracks. He stood waiting by the bridge.

“Why, there is Monty now!” cried Betty.

“He intends to hop that freight!” exclaimed Kay.

40

The girls ran down the right-of-way, shouting to the tramp. The rumble of the train drowned out their words but the man saw them coming toward him. Recognizing Kay as the one who had pursued him, he assumed that she intended to make trouble because of the stolen pocketbooks.

Monty’s face became convulsed with rage. He swung aboard the creeping train, then, clinging with one hand to the iron, shook a fist at the girls. The freight thundered over the trestle and picked up speed.

“We’ve lost him,” murmured Kay in disappointment. “I wonder if the train stops at the next station?”

“I’d judge not,” answered the doctor. “It was a through freight. Probably the first stop will be at Circle City twenty miles away.”

“How close is the nearest station?”

“About six miles. A little place called Alton.”

“Let’s drive there if you can spare the time, Doctor,” urged Kay. “We could ask the station agent to telephone at once to Circle City where railroad officials might capture Monty as soon as the freight pulls in.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” approved the young physician. “We’ll drive straight to Alton.”

The four retraced their way to the car. Doctor Evans made all possible speed to the nearby station, where he aided the girls in making a full report of the incident to the railroad agent.

41

“We could ask that the man be held on a charge of theft,” Kay said, “but it is not our desire to prosecute him. We wish to have him questioned as to his identity.”

“I assure you that the matter is of the greatest importance,” urged the doctor.

“I’ll call the Circle City station immediately,” the agent promised. He went to his desk and picked up the phone.

“Railroad officials will be on the lookout for the man,” he assured Kay and her friends. “But you should drive to Circle City and identify him.”

Kay glanced questioningly at Doctor Evans.

“I’m not sure that I dare spare the time,” he said slowly. “I believe I’ll call my office and also the Moleson residence.”

Kay and the twins sat down to wait. In a very few minutes

Doctor Evans reappeared, and they knew at once by the look on his face that something had gone wrong.

“Is Mrs. Moleson worse?” Kay asked.

“Yes, the nurse tells me she is very low. She took a bad turn shortly after I left.”

“Then it is more important than ever that we find her son.”

“Yes, but I can’t spare another minute for the search. I must return at once.”

“I’ll be glad to stay here and continue the hunt,” Kay announced, making a quick decision.

42

“But you haven’t your car. I can’t leave you girls stranded here.”

“We’ll find some way to reach Circle City,” Kay said confidently. “Please don’t worry about us at all. Just hurry as fast as you can to Mrs. Moleson.”

43

CHAPTER VI

AN ENGAGEMENT RING

The doctor did not try to have Kay give up her purpose. He said good-bye, sprang into his car, and drove away.

“Just how do you propose reaching Circle City?” Betty demanded when the girls were alone on the station platform. “We haven’t enough money to hire a taxi. And if we should succeed in getting there we still would have no way to get back.”

“Perhaps I acted hastily,” Kay admitted, “but I couldn’t bear to lose contact with that fellow after we had gone to so much trouble. Anyway, I have an idea.”

She asked the obliging station agent if she might use his telephone. Receiving permission to do so, she called her home in Brantwood. First she held a lengthy conversation with her mother, who then connected her with Bill Tracey. The young lawyer, who was not particularly busy at the time, promptly agreed that he would drive over to Alton for the girls.

“Come as quickly as you can,” Kay urged. “I’m not sure how long the authorities will hold Monty Moleson.”

While the girls were waiting they wandered across the

street to a lunch room. Getting into conversation with the woman who owned it, Kay learned Monty was thought to be strange. Presently Kay saw her cousin's car swing into view and the girls rushed out to meet him.

“Now tell me what this is all about,” said Cousin Bill as he helped them into the automobile. “Why so much excitement about an ordinary tramp?”

“He's not an ordinary one at all,” Kay declared. “Cousin Bill, we have evidence that the man is the lost son of Mrs. Montgomery Moleson. She probably hasn't long to live, and that's why it's so important to locate him.”

“Well, I thought you probably had a pretty good reason,” said the young lawyer. “We'll drive on to Circle City and talk with the fellow.”

“Cousin Bill, did you ever chance to hear that young Monty Moleson had seriously broken the law?” Kay inquired as the car sped along.

“I don't remember any particular case, Kay. Of course, I'm familiar with the Moleson name. If I remember correctly, the elder Mr. Moleson once brought back half a million dollars worth of paintings from Europe.”

“We saw some of them,” Betty said in awe, “but we never dreamed they were so valuable.”

“Newspaper reports may have exaggerated their worth,” returned the young lawyer. “But I recall there was one particular portrait——”

“Cousin Bill,” interrupted Kay, touching her relative’s arm lightly, “that car ahead seems to be stalled at the side of the road.”

A large sleek convertible was parked just ahead. A slim girl in a white sports frock had alighted and was waving her brightly colored scarf. Bill Tracey slammed on the brakes and brought his own car to a standstill.

“Anything wrong?” he inquired.

“I’ve run out of gas,” the girl said, coming over to the car. “I wonder if you could help me out?”

“Why yes, if you have a siphon,” the lawyer answered.

“Oh, dear, I’m afraid I haven’t.”

“Then probably the best thing for you to do is ride along with us to the nearest gasoline station. The attendant can drive you back.”

“Thank you,” smiled the girl, “I guess that’s what I’ll do. It was stupid of me to neglect buying gas when I started for the golf course.”

Kay and the twins made room for the girl, observing that she wore her clothes well and was rather striking in appearance. Her age was difficult to guess but they judged that she must be in her late twenties.

“Do you enjoy golf?” Kay asked politely as the car moved down the road.

“Oh, it’s a pleasant way to kill time,” the young woman replied with a shrug. “I live an entirely useless life, since my fiance died.”

As she spoke, she glanced down at a curious ring which she wore on her finger. It was not a diamond, Kay observed. Several green stones were set between intertwining strands of white gold. 46

The Tracey girl longed to learn the history of the ring, but felt she had no right to pry into the stranger’s private affairs. It would not do to re-open old wounds. Undoubtedly the young woman had been heartbroken by the death of her sweetheart and had never recovered fully from the shock. To bridge over an awkward silence which fell upon the group, Wilma mentioned that they were on their way to Circle City.

“Do you live there?” inquired the girl.

“Oh, no, our homes are in Brantwood,” Wilma responded. “We took part in a basketball game at Fremont and then drove on to the Moleson place.”

Wilma might have related more than would have been discreet, had she not observed a queer expression upon the girl’s face. Kay too saw the look and said casually:

“You don’t by any chance know Mrs. Montgomery Moleson?”

“Yes, I am very well acquainted with her,” replied the young woman in a strained voice. She hesitated, then added, “You see, I was engaged to marry her son.”

“Monty?” Kay asked in astonishment.

“Yes, that was several years ago, before he lost his life in Africa. He gave me this lovely ring and I have worn it always.”

47

The girl removed the band from her finger and held it out to Wilma.

“I have never seen another like it,” she continued. “Monty bought it for me somewhere abroad. In Italy, I believe.”

Wilma examined the ring and passed it to Kay, who in turn handed it to Betty.

“It may not be an especially valuable piece of jewelry,” the girl declared, “but the design is unique. And I treasure it particularly since it was Monty’s last gift to me.”

Wilma and Betty met Kay’s gaze. They were all wondering what the young woman would say should they tell her they had good reason to believe Montgomery Moleson still lived.

“We’re coming to a gasoline station at last,” commented Cousin Bill.

Kay and the twins were sorry to part with their new acquaintance so soon. There were many questions which they wished to ask.

“Thank you very much for the ride,” said their passenger as the car swung into the station driveway. “Oh, yes, and may I have my ring?”

“Why, I’m sure I handed it to you,” gasped Betty. “You were talking at the time.”

The young woman looked troubled. “I don’t seem to remember anything about it. I haven’t it now.”

“The ring must be somewhere in the car,” declared Wilma. “Let’s look on the floor.”

48

She searched carefully, even removing the carpet. The ring was not there. By this time Cousin Bill had stopped the car and now joined in the search.

“Oh, dear, I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose that ring,” the young woman murmured nervously.

“It’s all my fault,” said Betty self-accusingly.

“No, I seem to remember now that you did hand it to me. But I must have allowed it to slip from my fingers.”

“It should be here, though,” said Wilma. “I don’t see where it could have gone.”

For ten minutes the search continued until every inch of the car had been covered.

“I am afraid it is lost for good,” said the young woman. “How careless of me to have removed it from my finger.”

“I feel that I’m to blame,” Betty said sadly. “I can’t help but believe the ring will be found somewhere in the car.”

“Let me take your name and address,” suggested Kay who had been strangely silent during the search. “If the ring should turn up I’ll send it to you. I can almost promise that we’ll find it.”

“My name is Patricia Robbin. I’ll give you my card. Oh, I do hope the ring will be recovered for it means so much to me.”

Realizing that she was delaying the departure of her new acquaintances, the young woman thanked them again for the ride and left the car.

49

“Do you suppose Miss Robbin blamed me for the loss of the ring?” Betty asked uneasily when they were enroute to Circle City once more.

“I’m sure she didn’t,” replied Kay. “I’m the one who deserves the blame.”

“You?” demanded Betty in astonishment.

“I saw her take the ring from you,” Kay explained. “But she very absently allowed it to slip from her hand to the car seat.”

“And then what became of it?” asked Wilma.

“At the moment it’s reposing in my pocket!”

“Why, Kay Tracey!”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” laughed Kay uneasily. “I’m not in the habit of stealing rings. I kept it for a special purpose and I intend to return it to her—probably tomorrow.”

“Is that why you asked for her name and address?” questioned Betty.

“Of course. I became interested in her the moment she mentioned that Monty Moleson had given her the ring.”

“Imagine a fine young woman like Patricia Robbin being engaged to a person like him,” sighed Wilma.

“He wasn’t this way when she knew him,” Kay said quickly. “The man belongs to a good family and I believe under the right influence he might straighten out.”

“You’re not hoping to bring the two together again!” Betty gasped.

50

“I’ve not thought that far ahead,” answered Kay, smiling because her chums were so shocked at the idea. “But I am planning to show this ring to Monty. I believe that the sight of it may call up old memories in his mind and start him once more on the right road!”

51

CHAPTER VII

FRIENDLY INTERFERENCE

From the front seat of the car Bill Tracey had listened to the conversation regarding Miss Robbin's ring.

"What do you think of my plan, Cousin Bill?" Kay asked him as Wilma and Betty fell silent.

"It may work out," the young lawyer answered thoughtfully. "I should say everything depends upon Monty Moleson's character. I've not met the fellow."

"I think it will take more than a mere ring to bring him to his senses," declared Betty with a firm nod of her blond head. "Anyway, he's not half good enough for a girl like Miss Robbin."

"Not in his present state, that's certain," Kay agreed. "But don't you think he will improve?"

"A leopard can't change its spots," commented Cousin Bill dryly.

"Miss Robbin has built up a certain picture in her mind of Monty," declared Wilma. "It may not be easy for her to think of him in any other way. Don't you recall the poem which

begins:

““When we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years,
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss;
Truly that hour foretold
Sorrow to this.’”

52

“Perhaps I am wrong in hoping to reunite the couple,” Kay admitted slowly. “But everything could work out so beautifully. Monty might inherit his mother’s property and use part of it to pay his debts and reimburse the partner whom he defrauded. Then he could marry Miss Robbin——”

“And live happily ever after, as they say in the fairy tales,” finished Cousin Bill. “Kay, aren’t you getting a little ahead of yourself?”

“I suppose it sounds fantastic,” Kay sighed. “But how lovely it might be!”

Already she was sorry that she had kept Miss Robbin’s ring. At the moment it had seemed to her like a good idea, but now she began to realize that she might make a mistake in trying to reunite Monty and the young woman.

Soon the girls saw the tall water tower of Circle City looming up in the distance. Cousin Bill drove directly to the railroad station.

“I’ll ask the station agent what they have done with Monty,” Kay said eagerly. “I hope they haven’t taken him to jail.”

She ran into the depot and quickly introduced herself to the elderly man at the ticket window.

53

“I am Kay Tracey,” she said. “You received the message I sent from the Alton station?”

“Yes, Number 17 was searched as you requested, but we didn’t find anyone.”

“No one at all?”

The agent shook his head.

“The man was on the train,” Kay insisted. “Did it make a stop anywhere between here and Alton?”

“No. But the train pulled up for a few minutes at a water tank.”

“The fellow might have jumped off before the cars were inspected,” Kay said in disappointment. “That’s probably what happened.”

She went back to the car to report the news. Cousin Bill felt a trifle annoyed because he had wasted so much time.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Kay apologized. “I didn’t dream the officials would fail to catch the man. Monty must have known we were after him.”

“He may be lurking around Circle City somewhere,” Bill Tracey declared in a more cheerful tone. “But we haven’t time to try to trace him. Why not go to the police?”

“I guess that’s about all we can do now,” Kay admitted.

At the Circle City police station she gave the officer in charge of the desk a complete description of the missing man. Not wishing to reveal her real purpose in seeking him, she reported that Monty had attempted to steal money from the members of her party.

54

“We’ll find the fellow if he is still in Circle City,” the officer promised.

Everyone was rather quiet during the ride back to the Moleson home on Acorn Drive. Kay knew that she had put her good-natured relative to a great deal of trouble, and apparently for no purpose. Then too she was deeply worried about Mrs. Moleson’s condition. What if the woman had died? In that case, her property undoubtedly would go to some distant relative or a friend.

“Who is the woman’s lawyer?” questioned Cousin Bill.

“I heard Doctor Evans say her affairs are handled by a man named Blanchard,” Wilma Worth contributed. “From his tone I gathered he doesn’t regard the person very highly.”

“I’m not surprised,” replied Cousin Bill.

“Do you know Blanchard?” Kay asked in astonishment.

“Only by reputation. He is a capable lawyer but a shrewd one. He’s not above handling a case to his own best interests.”

When the young people arrived at the Moleson home they noticed Doctor Evans just driving away. He pulled up at the side of the road to talk with them for a few minutes.

“How is Mrs. Moleson?” Kay inquired in an anxious tone.

55

“I gave her a heart stimulant and she rallied,” the doctor responded gravely. “At the present time she is resting easily.”

“Oh, I’m relieved to hear that,” murmured Kay.

Cousin Bill and the physician chatted for a few minutes, renewing their friendship. The latter questioned the girls as to their success in tracing Monty. Kay confessed her failure.

“I have been thinking over the matter,” said the doctor. “It seems to me that it will be best to tell Mrs. Moleson at once that her son lives. If we wait until we have absolute proof, it may be too late.”

“Will it be possible to talk with her now?” asked Kay hopefully.

“Yes, if she is not sleeping. I will go with you.”

The young man escorted the party into the house. He went upstairs alone, sending the nurse down to report that Mrs. Moleson was awake and would see the visitors.

Kay glanced curiously at Miss Killman, who was a thin, middle-aged woman with a sharp, hard face. The nurse in turn regarded the newcomers somewhat suspiciously. It was apparent that she did not approve of their presence in the house.

“The doctor says you may come up,” she said crossly. “But I think so many persons will excite her.”

“Betty and I will stay here,” Wilma said quickly.

56

Cousin Bill and Kay followed the nurse up a circular stairway to a second story bedroom. They entered quietly, feeling decidedly ill at ease.

“I have told Mrs. Moleson why you are here,” said Doctor Evans quietly.

“You have news of my son—of Monty,” the invalid murmured, turning her head on the pillow. “All these years I have believed him dead. Is it possible that at last my prayers are to be answered?”

“I have reason to believe that your son is alive, and I hope to bring him to you,” said Kay gently.

“When may I see him?” the old lady pleaded. “Today? I feel that my time here on earth is so short. If I should have another attack——”

“Now don’t think of that,” put in the doctor cheerfully.

“It may be several days before I can bring your son here,”

Kay said.

“There is one thing which I must do at once,” declared Mrs. Moleson. “I must change my will in favor of Monty.”

“You should certainly do that if you have failed to name your son as an heir,” Bill Tracey said quickly. “One cannot be too careful about such matters.”

“I have left everything in the hands of my lawyer, Mr. Blanchard. He is a very capable man.”

“Your son’s name was not mentioned in the will?”

57

“No, I left him nothing because I believed him to be dead. Oh, I think as a matter of legal formality Mr. Blanchard wrote in something about a bequest of one dollar.”

Cousin Bill and Kay exchanged quick glances.

“That makes the situation more awkward,” said the young lawyer. “If you have failed to leave your son anything, legally he might claim a share of the estate upon your death. But your bequest of one dollar would cut him off entirely.”

“Dear me, I left everything to Mr. Blanchard,” murmured Mrs. Moleson uneasily. “I was very weak and tired when he brought me the will to sign. I read only parts of it.”

“One should never sign a paper without reading every word of it,” declared Kay’s cousin. “I should like to suggest that you ask your lawyer for the will immediately. It is in his possession, I suppose?”

“He has one copy and I the other. Oh, I realize now that I acted very unwisely. I must read the will at once while I have the strength to do so.”

“I’ll be glad to read it to you if I may be of service,” Kay offered.

“The will is in the lower drawer of the desk,” Mrs. Moleson replied, pointing to a secretary in the far corner of the room.

The Tracey girl had no difficulty in finding the paper. She drew up a chair close to the bed, and with Cousin Bill and the doctor near by, read the contents in a clear voice.

58

“My mind is very confused by the legal terms,” Mrs. Moleson complained when the girl finished. “Tell me what it all means.”

“It means you leave fifty thousand dollars to the Westhaven Home for the aged, a similar amount to the Fremont Art Institute, and the remainder of your fortune to Mr. Blanchard.”

“Oh, that can’t be right,” the old lady protested. “My fine portraits are to be given to the Art Institute if Monty is not alive to claim them. I left Mr. Blanchard only five hundred dollars.”

“According to this will he is to receive the paintings,” Kay said.

“I never intended anything of the kind. And I care nothing about the Westhaven Home for the aged. That is Mr.

Blanchard's favorite charity." Mrs. Moleson spoke with increasing excitement.

"Now don't become distressed," put in the doctor soothingly. "Everything can be settled as you wish."

"Certainly," agreed Mr. Tracey. "I suggest that you destroy this will and have another drawn up."

"Yes, that is just what I shall do. Please send for Mr. Blanchard at once. Now I will try to rest until he comes."

Doctor Evans, Kay, and Cousin Bill quietly withdrew to the living room, where they put in a call for Mr. Blanchard.

59

"Please come at once," Kay told the man over the telephone. "Mrs. Moleson is asking for you, as she has decided to change her will."

There was a long silence. Then the lawyer asked in a surly tone, "Did Mrs. Moleson make the request herself?"

"She did."

"Then someone has been putting ideas in her head!"

"Please hurry as fast as you can," Kay urged coldly.

However, Mr. Blanchard did not come. Half an hour went by, then another. Mrs. Moleson kept asking for him, as the others tried to soothe her. Another half hour went by!

CHAPTER VIII

A NEW WILL

Mr. Blanchard did not arrive at the Moleson mansion for nearly two hours and a half. A maid escorted the short, dapper little man with the cunning eyes into the living room.

“I am at a loss to understand the meaning of the telephone call I received,” he said with thinly veiled anger after he had been introduced to the visitors from Brantwood. “I feel that it would be dangerous to trouble Mrs. Moleson at this time _____”

“It is her wish that the will be changed at once,” Kay spoke up.

Mr. Blanchard’s face flushed a rosy pink.

“I know Doctor Evans will agree with me,” he said, “that my client must not be annoyed with business cares at this time. If you insist upon exciting her, then you alone may be responsible for her death.”

“I think you are not stating the case fairly,” responded Doctor Evans. “In my opinion, Mrs. Moleson will be unable to relax until this matter has been settled to her satisfaction.”

Kay and Cousin Bill remained below with the Worth twins while the doctor accompanied Mr. Blanchard upstairs. The interview lasted several minutes, at the end of which the lawyer stormed from the bedroom.

“I’ll have nothing further to do with the case,” he said angrily. “Mrs. Moleson is out of her mind, or she wouldn’t want to change her will now.”

When Kay and her cousin joined the doctor upstairs they learned that Mr. Blanchard had not given up the case of his own free will. Mrs. Moleson had dismissed him because of his refusal to do her bidding.

