

THE CRIMSON BRIER BUSH

Frances K. Judd

A KAY TRACEY MYSTERY



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A KAY TRACEY MYSTERY





“It’s no use, Kay, we’re trapped!”

A Kay Tracey Mystery

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Francis K. Judd



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THE CRIMSON BRIER BUSH

CHAPTER I

A MISSING PAPER

“Tell me about this spooky farm we’re going to, Mother,” Kay Tracey said, looking up from a fern she had just planted in the new rock garden.

“I didn’t say it was spooky,” the pretty woman remarked with a smile. “Aunt Jessie intimated it was old and mysterious. That’s why she wants us to go there with her.”

“Aunt Jessie’s sort of mysterious, too.” Kay laughed. “I guess that’s why I like her.”

“She’ll be here very soon,” Mrs. Tracey said, pulling off her garden gloves and turning toward the house. “I wouldn’t want Jessie Stoke to catch us looking like this.”

“You look perfectly adorable in garden clothes,” Kay insisted, “but I know what you mean.” She tamped the earth around the fern. “I can’t wait to ask Aunt Jessie about the farm. The bigger the mystery, the better I like it.”

Mrs. Tracey turned to regard the impish smile of her chestnut-haired daughter. “Don’t suggest such a thing to your aunt,” she warned. “We don’t want to alarm her.”

Kay laughed. "I'll talk about this rock garden instead. It was a lovely idea of yours, Mother."

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Some of the miniature plants were in flower. Kay said the whole garden reminded her of one she had seen while visiting the Worth twins at their summer home on Lost Lake.

"I wish Wilma and Betty could go to the farm with us," Kay commented a trifle wistfully.

"I don't believe that can be arranged," Mrs. Tracey answered regretfully. "Jessie is rather peculiar, and I'm afraid wouldn't like it if we invited anyone else to go along."

"I wonder why Aunt Jessie wants us to inspect the farm," Kay said impatiently.

"She didn't give any details in her letter. She just wrote that she had inherited the place and wanted us to visit it with her because she was afraid to go there alone."

"Afraid of what?" Kay asked.

"Since the sudden death of her husband, your aunt has been very nervous," Mrs. Tracey explained. "I understand that the farm is located in a rather isolated place and has had no tenant for some months. Probably that explains why she insists we go with her."

Aunt Jessie Stoke was an infrequent visitor at the Tracey home, but Kay had heard many stories of the eccentric woman who had become a widow recently. She had inherited the farm near Cherryville. The property at one time had

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belonged to Mr. Stoke's grand-uncle, William Wendell. Since the place was so far removed from the city, neither Mr. Stoke nor his wife had ever visited it. In settling up her husband's estate, Aunt Jessie considered it advisable to inspect the farm. She promptly wrote to Mrs. Tracey and Kay, asking them to visit Cherryville with her.

The two hastened from the garden to the house to change into more presentable clothing. The girl put on a cool, white frock and then busied herself setting the luncheon table on the veranda. She was arranging a centerpiece of garden flowers when Cousin Bill Tracey's car rolled into the driveway.

"Why, I thought you were on your way to the railroad station to meet Aunt Jessie!" Kay exclaimed as the young lawyer hurried toward her.

"I should be," Cousin Bill answered apologetically, "but an important business matter has just come up and I'm supposed to meet a man in ten minutes at the First National Bank. Will you do me a favor?"

"You mean I'm to go to the train?"

"I'll be grateful if you will, Kay. You may take my car. I hate like everything to ask you to do it when I promised your mother I'd go——"

"I don't mind a bit," Kay smiled, "but there's very little time to spare."

Enroute to the station, Kay dropped her Cousin Bill at the bank. Arriving a few minutes later at the railroad platform

she was relieved to observe that the train was not yet in. She parked not far from the tracks and was sitting behind the wheel lost in thought when a girl emerged from the station, fingering a railroad ticket. She was Ethel Eaton, one of Kay's classmates at Carmont High School. The two girls had never been friends.

"Hello, Ethel," Kay called as the other approached. "Are you leaving town?"

The question had been intended casually, but a dark flush spread over Ethel's face.

"Oh, I'm on my way to Carmont," she answered irritably. "I suppose you're going there too since this is the first day of summer school."

Kay did not understand the remark for a moment. Then it dawned upon her that Ethel was forced to take special work, hoping to remove a condition which she had received in algebra.

"What subjects are you taking this summer?"

"Algebra," Ethel replied, thus confirming the other's suspicion. "I suppose you're making up credits in the same subject."

Kay smilingly shook her head. "I'm just loafing this summer."

"You mean you weren't conditioned in anything?" Ethel demanded incredulously. "Well, I call that favoritism."

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kay drawled. “I studied hard.”

“Are you hinting that I didn’t?”

“Not at all,” Kay returned, for she had no intention of being drawn into a quarrel. “I’m sure you did.”

5

“I don’t see how you got by,” Ethel grumbled. “I guess you must have had a pull with the teacher. It makes me sick.”

The conversation was cut short by the arrival of the train which came gliding into the station. As Kay alighted from her automobile, Ethel hurried away without bothering to say good-bye.

A few passengers started to hurry from one of the coaches. Before anyone could descend the steps, Ethel pushed forward and tried to enter the car. She collided with a tall, wiry woman of early middle age who was in the act of stepping down onto the platform. The passenger clutched Ethel for support, allowing her pocketbook to fall from her hand. It struck the hard pavement and flew open, the contents tumbling out.

“Well, my goodness, can’t you let a person get off before you start pushing in?” the woman asked irritably as she glared at Ethel. “Now see what you’ve done.”

“It was your fault, not mine,” the girl retorted impudently.

Before Kay could reach the scene to help, the conductor picked up the purse and retrieved several articles which had scattered over the platform. Unnoticed by anyone, a playful wind carried a scrap of paper and a five-dollar bill beneath the

train.

While the woman was thanking the conductor, Ethel slipped into the car, taking a seat on the side opposite the station. Kay was almost certain the excited woman passenger was none other than Aunt Jessie, and called her name. 6

“Well, dear me, if it isn’t Kay!” the woman exclaimed, her frown disappearing. “I would know you anywhere for you are the picture of your mother. Did you see that rude girl bump into me a moment ago? She made me drop my purse, and now, I declare, I’m so upset I don’t know if I’ve lost anything or not!”

“I think I picked up everything, Madam,” the conductor assured her as he waved his hand in signal to the engineer.

As the train slowly pulled from the station, Aunt Jessie made a hasty inspection of her purse. “Yes, I guess nothing is missing,” she agreed.

“My car is over there,” Kay said, picking up her aunt’s overnight bag and guiding her toward the automobile. “I imagine you must be tired from your journey.”

“Yes, I am a mite tuckered out. But I’ll be fresh as a daisy again when I’ve rested a few minutes.”

All the way to the Tracey home, Aunt Jessie could not forget her unfortunate encounter with Ethel Eaton. She sputtered and fumed about the manners of modern young people.

“Fortunately, Ethel Eaton isn’t a sample of the Brantwood

young folks,” Kay smiled. “The girl has very few friends.”

By the time the house was reached, Aunt Jessie’s feelings had been soothed. She greeted Mrs. Tracey warmly, and after resting for an hour, did justice to the excellent luncheon. Not until the dishes were washed and everyone had gathered in the living room did she speak of the farm near Cherryville. 7

“I imagine you thought it strange of me to request that someone accompany me to the place,” she remarked. “The truth is, since Ross died I’ve been nervous and easily excited—or so my doctor says. I don’t like to visit such an out-of-the-way spot alone. Silly of me, isn’t it?”