Before leaving the house the dismissed lawyer called the nurse aside. In his excitement he spoke louder than he intended, so that Wilma and Betty heard the words:

“If the old lady makes a new will our goose is cooked! Use your influence to keep her from doing it. And try to get that Tracey girl and her lawyer cousin out of the house.”

“I’ll do my best,” the woman promised.

The twins did not let on that they had heard him, but they quickly went upstairs to Mrs. Moleson’s room. At the first opportunity they would tell Kay what they had learned.

They found the invalid fretfully moving her fingers on the pillow.

“Where is Miss Killman?” she asked peevishly. “When I want her she is never here.”

“She went downstairs for a moment,” Kay said kindly.
“I’ll be glad to do anything I can for you.”

“Please bring me a drink of water,” requested the old lady.
“Dear me, I’m so upset. Now that I’ve dismissed Mr. Blanchard I have no lawyer. Perhaps I could use my first will.”

“Have you made more than one?” questioned Bill Tracey.

“Yes, I had one drawn up years ago, long before my son disappeared. I left all my property with the exception of a few bequests to charity. That is the way I should like to have it stand now.”

“What became of the document?” inquired Cousin Bill.

“That’s the trouble—I can’t remember,” frowned Mrs. Moleson. “I hid it somewhere. It seems to me I put it in a trunk in the attic. No! It must have been in a bureau drawer. Oh, dear, why is my mind so dazed?”

“We’ll be glad to search for the will if you wish,” said Betty eagerly.

“Please do,” Mrs. Moleson murmured. “I think it must be somewhere in the attic.”

Kay gave the old lady a drink of water. When Miss Killman returned, she and the twins hastened to the third floor storeroom. As they searched through old chests, bureaus and trunks, Wilma and Betty related the conversation they had overheard between the nurse and Mr. Blanchard.

“I distrusted Miss Killman from the first,” Kay declared. “Undoubtedly she’s plotting with Blanchard to gain the bulk of Mrs. Moleson’s fortune.”

“I hope we can find the other will,” said Betty. “But where could it have been hidden?”

“Mrs. Moleson may have destroyed it and forgotten about it,” Wilma commented. “We’ve covered practically every inch of this attic.”

“Here are some old papers in the pocket of this suitcase,” Kay said. “I’ll look them over.”

A moment later she gave a cry of delight.

“Here it is!” she exclaimed triumphantly.

The girls carried the document down to Mrs. Moleson’s bedroom. They were surprised to find Cousin Bill standing just outside the door. He explained that Doctor Evans had gone and that the nurse had requested him to leave because he was exciting the patient.

“That wasn’t the real reason she sent you away,” Kay said significantly. “Betty and Wilma just learned that Mr. Blanchard and Miss Killman are working together to gain Mrs. Moleson’s fortune.”

She repeated the entire conversation.

“You’d better not tell Mrs. Moleson what you’ve learned,” Cousin Bill advised grimly, “at least not yet,” he added.

“She’s had quite enough to bear in one day.”

Kay tapped lightly on the bedroom door. Miss Killman opened it only halfway.

“You can’t come in now,” she said sternly.

“It is very important. We have found the papers Mrs. Moleson wants.”

“My patient has had far too much excitement already. You must go away.”

“Let them come in,” called Mrs. Moleson weakly.

“But Mrs. Moleson—” protested the nurse.

“Let them come in, I say.”

Unwillingly the nurse moved aside, allowing Cousin Bill and the girls to enter. They drew up chairs by the bedside and Kay read the contents of the will.

“Yes, that is as I wish it,” murmured Mrs. Moleson. “Only I’d like to give my old servant Hodges, who has gone back to England, a bequest of a thousand dollars. Everything else will go to my son providing he claims the fortune within the next three years.”

“If you wish I’ll draw up a new will along these lines,” Cousin Bill offered. “I can have it ready for your signature in a very few minutes.”

“I don’t like to interfere,” interrupted Miss Killman severely, “but Mrs. Moleson cannot undergo any more excitement today. The will must wait.”

“Fiddlesticks!” snapped the old lady. “I’m feeling stronger now than I have in weeks. I’ll not rest until the will is signed.”

“You are too determined for your own good, Mrs. Moleson. I am in charge here——”

“You’ve thwarted me ever since you came into this house,” the old lady said with surprising spirit. “When I need you you’re always out, and when I don’t want you, here you are. I wish you’d pack up your things and leave.”

65

Kay and the twins felt like cheering, so great was their joy. Miss Killman did not take her dismissal meekly, saying she had really been engaged by Mr. Blanchard.

“What will you do without a nurse?” she asked in a cunning tone. “You can’t take care of yourself.”

“I’ll stay with Mrs. Moleson until a new nurse comes on the case,” Kay said quickly. “Mother can send me some clothes from home.”

“And we’ll remain too,” offered Betty, speaking for her sister as well.

In the end Miss Killman packed her suitcase and left the house. Kay immediately notified Doctor Evans, who promised he would engage another nurse immediately.

The girls made the patient as comfortable as possible. She slept for half an hour. When she awakened, Bill Tracey had the new will ready for her signature.

“There, that’s a great load off my mind,” sighed Mrs. Moleson. “Now, if I only could see my son once more I could die with no feeling of regret at having to leave this world.”

“You’ll not die,” declared Kay cheerfully. “You seem stronger already.”

“I do feel much better,” the woman admitted.

66

Cousin Bill decided he should return to Brantwood at once as business matters required his presence there. He promised to return the following day, bringing the girls many articles which they would need.

With the young man gone, Kay and the twins were a little uneasy over their responsibilities. They knew that should the patient take a turn for the worse while there was no nurse on duty, they might be severely criticised.

“Yet it was Mrs. Moleson herself who dismissed Miss Killman,” Betty declared. “We had very little to do with it.”

“Did Doctor Evans tell you the name of the new nurse?” Wilma asked Kay.

“Yes, she is Miss Carter, and is coming on the bus. Probably she won’t get here until late this evening.”

It was after ten o’clock when the doorbell rang sharply. Kay

answered it herself. A young woman carrying a suitcase half stumbled into the hallway.

“Is this the Moleson residence?” the young woman gasped.

“Yes. Are you Miss Carter?”

The nurse nodded. “Excuse me for being so short of breath, but I’ve been running.”

“Running?” Kay inquired in surprise.

“A man frightened me. As I was coming up the street from the bus stop, a fellow suddenly stepped out from behind the bushes. I thought he meant to hold me up, so I ran.”

67

“I don’t wonder you were frightened. Where did you see the man?”

“He was hidden behind the shrubs down by the estate entrance.”

Kay crossed over to a window and looked out. The grounds were deserted.

“He’s not there now,” said the nurse. “I heard him run off.”

“Then I guess he couldn’t have been a hold-up man,” Kay remarked in relief. “Yet it’s queer anyone should be prowling around here at night.”

“It was foolish of me to run. I’m quite myself now. If you’ll

show me upstairs I'll take over my duties.”

Miss Carter proved to be thoroughly efficient. She assured the girls that she would look after Mrs. Moleson during the night, and urged them to get some rest. Wilma, Betty and Kay were glad to give up their duties for they were very tired. They went to the large bedroom they were sharing which overlooked the garden.

All three were fast asleep almost as soon as their heads touched the pillows. Kay, in spite of her great weariness, did not rest well. The chiming of a clock presently aroused her. She counted the strokes; it was midnight.

Suddenly she became aware of a sound outside the house. She could hear the soft pad-pad of footsteps under the window. Quietly the curious girl crept out of bed, pulled aside the heavy curtain, and peered below. She could see no one.

68

“Either the person is gone or I imagined I heard someone,” she thought.

After standing for a moment at the window, Kay tiptoed back toward the bed. She was brought up short by a loud, shrill cry. The sound seemed to come from the direction of the kitchen.

“Now what has happened?” she thought in alarm.

Darting to the bed, she shook Wilma and Betty vigorously.

69

CHAPTER IX

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

“What is it?” Betty mumbled drowsily. She burrowed deeper into the covers.

“Wake up!” Kay commanded, giving her another shake. “I just heard someone scream. We must go downstairs and find out what is wrong.”

“Maybe you were having a nightmare,” mumbled Wilma, trying to arouse herself.

“I heard a woman scream,” Kay repeated firmly. “Stay here if you like, but I’m going down.”

By this time the twins were fully awake. They sprang from bed and were close behind Kay as she tiptoed down the hall.

“You’re sure you didn’t imagine it?” Betty asked skeptically.

Kay did not answer. Leading the way down the back stairs, she opened the kitchen door and all but stumbled over a figure lying at her feet.

“Who is it?” she gasped, and reached for the electric switch.

Instantly the kitchen was flooded with light. The girls were horrified to see Miss Carter lying in a heap near the foot of the stairs.

“Why, you’re hurt!” exclaimed Kay.

She and the twins helped the nurse to her feet. The young woman appeared dazed and her face was twisted with pain.

70

“I fell against the cabinet and injured my shoulder,” she murmured. “But it’s nothing serious. I was more frightened than hurt. I’ll be all right in a minute.”

The girls helped the nurse into a chair. They saw her glance nervously toward the window.

“I wish you would pull down the shades,” she murmured. “Someone might be watching us from the outside.”

Betty obeyed the request.

“Did you see anyone at the window?” Kay asked quietly.

“I saw a man standing by the door,” the nurse replied uneasily. “I had just come downstairs intending to get Mrs. Moleson a glass of warm milk. Suddenly I observed the figure crouching by the door. It frightened me so that I whirled around and struck my shoulder against the sharp edge of the kitchen cabinet. I’m afraid I screamed.”

“I don’t wonder that you did,” Kay said. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, and I must hasten back to my patient. If she heard my cry she must have been greatly upset. I should not leave her alone.”

Miss Carter poured a glass of milk from a bottle, warmed it, then went upstairs with it.

“That nurse has courage to stay here after such a fright,” Betty declared.

71

“She must have seen the same person I heard walking beneath the bedroom window,” Kay said thoughtfully. “Who would be prowling about the house at this time of night?”

She walked toward the kitchen door.

“Don’t you dare step foot outside!” Wilma commanded sternly. “It’s not safe.”

“I’d like to get a glimpse of that fellow.”

“He’s probably gone by now,” insisted Betty. “Don’t do anything reckless, Kay.”

“Oh, all right,” she gave in reluctantly. “But I suspect it was a thief after Mrs. Moleson’s valuables. The portraits in this house would make a rich haul!”

“All the more reason why you shouldn’t open that door,” said Wilma severely. “Let’s test all the windows and go back to bed.”

The girls went from room to room, making certain that every

door and window had been locked. In peering outside Kay could see no sign of an intruder, yet she felt as if someone were watching her every move. She wished that Wilma and Betty were not so timid. She would have liked to have made a thorough inspection of the grounds.

At length the girls went back to their bedroom. During the remainder of the night there was no further disturbance.

In the morning Kay had an opportunity to make a careful search of the house. In company with one of the two maids she made a check of Mrs. Moleson's silverware and other valuables. To her relief everything was in its place save four books which were missing from the library. At first Kay was inclined to consider the loss of no consequence until the servant told her that Mrs. Moleson set particular store upon the volumes.

72

“For some reason she seems to treasure those books,” the young woman explained. “She never allowed anyone to take them from the case; at least not since Annie and I've been in the house. We came here to work two years ago.”

“Didn't you have to dust them?” Kay asked in amazement.

“No, she always did that herself. In fact, she often kept the library under lock and key.”

“That's odd,” Kay murmured, half to herself. “I wonder who could have taken the books?”

“Mrs. Moleson will be greatly upset if she hears about it.”

“Then we must keep the knowledge from her. In the meantime we may be able to find the books. Perhaps they weren’t stolen at all.”

However, Kay spoke with very little confidence. She could not imagine why a thief would choose books from among so many other valuables. It was her belief that the volumes had been stolen by the mysterious night prowler. Undoubtedly, the man had entered the house before she and the twins had checked the doors and windows.

73

Shortly after breakfast Doctor Evans arrived at the house, bringing with him Doctor Everhart, a noted specialist. The two spent half an hour with the patient and then held a consultation. Miss Carter reported to Kay the result of their findings.

“Doctor Everhart believes that Mrs. Moleson’s heart trouble is largely due to hysteria, caused no doubt by worry and grief. He thinks her real ailment is of a different nature. They’ve decided to take her to the hospital for observation, and possibly an operation.”

“Then I suppose we’ll not be needed here any more,” Kay said with a feeling of regret. “I should like to say good-bye to Mrs. Moleson before I go away.”

“Yes, she wishes to talk with you. She asked me to have you come to her room.”

Kay and the twins followed the nurse upstairs. Mrs. Moleson shook hands with them and thanked them for their kindness.

“I wonder if I might ask one more favor?” she said hesitantly.

“Why, of course,” replied Kay.

“I should like to take a few books with me to the hospital.”

“I’ll be glad to get them for you.”

“I’ve written down three titles so that you will make no mistake,” Mrs. Moleson said, offering Kay a slip of paper.

74

“I’ll bring them right up to you, Mrs. Moleson.”

Kay did not glance at the paper until she and the twins were in the corridor. Then she stared at the titles in dismay.

“What’s the matter?” asked Betty.

“Why, these are the very books which were stolen last night! Now what shall I tell Mrs. Moleson?”

“If she learns the truth she’s apt to have a relapse,” Wilma declared. “I’d hate to break the news to her.”

“I know what I’ll do!” Kay exclaimed. “I’ll wrap up three other books, and I doubt if she’ll ever tear off the paper. In the meantime we may be able to find out what became of the volumes that were stolen.”

“We’ll surely have a difficult time doing that,” Betty said dryly. “With Mrs. Moleson in the hospital there’s no excuse for us remaining here.”

“Not unless she wishes us to keep watch of the house,” smiled Kay. “Someone ought to be in charge of the servants! And with prowlers about, the portraits should be guarded!”

Betty laughed. “You certainly can think up reasons quickly, Kay.”

The girls wrapped up three books and carried them to Mrs. Moleson.

“I’ll pack the volumes in your suitcase,” Kay said as the woman stretched out her hand to take them.

75

The chums were afraid she might insist upon examining the books but the timely arrival of the hospital ambulance prevented this. While the attendants and Miss Carter assisted the patient downstairs, Kay and the twins carried out her luggage. As they stowed the suitcase in the vehicle, a car drove up to the house.

“Mr. Blanchard!” Kay exclaimed in an undertone. “That means trouble!”

The lawyer hurried up the path, stopping short at sight of the ambulance.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded. “Is Mrs. Moleson being taken to the hospital?”

“Yes,” replied Kay, speaking politely. “The doctors have decided to take her there for observation. It is thought that the original diagnosis may have been incorrect.”

Mr. Blanchard stood silent for a moment. It was evident to the girls that he did not like the situation.

“Who is to be in charge here during Mrs. Moleson’s absence?” he asked abruptly.

“I am not sure,” Kay told him. “I may volunteer my services if she needs me. It doesn’t seem wise to leave so many valuables unguarded.”

Anger flashed in the lawyer’s dark eyes.

“It seems to me you’re far too interested in my client’s art treasures.”

“Your client?” Kay smiled. “If my memory serves me correctly, Mrs. Moleson doesn’t consider herself your client any longer. So you won’t have to worry further about her.”

76

“But I shall,” shouted Mr. Blanchard with rising anger. “I’m not going to stand by and see persons like yourself take advantage of a helpless old lady. That’s why I shall insist upon having my own watchman guard this mansion!”

77

CHAPTER X

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

As Mr. Blanchard delivered his tirade, the door opened. Doctor Evans, Miss Carter, and the hospital attendants who were carrying the patient emerged in time to hear his words.

“Mrs. Moleson,” the man cried, rushing to her, “these girls tell me you are being taken to the hospital. Surely you’re not going away without leaving someone in charge of your paintings?”

“The servants will be in the house.”

“But can you trust them to guard your valuable portraits? Believe me, my dear Mrs. Moleson, I have only your best interests at heart. That is why I ask permission to keep a guard here during your absence. I know just the man for the job, and I will pay his salary myself.”

Kay glanced quickly at her chums. Not for an instant did she believe that Mr. Blanchard was the generous, honest individual he pretended to be. She felt certain he was scheming to obtain a part of Mrs. Moleson’s fortune. It would be positively dangerous to allow him to select the guard. She said evenly:

“Mrs. Moleson, if you wish someone to remain in the house during your absence, I’ll be glad to stay. I’m sure Betty and Wilma will help out. Perhaps my mother would come, too.”

Mrs. Moleson gazed from one to another with troubled eyes.

“I suppose someone should stay,” she murmured. “Oh, dear, I don’t know what to say. Doctor Evans, I leave it to your judgment. Tell me what to do.”

“If I were you I should accept the offer of these young ladies,” he said instantly.

“Very well, I’ll be grateful if you will remain,” Mrs. Moleson said, smiling at Kay.

Mr. Blanchard glared furiously at Doctor Evans. Without saying a word, he jumped into his car and slammed the door. In an insane burst of speed, he drove down the gravel, turning the corner so sharply that he crushed a beautiful bush which was in bloom.

“You did well to dismiss the man,” said Doctor Evans quietly. “I fear that his interests are purely selfish.”

The attendants carried Mrs. Moleson to the ambulance. Miss Carter was to ride with her and remain as special nurse at the hospital.

“Now don’t worry about anything, Mrs. Moleson,” Kay called when the ambulance was ready to leave. “We’ll take care of things here and come often to visit you in the hospital.”

The big automobile moved away slowly, leaving the girls alone on the driveway. They stood watching until the ambulance had disappeared, then soberly went back into the house.

“We’ve talked ourselves into a real job this time,” Kay remarked. “If one of Mrs. Moleson’s portraits should disappear while we’re here, Mr. Blanchard would make no end of trouble.”

“It’s up to us to see that nothing is stolen,” declared Wilma. “Why not telephone the police and ask that the cruiser be sent past here at regular intervals?”

“That’s a very good idea,” approved Kay, “but I’d feel safer if an older person were here in the house.”

A few minutes later she telephoned Brantwood, talking with both her mother and Cousin Bill. Mrs. Tracey agreed that the girls should not remain at the mansion alone. She assured Kay she would take the first train to join them.

Early that afternoon the chums met Kay’s mother at the railroad station. She had brought fresh clothing for her daughter and the twins so that she was fairly well loaded down with luggage.

“How is Mrs. Moleson?” Mrs. Tracey inquired after the greetings were over.

“We haven’t heard since she was taken to the hospital,” Kay replied. “I’d like to stop there on our way to the mansion.”

At the hospital the girls were not allowed to see Mrs. Moleson but they talked with Miss Carter for a few minutes. The nurse told them that the patient was not doing well.

“She has been hysterical a great deal of the time,” Miss Carter said. “It is pitiful to hear her calling for her son.”

“Do you think she would improve if she were to see him?” Kay inquired.

“Doctor Evans seems to think she would.”

“The moment I have any news of the man, I’ll let you know,” Kay promised. To herself she added determinedly, “I’ll redouble my efforts to find him.”

Upon reaching the Moleson Mansion, Kay’s first act was to telephone the Circle City police. They reported that they had been unable to locate anyone answering Monty Moleson’s description.

“I did hear that the sheriff at Silvertown is holding a tramp for theft,” the chief told her. “It’s just possible that he may be the man you’re after. You might investigate.”

“Thank you,” said Kay, “I’ll drive there right away.”

Mrs. Tracey did not mind being left alone with the servants so Betty and Wilma decided to go with their chum to Silvertown. From a local filling station man they learned that the community was only six miles from Circle City.

“It seems logical that the man may be Monty,” Kay declared enthusiastically. “Oh, for Mrs. Moleson’s sake I hope our search is nearing the end.”

The girls made the trip in record time, but upon entering Silvertown they saw no building which resembled a jail.

81

“There must be one somewhere,” Kay declared as they slowly cruised around town.

“Let’s go into the courthouse and inquire,” Betty suggested.

Kay squeezed the car into a narrow parking place and the three girls scampered up the wide, stone steps that led to a cluster of Ionic columns. A uniformed guard stood at the entrance to the building.

“We’re trying to find the jail,” Kay said. “Can you tell us where it is?”

“On the top floor. Take the elevator down the hall.”

“And the sheriff,” Kay added. “Where shall we find him?”

“His office is on the third floor too.”

The girls found Sheriff Hughes to be a bluff man.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “I’m holding a tramp here. You mean the fellow who stole a car last night. Let’s see, you’re his sisters, aren’t you?”

“His sisters!” the girls echoed blankly.

“Yes, he said you might be along to bail him out.”

“Do we look as if we were related to a tramp?” asked Wilma indignantly.

“Well, he might look like you if we went to the trouble of scrubbing him up.”

“But sheriff—” protested Kay.

“No ‘buts’ go around here,” he said with finality, and punctuated his words by ringing loudly for the turnkey.

82

When that servant of the law arrived the sheriff ordered:

“Listen, Joe, bring that hobo in here from cell 21. His family has come to bail him out.”

Before the girls could make any impression upon the sheriff’s arrogance, Joe returned with the tramp. He was a shaggy-haired individual with the odor of many campfires clinging to his person. Kay saw at a glance that he was not Monty the Mole.

“Well, young ladies,” said the sheriff expansively. “Here’s your long lost brother. If you take my advice you will send him to the laundry.”

By this time Kay felt that the joke had gone far enough.

“We never saw this man before in our lives,” she said coldly.

“I don’t blame you,” retorted the sheriff. “I’d disown a guy

like this myself. What do you say, old Tomato Can?"

The tramp pointed at Wilma with a dirt-laden forefinger. "This dreamy-eyed gal here looks mighty familiar."

"Why, the idea!" the accused girl gasped, shrinking away.

The entire scene suddenly struck Kay as being 83 ridiculously funny. The very thought of connecting the poetic Wilma with such a strange person was too unexpected for words—so she did not even try to put it in words; she sat down and laughed until tears came to her eyes.

"Why don't you compose a poem about it, Wilma?" she asked as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Listen, sister," the sheriff said crossly, "you can't laugh yourself out of a tight spot. Not with me."

"What tight spot?" Kay retorted, losing patience. "If you are intimating that we know anything about the theft last night you are entirely wrong."

"We've already told you that we've never seen this man before," Wilma added indignantly. "And he has never set eyes on us either."

"I was sent here by the chief of police at Circle City," Kay continued indignantly. "If we were wanted for a crime is it likely we would come walking boldly into your office?"

"I guess maybe I made a mistake," muttered the sheriff. "Take this fellow back to the cell, Joe."

The girls left the building and went back to their car. They were deeply disappointed over the outcome of the trip.

“Nothing to do but go back home,” Betty sighed.

“Let’s drive through Circle City again,” Kay suggested. “I can’t help thinking Monty may be wandering about somewhere in the vicinity.”

Upon reaching the place the girls drove around and finally approached the railroad tracks. Kay stopped the car not far from the water tower and walked to the station to ask the agent if he had seen anyone resembling the missing tramp.

84

“Monty hasn’t been around here,” she reported to her chums upon her return.

Kay started the engine with the intention of crossing the tracks. Far up the line a train was coming but she would have ample time to get over the ties.

She shifted gears and the car moved forward. Then the motor sputtered and died. The automobile had stalled directly on the tracks.

“Oh, Kay!” cried Betty in terror.

“I’ll have it started in a second. Don’t get excited.”

But the car would not start.

“Get out,” she cried, “or we may be hit!”

CHAPTER XI

A CLOSE CALL

The girls leaped from the car while the train still was some distance up the track. Betty and Wilma tried vainly to push the automobile over the crossing, while Kay tore off her scarf and began to wave it. Even when she ran up the track she could not seem to attract the engineer's attention.

"The car will be smashed!" Betty cried frantically.

At just that moment another automobile came down the road toward the crossing. The young driver, a man in his early twenties, took in the situation instantly. Motioning the twins to jump aside, he bumped the stalled car and pushed it to safety.

Scarcely had his own automobile rolled over the crossing when the heavy train thundered by. Kay's car headed toward the ditch, but it came to a standstill just at the edge of the road.

"That was a narrow escape," Betty gasped.

The young man alighted from his auto as Kay came hurrying up.

“Oh, thank you for saving my car,” she said breathlessly. “You had a very close call yourself.”

“I knew I had plenty of time or I shouldn’t have attempted it,” the young man smiled. “You don’t catch me getting smashed up in an accident. I’ve seen too many of them.”

“You’re not a doctor?” Kay inquired in surprise.

“I hope to be one of these days. Right now I’m just a medical student. My name is Carl Anthony.”

The girls gave their names, explaining that they lived in Brantwood. While the young man tried to start Kay’s machine, Betty told him why they were in the town.

“We’ve been searching for a tramp-like man. He disappeared here in Circle City and it’s important that we find him.”

“The man’s mother is very ill,” Kay added. “She has been calling for him, and her doctor believes that if he could be found she might improve.”

“Circle City seems to be a favorite haunt of wanderers,” the medical student declared. “I saw a strange looking fellow this morning down by that water tower. He was walking west toward Jedson’s farm.”

“Do you suppose he could have been Monty?” Wilma asked Kay eagerly.

“He might have been,” Kay said hopefully. “Did you notice if

the fellow went to the farmhouse, Mr. Anthony?”

“No, I didn’t, but I’ve often heard Jedson complain that nearly every hobo who steals rides on freight cars stops at his place to ask for food.”

“I’d like to talk with the farmer,” suggested Kay.

87

“It’s not much of a walk over there,” replied the young man.

“We don’t mind hiking,” said Kay cheerfully.

“I’ll go along with you if you like,” offered the medical student. “I’m afraid I’ll be unable to get your car started without a little work. It may take a few minutes.”

The four went down the tracks and then cut through a field. Carl Anthony told the girls more about himself and they found him to be a very likeable, ambitious young man.

Before they had gone far the girls observed an old farmer in straw hat and overalls searching industriously near one of the haystacks which dotted the field. As they came closer they saw that he had a club in one hand.

“Hello, Mr. Jedson,” greeted the young medical student. “I’ve brought you some visitors.”

The farmer scarcely glanced at the girls as he replied irritably:

“If you’re here to buy eggs I can’t let you have any this week. Someone just broke into my hen house and made off with every egg in sight.”

“That’s too bad,” said young Anthony sympathetically. “This isn’t the first time you’ve been robbed, is it?”

“Every time a train goes by a hobo drops off and grabs up whatever he can lay hands on! Last summer my melon patch was a total loss. Cows are milked in the field, turkeys are stolen, fruit is picked from my trees,” the man said grimly. 88

“I don’t wonder you feel angry,” Kay remarked.

“Just wait until I catch another tramp on this place!”

The farmer’s eyes blazed with wrath and he twisted the stout club in his hand.

“I hope you won’t use that weapon on the poor fellow,” young Anthony observed mildly.

“He might not be the right person, you know,” Kay added.

“One tramp is the same as another to me,” the farmer muttered. “But I’m pretty sure the hobo who robbed my hen house is still around here somewhere. He may be hiding in one of these haystacks.”

“We’ll help you search for him,” offered the young doctor. “But put away your club. Any violence will involve you with the authorities.”

To the relief of the girls the farmer did drop the club.

“I’d not carry a weapon,” he explained, “only some tramps

are desperate characters. My patience has been tried to the limit.”

“It’s barely possible that the man you seek is in jail at Silvertown,” Kay remarked. “The sheriff there arrested a hobo who was caught stealing a car.”

“The fellow who took my eggs is still somewhere close by,” insisted the farmer. “I’ll look in another haystack _____”

89

He broke off quickly. A man in wrinkled clothes had emerged from behind the barn. Although he was some distance away, the girls could see that he was carrying something in his hat.

“There’s the thieving rascal now!” cried the farmer. “He still has the eggs!”

With a shout of rage Jedson ran after the hobo.

“Stop!” he yelled.

Instead, the fellow turned and ran across the field toward the woods. Kay caught only a fleeting glimpse of his face. She thought that the man looked a little like Monty but she could not be sure.

Carl Anthony and the girls joined in the chase. They were afraid that if Farmer Jedson should capture the tramp, he might resort to violence.

Before the fleeing man had gone very far he dropped the eggs. The sight of so much waste further enraged Jedson, who

redoubled his efforts to overtake the hapless tramp.

“You’ll go to jail for this!” he shouted.

In the race Carl Anthony and the girls were left far behind. Then they saw the farmer halt suddenly. They thought he had given up the pursuit until they heard him cry warningly:

“Look out! The silage pit!”

The hobo did not hear the words. He ran straight on. Suddenly he seemed to stumble.

It was too late for the runner to save himself. To the horror of those who watched, he pitched head foremost into the pit.

90

“Is the hole deep?” shouted Carl Anthony as they all ran toward it.

“Yes,” answered the farmer. Then as a scream reached them, he remembered that the hole had been emptied of silage and he had not put a cover over it.

“There’s a sharp stone at the bottom,” he added. Groans from the unfortunate man indicated he had crashed on it.

“The fellow’s badly hurt!” cried Carl Anthony, first to reach the pit.

He jumped down and turned the victim over gently. As his face came to Kay’s gaze, she gasped:

“It’s Monty!”

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN IN THE PIT

“That stone cut him badly!” cried Farmer Jedson, his voice betraying his fear.

“We must get this fellow out of here before he bleeds to death,” called Carl Anthony from below. “Someone help me.”

Kay leaped down into the pit and aided him in raising the injured man. Wilma and Betty helped from above but Farmer Jedson was too excited to be of much use.

“Folks may say I tried to kill him!” he groaned.

“He’s gravely injured,” said Carl Anthony soberly. “His wounds must be dressed at once. Can we take him to the house?”

“Yes, yes, of course. My wife is at the hospital visiting our sick daughter. But that doesn’t matter.”

“Bring a blanket,” ordered the young medical student. “We’ll use it as a stretcher.”

Farmer Jedson seemed so confused that Kay ran with him to the house. She found the blanket herself and put a kettle of

water on the stove, knowing they would need it to bathe Monty's wounds.

The tramp was carried to the house and placed on a bed. Kay was alarmed at the pallor of his face. He had lost a great deal of blood.

92

“We must be very careful in treating the wounds or an infection will set in,” Carl Anthony told Kay gravely. “If only we had the fellow at a hospital! But we must do the best we can here.”

The young medical student washed his hands and set to work. Three of Monty's ribs had been crushed, in addition to the deep, bleeding gash in his head.

“See if you can find bandages and an antiseptic,” he instructed Kay.

Farmer Jedson did not know where his wife kept the articles, but the girl found them herself in the kitchen cupboard.

“I'll soon have this bleeding checked,” Carl Anthony said when she returned with the things. “He evidently has a bad concussion and his ribs need taping.”

“Will he live?” Kay asked anxiously.

“I won't venture an opinion,” the young man replied in a low voice. “If an infection doesn't set in, his chances should be excellent.”

Kay and the twins had given no outward indication that

Monty was the man whom they were seeking. They had been too busy aiding Carl Anthony for them to reveal the fellow's true identity. As the young medical student finished his work and went to the kitchen to wash his hands, Kay wondered if she should tell him the truth, he being a stranger.

“It's a foregone conclusion that our patient has no friends or money,” Carl Anthony said before the girl could speak. “Of course he can't be kept here. I'll have to call the hospital and see if they will take him in.”

93

Kay frowned thoughtfully. If Monty were brought to a public institution his record would be subjected to close scrutiny. He would be asked his name and former home. Should his true identity be learned the situation might prove humiliating for many persons.

“I have an idea!” she declared after a moment. “Wait a minute while I telephone Doctor Evans.”

Kay went to the living room to make the call. She discovered Mr. Jedson there, nervously pacing the floor.

“How is the poor fellow now?” he asked anxiously.

“Mr. Anthony has finished dressing his wounds,” Kay said kindly. “He is resting. Wilma and Betty are at his bedside. Would you care to go in?”

“No! No!” the man returned quickly. “The sight of anyone suffering always upsets me. That's why I didn't go to the hospital with my wife.”

Kay moved toward the telephone.

“What are you aiming to do?” the farmer asked anxiously.
“You’re not telephoning the police?”

“No, I thought I would call Doctor Evans.”

“I wish you wouldn’t tell anyone what happened here,”
the farmer pleaded. “I wouldn’t have chased that fellow
if I’d known he would stumble into the pit.”

94

“It wasn’t your fault, Mr. Jedson. I’m sure you needn’t blame
yourself for the accident.”

“That was what it was—an accident. But will the police
believe me? They know I’ve threatened violence to any tramp
who sets foot on my place.”

“There were several witnesses, Mr. Jedson. I feel sure the
police will not trouble you. Nevertheless, it may be just as
well to make no report to them.”

“That’s the way I feel about it,” the farmer said in obvious
relief.

“The patient needs the very best care,” Kay continued. “I’ll
ask Doctor Evans to take the case. He is a person who can be
trusted.”

After Mr. Jedson had gone away she placed her call. Several
minutes elapsed before the connection was established, and
then she had trouble in making the doctor understand what
had occurred.

“You say you have found Monty Moleson but he is badly injured?”

“Yes,” Kay explained. “The man is in need of good nursing care. I hesitate to take him to a hospital because of the questions which will be asked.”

“No, that would not be wise. Let me see——”

“I was wondering if it would be possible to take him to the Moleson home?” Kay asked quickly. “With Mrs. Moleson in the hospital she would not be disturbed. At the proper moment we could break the news to her.”

95

“Yes, the Moleson Mansion is the logical place,” the doctor agreed. “After all, it is Monty’s home and he will have perfect quiet there.”

“Can you arrange for a nurse?”

“I’ll engage Mrs. Merriman. She is a very discreet woman and can be trusted. I’ll arrange all details at this end, explain what is necessary to the servants and send an ambulance to pick up the patient.”

“Don’t you think an ambulance might attract too much attention, Doctor Evans?”

“Yes, you are right. It will be better to bring him in a car. Is he in such a condition that you can move him alone?”

“We have help here,” Kay replied. “Yes, everything can be arranged.”

Following the telephone conversation, she talked with Betty and Wilma, taking them into her confidence. The twins agreed that it would be unwise to tell either Carl Anthony or Mr. Jedson where the patient was to be removed. Kay let both men believe that he would be brought to a private nursing home in Fremont.

“Private homes cost money,” said Farmer Jedson in amazement. “Who will look after the bill?”

“I’ll be responsible,” answered Kay.

“Aren’t you being rather generous?” inquired Carl Anthony with a broad smile. “After all, the fellow is a nobody. He was caught stealing.”

96

“Even so, he needs good care, and I’d like to see that he gets it.”

Carl Anthony tried to convince Kay she was making a mistake. Failing to do so, he walked back to the railroad crossing and brought her car over to the farmhouse.

“Will it be safe to move the man now?” Kay asked.

“Yes, he’s in a semi-stupor and will feel no pain. There’ll be no danger if you drive carefully.”

The young medical student supervised the moving of the patient.

“We’ll need a blanket to throw over him,” Kay told the farmer.

Carl Anthony laid the cover across the sleeping figure, leaving the face exposed. After they had driven a short distance down the road they stopped the car and rearranged the blanket so that the sick man would not be visible.

It was well that they took such a precaution, for the girls had not traveled very many miles before they came to a main highway intersection. As they waited for the light to change, another car pulled up alongside their own.

“It’s Ethel Eaton,” whispered Betty. “She *would* come along.”

The girl was a student at Carmont High School, but her jealousy of Kay often led her to try spoiling the amateur detective’s efforts.

97

“Hello, girls,” Ethel called. “What are you doing over this way?”

“Oh, we’re just having a little outing,” Kay answered carelessly.

“What are you carrying in the back seat?” Ethel asked, craning her neck. “Why, it looks like a person lying under a blanket!”

“Well, well, if you haven’t a vivid imagination!” laughed Betty.

The matter might have passed off very well had not Monty at that moment given a low moan.

“What was that?” demanded Ethel.

“Did you hear anything?” Kay asked innocently.

To her relief the traffic light changed to green. She drove away before Ethel could ask another question.

“Do you think she suspected anything?” Betty murmured anxiously, looking back.

“I’m afraid she did,” Kay frowned. “Is she following us?”

“No, she took the other road.”

“Then perhaps she didn’t find out anything.”

However, Ethel Eaton had not been misled. She was very certain the girls had been carrying an injured person in their car. Perhaps they had struck him down on the road! What a tale she would have to report when she reached home. Ethel’s eyes snapped at the thought.

98

Relieved that they were not being followed, the girls went on to Acorn Drive. Mrs. Tracey, Doctor Evans, and the elderly nurse were on the watch for the automobile. Kay brought the car to the rear of the house, and under cover of the dense shrubbery the man was moved to a bedroom on the third floor.

“I don’t believe anyone saw us,” Kay declared in satisfaction. “Monty’s presence here must be kept an absolute secret.”

“Mrs. Merriman is to be trusted,” Doctor Evans assured her. “She will repeat nothing that she hears or sees.”

As soon as the nurse had prepared the patient, Doctor Evans made a complete examination.

“Your friend the medical student did a very fine piece of work,” he told Kay as they stood together at the bedside.

“All the way here Monty mumbled and talked incoherently. It worried me.”

“His acting that way was to be expected,” replied the doctor. “He should be himself by tomorrow. Unless infection sets in there should be no cause for anxiety.”

Kay turned away from the bedside. As she did so the tramp began to mutter again. She distinctly caught the words, “Murmuring Portrait.”

“The poor fellow is wandering far afield,” Doctor Evans smiled. “By morning he should be fairly rational, however.”

99

“Do you suppose he realizes where he is?” Kay asked in an undertone.

“Oh, no, he’ll remember nothing of what happened when he comes out of this.”

The conversation was cut short by the arrival of the maid Annie who announced that Kay was wanted on the telephone. “I think it is the hospital calling,” she explained.

Kay hurried downstairs. Miss Carter’s clear voice came to her through the receiver.

“I thought you might like to know that Mrs. Moleson seems greatly improved today.”

“I’m so glad, Miss Carter.”

“However, I’m forced to report that at the moment she is very much upset.”

“Why, what has happened?”

“It seems you made a mistake about some books you wrapped up for her.”

“Oh, the books—” Kay murmured, her heart sinking.

“Yes, I can’t see that it makes any great difference myself, but you know sick persons have strange whims. I’m afraid she’ll work herself into a state of collapse if she doesn’t get them. Have you the titles?”

“I still have the list.”

“Then please bring the volumes as soon as you can,” the nurse urged. “Mrs. Moleson will not relax until she gets them.”

100

Kay hung up the receiver and leaned weakly against the wall. Her little plan had not worked at all. She was in a real dilemma!

101

CHAPTER XIII

KAY'S PREDICAMENT

After considering her problem for some time, Kay decided that she would go to the hospital and tell Mrs. Moleson she could not find the books.

“That is the truth, too,” she told herself. “I cannot locate the volumes because someone has taken them, yet Mrs. Moleson may think I simply don’t know where to search for them.”

Kay was admitted to Room 402 by Nurse Carter. Her patient sat propped up with pillows and looked stronger than when she had left her home.

“I am so sorry to have caused you such a lot of trouble, Miss Tracey,” the woman murmured. “You brought the books?”

“I couldn’t find them anywhere in the library,” Kay admitted reluctantly.

Mrs. Moleson drew in her breath sharply.

“They were in plain sight in the north case. Did you look there?”

“I may not have searched carefully enough.”

“The books must be there,” Mrs. Moleson continued, her voice becoming fretful.

“Would no other volume serve as well?” interposed Miss Carter.

“I must have the ones I listed!” Mrs. Moleson exclaimed. “You don’t understand—there was something inside——”

102

She broke off and dropped her head back against the pillow, seemingly worn out by her attempt to talk.

“I think you should go now,” the nurse said quietly to Kay. “She needs sleep.”

The girl moved toward the door. As she went out she heard Mrs. Moleson murmur:

“Who could have suspected the secret? Only Monty knew _____”

It dawned upon Kay that something valuable had been hidden inside the books requested by Mrs. Moleson, and that only the woman and her son shared that knowledge.

“What can it be?” the girl mused, and thereupon resolved to make another search for the missing volumes.

That very evening she and the twins locked themselves in the library and went through the shelves one by one. Kay felt behind the rows of books, discovering that many volumes had been tucked away out of sight. Suddenly she came upon a

leather bound copy of poems by Keats.

“Why, this is one of the books Mrs. Moleson requested!” she cried.

As Kay turned the pages, a piece of paper fluttered to the floor.

“Money!” exclaimed Betty in awe. She snatched up the crisp bill and her eyes opened wide. “A thousand dollars!”