“Not at all,” replied Mrs. Tracey. “I think you show good judgment not to make the trip by yourself. Kay and I will be delighted to go with you.”

“My husband always planned to look at the farm but he never could arrange it,” Aunt Jessie continued. “It was well kept when Mr. Wendell owned it, but my attorney tells me that the late tenants have allowed the place to run down shamefully.”

“Where is the place located?” Kay inquired with interest.

“Near Cherryville, in a rather wild locality, I believe. I have the exact directions on a paper in my purse. I’ll let you read them yourself.”

“I’ll bring your pocketbook,” Kay offered, quickly arising.

She found the purse in a bedroom. The woman searched through it and then exclaimed:

“Why, the paper is gone, and a five-dollar bill! Oh, dear me, I don’t mind losing the money, but the paper is important. It must have fallen out of my bag when that girl bumped into me.”

“I’ll hurry over to the station and see if I can find it,” Kay offered. “The money probably is gone by this time but the paper may be there still.”

“You’ll never find either of them, I’m afraid,” Aunt Jessie predicted. “I’ve had nothing but bad luck ever since I started for Brantwood.”

Kay insisted upon making the trip back to the station for she knew that unless the missing paper were found, the journey to Cherryville would be delayed. Aunt Jessie would have to write to her attorney for a new set of directions. The station platform was deserted save for an elderly porter who watched Kay curiously as she searched along the tracks.

“Did you lose something, miss?” he asked, his words punctuated by a diffident grin.

“My aunt did,” Kay replied, her eyes still roving up and down the rails. “She lost an important paper when she got off the train here about an hour ago.”

“Well, miss, with this wind blowing I’m afraid Lady Luck isn’t going to smile on you. If that paper fell down on the tracks, the wind probably has taken it for a ride.”

“By the way,” Kay said, “have you seen anyone around the station since the train left? Anyone at all?”

“Now let me think. No, I haven’t seen anyone at all.” The elderly man paused uncertainly and scratched his head. Then he spoke more positively. “I take that back, miss. There was one man. I saw him sitting in a junk-heap of an automobile right over there by the platform. He was reading something on a piece of paper. Then he folded it up like it was his ticket and put it inside his pocket. Yes, I’m sure.”

“Was the man alone?” Kay inquired with quick interest.

“He was all by himself, except for a little baby.”

“A baby!”

“It was a cute little rascal. The man had it chucked on the back seat.”

“Which way did he go?”

“I didn’t watch him closely, miss. I saw him drive up to the main highway but I didn’t take any notice after that.”

Kay was greatly interested in the porter’s words, but try as she might she could not think who the man with the baby might have been. The fact that he had looked at a paper before leaving led her to surmise that it might have been the one Aunt Jessie had lost. However, she decided to make one last effort to find it and stepped down onto the tracks so she could peer under the protruding edge of the station platform.

“You aren’t allowed out there,” the porter warned. “It’s against the rules and regulations.”

“I won’t get run over,” Kay smiled as she poked a stick into several likely looking places. “I’d love to find the five dollars my aunt lost.”

“Five dollars!” the porter exclaimed. “I thought you said it was a paper.”

“She lost both.”

A silence fell as the elderly man appeared to be thinking. Then, after an obvious struggle with himself, he astonished Kay by saying:

“Well now, miss, you should have told me all your troubles at once. I’m in a good position to help you about the money.”

CHAPTER II

ETHEL'S DISAPPEARANCE

“You know what became of the missing five dollar bill?” Kay asked the porter in surprise.

“It just happens that I found it myself, miss,” the elderly man answered, taking the money from his pocket and placing it in her hand. “Here it is.”

Kay thanked him and tucked the bill away in her purse. She drew out a dollar bill which she offered the attendant as a reward for his honesty.

“That’s mighty nice of you,” the elderly man said as he accepted the money. “Thank you very much.”

“Oh, you’re perfectly welcome,” Kay returned, “and don’t forget, there will be another reward for you if you can find the other paper.”

“I’ll keep looking, miss,” the fellow promised, “but I’ve got a feeling that it blew away.”

Kay hurried to her car, but on the way she stopped in at the station office and explained about the porter’s honesty to the railroad agent, for the girl had a keen sense of justice and

liked to see worthy acts rewarded.

Kay was a serious, conscientious type of person, but those who knew her well had learned that she was always ready for a good time. Her father, Roger Tracey, a newspaper editor, had died many years before and since then Kay and her mother had resided in Brantwood, making a home for Cousin Bill Tracey, a bachelor lawyer.

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Despite Aunt Jessie's opinion to the contrary, Kay resembled her mother only slightly. Her eyes were an acorn brown; and often twinkled with merriment, though they could be serious too.

She attended school at Carmont during the regular winter session, commuting from Brantwood with her chums, the Worth twins, Wilma and Betty. At present the twins were vacationing at Lost Lake. Kay had spent several pleasant weeks at their cottage and while there had experienced two never-to-be-forgotten adventures, one of which led to the unfolding of a secret at a windmill.

Her friends frequently remarked that wherever the girl went she seemed destined to uncover a mystery. Such a statement obviously was an exaggeration, but it was true that she had enjoyed more than her share of mystery solving.

Kay had driven less than a block from the railroad station when she suddenly jammed her foot hard against the brake. The tires screeched and the car came to an abrupt halt by the curb. A young man who was walking along the street turned his head quickly.

“Why, hello, Kay!” he exclaimed eagerly.

“Hello yourself, Ronald Earle,” the girl laughed. “Jump in and I’ll give you a lift.”

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The young man obeyed with alacrity although he explained regretfully that he was only going a few blocks farther.

“What are you doing in this part of town?” he inquired curiously as they drove along slowly. “Meeting someone at the train?”

Kay told him of Aunt Jessie’s arrival, and mentioned the unfortunate encounter with Ethel Eaton which had resulted in the loss of the valuable paper.

“Why, I saw Ethel myself only a few minutes before the train came in,” Ronald replied. “I spoke to her but she pretended not to see me.”

“I suspect she’s feeling downhearted because she has to attend school this summer.”

“A fellow might sympathize with her if she had ever studied. Ethel thought school was a lark, so now I guess she’ll have to take her medicine.”

“By the way, Ronald,” Kay interposed, “while you were at the station did you chance to see a strange man with a dilapidated car?”

“That’s a rather broad description.”

“This man had a baby with him.”

“Why, I think I know the fellow you mean!” Ronald exclaimed. “I noticed him because the baby was crying and he didn’t seem to be able to do anything about it.”

“Who was the man, Ronald?” Kay inquired eagerly.

“I’m certain I never saw him before. To tell you the truth, I didn’t pay a great deal of attention.”

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“Could you describe him? Think hard, Ronald.”

The young man shook his head. “I just noticed him and that was all. I’m sorry, Kay. Is it important?”

“In a way, yes. You see, I suspect he may have been the person who picked up the paper my aunt lost.”

“I wish I could help you.”

“We’ll probably find Aunt Jessie’s farm, all right, but it may be a lot of trouble,” the girl replied. “It’s somewhere near Cherryville, but I never heard of that place before.”