103

“Is it genuine?” gasped Wilma.

“Money must have been hidden in the other volumes too!” cried Kay. “The thief probably overlooked this book because it was hidden behind the others.”

The girls were so excited over their discovery that they spent two hours searching for more money, but they found none.

“Mrs. Moleson’s books have been taken away, that’s clear,” Kay declared at last. “For all we know, they may have been gone for years.”

“Perhaps one of the servants is responsible,” Wilma suggested.

“It’s possible those particular volumes were removed by that man who was skulking around the house,” Kay said thoughtfully. “I wish I had caught a glimpse of him.”

“Let’s get to bed,” suggested Wilma, glancing at the clock.

“It’s after eleven o’clock.”

“What shall we do with the money?” asked Betty.

“Why not leave it right where we found it?” questioned Kay. “It should be safe here until morning. Then I’ll take the book and the money to the hospital.”

Wilma and Betty approved of this, so their chum replaced the volume on the shelf, and they all went upstairs to bed. As Kay undressed she could hear Monty groaning in the room overhead. The sound proved so distressing that she found it impossible to go to sleep. Shortly after midnight she arose and dressed again.

104

“I’ll go downstairs and get some milk,” she decided.

Kay tiptoed down the steps so that she would not disturb the other sleepers. As she reached the lower floor she heard a slight movement coming from the direction of the library. The door was open a crack and she could see a dim light within.

Moving nearer, Kay made out a masked figure with a flashlight. The man was examining the books in the library cases!

The girl was tempted to accost the prowler. Then, deciding that he might be armed, she stole upstairs to summon aid. Quickly she aroused her mother and the twins.

“We’ll block off both doors to the library,” Kay whispered as they all tiptoed down the stairs. “Then we’ll have the fellow trapped.”

Just at that instant Wilma's foot slipped on the carpet. The nervous girl seized the railing for support and gave a smothered cry.

The clatter reached the ears of the masked intruder in the library. Instantly he darted out into the hall, flashlight in hand. As he ran toward a side door he extinguished the beam.

"Quick! He'll get away!" cried Kay.

She ran after the fellow, but when she reached the door no one was in sight.

105

"Let's look in the library," said Kay. "I'm afraid Mrs. Moleson's book may be gone now."

To her intense relief the volume of poems had not been stolen and the thousand-dollar bill was still hidden within the pages.

"I'm going to sleep with the book under my pillow for the rest of the night," Kay declared.

"I'm sure I'll not sleep at all," Betty said with a shiver. "It gives me the creeps to think of a masked prowler on the premises. This makes the second time the house has been entered!"

Kay knew it would be useless to make any search for the man that night. However, she was up before breakfast the next morning examining the grounds. Near the side door she found fresh footprints which she carefully measured. While she was thus occupied, the twins came out to join her.

“Here’s something,” Betty said, stooping to pick up an object lying in the dirt.

“Just an old pencil,” observed Wilma in disappointment.

“It must have dropped from the thief’s pocket last night. There’s printing on it.”

Betty read aloud the words: ““Compliments of the Opal Paint Company.””

“That may prove to be a clue,” Kay said eagerly. “Keep the pencil, Betty.”

A moment later Wilma made a discovery of her own. In the shrubbery near the door she found a crumpled timetable. The girl could not be sure that it had been dropped from the masked man’s pocket, but she kept it for minute inspection later on.

106

Directly after breakfast Kay took the volume of poems to the hospital. She was permitted to talk for a few minutes with Mrs. Moleson, who seemed delighted to have obtained the book. Kay smiled as she saw the woman slyly searching for the thousand-dollar bill, but its owner said nothing.

“I couldn’t find the two other books, Mrs. Moleson,” the girl spoke up, “but I may be able to locate them soon.”

Kay helped the nurse arrange a huge bouquet of flowers which her mother had sent to the patient. As she turned to leave she said casually to Mrs. Moleson:

“By the way, can you tell me if there is a concern in this city called the Opal Paint Company?”

The question electrified Mrs. Moleson. She suddenly raised herself on an elbow.

“There is very little I cannot tell you about the Opal Paint Company! My husband once owned the concern. Monty, my son, worked there until Mr. Baylor made things most unpleasant for him.”

“Indeed?” murmured Kay. She was more interested than she cared to reveal.

“Monty was taken into the business shortly before my husband died. Because my son did not get on well with the workmen, it was decided to take a partner into the concern. Mr. Baylor bought a half interest. Upon the death of my husband he insisted on changing the company’s name.”

107

“Your son continued to work there?”

“Yes, but Mr. Baylor did not treat him as a partner. They had many bitter arguments. Day by day I could see Monty losing interest in the business. After a particularly difficult scene one morning my son disappeared. I have not seen him since.”

Mrs. Moleson dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. For several minutes she was unable to continue the story.

“My son is said to have died in Africa, as you know. There was never any proof of that fact. For that reason I am always willing to hope that he still lives.”

“I believe that your son soon will communicate with you,” Kay said kindly. “You must have faith that he will be restored to you.”

“I have prayed for his return,” Mrs. Moleson replied sadly. “I fear he would never dare come home even if he were alive, though.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Mr. Baylor claims that my son defrauded him of thousands of dollars. After Monty disappeared he would not allow me to claim my son’s possessions, saying that everything belonged to him. There was a portrait which hung in Monty’s office which I particularly wanted. He would not give it to me.”

108

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

“How could I? Had I made any complaint Mr. Baylor would have exposed my son. You see, Monty made a sad mess of his life, and I fear it would never be possible for him to reestablish himself here even if he were to return.”

The conversation had wearied Mrs. Moleson, so the nurse signaled to Kay to leave. The girl was sorry to go, for there were many questions which she wished to ask. However, she left immediately.

“It’s strange that anyone from the Opal Paint Company should be prowling about the Moleson Mansion,” Kay reflected as she left the hospital. “I wonder if Mr. Baylor could have been the individual? Just for the fun of it I think

I'll drop over to his office and ask a few questions.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE GYPSY PORTRAIT

Kay had little trouble in locating the offices of the Opal Paint Company. She asked to speak to Mr. Baylor, and was shown immediately into his presence.

One glance at the portly, slightly bald official convinced her that he was not the prowler who had entered the Moleson Mansion. The masked man had been tall and thin.

“What may I do for you?” Mr. Baylor inquired with affected cordiality.

“I am acting for Mrs. Moleson, who is ill in the hospital,” replied Kay boldly.

“Mrs. Moleson, eh?” The man’s eyes became crafty, his expression guarded.

“Yes, I understand that her son left several of his personal things here, such as a desk and a painting.”

“That is quite true,” returned Mr. Baylor smoothly. “I have kept them because Monty Moleson fleeced me out of a large sum of money.”

“I know nothing of that. Mr. Baylor. But the things are of no particular use to you, and it would help Mrs. Moleson’s condition very much for her to know that she has her son’s belongings.”

The official bestowed an appraising glance upon Kay, and decided that she was shrewder than he had thought at first.

110

“Mrs. Moleson had a lot of nerve, sending you here,” he said in annoyance. “The old lady always did like to disrupt the office!”

“She has a right to her son’s personal belongings,” said Kay quietly.

“That precious son of hers!” Mr. Baylor exclaimed sarcastically. “She ought to be glad that he died in Africa. The boy was no good—a weakling. Now run along and don’t bother me. Can’t you understand I am busy?”

Kay did not allow herself to be dismissed so easily. She had noticed a handsome, hand-carved desk standing in the corner of the room and guessed that it belonged to the Molesons. Directly above it hung the portrait of a gypsy. Kay felt certain the oil painting had been done from life, for the face had a quality about it which never could have been produced from an artist’s imagination.

The picture had strength and originality, yet the sinister expression of the old crone’s face gave Kay an unpleasant feeling. Following the girl’s gaze, Mr. Baylor scowled at the portrait.

“I hate that ugly thing!” he exclaimed. “The only reason why I’ve kept it is because an artist once told me it’s valuable.”

“If you dislike the painting why don’t you return it to Mrs. Moleson?” Kay asked the man quickly.

111

“Because I mean to sell it,” answered Mr. Baylor shortly.

At that moment a secretary came into the office to tell Mr. Baylor that he was needed outside to settle a dispute between two workmen. He left at once.

Kay had a daring thought. She disliked the man and his attitude toward Mrs. Moleson. He had no right to keep the painting, if it belonged to the family.

“He’ll not keep it, either!” the girl decided impulsively.

She walked boldly to the portrait and lifted it from the wall. The painting was a large one but it was not heavy. She carried it out through the main office and to her car.

Not until the girl was ready to drive away did Mr. Baylor discover what she had done. Then he came running out to the auto, but it was too late for him to stop her. As she drove away, Kay grew more and more worried over her rash act.

“He may try to make trouble,” she thought uneasily. “Just to protect myself, I’ll ring up Cousin Bill and tell him what I’ve done.”

Kay put in a telephone call as soon as she reached the mansion. She was greatly relieved when the young lawyer

assured her that she had a perfect right to claim the painting for Mrs. Moleson.

“Baylor won’t make any trouble,” he told her. “I’ll see that he gives up the furniture, too. The man has bluffed Mrs. Moleson long enough. He’ll back down when he discovers that we mean business.”

112

Kay had made a similar estimate of Mr. Baylor’s character. She was delighted the next morning when a moving van pulled up in front of the mansion and unloaded a fine carved desk, a chair, and several smaller pieces of furniture.

“Cousin Bill surely didn’t waste any time!” Kay chuckled.

At Mrs. Tracey’s suggestion the desk was carried up to the third floor and placed in Monty’s den. Kay thought that the gypsy’s portrait belonged above it so they hung the picture there.

“What an ugly old woman,” Betty shuddered as she stared at the painting. “Could anyone in real life be so horrible?”

“Such crafty eyes,” Kay added. “I wish we knew the history of the portrait. There is a haunting quality about it which I can’t seem to forget.”

Wilma had been gazing silently at the painting. She now began to compose aloud a poem inspired by the sight of the old gypsy with the haggard face and piercing eyes.

“Oh, face of a Gypsy, stern and uncouth,
Stripped of its beauty, shorn of its bloom;

Cheeks that once blushed with the first fire of youth,
Now are quite withered, like those in a tomb!”

“For goodness sake, Wilma, if you must compose poetry why don’t you choose a cheerful subject?” Betty remarked. “You make me shiver.”

113

“I admire the portrait,” Wilma replied dreamily.

Several times that day Kay observed the girl stealing alone to the third floor to view the painting. That evening she went up herself and played a flashlight on the picture. The magnetic eyes, like some crafty beast’s, seemed to draw her toward the gypsy.

For several hours before this she had been busy helping the nurse to look after Monty. The wanderer had recovered consciousness, but at intervals would lapse into a state of delirium. His moans of pain made the top floor a most unpleasant place in which to be.

Doctor Evans came frequently to the mansion, reporting that the man’s condition remained about the same.

“Do you think we should tell Mrs. Moleson about her son?” Kay had asked him that afternoon.

“I believe we should wait a few days before doing that,” the doctor had replied. “Has the fellow said anything which would indicate that he recognizes his surroundings?”

Kay had shaken her head.

“He mumbles a great deal, but I haven’t been able to make out many of the words. He talks most of all about a ‘murmuring portrait.’”

“The poor fellow is far from rational now, but within a few days I look for an improvement in his condition. In the meantime we will spare Mrs. Moleson.”

114

“If she knew he were here she would insist upon seeing him at once,” Kay had agreed. “The shock of his presence might prove very great to her just now.”

Since the man had been a patient in the mansion, Nurse Merriman had shaved him and made him far more presentable. Kay had wondered if after all she might not be making a mistake in trying to reunite mother and son. The face on the pillow was weak and dissipated looking. Unless the man could change his character, there could be little or no happiness in store for Mrs. Moleson.

Once as Kay was watching him while the nurse was in the kitchen, Monty stirred slightly. His hands moved restlessly on the covers. Then he tried to sit up.

“Let me out of here!” he cried suddenly. Kay pressed him back gently on the bed. “I won’t stay in jail! Let me out!”

“You are in your own home,” said Kay.

The man did not seem to understand what she meant. He struggled again.

“Let me go!” he pleaded. “I must take the money to the Ruler.

I must get it to him before——”

Monty sagged back, spent by his effort to speak.

“Here, drink this,” urged Kay, forcing a glass of medicine to his lips.

115

For several minutes the man remained quiet. Then he began to rave once more, repeating that he must take money to the Ruler. Kay puzzled over the strange words. She decided that in all probability Monty had been paying someone money to keep silent about his true identity. When he started to talk again, she placed her hand soothingly over his own.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I’ll take the money for you.”

“You’ll carry the money to the Ruler so he won’t bother me any more?”

“Yes, Monty.”

The man did not seem to notice her use of the familiar name, but Kay thought a queer light came into his eyes just then.

“I believe he may be almost rational,” she decided. “This is the moment to show him Patricia Robbin’s ring!”

Kay had carried the engagement ring in her pocket, ready for just such an opportunity as this. She took the circlet from its tissue wrapping and held it in front of the tramp’s eyes. He seemed not to notice.

“Look, Monty,” she pleaded, “don’t you remember this ring?”

The one you gave Miss Robbin? Try hard to remember.”

CHAPTER XV

SERIOUS COMPLICATIONS

Monty stared at the ring, then made an effort to snatch it from the girl's hand.

“Jewels!” he whispered gloatingly. “Ah, the Ruler will like that ring! Give it to me!”

Kay drew back from the bed, dismayed at the outcome of her little experiment. With an amazing amount of strength Monty threw off his covers and rolled from the bed.

“I'm getting out of here!” he shouted, running toward an open window. “You can't keep me in jail!”

Calling for help, Kay flung herself upon the delirious man in an attempt to restrain him.

“Please get back into bed,” she pleaded frantically.

Monty hurled the girl aside. She crashed into a night stand laden with a tray of dishes. Over went the tray. It struck the floor with a resounding crash which could be heard on the floor below.

Mrs. Tracey, Wilma and Betty came hurrying upstairs

to learn what the trouble was. Taking in the situation at a glance, they aided Kay in overpowering the excited man. By the time they had him in bed Nurse Merriman came running into the room. She gave him a soothing drink, whereupon Monty lay back on his pillow, completely spent.

“After this I shall not leave him alone even for a moment while he is awake,” she declared anxiously. “I had no idea the man was so violent. I don’t see what could have excited him.”

She glanced a trifle suspiciously at Kay. The girl had replaced Miss Robbin’s ring in her pocket and decided not to speak of her little experiment.

During the remainder of the day Monty was very restless, talking incoherently much of the time. Kay and the twins found time heavy on their hands, for Mrs. Merriman was so capable that she required little assistance in caring for the man. Mrs. Tracey suggested that the girls return to school.

“I suppose we should,” Kay sighed. “We can’t afford to be out too many days.”

“I’ll remain here for a time,” her mother promised. “If there is any change in the man’s condition I’ll telephone for you to come at once. Of course you’ll be able to run down here over the week-end.”

Kay and the twins returned home early the following morning with no eagerness to take up their studies again. They felt they could not enter wholeheartedly into the activities of Carmont High until the mystery at Acorn Drive should be solved.

“We mustn’t tell anyone what happened,” Kay warned her chums.

“We’ll not breathe a word of it,” Betty promised.

118

However, the girls were to be sorely tried. Upon returning to school they found out that during their absence Ethel Eaton had been telling a wild tale about them. She had whispered to her friends that Kay had run over a man in her automobile. The story had spread until now everyone seemed to know about it.

“Ethel, whatever possessed you to think of such a thing?” Kay asked the girl directly. “You know it isn’t true!”

“I don’t know any such thing,” Ethel retorted. “Do you deny that you were carrying someone in the back seat of your car when I met you on the road?”

Kay laughed uneasily. “Your imagination must have tricked you, Ethel. I assure you I have never injured anyone in all my life.”

“You were carrying someone in your car!” Ethel insisted. “If it weren’t true you’d deny it!”

Many students including Ronald Earle, Kay’s friend and companion on many adventures, were puzzled by her refusal to deny Ethel’s accusation. Ronald half suspected that she was involved in some mysterious happening and felt hurt because she had not shared the secret with him, as she had many of the other mysteries she had solved.

Kay believed that it would be best to tell no one about Monty Moleson until after she should have revealed the man's identity to his mother. For several days she went quietly to school, returning home each evening to prepare dinner for Cousin Bill. The end of the week found Kay and the twins enroute to Acorn Drive once again.

Unaware that the girls had gone away, Ronald Earle called at the Tracey home to inquire if Kay would like to attend a movie with him.

"She's not here now," Bill Tracey told the young man. "You just missed her. She's spending the week-end at Fremont."

"I might drive over that way myself," Ronald said. "I know a fellow who lives there."

"The girls are staying at a place on Acorn Drive. I can give you the address."

He wrote down the number of the Moleson Mansion for Ronald. Immediately the young man gave up his plan of seeing a movie, and started at once for Fremont.

It was long after darkness had set in before Ronald reached his destination. As he parked his car in front of the house, wondering if he had come to the right place, another car drew up alongside, and Carl Anthony alighted.

Kay had mentioned Mrs. Moleson's address to the medical student, but the young man had no idea that it was a residence. He believed that the girls had taken the injured Monty to a private nursing home. He had made up his mind to

call and inquire how the man was progressing.

Ronald watched Carl Anthony with unfriendly eyes. The fellow was unusually handsome. He wondered if that fact might have had anything to do with Kay's silence regarding her recent stay at Acorn Drive.

120

As the young student walked up to the front door, Ronald slowly followed him. He timed his steps so that he arrived on the porch just as Kay came to answer the summons.

Her eyes opened wide at sight of Carl Anthony, then her confusion increased as she saw Ronald Earle coming up the steps. Passing off the situation as well as she could, she introduced the boys and invited them into the house.

"I suppose you're surprised to see me here, Kay," remarked Ronald. "Your cousin gave me the address of this place."

"How is our patient?" asked Carl Anthony.

"Patient?" demanded Ronald before Kay could answer. "Is someone ill here?"

"Well, not exactly," the girl replied in embarrassment. "A man was hurt——"

The doorbell rang again, and with a sigh of relief at the interruption Kay excused herself to answer it. When she opened the door, Mr. Blanchard boldly walked in.

"Who are these young men?" the lawyer demanded rudely.

“They are friends of mine,” replied Kay shortly.

“And what right have you to bring them into my client’s home while she is away? Oh, I’ve been watching this house, and I’m not blind to the things which have been going on! You are all trespassers here and I order you to leave at once!” 121

Kay was not the least bit frightened by Mr. Blanchard, but she glanced quickly at Ronald and Carl. What would they be likely to think? Before the girl could make any reply to Mr. Blanchard’s angry tirade, a low moan was heard from above.

“What was that?” cried the lawyer.

Ronald looked startled. Carl Anthony alone had any suspicion of the source of the groan.

“That sounded like someone in pain!” exclaimed Mr. Blanchard.

“You must have imagined it,” said Kay.

Just then Monty groaned again, and this time the lawyer knew he had not been mistaken.

“You’re hiding someone in this house!” he cried. “I’ll find out what’s going on here!”

Before Kay could prevent him the lawyer had started up the circular stairway. Kay was fairly beside herself with anxiety. She knew it would never do for him to discover the existence of Mrs. Moleson’s son.

“Oh, Ronald, don’t let him go upstairs!” she murmured.
“Can’t you help me?”

“Where is the fuse box?” the young man demanded in a whisper.

“In the entrance way to the basement!” Kay exclaimed.
“Oh, that’s a grand idea!”

122

She darted to the kitchen, jerked open the cellar door, and quickly pulled out electric light fuses as fast as she could unscrew them. The house was plunged into total darkness.

“Now we’ll see if Mr. Blanchard can find the third floor!”
Kay chuckled. “It might be a good plan to help him a bit!”

123

CHAPTER XVI

LOST IN THE DARK

“Turn on those lights!” shouted the angry lawyer as he groped about on the stairway.

“I think something must have happened to the fuses,” Kay called, muffling her amusement. “Here, let me help you before you fall.”

She gave the man her hand and led him down the stairway.

“I don’t want to go this way,” he complained. “Can’t you get those lights on?”

“In just a minute, Mr. Blanchard. Here, be careful, don’t stumble against the piano. Just let me lead you.”

Kay deftly guided the man to the side door which opened out onto a porch. Before he was aware of what she was about, she had pushed him outside and turned the key in the lock.

“That was a mean trick!” shouted the lawyer furiously, pounding on the door. “Let me in!”

Kay paid no attention to him, and in a few minutes he went away, muttering angrily to himself. He realized that he was no

match for the young people.

Wilma and Betty had come downstairs to learn why the lights had gone out. Everyone had a hearty laugh when Kay explained what had happened. Ronald helped her put back the fuses so the house was bright once more.

124

“Why don’t you tell us what this is all about?” the young man complained.

“Yes, you deserve to know—both of you,” Kay said. She glanced at the twins. “Don’t you think so too?”

“Yes, let’s tell everything,” Wilma agreed, and Betty was of the same opinion.

Kay related all that had occurred at the Moleson Mansion. She told of the search for Monty and of his strange mutterings since he had been confined to the third floor.

“Maybe the Ruler is a real person,” Ronald remarked thoughtfully.

“I decided the same thing several days ago,” Kay nodded.

“Perhaps the fellow is a Ruler of the Hoboes,” Carl Anthony suggested. “I’d like to investigate that angle of the mystery.”

“Count me with you,” declared Ronald.

Kay was delighted that the two boys were so much interested in the affair. She promised to show them the gypsy portrait which hung on the third floor wall.

“I’d like to see the patient too if I may,” said Carl Anthony. “I have considerable interest in his condition.”

Kay and the twins led the young men upstairs. Kay and the medical student entered the sick room. Monty was lying quietly in bed, but as they drew near him his eyelids fluttered open.

125

“Feeling better?” inquired Anthony.

Monty raised himself on an elbow and stared with bloodshot eyes at the young man.

“You were the one who stabbed me!” he accused in a quavering voice. “You threw me into a pit!”

Carl Anthony flushed at the accusation and glanced quickly at Nurse Merriman. He was afraid she might believe the fellow was speaking the truth.

“I would go now if I were you,” the woman said. “He is becoming excited again.”

The young man was glad to leave the bedroom.

“Don’t feel embarrassed,” Kay said. “Monty has been out of his mind for several days. I suppose your face was vaguely familiar to him. You were the first person he saw after he stumbled into the pit.”

Wilma and Betty had taken Ronald into the nearby room to show him the hand-carved desk and the gypsy portrait. The furniture had been rearranged at the request of Mrs.

Merriman, who used the place, whenever her patient was asleep, as a spot where she might rest and read. She liked to write at the desk when making up her chart for the doctor or penning letters. The beautiful piece of furniture now stood under a window.

Kay and Carl Anthony joined the group in the room. For several minutes the two boys stared at the painting of the gypsy, which still hung in the center of one paneled wall.

126

“What do you think of it?” Kay asked curiously.

“As a work of art, I suppose it’s a fine piece,” Ronald said slowly. “But what a face!”

“I shouldn’t want a picture like that in my house,” added Carl. “It would drive one mad to gaze at such a face for very long.”

“That remark gives me an idea!” Kay murmured, but she would not reveal what she meant.

A short time later both Carl Anthony and Ronald Earle took their leave. Both promised they would do all in their power to help the girls solve the strange mystery.

Kay felt that her mother had been too closely confined to the house for some time, so the next day she proposed that they all go for a long drive, leaving Mrs. Merriman to care for the patient.

“I should enjoy a breath of air,” Mrs. Tracey said gratefully. “This old house has depressed me. I need to get away from it

for a while.”

“Where shall we go, Mother?” Kay asked when they were all in the car.

“It makes no difference to me.”

“Then let’s drive over to Circle City,” said her daughter quickly.

“Why to Circle City?” Betty questioned alertly. “Now that we’ve found Monty, what is the particular attraction there?”

“I suppose it’s a foolish idea,” Kay replied, “but it occurred to me that Monty might have had an appointment with this mysterious individual called the Ruler. I feel there is a chance that the fellow may be found somewhere along the railroad tracks, perhaps near the water tower.”

127

“Well, that *is* an idea!” teased Betty. “But let’s drive on to Circle City. It’s a good shopping center.”

Mrs. Tracey wished to purchase a dress, so upon reaching the town the girls escorted her to one of the better shops. While Kay’s mother was making her selection, Ethel Eaton happened to come into the store. She often drove to Circle City to shop, declaring that the stores at Brantwood did not carry attractive merchandise.

Ethel did not observe Mrs. Tracey. Seeing Kay and the twins she asked insolently:

“Well, what brings you here? I hope you didn’t run down any more pedestrians on your way!”

“Ethel,” said Kay quietly, “I’ve been waiting for a chance to talk with you alone. You know very well that I have never struck anyone with my car. I want you to stop telling such ridiculous stories about me. What’s more, you must take back every word.”

“I’ll never do it.”

Mrs. Tracey, who had been in the fitting room, came toward the girls. Upon seeing her, Ethel flushed, believing Kay’s mother meant to reprimand her. In confusion she turned and fled from the store, unaware that she still held in one hand an expensive pair of gloves, picked up from one of the tables.

128

“Ethel is carrying off something from the store!” Wilma exclaimed. “Shall we stop her?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Kay said dryly.

She had seen a mannish-looking woman bearing down on Ethel and correctly guessed that she was the store detective.

“Just a minute, young lady,” said the woman sharply, grasping Ethel’s arm.

“What do you want?” the girl demanded, trying to jerk away.

“You’ll have to give up those gloves.”

“Oh,” gasped Ethel as she saw the price tag dangling from them. “I must have picked them up by mistake.”

“That’s what all shoplifters say when they’re caught,” returned the detective grimly. “You’ll have to come along with me!”

CHAPTER XVII

A FIGURE OF MYSTERY

Ethel Eaton was terrified.

“Where are you taking me?” she gasped.

“To the manager’s office,” said the store detective.

“You’re making a big mistake. I’m not a shoplifter! I can explain everything.”

Kay and the twins enjoyed themselves immensely as Ethel tried to make the woman believe her story. Mrs. Tracey, however, would not allow the misunderstanding to continue. She stepped forward to speak to the store detective.

“Here is someone who can identify me!” Ethel cried. “Tell her who I am, Mrs. Tracey.”

Kay’s mother explained that she knew the girl well, and that the gloves unquestionably had been picked up by mistake. At last Ethel was allowed to go free after being warned to be more careful in the future.

“How did you happen to pick up the gloves?” Mrs. Tracey asked. She had not heard the conversation between the girl

and her daughter.

Ethel glanced at Kay and her eyes fell.

“I guess I was just absent-minded,” she muttered.

“By the way,” said Kay evenly, “don’t you think it might be a good idea to straighten out that little matter we were discussing?”

130

“I’ll do it just as soon as I get back to school,” Ethel promised, and fled from the store.

Kay and her party soon left the shop and rode toward the railroad tracks. As they approached the crossing the warning signal began to flash red.

“Be careful!” said Mrs. Tracey nervously.

Although the train was far up the tracks, Kay did not attempt to cross ahead of it. The heavy freight came very slowly, laden with coal, lumber, and steel products. To the irritation of the girls it slowed down and finally came to a full stop, blocking the crossing.

“Now we’ll have to stay here a long time,” Kay sighed.

Directly in front of the Tracey automobile stood a carload of lumber. Kay was staring at it absent-mindedly, when she noticed two tousled heads emerge.

“O. K., Sally,” hissed a voice. “The coast is clear.”

Two slim figures clad in overalls leaped down from the load of lumber. At first glance one would have taken them for boys, but Kay noticed tangled masses of curls and tell-tale feminine curves. One of the girls held her shoulder as if it pained her, and her checks were tear-stained.

“Girl riders!” exclaimed Wilma. “Well, did you ever!”

131

“I believe one of them has been hurt!” Kay declared. “I’m going to find out what is wrong.”

She jumped from the car and ran over to the two strangers. They drew back as if they were afraid.

“I can see that you are in trouble,” she said kindly. “Is there anything I can do?”

The girl named Sally wiped away her tears with a grimy fist and stared at Kay.

“I hurt myself,” she explained. “Peg and I were riding on the lumber car. The load shifted when the train stopped back at the last station. Some of the boards struck my shoulder.”

“Sally wasn’t hurt very badly,” the other went on quickly. “She got scared and lost her nerve. She’s afraid to ride any farther.”

“I don’t blame you a bit, Sally,” said Kay. “A freight train is no place for a girl.”

“It’s the only way we have of getting back home,” Peg answered with a defiant toss of her head. “We’re broke.”

“Where is your home?” asked Kay.

“We live at Saxon,” replied Sally. “Peg and I were pretty fed up with staying at home. There was nothing to do. We heard about jobs being open in a factory at Everett so we hitchhiked there.”

“You had no luck?”

“Not a bit,” answered Peg. “All the jobs were gone. In a few days our money was all used up and we were hungry. We wanted to get home quick so we hopped a freight.”

132

“Come over to the car and talk with Mother,” Kay invited. “She may be able to help you.”

Mrs. Tracey was deeply interested in the two girls, particularly when after questioning them in some detail she learned that they came from deserving families. Peg had three brothers out of work and an older sister who was supporting her parents. Sally too came from a large family. Her father had been an invalid for three years.

“If I could get home again I’d try to find housework,” Peg declared. “It doesn’t pay very well, but at least you get three square meals a day.”

“I’ll give you money enough for your tickets home,” Mrs. Tracey offered generously. “But you must promise never to ride again on a freight train. It is too dangerous!”

“I’ll say it is!” exclaimed Sally. “We ran into some awful

characters. Take the Ruler, for instance.”

“The Ruler!” echoed Kay, glancing quickly at the twins.

“He was the ugliest looking creature in the world,” Sally shuddered. “We didn’t see him very close but we heard plenty about him!”

“We listened to two tramps talking about the man,” Peg took up the story. “They said he takes advantage of folks who are down on their luck after pretending to be friendly to them.”

133

“We heard about a crippled girl named Drusilla who was hurt in a railroad accident,” Sally added. “The company gave her two thousand dollars’ damages. The Ruler got it all away from her.”

“You say you actually saw the man?” Kay asked eagerly.

“Only at a distance. He was in the car next to ours, talking with a hobo.”

“Did you see his face?”

“He looked like a gypsy,” Peg revealed. “His head was very large and his eyes wicked. He had a hooked nose and his skin—oh, I couldn’t describe it.”

“Did it look dry like parchment?”

“Yes, that’s it! Oh, it made me shiver just to see his face. Sally and I took care to keep out of sight.”

Kay and the twins were struck by the fact that the description of the Ruler might have been applied aptly to the portrait of the gypsy woman which hung in the Moleson Mansion. They asked Peg and Sally for additional details, but the girls had nothing more to tell.

“We’ll take you to the station and buy your railroad tickets,” Kay said, trying to hide her joy at the information they had given her. “How would you like a good hot dinner?”

“We’ve not had any decent food in two weeks,” Sally said gratefully, tears coming into her eyes again. “You’re so good and kind.”

134

Mrs. Tracey bought the tickets and then gave each of the girls a dollar. Kay took them to a lunch room across from the station, and there left them.

“We’ll write to you as soon as we get home,” Sally promised as they said good-bye. “And we’ll never forget your kindness to us.”

As they drove on to the Moleson Mansion, Mrs. Tracey and the girls discussed the information that had been given by the two runaway girls. Kay thought it likely that the mysterious Ruler encountered by Peg and Sally might be the same individual of whom Monty spoke so often in his delirium.

“I feel sure there must be a connection between the gypsy portrait and this strange man who steals from people who trust him,” she said soberly. “It seems odd, yet the girls’ description of him—” She broke off, then asked, “I wonder—do you suppose the Ruler might be related to the woman in

the picture?”

“It’s a possibility,” Wilma agreed. “I wish we could locate the artist who painted it. He could explain so many things to us.”

“There’s not much chance of finding him,” Kay said regretfully. “One can’t even distinguish his name on the canvas.”

The car drew up at the Moleson Mansion and the girls jumped out. They followed Mrs. Tracey into the house, but all stopped short as they heard a commotion on the third floor.

135

“Monty is making trouble again!” Kay gasped.

The noise subsided before the newcomers were halfway up. Doctor Evans, looking disheveled and decidedly irritated, came from the patient’s room.

“I’ve just had a tussle with Monty,” he told Kay grimly. “The fellow took a sudden notion he must carry money to the Ruler! I’ve given him a sedative, and Mrs. Merriman should be able to handle him for a few hours. If this keeps up I’m afraid he must be cared for elsewhere.”

The doctor advised the girls not to enter the bedroom, so with Mrs. Tracey they returned to the library. For want of another occupation, Kay began to search through the shelves of books. She had no hope of finding any of the volumes requested by Mrs. Moleson, and so was quite delighted when she happened unexpectedly upon one of the titles.

“Is there any money in it?” Betty cried eagerly.

Kay shook the book, and a thousand-dollar bill dropped to the floor.

“Perhaps the third volume is here too! If only we can find it!” she cried.

Excited by their discovery, the girls spent an hour examining the various titles. Their search went unrewarded, however.

“If I were you I’d keep the library doors locked henceforth,” Mrs. Tracey suggested. “We are responsible for Mrs. Moleson’s property during our stay here, and I shouldn’t like to have anything disappear.”

136

Kay herself closed up the house that night. Before going to bed she made sure that the doors opening into the library were secured. When she came down to breakfast the next morning her mother said chidingly:

“Kay, I warned you to lock up the library last night.”

“Oh, I did, Mother.”

“I’ve just been in there,” replied Mrs. Tracey. “Several volumes which I distinctly recall were in the north case have disappeared. Or did you remove them?”

“Why, no!”

Kay went at once to the library. Her mother was right. Four books were missing. Fortunately the one containing the

thousand-dollar bill had been overlooked.

“Nothing else has been disturbed in the house,” Mrs. Tracey reported. “I’ve checked over everything.”

“This is certainly strange, Mother. Who has a key to the library?”

“I’ve already questioned the servants. No one will admit having entered the room. But that’s to be expected.”

“Somehow I can’t believe it’s anyone who lives in the house,” Kay said slowly. “I think that midnight prowler may be responsible. Yet how does he manage to get in and out with everything locked? It’s beyond me.”

137

While Kay was examining the library in her search for clues of the recent visitor, a servant came to say that she was wanted on the telephone. It was Miss Carter, calling from the hospital to report that Mr. Blanchard had visited Mrs. Moleson. He had excited the patient by telling her of weird happenings going on in her home since she had been away. Mrs. Moleson accordingly was determined to return at once to the mansion.

“Surely she’ll not be allowed to leave?” Kay asked in alarm.

“The doctors have decided to let her have her way,” Miss Carter replied. “She is considerably improved.”

“But she should not come here,” gasped Kay, her mind in a turmoil.

“Perhaps you can persuade her to remain, Miss Tracey, but I doubt it. I can do nothing with her myself. Why not come over and talk with her?”

“I’ll do so immediately,” Kay promised.

All the way to the hospital the sorely troubled girl planned what she would tell Mrs. Moleson. By the time she reached the woman’s room she had made up her mind that she must reveal the truth.

After assuring the patient that Mr. Blanchard’s outlandish stories were quite unfounded, Kay quietly told the woman that her son had been found and was at the mansion. She was careful not to reveal the extent of his injuries or that he had lived the life of a wanderer. Tears of joy came into Mrs. Moleson’s eyes, but she accepted the news far more calmly than Kay had expected.

138

“Nothing could stop me from going home now,” the woman declared happily. “Take me to my son—take me to Monty at once!”

139

CHAPTER XVIII

KAY'S DISAPPEARANCE

While the ambulance carried Mrs. Moleson back to Acorn Drive, Kay followed in her car. At home Monty dropped off to sleep. Assuring herself that the man would cause no more trouble for at least an hour, Mrs. Merriman decided to get a little rest herself. She dared not leave the room, so she stretched out on a cot by the window. Weary to a point of exhaustion, she fell asleep almost at once.

Half an hour later the barking of a dog in the yard below awakened Monty but the nurse did not stir. The patient sat up in bed and looked around in a bewildered way. Then he swung his feet out and staggered over to a closet where his clothes had been hung. Pulling them over his pajamas, and without glancing at the nurse, he wandered from the room.

Monty was in a state of semi-consciousness. He had no idea where he was going. Opening a door, he stepped into the den. Directly before him, hanging on a wall, was the portrait of the gypsy woman.

“Well, well, a familiar face!” muttered Monty. “How did you get here?”

It seemed to him that the figure murmured something in reply.

“Get away from here or they will kill you,” Monty whispered, his eyes on the painting. “Go to Africa!”

Suddenly a wire which supported one side of the painting gave way and allowed the picture to sag down on the wall. With a low cry of terror Monty ran from the room. He darted down the staircase and let himself out onto a second floor balcony just as the ambulance bearing Mrs. Moleson drove up to the door.

The hospital attendants were so busy helping their patient that they did not see Monty watching them; nor did Kay chance to glance up just then. The men carried Mrs. Moleson into the house and upstairs to her bedroom. Kay remained with the woman to see that she was made comfortable.

With an amazing display of agility for one who had been injured so severely, Monty slid over the balcony railing and down the rose trellis to the ground. He ran over to the empty ambulance, and finding the motor running, he chuckled with delight.

“Now we will go places, Monty,” he told himself gleefully. “We’ll find the Ruler!”

Sliding into the driver’s seat, he shifted gears and the ambulance roared away. The heavy car lurched around the corner, the rear wheels striking the curb. Monty did not notice this. He pressed his finger hard on the horn button and laughed in delight. It was amusing to see folks scurry to get out of his way.

Mrs. Moleson was resting comfortably in the Mansion

on Acorn Drive. However, she was impatient to see her son.

“You are not deceiving me?” she asked Kay piteously. “Monty is really in this house?”

“Yes, you shall see him in a very few minutes,” the girl promised. “Try to rest now.”

“I can’t,” murmured the woman. “Take me to my son at once. Please, for I have waited so long.”

Kay and the twins helped Mrs. Tracey lift the woman into a wheel chair. Then, unaware that anything had happened to Monty, they began their slow progress up the stairway.

In the meantime Mrs. Merriman had awakened to discover that her patient was missing. She did not wish to alarm the household for fear that she would be blamed for his disappearance. Instead, she hurried from room to room searching for the man.

Finally Kay and her party reached the third floor bedroom with Mrs. Moleson.

“Your son has been injured and isn’t exactly himself,” Kay told the woman, hoping to prepare her for anything which Monty might say. “I’d not try to talk with him if I were you.”

“Just let me see him,” pleaded the old lady.

Kay opened the door and wheeled Mrs. Moleson into the room. Then she saw that Nurse Merriman was gone and that

the bed was empty.

“Where is my son?” cried Mrs. Moleson plaintively. “What have you done with him?”

Kay and the twins glanced helplessly at Mrs. Tracey. They could not understand what had happened.

142

“Monty was here when I started for the hospital,” Kay murmured.

“I’m sure Mrs. Merriman hasn’t left the house,” Mrs. Tracey added in bewilderment.

“You have tricked me,” sobbed Mrs. Moleson, burying her face in her hands. “I might have known I should never see my boy again.”

“He is here somewhere in the house,” Kay insisted desperately. “I’ll find Mrs. Merriman. She’ll know what has happened to him. Please keep up your courage, Mrs. Moleson.”

Leaving her mother and the twins to comfort the woman as best they could, she ran out into the hall, loudly calling Mrs. Merriman’s name.

“Here I am,” answered the nurse from the den.

“Where is Monty?” Kay asked, rushing into the room.

“I don’t know,” acknowledged the nurse in despair. “I dropped off to sleep for a moment and when I awakened he

was gone! I'm sure he must be somewhere in the house."

"I believe he's been in this room."

Kay had noticed the rakish angle at which the portrait was hanging. Crossing to it, she retied the broken wire so that the picture could be straightened. Just then the front doorbell rang.

"That may be Monty downstairs!" the nurse exclaimed hopefully.

143

Both she and Kay hastened to the lower floor. It was not Monty who stood at the door but the hospital attendants.

"Someone has skipped off with our ambulance," the driver reported excitedly. "We'll have to use your telephone to call the police."

"Your ambulance is missing!" Kay gasped, glancing at the nurse.

"Sure is. Someone ran off with it while we were helping Mrs. Moleson into the house. We've searched the grounds and it's nowhere around."

"Monty must have taken it," said Kay in horror.

"Who is Monty?" demanded the driver.