“I have, Kay. It’s not far from Grove City.”

“That means absolutely nothing to me,” his companion laughed.

“If you have a state road map I can show you where it is.”

Kay stopped the car by the curb and found several route

folders in the dashboard compartment. Ronald studied one of the larger maps for some minutes. Then, taking a pencil from his pocket, he drew a tiny circle on the paper.

“Here is Grove City,” he explained to Kay. “Cherryville isn’t on the main road and the place seems to be too small to appear on the map. But if you take this turn where I’ve marked an X you’ll have no trouble.”

“If we get as far as Cherryville, Aunt Jessie should be able to locate the farm,” Kay declared gratefully.

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“Thanks ever so much, Ronnie.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, Kay. When do you leave?”

“It all depends upon my aunt. I hope she feels rested enough to start tomorrow for I’m eager to see the place.”

“Hoping you’ll run into another mystery?” Ronald asked teasingly.

“Oh, there’s no chance of that, I’m afraid. I’m not expecting to have a very exciting time, nor a restful one, either. There will be too much work to do.”

“Do you plan to be gone long?” the young man inquired.

“That depends upon Aunt Jessie, too. I think she hopes to set things in order there. I don’t know just when she will return.”

“If you’re away from Brantwood too many days, I may drop down there to see you,” Ronald threatened. “This town seems absolutely dead when you’re gone.”

Kay laughed and drove on again. A few blocks farther down the street, Ronald reluctantly said good-bye to his companion and left the car. Upon reaching home, the girl learned from her mother that Aunt Jessie had retired to her room to lie down again.

“We’ll not awaken her now,” Mrs. Tracey said. “Jessie isn’t well at all, and she seems unable to control her nerves. After you left she worked herself into a dreadful state over the loss of her money and that paper.”

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At dinner time when their relative came downstairs, she seemed greatly refreshed, and praised Kay highly for having recovered the five dollars. Upon hearing that the porter had been rewarded, she insisted upon repaying the girl. She was still troubled over the loss of the paper, but agreed with Kay and Mrs. Tracey that she should be able to locate the farm by making inquiries at Cherryville.

“We may as well start early tomorrow if it fits in with your plans,” Aunt Jessie declared as she studied the map offered for her inspection. “I rather dread the trip and will be glad to get it out of my mind.”

Kay and her mother packed their bags that evening, so that everything would be ready for a speedy departure in the morning. Breakfast was served at seven o’clock and by eight the travelers were saying good-bye to Cousin Bill.

“Drive carefully,” the young lawyer warned the girl. “Remember, Aunt Jessie is easily upset.”

“I’ll try to keep between the fence posts,” Kay smiled. “Well,

I guess we're ready to start."

She stepped into the car and started the motor, but before she could back from the driveway, Cousin Bill held up his hand in an arresting gesture.

"Wait!" he commanded. "The telephone is ringing. Better wait a minute."

"It's probably for me," Mrs. Tracey sighed. "I may as well answer it myself."

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She hurried inside. Kay waited impatiently as several minutes elapsed. Finally her mother appeared in the doorway. She was frowning.

"Anything wrong?" Kay asked quickly.

Mrs. Tracey nodded soberly. "Ethel Eaton has disappeared mysteriously," she explained. "For the time being, our trip must be postponed."

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CHAPTER III

CRIMSON BRIER FARM

Kay stared incredulously at her mother.

“Ethel Eaton has disappeared?” she echoed in a shocked tone. “But Mother, I saw her at the railroad station only yesterday afternoon.”

“I know. I told Mrs. Eaton so. Apparently you were one of the last persons to talk with her, Kay. Ethel boarded the train and hasn’t been heard from since.”

“Why, she was on her way to Carmont High School.”

“That was what Mrs. Eaton thought, but Ethel failed to return home last night, and the school authorities report she never arrived there. Her mother, poor woman, is half hysterical.”

“You don’t suppose Ethel ran away from home?” Kay murmured thoughtfully. “She gave me no hint of such an idea.”

“Mrs. Eaton thinks now you may have said something to her at the station which influenced her to leave.”

“Why, how ridiculous!”

“I assured her mother I was certain you had nothing to do with the disappearance, but she was too excited to listen to me.”

“I’m terribly sorry Ethel is causing her family so much worry,” Kay said slowly, “but knowing the girl as I do, I imagine she’ll be back home in a day or so, as soon as the novelty of the experience wears away. I suspect she didn’t want to attend school this summer.”

“Is Ethel Eaton the girl who bumped into me at the station?” Aunt Jessie inquired with interest, and upon receiving an affirmative reply, added tartly, “I don’t see what all this has to do with us. Why must we postpone our trip because a silly girl takes it into her head to run away from school?”

“If she really has disappeared I should think it would be a case for the police,” Kay agreed. “I don’t see what we can do to help.”

“That’s just the trouble,” Mrs. Tracey reported. “The case has been turned over to the authorities. Mr. Eaton is coming here in fifteen minutes with a police officer to question you, Kay.”

“To question me?”

“Yes, the Eatons are convinced you can shed some light upon Ethel’s disappearance.”

“Well, I can’t. All I know is that she didn’t want to go back to school.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to wait, Kay,” Mrs. Tracey said

regretfully. "I hope we'll not be delayed long."

It was nearly an hour before Mr. Eaton and the policeman came to question Kay. The girl replied to all their inquiries, explaining over and over that she was unable to shed any light upon Ethel's disappearance. Finally, the two men left.

20

"Now let's be off before something else happens to delay us," Kay proposed, helping her aunt into the car again. "We should still reach Cherryville before nightfall."

"Unless we have more trouble," Aunt Jessie remarked pessimistically. "I feel it in my bones we will have, too!"

It seemed that her prediction was a true one, for only three miles from Brantwood a tire suddenly went soft. Fortunately Kay remembered passing a filling station only a quarter of a mile back. She walked the distance and brought a man who changed the tire for her. However, the accident delayed the party nearly an hour.

The travelers went on again, and Kay was just beginning to relax at the wheel when a black cat darted across the road. The girl swerved the car, missing the animal by inches. She would have thought no more of the incident, but Aunt Jessie uttered a shrill scream, collapsing against Mrs. Tracey.

"My heart, my heart," the woman murmured weakly. "Oh, I can't stand all this excitement. A black cat! It means a death in the family."

"Nonsense, Jessie!" Mrs. Tracey said sternly. "Your heart is

all right. It's your nerves. Try to calm yourself."

"Dozens of cats have crossed my path before," Kay added as she halted the car. "I've never had any real bad luck."

21

"I knew when I planned this trip that it was all a mistake," Aunt Jessie wailed.

"You'll feel more cheerful after you've had luncheon," Mrs. Tracey said kindly. "Drive on again, Kay, and stop at the first tea room you see."

Soon the party noticed an imposing sign along the road which bore the words: "Rainbow Tea Room. Chicken dinners a specialty."

"This place looks inviting," Kay declared, parking the car not far from the door.

"I never liked chicken," Aunt Jessie sniffed. "It isn't decently cooked at roadside places. It's apt to make one ill."

"I'm sure they have other dishes," Mrs. Tracey smiled. "If not, we can go on again."

Aunt Jessie allowed herself to be escorted into the restaurant. With a haughty glance about the place she assured herself that it was scrupulously clean. Kay led the way to a booth at the rear.

Mrs. Tracey and her daughter quickly selected a luncheon from the menu cards and waited indulgently while Aunt Jessie

studied hers.