She explained that he was a patient in the house who had wandered from his room. A brief examination of the ground beneath the balcony revealed footprints and Kay found a

piece of Monty's clothing caught in a rose bush.

"He escaped down this trellis," she declared.

"Then he went off with the ambulance all right!" exclaimed the driver. "The motor was running."

"Monty isn't a responsible person," Kay said anxiously. "He's likely to kill himself."

"And a lot of other people too! A crazy man at the wheel of an ambulance! Come on, Joe, we've got to get busy on the phone."

The two men called the police station, warning the officials to start searching for the runaway. By the time they had completed their call Kay had backed her own car from the garage. The attendants jumped into the back seat while Wilma and Betty squeezed in beside Kay.

144

"Where are we going?" asked the ambulance driver as the car swung from the grounds.

"I have an idea Monty may have headed back to Circle City," Kay said. "Perhaps toward the water tower. It seems to be a favorite haunt of his."

"Let's pick up an officer. If we should find the man, we may need help."

Kay stopped for a moment at the police station and then made all possible speed toward Circle City. A few minutes later they caught sight of the missing ambulance jammed between

two trees along the roadside.

“Oh, I knew something dreadful would happen,” Wilma moaned. “Monty never could have survived such a crash.”

Kay was of the same opinion; yet when they all searched the wreckage there was no sign of the man, nor could he be found wandering in the vicinity.

“Perhaps someone picked him up and took him to a hospital,” Kay suggested.

The girls spent two hours telephoning and making inquiries. Monty had not been entered in any hospital. No one had witnessed the accident. Even the police admitted themselves completely baffled. It was late afternoon before the girls returned to the Moleson mansion, thoroughly discouraged by their failure.

145

“I’ve never heard of a stranger accident,” Wilma declared. “It’s almost uncanny.”

“Yes, it is,” Kay agreed soberly. “Even the way that portrait of the gypsy woman shifted on the wall—yet there must be a logical explanation for it.”

“Didn’t you say the wire broke?” Betty asked. “I hope you’re not getting superstitious, Kay.”

“Hardly. But I agree with Wilma that odd things have been happening around here.”

After they had reached the mansion, Kay went to the third

floor alone, spending many minutes staring at the portrait. Betty found her there and led her away.

“That face gives me the jitters, Kay,” she declared. “I wish you wouldn’t spend so much time looking at it.”

“Afraid I’ll get to be like Monty?”

As was to be expected, Mrs. Moleson had suffered a collapse following her bitter disappointment. The girls tried to cheer her by saying that Monty surely would be found soon, but she refused to take heart.

“I wonder myself if we’ll ever find the man,” Kay confessed to the twins later that night as they prepared for bed.

“Somehow I’ve made a mess of this entire affair.”

“It’s not your fault that things have turned out as they have,” Wilma said loyally.

146

Kay made no reply as she rolled into bed. Betty turned off the light while Wilma pushed up the window. Soon the three girls were asleep.

Some time after midnight Wilma awoke, and chancing to glance toward Kay’s cot, was surprised to see it empty. She nudged Betty who lay beside her.

“What do you want?” the girl asked irritably. “Why don’t you let me sleep?”

“Betty, Kay’s bed is empty!”

“She probably went downstairs for a drink of milk. I’m going back to sleep.” Betty rolled over and half buried her head under the sheet.

Wilma could not sleep. She waited fifteen minutes; then, slipping into her bathrobe, she went down to the kitchen. Kay was not there nor could her chum find her anywhere in the house.

By this time Wilma was thoroughly alarmed. Rushing back to the bedroom, she gave her sister a rude shake.

“Get up, Betty,” she commanded. “Kay is missing! I’m terribly afraid something has happened to her!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE MURMURING PORTRAIT

Betty was thoroughly awake in an instant. She slipped on a robe and slippers as quickly as possible.

“Kay must be somewhere in the house,” Wilma told her anxiously, “but I’ve been unable to find her. Do you suppose she could have started out alone to search for Monty?”

“Is the car missing from the garage?”

“I’ll look and see.”

The Tracey automobile had not been taken from the grounds. It was possible that Kay might have called a taxi, though this did not seem likely.

Wilma and Betty did not wish to awaken Mrs. Tracey but they could see no other way out. They rapped on her door and told her of Kay’s absence.

“Something has happened,” declared Mrs. Tracey anxiously. “It’s not like my daughter to go off at night without explaining her movements.”

When a more thorough search convinced everyone that Kay

was not on the premises, Wilma telephoned to Doctor Evans and to Bill Tracey. Neither of them had received any communication from the missing girl.

“Perhaps Mr. Blanchard has had something to do with her disappearance,” Betty suggested. “He’s tried so many times to make trouble.”

148

When the lawyer had been aroused from bed and called to the telephone, he made it very clear that he knew nothing about Kay’s disappearance. Furthermore, he did not wish to be annoyed again, he said.

It was nearing dawn, and still no word had been received from the missing girl. Mrs. Tracey tried to remain calm but her nerves were close to the breaking point.

“What was that noise?” she asked suddenly.

“I didn’t hear anything,” replied Betty.

“There it is again.”

As the three stood listening they heard a faint tapping which seemed to float down from above.

“I believe the sound comes from Mrs. Moleson’s room,” declared Wilma.

“No, it’s not from that direction,” insisted Betty. “I think it’s on the third floor.”

Closely followed by Mrs. Tracey, the girls tiptoed up the

stairway. The tapping had ceased. They waited a few minutes and then heard the noise once more. This time they felt certain it came from the den.

Wilma softly opened the door and peered into the very dimly-lighted room. At first she could distinguish little. Then her eyes fastened upon the wall where the gypsy portrait had hung. A painting was there, but it was one of a soldier in a red uniform.

Wilma rubbed her eyes, wondering if she were really awake. As she stared at the canvas, she heard a sound which seemed to come from the lips of the stern looking man in the picture. The portrait actually was murmuring! With a cry of fright Wilma retreated.

149

“What is the matter with you?” Betty demanded, catching her sister by the arm.

“Don’t—go—in—there,” Wilma whispered fearfully. “The portrait of the gypsy is gone. Another one is hanging on the wall and it’s murmuring. I heard it.”

“Have you lost your senses?” demanded Betty impatiently. “Wilma Worth, I’m ashamed of you.”

“I tell you I heard it with my own ears.”

Mrs. Tracey opened the door and went inside the room, closely followed by Betty. They both stopped short as they heard a low sound not unlike a human voice.

“The gypsy’s picture is gone,” Betty whispered in awe. “I

never saw this one before.”

“Turn on the lights,” commanded Mrs. Tracey, trying to remain calm and collected.

Betty groped about until she found the switch. Instantly the room became bright.

“No one is here,” Mrs. Tracey said in a low voice as she glanced uneasily about her.

“But the portrait has been changed.”

“Yes. I don’t understand it at all. What was that?”

150

Mrs. Tracey’s eyes opened wide. Both she and Betty had heard a faint tinkling sound which might have been caused by a person touching two glasses together. They could not localize the strange noise.

“Listen!” commanded Mrs. Tracey in awe.

The murmuring could be heard again, much plainer this time. Mrs. Tracey rubbed her hand over her eyes. Was it her imagination, or had the portrait shifted a bit to the right?

“It’s terribly close in this room,” she whispered. “I feel dizzy.”

“I’ll open a window,” Betty said quickly. “Sit down in this chair for a minute and you’ll be all right.”

The Worth girl herself felt none too well. She called to

Wilma, who came timidly into the room from the hallway.

“Let’s not stay here, Betty,” she said nervously. “We can take Mrs. Tracey downstairs and go out on the porch.”

“Yes, that will be better,” Betty quickly agreed, and turned out the lights.

The cool, fresh air revived Mrs. Tracey.

“Do you know, I believe we imagined everything,” she declared with an uneasy laugh. “It’s rather ridiculous to think that a picture can murmur. We must have heard the wind.”

“All the windows were closed,” said Betty. “There was no breeze stirring inside.”

151

“You are right,” Mrs. Tracey admitted. “I guess we must have imagined everything. I should judge that a reduced supply of oxygen might affect one’s senses.”

Betty was willing to return to the den, but Wilma and Mrs. Tracey, eager to continue the search for Kay, overruled her.

“I’ll go back to the bedroom and get my coat,” Wilma declared. “Then I’ll search the grounds more thoroughly. Kay couldn’t have gone far away.”

Mrs. Tracey and Betty went with her. As Wilma opened the door a beam of light from the hallway shot directly across Kay’s bed. It was no longer empty.

“Why, Kay is here!” exclaimed Wilma.

“Sleeping like a babe,” added Betty.

The latter observation was not entirely accurate. Kay was not sleeping peacefully. She tossed restlessly on the bed, now and then clutching her pillow with her hands as though engaging it in battle.

“She must be having a nightmare,” whispered Wilma. “Shall we awaken her?”

“No, let her sleep,” decided Mrs. Tracey. “The poor child looks exhausted. I wonder where she has been?”

In the dim light the three could not see that Kay’s hands and arms were stained with blood from a multitude of tiny cuts. Mrs. Tracey went back to her own room, while Wilma and Betty quietly undressed in the dark.

152

The twins did not rest very well during the remainder of the night. Kay talking strangely in her sleep kept them awake. At dawn Wilma arose and tiptoed to the den. She wished to have another look at the new painting on the wall.

The girl cautiously opened the door. She could hear no sound from within. As her eyes roved over to the wall she received another surprise. The murmuring portrait had vanished and in its place hung the one of the gypsy!

“Or has it always been here?” Wilma mused in perplexity. “Perhaps we imagined everything last night.”

After a minute or two she stepped out into the hall. There she paused to listen. She could hear Mrs. Moleson moaning and

sobbing. The distracted woman called Kay's name again and again, pleading that her son be restored to her.

Wilma considered going in to see the patient, but decided against it. She went on toward her own bedroom. As she opened the door she nearly ran into Betty who was starting to search for her.

“Wilma, come quickly!”

“Why, what is wrong now?”

“I want you to look at Kay,” Betty declared excitedly. “Her hands and arms have been cut!”

CHAPTER XX

A CHANGE OF OPINION

The commotion from Mrs. Moleson's room, combined with the talking outside her bedroom door, had awakened Kay. She stirred and sat up. For a moment she could not remember where she was. She seemed to ache in every muscle.

Glancing down, the girl was astonished to see that the bed linen was splattered with dried blood. Her arms were severely scratched and cut.

"I look as if I've been in a fight," Kay thought. "How in the world did I get scratched like this?"

Vaguely she tried to recall where she had been during the night. She seemed to have a memory of crashing glass. Or was it all a dream?

"These cuts are very real, though," Kay told herself ruefully. "I'll clean myself up and say nothing about them to anyone."

She was washing herself in the bathroom when Wilma and Betty came in. She had jerked the sheets from the bed, tucking them out of sight. The twins, however, were not to be deceived so easily.

“Kay, where were you last night?” Betty asked her friend anxiously.

“In bed,” Kay answered innocently, taking care to keep her arms well covered with a towel.

“Let me see your hands,” commanded Wilma sternly.
“Betty says you hurt yourself.”

154

“Oh, you mean these little scratches?” Reluctantly Kay exposed her arms. “They’re nothing at all.”

“Why, the skin is broken in a dozen places,” Wilma said in horror.

“How did it happen?” Betty asked. “Tell us where you were and how you hurt yourself.”

“There’s really nothing at all to tell.”

Just then Mrs. Tracey came into the bedroom. She too looked at her daughter’s wounds and insisted upon an explanation for them.

“All right, I’ll tell you,” Kay sighed, “but it all sounds so silly. I went to the den more upon an impulse than for any other reason. Suddenly as I gazed at the gypsy picture in the dim light I became dizzy. The room began to turn around, or that’s the way it seemed in my mind.”

“Why, that’s exactly what happened to me,” Mrs. Tracey murmured.

“I felt as if I were losing my balance so I reached out for support. Then it grew dark and my hand struck a shelf of glassware.”

“Glassware!” exclaimed Wilma. “But how could that be? There is no glassware in the den.”

“I knew the story would sound silly. That’s why I didn’t care to tell you about it.”

“Are you sure you didn’t dream it, Kay?” asked her mother.

“She couldn’t have dreamed it all,” said Betty soberly. “We know Kay left her bed, and the cuts on her hands show that she must have crashed into something.”

155

“After this I think we’ll have to tie you in bed at night,” declared Mrs. Tracey. “I’m afraid you’ve been walking in your sleep.”

This explanation seemed to satisfy everyone so Kay let the matter drop. In her own mind, however, she was convinced that she had not imagined any part of the tale.

Learning that Mrs. Moleson was constantly calling for her, the girl went immediately to see the woman. She found her with a tray in front of her.

“Now eat your breakfast and try not to worry,” Kay told the patient cheerfully. “I have every reason to believe that your son will be found. There is the bell now! Perhaps the police are bringing good news!”

She ran down to open the door. The visitor was Patricia Robbin. Both girls were rather startled to see each other again.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were staying here,” Patricia said. “I called to inquire about Mrs. Moleson as I was told that she is very ill.”

“Won’t you come in?” Kay invited. “I am sure Mrs. Moleson will be happy to see you. She has been very ill. That is why my mother and chums have stayed here.”

“I didn’t know you were acquainted with Mrs. Moleson,” the girl remarked. “Oh, by the way, I don’t suppose you ever found my ring?”

156

“Yes, I meant to speak of it to you. I’ll get it for you now.”

Kay hurried upstairs to her room, where Betty and Wilma were busy writing. They were surprised to learn that Miss Robbin had called, and were even more amazed to hear that Kay expected to return the ring to her.

“I thought you intended to keep it for a while,” Wilma said. “Didn’t you decide to show it to Monty in the hope of bringing him back to his senses?”

Kay was silent for a moment. Then she said gravely:

“I have changed my mind. I’m not going to do one more thing to unite Monty with his mother or sweetheart.”

“Why Kay!” Betty exclaimed. “I never knew you to give up a mystery before.”

“What made you lose interest?” Wilma inquired.

“I’ve not lost interest exactly, but I’ve reached the conclusion that if Mrs. Moleson ever realizes her son’s true condition it will kill her.”

“Then you believe that Monty will never regain his faculties?”

“From what Doctor Evans has told me I doubt it very much. The man’s recent injuries are not responsible for his mental state as I believed at first. I fear that in spite of anything we can do for him, he’ll always be Monty the Mole.”

157

“It’s a shame,” said Betty.

“Probably you are right,” Wilma acknowledged slowly. “It will be better for Miss Robbin and Mrs. Moleson to remember Monty as he existed years ago.”

“That is why I shall return the ring to her.”

Wilma and Betty went downstairs to renew their acquaintance with Miss Robbin, and a few minutes later Mrs. Tracey joined the group. All found the young woman to be very friendly and pleasant.

“I am so happy to have my ring again,” Patricia told Kay gratefully. “After this I shall keep it in my safety deposit box. I could not bear to lose it.”

Mrs. Tracey escorted the visitor upstairs to see Mrs. Moleson.

Fearing that too many persons might upset the patient, Kay and the twins waited downstairs.

“It seems a pity that Monty and his sweetheart can’t be united,” Betty remarked sadly. “But of course that is quite impossible.”

Wilma began to quote softly:

“It is buried and done with,
The love that we knew;
Those cobwebs we spun with
Are beaded with dew.

I loved thee; I leave thee;
To love thee was pain;
I dare not believe thee
To love thee again.”

158

“Perhaps if Miss Robbin were to see him—” Betty ventured.

“No,” said Kay firmly, “that is the one thing we must try to prevent. Patricia lives in her memories. If she were to see Monty the Mole as he is today, she would be completely broken up.”

The telephone rang at that moment and Betty arose to answer it.

“It’s for you, Kay. From the police station.”

“Perhaps Monty has been found!” Wilma exclaimed.

“Wouldn’t that be just fate!”

Her guess proved to be entirely correct. The police had captured a man believed to be the one who had stolen and wrecked the hospital ambulance. They wanted Kay to come at once to the jail to identify him.

“Will you go?” asked Wilma.

“I must, but how I dread the ordeal.”

“Wilma and I will go along if you like,” Betty offered.

“Indeed you will!” Kay replied. “Let’s slip away quietly while Miss Robbin is upstairs.”

CHAPTER XXI

MONTY'S PLIGHT

When Kay and the twins reached the jail an attendant led them directly to the infirmary where Monty the Mole was being held. The girls were shocked by his appearance. His face was scratched and bruised, and they saw that he had been tied to his bed.

“The fellow was injured when his ambulance crashed into a tree,” explained the attendant. “He wandered down to the railroad tracks. The police captured him there but he put up quite a battle before they subdued him!”

An officer asked Kay to identify the prisoner. She hesitated a long while before making a reply. The man was Monty the Mole. She had no doubt on that score. Yet she disliked to make a positive identification of him, knowing that severe charges might be placed against him.

“I see that you recognize the man,” said the officer, who was a keen judge of facial expression.

“Yes,” Kay admitted reluctantly, “he is the one who ran off with the ambulance.”

“Can you tell us his name?”

“I believe he calls himself Monty the Mole.”

Kay had no intention of bringing humiliation upon Mrs. Moleson by revealing that the man was her son. She gave Wilma and Betty a quick glance which warned them to keep a discreet silence. 160

While the girls were talking with the officer, the prison doctor entered the infirmary to make his routine inspection. He paused at Monty’s bed, talked briefly with the man, and then walked over to the window where the others were standing.

“How is he, doctor?” inquired the officer.

“No better, I regret to say. Clearly the fellow is deranged. He’ll have to be sent to an asylum.”

“Do you think his mental condition might have been caused by a couple of accidents?” Kay asked quickly.

The doctor shook his head.

“No, I fear his trouble began some time ago. Under proper care and institutional treatment his mind might clear. But it is doubtful.”

“Well, I suppose we may as well have him transferred as soon as possible,” the officer commented.

“Has he no relatives?” questioned the doctor.

“None that we know of.”

While the doctor and the policeman were discussing Monty's case, Kay walked over to the man's bedside. She did not expect him to recognize her, and was surprised when he stared at her as if he recalled having seen her before.

"Am I in jail again?" he muttered.

"Yes, Monty," Kay answered gently, "but don't worry. You'll not be here very long."

161

"The Ruler will help me get out!" the man mumbled. "I must have word sent to him. Go to him—at once—tell him Monty needs his help."

"Who is the Ruler?" Kay asked. "Where shall I find him?"

"Ask for George Doran," the man directed. "Columbia Apartments—Circle City."

Kay repeated the directions aloud and scribbled them on a pad of paper. Before she could ask another question, the doctor and the officer had come over to his bedside.

"Well, Monty," said the policeman, "how would you like to go for a nice ride?"

The fellow stared at his questioner blankly. He did not appear to understand what was meant.

"I'll have him transferred to High Point State Hospital late this afternoon," the officer said in an undertone, addressing the doctor again. "There's nothing we can do for him here."

Not until the girls had left the jail did Kay show Betty and Wilma the address which she had obtained from Monty.

“What do you propose to do with it?” Betty asked curiously.

“Why, I shall go there, of course.”

“You’d only be wasting your time,” Wilma protested. “Monty is hopelessly confused. If such a person as the Ruler exists I’m sure he’ll not be found at a first class apartment house.”

162

“Monty seemed fairly rational when he gave it to me.”

“Let’s go back home, Kay,” urged Betty.

“It would take us only half an hour to go to the apartment. If you like I’ll take you back to the Moleson Mansion and make the trip alone.”

“No, we’ll stay with you if you’re determined to do it,” Betty declared.

In a short space of time the girls located the Circle City apartment house.

“Wait here and I’ll find out,” Kay said, leaving the car.

She went into the apartment house vestibule. There were no cards above any of the mailboxes which bore the name Doran, so she rang the bell to summon the janitor. After a long wait the door opened and a stout, red-faced man peered out at her.

“Well?” he asked in an unfriendly tone.

“I’m trying to locate a man by the name of George Doran. Does he live here?”

The janitor eyed Kay suspiciously.

“Why do you want to see him?” he asked bluntly.

“I have a message from one of his friends.”

“I’ll give it to him.”

“I prefer to see Mr. Doran myself.”

“You can’t.”

“Why, may I ask?”

“Because he’s not here any more. He gave up his apartment weeks ago.”

163

“Can’t you tell me his new address?” Kay asked. “He must have left one.”