“I can’t see very well even with my glasses,” she complained. “Would you mind reading the menu to me, Kathryn?”

While Mrs. Tracey tried to help her relative make a selection, Kay leaned her head back wearily against the wall of the booth. For the first time she became aware of voices from the adjoining compartment. In passing it a moment before she had noticed casually that the table was occupied by two women, the older of whom wore an outfit that indicated she was a nurse.

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“I thought you would help me, Alice,” the nurse was saying reproachfully to her companion. “The bill amounts to over a thousand dollars and I have my own debts to meet.”

“I’d like to help you,” the other replied, “but I can’t spare the money.”

The voices dropped to a murmur and Kay lost the thread of the conversation entirely as Aunt Jessie asked her a question. Later when the waitress brought the luncheon, she again heard the younger woman speak.

“I thought my baby would be such a joy, but since her birth I’ve had nothing but trouble.”

The remark had no special significance for Kay, although she did consider it a strange thing for a mother to say. She heard no more of the conversation, for Aunt Jessie chattered so persistently that it was impossible to do so. When the three left the tea room a few minutes later, the adjoining booth was

vacant.

Storm clouds were gathering in the sky as the car sped on toward Cherryville. Mrs. Stoke kept her eyes glued on the road.

“How much farther is it?” she asked Kay nervously.
“We must reach the farm before the storm breaks.”

23

“If it does rain I look for nothing more than a sprinkle,” the girl replied cheerfully. “I believe we’re coming to the town now.”

Cherryville was on a single track railroad, and had only a few houses, stores, a post office, and a gasoline station into which Kay drove. As the attendant filled the tank of her car, she inquired about the location of Aunt Jessie’s farm. From the general description the man was not certain which place she meant, but his face lighted up as Mrs. Stoke recalled the name of the last tenants who had rented the property.

“Oh, sure, you mean the old Wendell place,” he declared. “Some call it Crimson Brier Farm. It’s not far from here but there’s a bad detour.”

“Did you say it was called Crimson Brier?” Kay questioned the man with interest. “What a pretty name.”

“It’s descriptive of the place, Miss. And you’ll find the site right pretty too, but it’s stuck off by itself in a lonely locality.”

The directions were clear enough, and Kay had no trouble in finding the road leading to the detour. Then for half an hour

they bumped along over a narrow, dusty stretch, traveling scarcely ten miles an hour. Aunt Jessie complained at the jolting and said again that she wished with all her heart she had remained at home in her city apartment.

“Cheer up,” Kay laughed good-naturedly. “This detour can’t last forever.”

24

Presently they came to a smooth road which branched off from the one they were on, and the girl decided that it must be the main thoroughfare again. They drove on for nearly five miles. Then the girl stopped the car.

“Now what is wrong?” wailed Aunt Jessie. “Another flat tire?”

“I’m afraid we’ve taken the wrong turn. This can’t be right or we’d have reached Crimson Brier Farm long ago.”

“I’d rather get out and walk than ride over that horrible detour again,” Aunt Jessie moaned. “Oh, why did I bring you on this wild trip anyway?”

“Because you want to inspect your property,” Mrs. Tracey smiled. “Keep up your courage, Jessie, and we’ll arrive there yet.”

Kay turned the car in the narrow road and drove back to the detour. She was compelled to follow it only a short distance before coming to the turn-off which she should have taken before.

Fifteen minutes later, rounding a sharp bend, she gave a gasp

of delight as she viewed a stretch of hilly country heavily wooded. A picturesque stream meandered along and a short distance ahead Kay glimpsed a hedge of scarlet brier bushes.

“We must be approaching your property,” she declared enthusiastically. “What a lovely spot.”

“It is too quiet here,” Aunt Jessie shivered. “But you’re right, Kay, the next place is the old Wendell farm. I recognize it from pictures.”

25

A little farther on Kay stopped the car before a dilapidated wooden gate at the entrance to a private road. Years of neglect had reduced the lane to a mere trail, which was overgrown with weeds. As Kay surveyed the deep ruts she wondered if it would be safe to take the car over them.

“Perhaps it would be better to park here and walk to the house,” she ventured doubtfully. “I’m afraid we may break a spring.”

“And walk clear up that hill?” Aunt Jessie almost gasped. “I never could do it.”

“I think we should take a chance with the car, Kay,” Mrs. Tracey intervened. “You can drive carefully.”

The girl said no more but alighted from the car and tugged at the gate. It had been nailed shut, but she was able to pry the barrier away after considerable trouble.

“Such a dreadful place,” Aunt Jessie complained as the car bumped over the road. “I’ll have a backache for a week after

this jolting.”

Kay drove as carefully as she could and finally brought the automobile to a standstill not far from the farm house. The owner reluctantly alighted to survey her inheritance. The structure was badly in need of paint; the front porch sagged; and the one chimney evidently had been struck by lightning, for the top half was missing and stray bricks were scattered at random over the roof and in the yard below. There were several small out-buildings, all in a state of disrepair, and the barn looked as if a good stiff wind would blow it down. On the dead limbs of a blighted tree doves cooed mournfully. From the distance came the intermittent baying of a dog.

26

All this had a depressing effect upon Aunt Jessie; so depressing, in fact, that the poor lady stumbled awkwardly as she climbed the rickety porch steps. To make matters worse she broke her spectacles in the process. The woman roundly berated a Fate which had brought her such a “white elephant” farm.

“I’ll take your glasses to Cherryville just as soon as I can and have them repaired,” Kay promised, picking up the broken pieces. “You have had more than your share of bad luck today, Aunt Jessie.”

“I knew before I started that this trip was a mistake,” the woman complained. “I suppose the inside of the house is even worse than the outside.”

“Oh, do cheer up,” Kay said optimistically. “Have you

noticed the gorgeous crimson roses? The brier bushes around the front porch are loaded with them.”

“How can I notice anything with my glasses broken?” her relative asked peevishly.

Kay reached over the porch railing. She picked a flower and placed it in one of Aunt Jessie’s hands.

“Oh, stickers!” the woman exclaimed, and with a cry of pain allowed the blossom to fall to the floor. She placed a wounded thumb in her mouth. “I hate brier bushes!”

27

Seeing that their relative could not be mollified, Kay and her mother led the woman into the homestead. Imprisoned, musty air accosted them, and they lost no time in opening all of the windows preparatory to a general cleaning. They were glad that the owner was unable to see all of the dirt, for it surely would have added to her distress.

“Now you sit down and rest, Jessie, while Kay and I clean up the house a bit,” Mrs. Tracey said with forced cheerfulness. “We’ll soon have everything in order.”

Kay went upstairs to open windows and to look at the rooms. As she raised a sash directly above the porch, she paused and listened intently. She was sure she had heard a strange sound.

Raising the window to its full height, she leaned far out, hoping to discover what it had been. Kay did not have long to wait. The sound was soon repeated—a plaintive, haunting cry, which seemed to come directly from the clump of crimson briars along a side fence.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOUNDLING

“What could that be?” Kay thought.

She listened for the sound to be repeated but heard nothing. Making up her mind that it was the cry of some little animal, she went on with her work. Presently she joined her mother and Aunt Jessie in the living room.

“This place gives me the creeps,” the latter said with a shiver. “Only a moment ago I heard a weird cry. It sounded almost human.”

“Yes, it did,” Mrs. Tracey agreed uneasily. “But of course no one is near by. It must have been a cat.”

A few minutes later the heartrending cry was again heard, and Kay no longer could endure it. She slipped quietly from the house, intending to investigate.

The noise was not difficult to trace. It came from the direction of the crimson brier bushes. The girl picked up a stout stick, for she could not imagine what sort of creature she might find caught in the thorns.

Cautiously she approached the thicket. Suddenly her

eyes opened wide in astonishment as she glimpsed a bit of blue cloth hidden almost out of sight. It was the corner of a blanket.

Kay hurled away her stick and with a gasp knelt down to pick up the bundle. As she drew aside the soft blanket, a fat, chubby baby opened its blue eyes. It whimpered as it nestled in her arms.

“Well, of all things!” Kay exclaimed in wonder. “How did *you* get here?”

Recovering from her surprise, she called shrilly to her mother and Aunt Jessie.

“Come here! Come here! I’ve found a live baby!”

Mrs. Tracey and Aunt Jessie appeared in the doorway.

“You’ve found *what?*” the latter demanded incredulously.

“A baby! The little thing was wrapped in a blanket and left beneath this crimson brier bush.”

“Let me see!” Aunt Jessie commanded, hurrying toward Kay. “Oh, why did I break my glasses?”

Kay fully expected that her aunt would accept this latest news as she had her other trouble, and was very much surprised to find that the woman actually was pleased about the episode.

“Such lovely little golden ringlets,” Mrs. Stoke murmured in admiration, fingering them lovingly. Next she took the bundle

from Kay's arms. "That's no way to hold a baby. You might drop her. Here, honey, come to your Aunt Jessie."

Mrs. Tracey and Kay exchanged baffled glances. They never knew how this woman would react to any situation.

30

"Where did you find the baby?" Mrs. Tracey asked her daughter.

Kay showed her mother the exact spot, and the two searched for a note. Apparently there was none.

"Such a place to abandon a baby," Mrs. Tracey said, shaking her head. "The little thing might have been scratched by the thorns."

"What shall we do with the infant, Aunt Jessie?" Kay questioned in perplexity.

"Why, feed it milk, of course. Thank goodness, there is a bottle wrapped in the blanket. But we must go for more immediately."

"You don't intend to keep the child?" Mrs. Tracey inquired incredulously.

"Keep it? Certainly I shall. It was abandoned on my farm, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but——"

"No buts about it," Aunt Jessie returned with grim

satisfaction. “This is my baby.”

“What about the poor parents?” Kay asked quietly.

“They have no rights, since they abandoned the child.”

“Isn’t it possible that the parents didn’t give up the baby? That it was taken from them?”

“It doesn’t seem reasonable to me. No, I’m aiming to keep this infant. If it hadn’t been intended I was to bring it up, the dear little mite wouldn’t have been left on my doorstep.”

31

“Beneath your brier bush, you mean,” Kay corrected with a smile.

“It makes no difference. I’ll keep the baby and we’ll say nothing about it.”

“You mean you’ll not let anyone know the child was left here?” Mrs. Tracey questioned disapprovingly.

“Certainly, that is the best way. If either of you starts telling folks about it, I’ll resent the matter deeply.”

Aunt Jessie tossed her head, and cuddling the baby in her arms, marched triumphantly into the kitchen. Kay and her mother followed reluctantly.

“She really does intend to keep the baby, Mother. What are we to do?”

“What can anyone do? When Jessie makes up her mind, one might as well submit to the inevitable as gracefully as possible.”

“But if the baby should have been stolen——”

“I know, it would be cruel to keep the child from its parents. However, I imagine everything will straighten itself out if we wait a few days.”

Entering the kitchen, Mrs. Tracey and Kay found Aunt Jessie making the baby a bed in a clothes basket which she had discovered.

“I wish you’d see if you can start a fire in the stove, Kay,” she requested. “We must warm this bottle of milk.”

“Aunt Jessie——”

32

“Now don’t start ‘Aunt Jessieing’ me. Just pitch in and help. We must get this house cleaned up so it will be a fit place for a baby.”

“You’re planning on staying here, then?” Kay asked, hiding a smile.

“Certainly I am. The country is the best place in which to bring up a child. The air is good here, and I may buy a cow _____”

The woman chatted on about her plans, forgetting that she had ever been depressed. When she had warmed the bottle of milk she fed the contents to the baby.

“The poor little thing was just hungry. That was all that was the matter with her,” Mrs. Stoke declared.

“Is it a girl baby?” Kay asked, wishing that Aunt Jessie would give her an opportunity to hold the bundle.

“Yes, and I imagine she must be about five months old.”

“Strange that no note was attached to the blankets,” Kay remarked thoughtfully. “We don’t even know her name.”

“I’ll call her Matilda, or perhaps Sophie,” Aunt Jessie said meditatively.

“Those names are a trifle old-fashioned, don’t you think?” Mrs. Tracey protested quickly. “They don’t seem to fit such a cute little cherub.”

“If she were mine I’d call her Rose,” Kay suggested impulsively. “It would be suitable because she was found under a rose bush.”

33

“Rose is a pretty name,” Aunt Jessie acknowledged reluctantly, mulling it over in her mind. “Maybe it is a mite better than Sophie or Matilda.”

“I think Rose is a lovely name,” Mrs. Tracey declared.

“Then that’s what we’ll call her,” Aunt Jessie consented.

When the baby had been fed, bathed and put in her little bed to sleep, Mrs. Stoke began to work with zeal and vigor. Kay and Mrs. Tracey could not keep up with her, and soon were

too exhausted even to try.

“Take things easier,” Mrs. Tracey cautioned the woman. “You may bring on another attack.”

“Fiddlesticks!” her relative snapped. “I never felt better in my life. My baby can’t live in a dirty house!”

Kay took several of the small rugs outside to shake the dust from them. As she did so, she observed a man in overalls coming up the lane. The farmer doffed his straw hat politely as he approached the girl.

“I didn’t know anyone was staying on the farm or I’d not have trespassed,” he apologized. “I’m looking for a cow. Haven’t seen her, have you?”

“No, I haven’t,” Kay replied.

“Bossy sometimes strays over here,” the man went on. “The fences on this place haven’t been kept up lately. I tell you, I’m glad to see the place occupied again.”

34

“You knew the former owners?”

“Everyone knew old Mr. Wendell and his wife. Nice folks. But when they died the farm was rented out, and it’s been going down ever since. No one has lived here for most a year now. I’ve tried to keep meddling folks away, but they sneak in and steal the fruit.”

“Do you live near by?” Kay questioned with interest.

“My farm is the next one south. See that fence over yonder? That’s where my property begins.”

“It looks like a well-kept piece of land.”

“One of the best in the country. Good rich soil, too.”

“I’d like to have you meet my aunt,” Kay said. “She is the owner of this farm. Your name is——”

“Tucker—Ned Tucker.”

“Please come this way.”

“All right, Miss.”

Mrs. Tracey and Aunt Jessie came out on the porch at Kay’s call and were introduced to the farmer. He spoke again of the bad fences, and the new owner promised that she would have them repaired within a few days.

“Isn’t that a cow down there by the windmill?” Kay asked, shading her eyes from the sun.

“That’s Bossy, sure enough,” the farmer agreed, starting away. “I’ll soon corral her.” He walked a few steps, then paused. “Come down to our farm some time and visit my wife,” he requested. “She gets pretty lonesome.”