“I can’t give you any information. But if you’ll tell me the message I’ll see that he gets it.”

“Very well,” said Kay. “Tell Mr. Doran that a friend of his named Monty the Mole is in serious trouble. The man was taken to jail today and is being sent to the High Point State Hospital.”

“I’ll deliver the message,” promised the janitor.

Kay returned to the automobile, reporting the conversation to Betty and Wilma.

“I know very well that the janitor has Doran’s address,” she declared. “He was afraid to give it to me for fear I had some connection with the police.”

“Shall we go back to the mansion now?” urged Wilma, who had no liking for their present adventure.

“Please, let’s not give up just yet,” pleaded Kay. “I’d like to drive around the corner and then keep watch of this apartment building.”

“You don’t believe the Ruler actually lives here?”

“No, but I think the janitor may deliver my message to him in person. If he does, we’ll follow and learn where he goes.”

The twins offered no objection to the plan. Kay parked her car just around the corner out of sight. They did not have long to wait. In a few minutes the man could be seen crossing the street toward the bus stop. He boarded a westbound vehicle.

164

“Perhaps he’s not on his way to deliver your message at all, Kay,” commented Wilma. “It would be just our luck to go to all this trouble for nothing.”

“That’s a chance we must take, of course,” Kay agreed, shifting gears.

She had no difficulty in keeping the bus in sight. The girls watched carefully at each stop but did not see the janitor alight.

“Is he riding to the end of the line?” complained Wilma. “I wish he’d hurry up and get off.”

Not until the bus reached its last stop did she have her wish. The man the girls were trailing finally got out. Without noticing the automobile, he started off afoot down the road.

Kay parked the car, and after waiting a few minutes the chums followed the man at some distance. They saw him turn from the main road into a deserted lane.

“He’s heading for that house over there,” Kay whispered.

She indicated an impressive brick dwelling located at the end of the lane in a hidden, tree-shaded site.

“Do you suppose the mysterious person called the Ruler lives there?” asked Betty in awe.

“George Doran and the Ruler must be one and the same person,” Kay replied. “I’d say we’re approaching his headquarters now.”

Keeping hidden by the trees and bushes which lined the path, the girls followed the janitor. To their surprise he did not go to the front door of the house. Instead he sought an entrance at the rear which opened directly into the cellar. The girls watched the man until he disappeared from view.

As Kay started forward, Wilma nervously gripped her by the hand. “Don’t try to get inside,” she whispered fearfully. “I’m afraid.”

“There is something sinister about this place,” Betty added.
“You can feel it in the air.”

“I must learn what is going on inside the place,” Kay insisted courageously.

She could feel her heart beating faster than usual. Shaking off Wilma’s restraining hand, she daringly stole toward one of the cellar windows.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STRANGE CELLAR

By lying flat on the earth Kay could look down into the dimly-lighted room below. The window glass had been covered by a curtain of coarse material which had parted in the center, leaving a wide crack. Through it Kay saw a sight which appalled her.

The room was filled with strange looking persons, nearly all of them tramps or cripples. At first the girl thought that they were holding some sort of meeting. Then she observed that one by one the people came forward to press money or jewels into the hand of a tall, hard-faced individual who bore a striking resemblance to the gypsy portrait. He wore the costume of a Rajah.

“That man must be the Ruler!” Kay thought.

The girl pressed her ear close to the window. She had seen the janitor approach the leader and she wished to hear what he would say. Kay caught just enough to know that the man was repeating the message which concerned Monty.

The Ruler’s face did not change expression. Kay saw him shrug his shoulders indifferently. Probably he was not concerned with Monty’s fate unless it meant money to

himself.

“It does not matter,” were his words. “I have no further use for the fellow. His working days are over,” he added gruffly.

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Betty and Wilma, consumed with curiosity, conquered their fears and crept to the window beside Kay.

“What does it mean?” Wilma gasped as she saw the crowd in the room below. “Is it a meeting?”

Kay shook her head.

“Those poor folks are giving money and jewels to the Ruler. I suspect that he encourages them to rob and steal. At any rate, he takes every penny from them and then casts them off as he has Monty!”

“He looks cruel and wicked,” Betty observed with a shiver. “No wonder Monty went crazy, if he were under the influence of such a person.”

“How did he gain his power?” Wilma asked.

“Probably by playing upon the superstitions of his subjects,” Kay answered. “Let’s go around to the other window.”

The girls stole to the opposite side of the house. They peered into a dark room and at first could see nothing. Then they noticed an old woman rocking to and fro in a chair. Her lips were moving as if she were talking or chanting to herself.

“Why, she’s the gypsy of the portrait!” Betty whispered in awe.

“She’s even more awful looking than her picture!” gasped Wilma. “Did you ever see such a horrible creature?”

As the girls watched, the door opened. The man known to them as the Ruler came inside. He bowed respectfully to the old woman, and emptied a collection of jewels into her lap.

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“I have brought you the day’s loot, Mother,” he said.

The old hag ran her hands through the gems and cackled with glee. Then she scowled.

“It is a very poor haul, my son. Why have you not done better?”

“Our subjects are becoming troublesome. The cripples say that I have not kept my promise to cure them. The tramps are a shiftless lot. Word just came that Monty the Mole has been sent to an asylum.”

“We must get new workers,” muttered the old woman. “It is time to change to a different locality. Our activities are becoming too well known to the police.”

“You are right as always, Mother,” said the Ruler, bowing.

Kay and the twins were so interested in the scene below that they failed to hear footsteps. Suddenly they were grasped by a firm hand. Whirling about, the girls faced a watchman.

“What are you doing here on these private grounds?” he demanded gruffly.

“We—were—just looking,” Betty stammered.

The girls would have fled, but at that moment another guard joined the watchman so they knew that escape would be out of the question. Their only hope would be to pretend innocence.

169

“We didn’t mean to trespass,” Kay declared earnestly. “You see, we were out walking and noticed this big house. We thought we’d see who lives here. Is this a public institution?”

“Yes, that’s right,” agreed the watchman quickly. “It’s run by the government. We take care of folks who were injured in the war—most of them are cripples.”

The two guards escorted the girls into an office room on the first floor. By this time, however, they were beginning to think that Kay and the twins had learned nothing of importance and that it might be wise to allow them to go free.

The girls acted their parts well, asking many questions concerning the institution.

“I’ll show you about,” offered the watchman. “Then you can see for yourselves the good work we do here.”

He led the girls through a large, empty dining room, a game room likewise deserted, and then to the kitchen. Here a motley-looking crew of men was preparing food under the direction of a hard-faced cook. Some of the cripples looked

wearily enough to collapse.

“We try to make our place pay for itself,” explained the watchman.

“Some of the men scarcely look able to work,” commented Wilma dryly.

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“Oh, it is much better for them to be active,” said the watchman, hurriedly taking the girls from the kitchen.

Kay and the twins followed their guide to another room where a group of men were repairing shoes. A dozen persons were busy at their benches. At first the girls noticed nothing irregular. Then Kay’s keen eyes observed that a tiny compartment had been put in the high-built last of one of the shoes. It was easy to guess that each shoe contained a similar cavity to be used as a place where jewels could be hidden.

The girls noticed too that many wires, having no connection with telephones or lighting, entered the room. In one nook there was a speaking tube. Small wonder that everything was in order! Should the police arrive for an inspection, or a chance visitor ask to be shown through the building, it would be a simple task to flash warnings throughout the building of their presence.

“You seem to be doing a very fine thing here,” remarked Kay, pretending that she accepted everything at face value.

“Yes, we are very proud of our institution,” returned the guide. “I will take you next to the library.”

He showed the girls a room which was lined from floor to ceiling with books.

“Do your workers spend much time here?” inquired Kay.

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“Oh, yes, each evening the place is crowded.”

The girl found it difficult to keep from smiling. She knew that the library was never used. The even rows of books were caked deeply with dust. No hand had touched them in months. The room itself had a musty odor as if windows were seldom opened.

“Now you have seen everything,” said the guide. “I will show you the exit.”

“Oh, we haven’t seen *everything!*” cried Betty impulsively.

The words slipped from her mouth before she realized the effect they would produce. She had not intended to show any interest in the rooms occupied by the Rajah and the gypsy woman.

“Just what do you mean?” asked the guide in a suspicious tone.

“Why, you didn’t show us the sleeping rooms,” Betty stammered.

“We never take visitors there,” replied the guide, relaxing. “Or for that matter to the basement either.”

“There is nothing of interest in those places, I suppose,” Kay remarked, keeping a straight face.

“No,” responded the man shortly.

He opened the outside door and stood aside for them to pass through. Just at that moment a man emerged from the cellar exit and came toward the girls. He was the janitor who had delivered Kay’s message to the Ruler.

172

The girl saw him first and lowered her head, but she could not escape detection. His eyes narrowed as he recognized her.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded harshly. “Didn’t I tell you I would deliver your message?”

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CHAPTER XXIII

A DARING ROLE

“Oh, I had no idea I’d see you again so soon,” Kay replied. She knew that their only hope of carrying off the situation would be to keep up the pretense of being casual visitors at the institution.

“What are you doing here?” the janitor repeated.

“We’ve just been through the building,” Kay said with a show of enthusiasm. “We were out this way on a little hike and the watchman said we might see the place.”

“Yes, they’re doing such interesting things here,” Betty added quickly.

A slow smile spread over the janitor’s face. He felt reassured. Kay saw the guide give him a wink which no doubt was meant to inform him that the girls were quite harmless.

“I think we should be going now,” said Wilma, who was eager to escape before anything should happen to the three.

The guide moved away for them to pass.

“I forgot to mention that this institution for cripples has

never received much publicity. The government wishes to keep its location fairly secret so that the inmates will not be bothered with too many visitors. For that reason we ask every visitor who comes here not to speak of the place to anyone.”

“I can understand why you make such a request,” agreed Kay.

“Yes indeed,” echoed Betty, edging away from the guard.

With these evasive answers the girls walked away, leaving the two men to feel assured that they would not reveal any of the institutional secrets. Kay and the twins did not glance back until they had reached the shelter of the trees which fringed the lane. Then they saw that the guard and the janitor were still standing outside the building.

“I’d give a great deal to hear what they are saying,” Kay declared. “Let’s circle back and try to overhear them.”

“If we’re caught it won’t be easy to talk ourselves out of it a second time,” Wilma said nervously, but she followed Kay and Betty.

Approaching from the opposite side of the building, the girls were able to get fairly close to the two men. Their voices could be heard plainly.

“Do you think it was wise to let those girls go?” asked the janitor.

“They didn’t suspect anything,” replied the guard.

“I’m not so sure. They sent a message to the Ruler about

Monty the Mole. The fellow has gone completely insane and is in an asylum.”

“He always was a border-line case,” returned the guard indifferently. “For weeks he’s been going around under the impression he is Monty Moleson.”

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At this remark the listening girls strained their ears so that they would miss nothing.

“I guess he picked up that idea when the Ruler let him take care of the real Monty Moleson.”

“Precious little care *that* prisoner has received.”

“He could have fared better if he hadn’t held out against the Ruler. It was a long time before he broke down and told where the Moleson treasure was hidden.”

“How did the Ruler meet him anyway?” asked the guard curiously. “He’s not the type we usually get here.”

“I heard the fellow is really an artist. It seems he wanted to paint a picture of the Ruler’s mother. He paid her a thousand dollars to pose for him. You might know she’d make good use of the time she spent with him.”

“She wouldn’t overlook a bet like that!” chuckled the guard wickedly. “Monty is completely under her influence now. For that matter, so are all the folks who come to this place. Oh, it’s a great racket, all right.”

“More so for the Ruler and his mother than for us,” said the

janitor pointedly. “We take all the risks and get very little for it. Look at the way they threw over Monty the Mole. We may end up with a similar fate.”

The two men talked in lower tones and presently went into the house. Not until then did Kay and the twins return to the lane.

176

“Did you understand what they meant about Monty Moleson?” Betty asked in awe. “Can it be that Monty the Mole isn’t really Mrs. Moleson’s son after all?”

“According to their conversation, the real Monty is a prisoner of that gypsy woman and her son,” Kay declared excitedly. “The fellow we know merely imagined himself to be the nicer man. It was a natural mistake to make. The first names were the same, and in his befuddled mind he actually thought himself to be Monty Moleson. Oh, so many things are clearing up for me now!”

“Then I wish you’d explain them to me,” said Wilma.

“We were all taken in because Monty the crazy tramp kept saying things which led us to believe that he was the real Monty Moleson. I suspect that this place is run by the old gypsy woman with her son who is known as the Ruler. They are holding the real Montgomery Moleson here in the hope of learning through him all about Mrs. Moleson’s art treasures and then stealing them.”

“Kay!” interposed Betty warningly. “Someone is coming down the lane.”

They saw a crippled girl hobbling along on her crutches, moving slowly and painfully toward them. Kay and the twins stepped behind the bushes until she drew near. Then they suddenly appeared. The cripple gave a frightened cry.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Kay gently, “we’ll not harm you. Are you on your way to the big house over there?”

“Yes, I am going to see the man who handles my business affairs,” answered the girl.

“Mr. Doran?” questioned Kay.

“Yes. How did you learn his name?”

“I can’t tell you that but I am fairly well acquainted with the man and his methods.”

Kay had been studying the stranger and half suspected that she was the same unfortunate person whom the two hitchhikers, Peg and Sally, had mentioned. In a tactful way she went about gaining as much information as possible. Amazed that the girls knew so much about her, the cripple told them even more about herself.

Her name was Drusilla Courtney. She had been injured in a railroad accident, and had received a fairly large sum of money to compensate her for her injuries.

“Mr. Doran is investing all my money for me,” she revealed. “He has promised me a fifty per cent increase in my funds. Isn’t that wonderful? It will be enough to keep me all my

days, and perhaps I'll be able to have my ugly crooked legs made straight again."

"Are you sure the man will keep his promise?" asked Kay.

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Drusilla's face clouded.

"I have written him several times lately and he has not replied. My money is running low and I'd like to have the dividends he told me I would receive. That is why I came here today—to see him personally and ask him for my money."

"I don't wish to discourage you," Kay told the girl kindly, "but I'm afraid you may never see your money again. Mr. Doran—that is only one of his names—has cheated and deceived many persons like yourself."

She then told a few of the facts which she had gathered regarding the Ruler and his mother. At first Drusilla could not believe that the man she had trusted was a scoundrel, but gradually the truth became evident to her. She began to sob pitifully.

"Don't cry," Kay said gently. "If you do exactly as I ask, I may be able to help you."

"I'll do anything I can," the girl promised tearfully. "But I am so helpless with these crutches."

"Let me see how I can walk with them," Kay requested.

Drusilla sat down on a log and gave up the wooden supports.

To the amazement of Betty and Wilma, Kay slipped them under her arms, and twisting her legs to resemble those of the unfortunate cripple, she hobbled up and down the lane.

“Drusilla, will you lend me these crutches for a few minutes?” Kay asked. “And I’d like to exchange clothes with you, too.”

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“Kay, you’re not going to pass yourself off as Drusilla!” Betty cried.

“Yes, I’ll visit Mr. Doran in disguise. Do you think I can get by?”

“You might,” said Wilma doubtfully, “but it’s too risky——”

“Nonsense,” Kay interrupted, “if Drusilla will let me have these crutches I’ll try my scheme. A great deal is at stake.”

“You may have the crutches and my clothes,” the crippled girl said instantly. “And I’ll tell you where to find Mr. Doran. His office is in the cellar. I know, because I was taken there when I brought my money for him to invest.”

The girls exchanged clothing, and after Kay had practiced for a few minutes with the crutches, she hobbled toward the house alone. Wilma and Betty saw their chum disappear into the dwelling.

Kay was fairly familiar with the interior of the building for she had made careful notes during her previous visit. The halls were deserted. She quickly located a stairway leading into the cellar.

Hobbling down the steps one at a time, she tapped loudly with her crutches to herald her approach. Before she reached the bottom of the stairway two guards appeared, but after one careless glance at her they allowed her to pass without questioning her.

Kay entered the room which served as a general gathering place for those who wished to have an audience with the Ruler. When a surly looking man came to ask her what she wanted the girl gave her name as Drusilla Courtney.

“I’ll tell the Ruler you are here,” said the fellow discouragingly, “but I think he’ll not have time to see you today.”

The visitor sat down in a dark corner to wait. She shrewdly guessed that Drusilla Courtney’s name was well known to everyone in the institution. As several minutes elapsed and no one appeared it became apparent to her that the Ruler intended to play a waiting game. He would let her sit there until she should become weary and leave.

“Only this time the joke will be on him,” Kay thought. “I’ll not go away until I’ve learned where Monty Moleson is imprisoned.”

She noticed a few books in a wall case. After a while she stole over to examine the titles. Nearly all of them were cheap, trashy tales, but one volume was bound in leather. Kay was not surprised to note that it was the title which she had been unable to locate in the Moleson library. Quickly she opened the cover. Mrs. Moleson’s name was written across the fly

leaf, conclusive proof that the book had been stolen from her.

Kay shook the volume. It contained no money.

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Replacing the book on the shelf, the girl moved slowly about the room.

“There must be a secret chamber here somewhere in the cellar,” she told herself. “If I dared I’d tap the walls, but the Ruler would be sure to hear me.”

Kay heard a slight sound and moved hastily back to her corner. Click! A panel on the opposite wall shot open and a boy carrying an empty tray stepped into view. The panel closed behind him. Not until then did the lad see Kay, but her presence failed to disturb him. He smiled in a simple way and went on to another room.

“He’s given me the clue to the hidden chamber!” Kay told herself excitedly.

She waited for a moment, then stole over to the wall. After groping about she finally located a tiny button which she pressed. The panel slid back, exposing a wooden stairway which led upward.

Kay did not hesitate. She stepped through the panel and heard it close behind her. Softly she crept up the steep staircase. It seemed to be leading to the second floor.

When she reached the last step Kay found herself confronted by another wall. As she ran her fingers deftly over it a panel gave way and slowly pushed inward. Kay knew that she had found the prison room!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SECRET ROOM

The room was dark, so that at first Kay could see nothing. Then she made out a shadowy figure strapped to a chair.

“Monty! Monty Moleson!” the girl called in a half whisper.

There was no answer and the reason soon became apparent. One of the prisoner’s ankles was chained to a bedpost, his hands were tied behind his back and he was gagged.

Kay moved quickly to the man. His face was haggard and his thin body had been wasted from starvation. She knew that he must be Monty Moleson for the lines of his angular face were strangely similar to those of Mrs. Moleson.

“I’ll have you free in a minute,” the girl said encouragingly.

She removed the gag.

“Who are you?” the man whispered.

“A friend. Trust me and I’ll get you out of here,” Kay said and soon had the man freed of his bonds.

“I had given up all hope,” Monty mumbled. “You came just

in time— I couldn't have held out against the fiends another day.”

Kay moved over to the window and cautiously raised the shade. With the room flooded by light she could see Monty much better and was shocked by his appearance.

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“They have starved you,” she said.

“Yes, and I've been tortured, too.”

“Who did it?”

“That gypsy witch and her cruel son who is called the Ruler,” the man responded. “They did it to force me to reveal certain secrets to them.”

“Secrets known only to your family?” Kay asked quickly.

“Yes, how did you learn——”

“Never mind that just now,” interposed Kay. “I'll explain everything later. You are Montgomery Moleson?”

“Yes.”

“You spoke of revealing certain secrets to the Ruler and his mother. How much have you told them?”

“So far they have not learned of the hidden treasure room in the Mansion. But I think the Ruler obtained certain books from my mother's library—volumes which contained money. At least he forced me to reveal that a considerable sum of

money had been hidden there.”

“Yes, some of the volumes have fallen into his hands,” Kay agreed.

Monty’s reference to a hidden treasure room had not escaped the girl, but there was no time to question him regarding its location. The most important thing at the moment was to smuggle the prisoner from this house before they both should be captured.

184

Kay was perplexed. Disguised as the crippled Drusilla, it would be possible for her to pass the guards unchallenged, but she could not hope to take Mr. Moleson with her. He would be recognized instantly.

“I am afraid we must wait until dark,” she told the man.
“There seems to be no other safe way.”

“Someone may come and find you here,” the prisoner said uneasily. “That simple lad who brings me my meals often slips in at odd times to gloat over me.”

“We must take the chance,” said Kay, knowing that to attempt escape now would be to invite capture.