35

“We’d be delighted to,” Mrs. Tracey answered politely.

“I’ll help you round up your cow, Mr. Tucker,” Kay offered, falling into step beside the man.

As they walked toward the windmill, it occurred to the girl to make a few casual inquiries regarding the persons who had been seen trespassing on the farm.

“Did anyone with a baby ever come here?” she asked.

“Well, now, I couldn’t say,” the man laughed, considering the question a strange one. “This is a great place for Sunday picnickers, so I reckon folks have brought along their babies.”

Kay wanted to tell the farmer about the infant which had been found under the crimson brier bush, but knowing that Aunt Jessie would never forgive her if she should, she switched the conversation to the subject of milk.

“I imagine my aunt will wish to arrange to have several quarts delivered here each day,” she remarked. “Is there a dairy near by?”

“Not one that delivers. Most folks hereabouts keep their own cows.”

“I wonder how we’ll get our milk? You don’t know of anyone who wants to rent out a cow, do you?”

“Now I never heard tell of renting a cow,” the farmer grinned, “but there are plenty of places where you could buy one. I might sell you Bossy here. She has a hankering for this place anyway.”

36

“Is she an expensive animal?” Kay asked cautiously.

“I’d sell her cheap. She’ll give better than three gallon of

milk.”

“I’ll talk it over with my aunt,” Kay promised, and hastened away to the house.

After a lengthy discussion with her relative, the woman came to inspect the cow herself. Finally the bargain was sealed.

“Bossy ought to be milked right away,” the man warned. “Her bag is full.”

Kay gazed at Aunt Jessie in consternation.

“Who will milk her?” she asked. “I never once thought of that.”

“I’m sure I can’t,” Aunt Jessie retorted. “You’ll have to do it, Kay.”

“There’s no trick to milking,” Mr. Tucker said with a wave of his hand. “You can learn to do it in one lesson.”

“I’m willing to try,” Kay offered, a trifle concerned.

Mrs. Tracey brought a pail from the kitchen and the farmer found a milking stool in the barn.

“Just sit down and start in,” he advised encouragingly. “Bossy is real gentle.”

Ned Tucker turned his back for a moment while Kay placed the stool beside the cow and started to milk. However, she had chosen unwittingly the wrong side of the

animal, and Bossy, thoroughly irritated at such treatment, lifted a hind leg and gave the bucket and Kay a hard kick.

CHAPTER V

AN INTERESTING CLUE

The pail crashed against Kay. Over went the stool and the girl with it. She found herself sprawled full length on the ground with Bossy gazing at her in calm disapproval.

“Are you hurt?” Mrs. Tracey cried anxiously, running forward to help her daughter regain her feet.

“N—no,” the girl murmured as she moved her arms experimentally. “I guess I’m all right, only Bossy took me by surprise.”

“The animal is vicious,” Aunt Jessie insisted angrily. “I’ll not have a wild cow on my farm.”

“Bossy wouldn’t hurt anyone on purpose,” Ned Tucker replied, trying not to laugh. “But she does like to be milked on the right side.”

“I guess I did make a mistake,” Kay admitted sheepishly. “I didn’t stop to think.”

“Here, I’ll show you how to do it,” the farmer grinned. “Watch me.”

He placed the stool on the near side of Bossy. Seating himself, he began to milk. When the pail was half full he induced Kay to try again, and this time the animal offered no objection, save that occasionally she would switch her tail in the girl's face.

"You'll have no trouble from now on," Ned Tucker said confidently. "I've been looking around the barn and there's plenty of feed. Most of the time you'll probably keep Bossy out to pasture."

"I suppose so," Kay admitted dubiously.

"Well, good luck," the farmer smiled genially as he pocketed the money paid him. "If you get up against it, just send word and I'll come over and help."

Kay carried the pail of rich milk into the house.

"Do you suppose he suspected about Rose?" Mrs. Stoke asked in a half whisper.

"I'm sure he didn't," the girl replied, "but I really don't see why we should keep the matter such a dark mystery."

Aunt Jessie pretended not to hear, and busied herself with the baby. Indeed, Kay and Mrs. Tracey could not blame her for wishing to keep Rose since the infant was so pretty and good-natured. They all hovered about the improvised crib, and before anyone realized it, dusk had come and the day was over.

The next morning directly after breakfast Kay and her mother

set off for Cherryville in the car, intending to purchase supplies. They had traveled only a short distance from the farm when they overtook a young man who was trudging wearily along the road, carrying a suitcase.

Kay seldom made it a practice of taking in hitch-hikers, but there was something about the appearance of the stranger which commanded her interest. She stopped the car and asked him if he would care to ride.

40

“Thanks,” he accepted, smiling as he tossed his suitcase into the back seat and got in himself. “I am pretty tired.”

“Are you going far?” asked Kay.

“Oh, I guess I’ll get off at Cherryville. One place is as good as another. I’m looking for work.”

“What type of work?” inquired Mrs. Tracey.

“I’m not particular. You see, I can’t be when I’m stone broke. I’m willing to do anything—chores around a farm, work in a grocery store, or whatever turns up.”

“I don’t believe you’ll find much to do at Cherryville,” Mrs. Tracey said thoughtfully.

“There’s just a possible chance my aunt might need a man to do odd jobs around her farm,” said Kay.

“If I could get room and board and maybe a few dollars extra, I’d be satisfied. As I said, I’m broke. Fact is, I don’t know whether I’ll eat again or not. I spent my last nickel for

breakfast.”

The Traceys liked the young man’s looks and felt that he might prove to be a good worker. They inquired as to his name and learned that it was Clarence Castner.

“You can’t do any work in those clothes,” Kay said, glancing at his suit which was clean and neatly pressed, though somewhat frayed. “Have you any overalls?”

41

“No, I haven’t.”

“We’ll give you enough money to buy a pair,” said Mrs. Tracey.

“You can pay us back if you like after you get your first money,” suggested Kay.

“And what if I fail to convince your aunt that I’m the person she needs?”

“Then we’ll just be out a pair of overalls,” Kay laughed.

At Cherryville the purchase was made. Then Clarence Castner helped carry the household supplies to the car. Back at Crimson Brier Farm he was decidedly nervous as he met Aunt Jessie, but his modest manner pleased the lady, so she promptly hired him.

“I’ll turn over my milking duties to you,” Kay declared as she showed the young man about the place. “I don’t seem to be very successful with cows myself.”

“What was that?” Clarence Castner asked, suddenly halting.
“I thought I heard a cry.”

“A cry,” Kay echoed, but she knew only too well what the sound had been.

It rather provoked her that Aunt Jessie insisted upon keeping secret the fact that Baby Rose had been found lying under the brier bush. Before going to Cherryville she had broached the subject again, but her relative had given her no satisfaction.

“I guess I imagined it,” Clarence remarked after a moment.

42

Presently Kay went back to the house alone, and at the kitchen door she found her Aunt Jessie awaiting her.

“Kay, I’ve changed my mind. We can’t let that young man stay here after all.”

“Why not? I’m sure he’s very deserving——”

“That has nothing to do with it. I’m afraid he’ll find out about the baby.”

“Why not fix up a room for him in the shed, then?” Kay suggested in desperation. “The poor man hasn’t a cent. He needs work.”

“I do hate to turn him away,” Mrs. Stoke admitted. “Do you suppose he’d be offended if we made him sleep outside?”

“I’m sure he’d prefer it to being sent away. I think the place

can be made fairly presentable.”

Clarence Castner offered no objection to the plan. When the shed was furnished he declared he would be very comfortable there.

“It seems a shame when there are so many empty bedrooms,” Mrs. Tracey began, but her relative interrupted her quickly.

“I’ll not have the young man finding out about Baby Rose, so that’s that. If he doesn’t like the shed he’ll have to leave!”

Kay had dropped in at the Cherryville post office and was agreeably surprised to receive a letter from Ronald Earle. She had been too busy to open it, but now she carried the envelope to her room to read its contents in private. The first portion she skimmed through quickly. Then she came to a paragraph which she went over twice.

43

“You may be interested to hear that Ethel Eaton is still missing from home. Some people think she eloped, but that theory is silly, because Ethel never had a steady boy friend in her life! Mrs. Eaton is taking it pretty hard, and I understand is in bed. Did you hear the description of Ethel that was broadcast on today’s news——”

Kay read no further, but with the letter in one hand she raced down the stairs to show it to her mother. Later, when Clarence Castner brought the milk to the house, she told him about her schoolmate’s strange disappearance.

“You say her name was Ethel Eaton?” he inquired curiously. “Why, that’s queer, because yesterday I saw a girl get off a

bus at Clinton. She was carrying a bag with the initials ‘E. E.’”

Eagerly Kay asked Clarence to describe the person he had seen. Although he was able to furnish only a few details, she was almost certain the girl had been Ethel Eaton.

“Where is Clinton?” she asked. “Is it far from here?”

“About twenty-five miles.”

“We must go there immediately.”

Mrs. Tracey was very willing that her daughter should undertake the trip for she sympathized deeply with Mr. and Mrs. Eaton. Soon Kay and Clarence were on the road, and shortly before dusk they drew up near the Clinton Hotel.

44

“Ethel may have registered here,” the Tracey girl declared. “I’ll go inside and inquire.”

The clerk allowed her to see the register, but Ethel Eaton’s name was not listed. From Kay’s description the man at the desk was unable to identify any of his guests as the missing girl.

Somewhat discouraged, Kay started back to the automobile. As she emerged from the hotel two persons came toward her, deeply engrossed in conversation.

“There she is!” Clarence Castner called from the car.

Already Kay had recognized Ethel Eaton. She thought that her

companion looked familiar, but for a moment could not place her. When she heard the woman speak, she recognized the voice as belonging to the unidentified “Alice” at the Rainbow Tea Room.

Before Kay could fully recover from her surprise, Ethel Eaton became aware that her path was being blocked. She stopped short in the street, gasped in dismay, and then tried to make light of the encounter.

“Why, hello, Kay,” she said casually, and tried to pass.

“Just a minute, Ethel. I must talk with you.”

“Really, I am in a hurry. I have an appointment with Mrs. Lare.”

45

“Oh, I don’t mean to intrude,” the older woman said hastily. “I was leaving, anyway.”

She nodded to Kay and moved rapidly down the street. Ethel was momentarily confused by this action, but she turned to her schoolmate with a cold, defiant gaze.

“Well, what do you want of me?”

“I think you know, Ethel. Your mother and father are half sick with worry because you ran away. You must return to Brantwood at once.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

“But think of your mother,” Kay pleaded. “She is actually ill

from worry.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Ethel replied soberly, “but I can’t go home. From now on I shall live my own life wherever I choose.”

“And will you support yourself, too?”

“Oh, yes,” the other answered aloofly. “I am through with school. I intend to go to work as a detective.”

Kay was unable to hide a smile. But immediately it faded away, as it occurred to her that poor misguided Ethel, in her zeal to prove herself, might become involved in some questionable scheme. She tried to warn the girl of this, but was cut short.

“Oh, stop preaching, Kay Tracey! I’m sick of it.”

“I didn’t mean to preach, Ethel. I’ll not say another word if only you’ll call your mother right away.”

46

Ethel shook her head, an angry gleam in her eyes.

“No, I did intend to, but now I shan’t. You’re entirely too nosey to suit me.”

“But your mother is so worried——”

“You’re probably just saying that to get me home again. Maybe I’ll call her some time, but not tonight.”

Kay felt that if she allowed the girl to leave Clinton, she

might not be able to trace her again. It was imperative that she communicate with the Eatons at once. If only she could use some ruse to compel Ethel to talk with her parents!

“Have you had dinner, Ethel?” she asked impulsively.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Then let’s go into the hotel and order something together,” Kay proposed. “We may as well forget our differences.”

Reluctantly Ethel agreed, and followed her schoolmate inside the hotel. She scarcely noticed that Kay paused for an instant beside the telephone operator’s desk to whisper:

“Get the Eaton home at Brantwood on the phone, and then page Miss Ethel Eaton.”

The operator nodded that she understood. Kay joined her classmate in the dining room. Scarcely had the girls given their orders when a page boy came in, crying in a sing-song voice:

“Call for Miss Eaton!”

47

Ethel looked astonished and pleased. “It must be a message from Mrs. Lare,” she said.

With an air of importance she summoned the page who told her she was wanted on the phone. Not bothering to excuse herself, she deserted her companion. Kay waited until the girl was out of sight, then followed. She felt highly elated that her simple plan appeared to be successful.

“I wish I could hear the conversation,” she thought with a chuckle. “I believe I’ll listen outside the booth!”

CHAPTER VI

KAY'S RUSE

Thinking that the telephone call had come from Mrs. Lare, Ethel had no hesitation in answering it. As her clear "hello" was transmitted over the wires, she was stunned to hear her father's angry response.

"So it's you, Ethel!" he reproved her severely. "I must say it's time you were letting us know where you went. Your mother is ill, and you must come home at once or I'll start after you. Why did you run away?"

Kay, who had been standing by the booth, was satisfied that her little ruse had been successful. She returned to the dining room and was waiting there a few minutes later when Ethel came back looking decidedly downcast.

"Bad news?" Kay inquired with an innocent air.

"Oh, it was my father on the phone," Ethel replied crossly. "Such luck! He says I must go home, and just when I had such an interesting mystery case."

"What sort of mystery?"

"Well, it concerns a lost baby, but I can't tell you any more

than that.”

Ethel had told just enough to whet Kay’s curiosity. She wondered if Ethel’s “case” could have any remote connection with Baby Rose who had been left under the crimson brier bush. In the hope of drawing the girl out and learning additional facts, she mentioned that a child had been found in the vicinity of her aunt’s farm.

“You can’t expect me to believe that,” Ethel retorted. “You’re just making up that statement, so I’ll tell you more about my case. But I’ll not do it—so there.”

“Suit yourself,” Kay said with a shrug. “But I told you the truth.”

“It’s queer how my father learned I was here in Clinton,” Ethel commented.

“I suppose a great many persons have seen you since you left Brantwood.”

“No one who recognized me. Kay Tracey, you told my father!”

“I have not talked with him,” Kay corrected, “but I’ll admit I put through the telephone call. I’m afraid you gave yourself away when you answered it.”

“It was a hateful, contemptible trick!”

“I only wanted to help you, Ethel. It isn’t fair to your mother _____”

The Eaton girl pushed aside her chair angrily. “All right, you win this time. I’ll go home. But after this keep out of my affairs.”