She crossed over to the window and gazed toward the lane. If only she were able to signal to her chums! She could not see them anywhere for they had secreted themselves in the bushes.

Kay glanced toward the sky. Thick clouds were rolling up from the west. Unless the storm should switch its path and

pass over, it would begin to rain within a few minutes.

“It looks like a bad storm, too,” Kay thought with sudden hope. “If it gets dark enough I’ll risk an escape.”

Returning to Monty, she told him that friends were waiting in the lane.

“We will help you to return to your old home,” she promised. “But in turn we shall ask you to co-operate with us.”

185

“You are very kind,” whispered Monty, “but you do not understand. I can never return home. My mother believes me to be dead.”

“She has been very ill and above everything else in the world she wishes to see you again.”

“I should like to be with her once more, too,” the man said brokenly. “But that is impossible. I left home in disgrace. If I were to go back I might be arrested. That would break my mother’s heart.”

“If you tell her your story I feel sure everything can be straightened out,” Kay promised.

“I must have time to think things over,” young Moleson murmured.

Kay walked back to the window. Directly beneath it she noticed an iron balcony which previously had escaped her attention.

“If I could help Monty out there he might be able to slide down a post and escape,” she thought. “The storm will break any minute now and the rain should conceal his movements.”

Kay knew that it would be highly dangerous for her to remain longer where she was, for at any moment someone might find her. Then too, unless she should return soon to Wilma and Betty, the twins might become alarmed over her lengthy absence and begin searching for her.

Calling Monty over to the window, Kay showed him the balcony.

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“If I help you down there, do you think you could reach the ground alone? Are you strong enough to attempt it?”

“Yes,” answered the man after a slight hesitation. “Yes, I can do it!”

“I’ll escape from the house by the same route I used coming in,” Kay explained tersely. “You are to wait on the balcony until the storm breaks in full force, then slide down the post to the ground. I’ll be waiting in the lane with my friends. If anything should happen and you fail to find us there, meet us at our car. It is at the end of the bus line to town. You will come?”

“Yes,” promised Monty soberly.

Kay helped the man through the window. He was very weak but she thought that he would have strength enough to reach the ground.

“Wait for the rain,” she warned him as she closed the window. “If you don’t, someone will be sure to see you.”

With Mr. Moleson safe on the balcony, Kay lost no time in quitting the prison room. She retreated down the secret staircase and located the catch which opened the panel into the cellar.

Scarcely had she got there when she heard voices in the hallway adjoining. It was too late for Kay to retreat, so she dropped into a chair, contorted her face, and placed her crutches so that they covered her lower limbs.

187

The Ruler and his gypsy mother came into the room. They stopped short as they saw the girl, and for a fearful moment she believed that they had penetrated her disguise. Then she relaxed as the man said unpleasantly:

“So you’re still here! I thought you’d be gone by this time.”

“Please, Mr. Doran, I’d like my money back,” Kay said in a whining voice. “You promised me you’d double my investment and so far you haven’t given me a penny.”

“I’m too busy to bother with you today,” he replied shortly.

“Go away and come back next week,” added the gypsy woman. “We have no money for you now.”

“But I am very poor,” Kay insisted, twisting her hands. “I do not have enough to buy bread.”

“Begone, do you hear!” screamed the gypsy, losing her

temper. “Go away and do not bother us again!”

Still acting the part of Drusilla, Kay began to weep. She picked up her crutches and hobbled away painfully. With head bent low she passed the guards and reached the outside door.

A few drops of rain spattered against her face as she stepped into the fresh air. It had become colder.

“The storm is coming!” she thought joyfully.

It was fairly dark outside already and a large black cloud had drifted almost directly overhead. As the girl hobbled toward the lane a streak of lightning ripped across the sky and the rain began to fall in torrents. Kay promptly swung her crutches over her shoulder and raced for the woods.

188

“Here we are!” called Wilma from a clump of bushes. “Thank goodness you’re back safe.”

In the dense growth of foliage the girls were fairly well protected from the storm. Kay’s clothing, however, was thoroughly soaked.

“Here are your crutches, Drusilla,” she said to the cripple, “but you must wear my clothes because it would never do for you to change back into these soggy ones of yours.”

“Let’s get to the car as quickly as we can,” urged Betty. “This rain may keep up for an hour.”

“I can’t leave yet,” said Kay anxiously. “I’m waiting for Mr.

Moleson.”

“Montgomery Moleson!” exclaimed Wilma. “Then you did find him!”

Kay gave a detailed account of her meeting with the man.

“This rain should give him a chance to escape from the balcony. I can’t understand what is delaying him, though.”

“Are you sure he will keep his promise to meet you here?” Betty asked doubtfully. “He may be afraid to return to his old home.”

“That is true, but he gave his word. I believe he’ll come.”

189

For some minutes the girls kept close watch of the house. Finally Kay left the shelter of the trees and circled the premises until she could see the iron balcony. It was deserted.

“Monty has escaped,” she reported to the twins upon her return to the lane. “Evidently he has broken his promise to me.”

“Perhaps he was recaptured,” Betty suggested.

Kay shook her head.

“I could see fresh footprints in the mud. They led toward the road. Monty has gone.”

“That’s gratitude for you!” Wilma said indignantly. “After

you risked your life to save him, too!”

“I’m terribly disappointed,” Kay declared. “All my plans are ruined now.”

“We may as well go back to the car,” Wilma proposed. “It has practically stopped raining.”

“All right,” agreed Kay listlessly. “Drusilla, you must come with us. We’ll look after you until the police force Mr. Doran to give up the money he has stolen from you.”

“Will I really get any of my money back?” the crippled girl asked eagerly.

“I hope that some of it will be left, Drusilla. At any rate I shall notify the police at once and they’ll raid this place.”

“You have been so good to me,” the girl murmured gratefully. “I’ll never forget your kindness.”

190

Kay made no response, for her thoughts had wandered far afield. She felt bitterly disappointed at Monty’s failure to meet her, particularly because she had sized up his character and felt somehow that he could be trusted. Why had he not kept his promise?

“He probably feared arrest on the old charge of defrauding his partner,” Kay reasoned. “But I’m sorry he didn’t trust me.”

As the chums walked down the lane the Tracey girl kept glancing back toward the house.

“You may as well forget Monty,” Betty told her friend bluntly. “Of course he disappeared because he was afraid.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Kay sighed, “but I was so sure he wouldn’t fail me.”

The girls had walked but a short distance farther when Drusilla suddenly halted. A look of fear came into her eyes.

“What was that?” she asked nervously, turning to glance toward the woods.

“I heard nothing,” said Betty in surprise.

“I did,” murmured Kay in a low tone. “It sounded like someone moaning.”

“Oh, probably you heard the wind in the pine trees,” said Wilma carelessly. “Let’s get away from this place before we’re caught.”

“It wasn’t the wind,” insisted the crippled girl.

191

“No,” agreed Kay, “for a moment I thought it sounded like someone in pain. There it is again!”

The four girls stood perfectly still, listening. This time no one could doubt but that the low moan came from the direction of the woods and that it was a human cry.

“Someone is in trouble,” whispered Drusilla.

“It may be that Monty Moleson hurt himself when he dropped

from the balcony,” Kay declared.

“Betty and I were watching every minute,” insisted Wilma.
“We saw no one cross the clearing.”

“You might have missed him in the heavy rain,” Kay returned. “Anyway, someone is in trouble and I must learn who he is. Wait here for me.”

Before her companions could protest Kay had slipped away, disappearing into the woods.

Guided by the low moans of pain, she crept closer until she saw a man lying on the ground at the base of an oak tree.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TREASURE

The injured person was not Monty Moleson. Instead, he was the watchman who had shown the girls through the institution. The man's eyes were blackened and there was a deep gash across his face.

Kay decided that he had been in a fight and that his unknown assailant, undoubtedly one of the persons swindled by the Ruler, had fled.

The watchman did not appear to be seriously injured. While Kay was trying to decide whether or not she should go to his aid, another man came through the woods. Seeing that he was one of the guards, the girl slipped away, knowing the watchman would receive attention.

“You didn't find Monty after all?” Betty inquired as Kay rejoined her friends.

“No, the injured person was the watchman who showed us around. One of the guards is with him so he'll be cared for properly. We'll have to get away from here unless we wish to be seen.”

The girls made as much speed as possible back to the

car. Due to Drusilla's crippled condition she could not walk very fast. However, they all reached the automobile without being seen by anyone from the institution.

"Monty Moleson can't be very far away," Kay remarked as she slid into the driver's seat. "I'd like to search for him."

"Oh, Kay, your clothes are soaking wet," protested Betty. "Let's go straight to the Moleson Mansion. I've had quite enough of trying to help ungrateful people."

When Wilma joined her sister in urging that they give up the search, Kay reluctantly headed the car toward Acorn Drive. Back again at the house, clean, dry clothing was provided for both Drusilla and Kay. The latter then sought Mrs. Moleson to give an account of the day's adventure.

"I am happy to know that my son still lives," the invalid declared after she had heard the entire story. "If he has done anything wrong I am sure it was because he was under the influence of those fiends, the Ruler and his gypsy mother. I would forgive Monty anything."

"I tried to make him understand that," Kay said, "but I am afraid I have failed."

"Even if I should never see Monty again it is a great comfort to me to know that he is not dead. Perhaps some day he will return to his home."

"I'll do everything in my power to help you see him again," Kay promised gravely. "I have an idea—but first I must telephone my Cousin Bill."

She immediately called the young lawyer, repeating to him everything she had learned at the institution.

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“I’ll notify the police at once and ask them to raid the place,” Cousin Bill promised tersely. “We’ll take action against the gypsy woman and her son and demand full restitution for the money they have stolen from Drusilla. She will make a valuable witness against them.”

“You’ll act at once, Cousin Bill? I’m afraid the Ruler will discover that Monty has escaped. Then he may become alarmed and flee with his mother and the other members of the gang.”

“I’ll not waste a minute, Kay. I’ll start for Circle City immediately and come to the mansion after I have contacted the police.”

Satisfied that her cousin would look after every detail of the proceedings, the girl went back upstairs. No one saw her enter the den where the portrait of the old gypsy woman hung. As Kay stared she saw that the painting had been changed again. A murmuring sound seemed to issue from the lips of the soldier.

“What has become of the gypsy portrait which should hang here?” Kay speculated, looking around the den but not seeing the canvas. “And why does this picture seem to murmur? There must be an explanation for all this.”

She thought she knew the answer. Monty Moleson himself had given her the clue by mentioning a treasure room secreted somewhere in the house.

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“Perhaps unwittingly I visited that very place,” Kay mused, recalling the cuts she had received on her arms. “When Betty and Wilma thought I walked in my sleep that time I remember coming into this room. A wall seemed to move away——”

She walked over to the portrait, peered behind it, and ran her hand over the wall. Her fingers touched a tiny button, hardly noticeable to the eye. She pressed on it, and instantly the panel which held the painting slowly turned like a revolving door.

“When I was here that night I must have leaned against the picture!” Kay chuckled. “Now I know what became of the gypsy portrait. Of course it’s on the other side of this panel!”

Delighted with her discovery, she ran to the door and called her mother and the twins. Unable to wait until they could climb the stairs she ran back into the den, and pressing on the picture panel, disappeared into the hidden room. As the section of wall revolved the gypsy portrait reappeared in the den, so that when Mrs. Tracey and the twins reached the room nothing seemed to be amiss.

“What has become of Kay?” asked Betty in bewilderment. “I saw her come in here. Why did she call?”

“Listen!” commanded Mrs. Tracey. “Am I dreaming, or is that portrait murmuring again?”

“It seems to be carrying on a regular conversation with itself this time!” gasped Betty.

As the three stared at the painting in awe they suddenly heard

a voice say quite clearly:

“I’ll have you out of here in just a minute—as soon as I can find the spring——”

“That was Kay’s voice!” Mrs. Tracey exclaimed. “She is somewhere behind that wall. We must get her out.”

“The picture probably revolves,” Betty declared excitedly. “But how does it work?”

Mrs. Tracey and the twins searched diligently for a secret spring. Before they could locate the button behind the picture a car was heard on the driveway. Looking out of the window, Betty saw Cousin Bill alighting from the machine. She called down, telling him that Kay was in trouble. He ran up the steps two at a time.

“What has happened?” he asked anxiously, hurrying into the den.

Before anyone could explain things to him, he stopped short, listening intently. He too heard the murmuring which seemed to come from the portrait itself.

“We think Kay has trapped herself in a secret room,” Mrs. Tracey said. “A moment ago we heard her voice distinctly. Now there is only a low murmur again.”

“It sounds as if she were talking with some other person,” her relative declared, pressing his ear against the wall. “There must be a hidden spring which opens the panel.”

“We’ve been trying to locate it,” said Betty. “So far we’ve had no luck.”

Bill Tracey applied his shoulder against the frame of the picture and pushed with all his strength. Nothing happened. He tried again. This time there was a clicking sound, and the entire section of wall revolved. The young lawyer was thrown off balance and barely saved himself from falling.

As the panel swung inward, Kay stumbled out into the room, leading Montgomery Moleson by the hand. Upon seeing so many people the man cringed away as if fearing their scorn.

“It’s all right,” whispered Kay, “you are among friends.”

She then presented him to her mother and the twins. Mrs. Tracey was quite taken aback but she tried not to show it.

“Mrs. Moleson will be very happy to have you home again,” she told the man kindly. “No doubt you wish to go to her bedside at once.”

“Yes,” murmured Monty, “only my appearance may shock her. If I might freshen up a bit——”

“Why don’t you slip into your old room and change your clothes?” Kay suggested. “I think you’ll find nearly everything you need there, for your mother has changed nothing since you left.”

“Aren’t you afraid the man may vanish again?” Betty asked after he had gone.

Kay shook her head.

“No, I’ve had a talk with him and he realizes that it would be foolish to run away from his troubles. He will face whatever comes.”

“Is there any danger that he will be sent to prison for his misdeeds?” Mrs. Tracey inquired anxiously.

“Mr. Baylor is the only person who could make it hard for him.”

“Mr. Baylor?” repeated Cousin Bill. “Why, that fellow has a reputation among business men as being something of a crook. He probably framed young Moleson.”

“From the very first I suspected he might have,” Kay declared in disgust. “I wish we could find out the truth.”

“I’m rather interested in this case, Kay. If you like, I’ll go into the partnership dealings and see what I can learn.”

“I wish you would, Cousin Bill. It will mean everything to Mr. Moleson and his mother if we could prove that Monty did not cheat his partner.”

“Tell us how you guessed that he was hiding in the secret room,” urged Betty.

“I figured he didn’t know me,” replied Kay, “and would think he ought to be careful and check up on my story before showing himself.”

“I suppose the secret room is empty?”

“Guess again,” laughed Kay gaily. “Follow me and I’ll lead you to the treasure!”

“Treasure!” gasped Mrs. Tracey. “Not really!”

Kay was enjoying the situation and waited a moment before answering.

“The place is filled with antique silver and valuable glassware. I’ve already smashed three choice goblets so be careful and don’t brush against any of the shelves.”

“How did you do that, Kay?” asked Wilma as they all followed her through the revolving wall-door.

“I did it on my midnight visit here. At the time I didn’t know how I received those cuts on my arms.”

The chamber behind the wall was not large but it was lined to the ceiling with priceless antiques.

“It would have saved a great deal of trouble if Mrs. Moleson had told us about this place,” said Kay. “By the way, it has a secret entrance from outdoors,” she added. “That’s how Monty got into the room.”

“If we’d been told everything, we’d have missed a lot of fun and excitement,” Betty laughed. “What did Monty tell you about himself, Kay?”

“Yes, just what did happen to him after he gave up his

business?” Mrs. Tracey asked.

“As far as I can learn he fell under the influence of that horrible gypsy woman,” Kay replied. “Even before he left home she exerted an almost hypnotic power over him.”

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“How did the rumor start that he had died in Africa?”

“The gypsy was responsible for that tale, as she wished to have Monty disappear conveniently so that no questions would be asked. You see, while she posed for the portrait she learned that the Moleson Mansion was filled with rare and valuable antiques.”

“She wished to steal them, of course?” asked Wilma.

“Yes. It was one of her workers who broke into the house and took books from the library. Monty had revealed that certain volumes contained money, but he refused to tell the exact location of this secret room. That was why the gypsy held him prisoner and tortured him.”

“It seems too cruel,” shuddered Mrs. Tracey. “Can’t the woman be sent to prison?”

“I am pleased to report that the police already have her in custody,” Cousin Bill interposed. “I came here to tell you the news but until this moment things have happened so fast that I’ve had no opportunity.”

“Did the police raid the so-called institution?” Kay asked eagerly.

“Yes, soon after I phoned them. By the time I got to Circle City I heard the story. They had surrounded the place and captured everyone. Under the flooring they had discovered a rich haul of stolen jewels.”

“I can tell them where they’ll find more loot,” declared Kay. “Some of it is hidden in tiny compartments built in the shoes which the cripples were supposed to repair.”

“It was a vicious racket,” said Cousin Bill. “You deserve credit for breaking it up, Kay.”

“I had a great deal of help. My chief concern now is Drusilla. Will any of her money be saved?”

“I hope to get every penny of it back,” the young lawyer said. “It will take some weeks, however.”

In a short while Monty Moleson returned looking like a different person. Years seemed to have fallen from his shoulders. Kay and her friends took him to his mother’s room but did not remain to witness the happy reunion.

“I wonder how Monty feels toward Miss Robbin?” Wilma mused when the girls were alone.

“I asked him about that,” Kay replied. “He still loves her.”

“Then why was he willing to leave her?”

“The old gypsy poisoned his mind in every respect. Monty didn’t really know what he was doing. After that old witch had convinced him that he had lost all honor, he felt he never

could face either his mother or his fiancée again.”

“I wonder if the engagement will stand?”

“Don’t waste any thought on that score!” chuckled Betty. “You should know that Kay wouldn’t overlook a detail like that!”

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“I was just thinking of telephoning Miss Robbin,” Kay admitted with a laugh.

An hour later the young woman arrived at the Moleson Mansion. After her meeting with Monty the girls felt assured that everything would be straightened out by the couple. Therefore, they were somewhat stunned when the young man announced that he could never marry Miss Robbin because his name had been disgraced.

It remained for Cousin Bill to provide proof that the man actually never had cheated his partner. In going over the books of the paint company, the young lawyer found evidence which showed that Mr. Baylor had never lost the sum of money which he claimed had been taken from him. Difficult general business conditions had made it easy for him to deceive Mrs. Moleson.

“Everything is fairly clear to me except this: why did Monty the Mole believe himself to be Monty Moleson?” Wilma queried as the girls were discussing the case alone.

“I can explain that,” said Kay. “At one time the fellow cheated his own partner. They were together in some small business. Later he fell under the spell of the Ruler and from

that time on failed rapidly in mentality. He heard Monty Moleson being discussed and finally imagined himself to be that person.”

“It is no wonder he fooled us,” declared Betty. “How fortunate that Kay learned the truth—otherwise Mrs. Moleson might never have been reunited with her son.”

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While the girls were talking, a servant came to say that Mrs. Moleson wished to speak with them. Kay and the twins found both Miss Robbin and Monty at the bedside.

The girls were not surprised when the mother with tears in her eyes thanked the chums for all they had done, but they were quite dumbfounded when she pressed a valuable gift of jewelry upon them. Wilma and Betty received lovely rings while Kay’s token of appreciation was a gold bracelet set with jewels.

“There is something I wish you would do for me in return,” smiled Mrs. Moleson after the girls had thanked her profusely.

“What is it?” smiled Kay. “We’ll be glad to do any favor.”

“I should like you to dispose of the portrait of that horrible gypsy woman. I feel that it has brought nothing but evil fortune upon our home, and I wish never to see it again. Monty feels the same way about it.”

“I’ll find a new home for it somehow,” Kay promised.

She did not wish to keep the portrait herself and neither

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Betty nor Wilma would accept it. They teased her by saying that she would never be able to dispose of the picture.

But the self-reliant Kay was not so easily baffled. She sold it to an art gallery, where its artistic qualities would be appreciated. The disposition of the painting pleased the Molesons greatly.

When the art dealer asked the name of the picture, Kay quickly replied:

“The Murmuring Portrait.”

THE END

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[The end of *The Murmuring Portrait* by Frances K. Judd]