Kay paid the bill and followed Ethel from the dining room. As she started toward the front entrance to go to her car, she halted impulsively.

50

“Ethel accused me of trying trickery, so I may as well deserve the name!” she chuckled. “Only it might not work twice.”

Stepping into one of the telephone booths she placed another call for Ethel. She was afraid that the girl would not answer again, but after a long wait she heard the familiar voice. Disguising her tone, Kay allowed her classmate to believe that she was a woman connected with the so-termed “mysterious” baby case.

“Oh, it’s you, Mrs. Lare?” Ethel inquired eagerly, with an abrupt change of tone. “I’m so glad you telephoned, for I wanted to get in touch with you. Important business has called me back home.”

Kay choked at this, and very nearly gave her identity away, but smothering a laugh, she tried to make a suitable reply.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she murmured vaguely.

“So am I, Mrs. Lare,” Ethel returned. “I had hoped to help you but now it is impossible. Perhaps some other person skilled in detective work can assist you in tracing your husband and child.”

“I am dreadfully disappointed because you will be unable to help me,” Kay murmured.

“I may run into a few clues later on,” the girl answered. “Tell me your new address, Mrs. Lare, and I’ll notify you if I learn anything.”

For a moment Kay could think of nothing to reply. She felt trapped, for of course she had no idea where Mrs. Lare might go.

51

“That’s very good of you,” she responded. Then upon impulse she added, “You can reach me at Crimson Brier Farm near Cherryville.”

Kay did not wish to prolong the conversation further lest she disclose her identity. She murmured a few more polite phrases, then rang off. After Ethel was out of sight, the smiling Tracey girl emerged from the booth and rejoined Clarence Castner who was waiting patiently in the car. She told him of her good fortune in inducing Ethel to return home.

“And now do we start back to the farm?” he inquired.

“Not yet. I’d like to find out if a certain Mrs. Lare is living here in Clinton.”

Kay scarcely knew where to begin her search. She visited the police station, but no one there had ever heard of anyone named Mrs. Lare. She looked through the telephone directory, she inquired at various business houses, but to no avail.

“I guess it’s no use,” Kay admitted at last. “I’ll buy a few

things and then we'll start back to Crimson Brier Farm."

She purchased a considerable quantity of baby clothing and while she was waiting for the bundle to be wrapped, asked the salesgirl if anyone answering Mrs. Lare's description had ever been seen in the shop. The response was in the negative.

Discouraged, Kay carried the package back to the car and told Clarence she was ready to start home.

52

"I'll drive," she offered. "You look all worn out."

"I shouldn't be," he smiled good-naturedly. "I've been resting while you've been doing the work."

Nevertheless Kay took the wheel, and the two soon were speeding toward the outskirts of Clinton. The girl drove automatically, stopping now and then for a red light, but with her mind upon the strange association of Mrs. Lare with Ethel Eaton. She was disturbed by a thought that the woman's lost infant might be the same one which she had found under the brier bush.

Kay was rudely aroused from reflection by the sound of a shrill siren. Glancing into the mirror, she was dismayed to observe that a police car was approaching rapidly from the rear.

"Now what have I done?" she gasped to her companion. "The driver is signaling for me to pull over to the curb!"

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CHAPTER VII

A CALL FOR COUSIN BILL

Kay obediently brought the automobile to a standstill, wondering uncomfortably if she had overlooked a red light. She had visions of receiving a traffic ticket and so was agreeably surprised when the driver of the police car smiled pleasantly as he came over to talk with her.

“I’d like to have you return to the police station with me, Miss.”

“What have I done?” Kay asked with a very gloomy face.

“Nothing at all. But aren’t you the girl who inquired at the station house a few minutes ago about a woman who had lost a baby?”

“A Mrs. Lare,” Kay supplied eagerly. “Have you located her?”

“Well, there is a woman at the station now who lost her child, and we’d like to find out what you know about it.”

Kay, remembering Aunt Jessie’s request, turned the subject. “I have a friend who is looking for her,” she said. “I’ll be glad to go back with you to see this woman.”

The policeman then admitted he did not know the woman's name. Although the girl was in a hurry to reach Cherryville, she willingly returned to headquarters.

There she was keenly disappointed to learn that the woman in question was not Mrs. Lare at all. The "lost" child was a mischievous lad of two years who had wandered away from his mother while shopping in a crowded store.

Even as Kay was explaining to the frantic woman that she knew nothing about the missing boy, a policeman entered, leading the little fellow by the hand. He had been found playing on the downtown streets. The mother apologized profusely for causing so much trouble, and hurriedly left the station with her offspring.

It was long after dark before Kay and Clarence Castner reached Crimson Brier Farm. They bumped over the lane which had been resurfaced in the worst places by gravel, and came within view of the lighted house. As the car stopped by the front porch, Aunt Jessie, lamp in hand, came to the door.

"Is it you, Kay?" she asked.

"We found Ethel Eaton," Kay reported, "and she promised that she would return home."

Before her relative had an opportunity to speak, the occupants of the car were startled to hear the cry of a baby from within the house. Clarence glanced quickly at Kay.

"Have you a baby here?" he asked.

Kay waited for Aunt Jessie to answer. The woman shifted uneasily and stood mute. Again the child wailed, and this time no one could mistake the sound.

“I guess an infant has a right to cry if it feels like it,” Aunt Jessie said tartly.

“Why, of course,” Clarence stammered. “I—I just didn’t know you were keeping a child——”

“Probably there are a great many things you don’t know, young man,” Aunt Jessie replied rudely. “I don’t mind your learning that I have a baby, but if you want to keep your job here, don’t go talking about it in Cherryville.”

“Certainly not, if that is your wish, Mrs. Stoke.”

Clarence regarded the woman curiously, and Kay knew that he must consider her request very strange. The girl felt deeply embarrassed that Aunt Jessie should encourage the man to believe that the baby belonged to her. However, Mrs. Tracey and her daughter felt that since they were guests at the farm, they could do little about the matter without incurring their relative’s wrath.

Later Kay told her mother of her experience in Clinton and of Ethel Eaton’s strange connection with Mrs. Lare. For the first time she spoke of the conversation she had overheard in the Rainbow Tea Room and raised the question as to whether or not Baby Rose might be the infant which the woman in the adjoining booth had lost.

“There are several angles to the case,” she said

thoughtfully. "I can't help but think that the nurse who was talking to Mrs. Lare that day may know something about the baby's disappearance. She was asking her patient for a large sum of money. I wish Cousin Bill were here, for I don't like to act in the matter without his legal advice."

"I wish Bill were here, too," Mrs. Tracey said. "He might induce Jessie to listen to reason in regard to the baby. I'm sure she'll never pay any heed to us."

"Perhaps if you should invite Cousin Bill he'd come to the farm for a week-end."

"I think he would," Mrs. Tracey nodded. "I'll write the letter tonight."

Despite their worry over Aunt Jessie's actions in regard to the baby, Kay and Mrs. Tracey were enjoying their stay at the farm. The weather was ideal and they spent many hours in the open air. Both developed a becoming tan and a ruddy glow in their cheeks.

Aunt Jessie spoke of making a permanent home at the farm. She hired Ned Tucker to help Clarence, and the two men set to work rebuilding fences, repairing out-buildings, and improving the road to the highway. They cleaned away the ugly growth of bushes and small trees which had marred the landscape, but for sentimental reasons Aunt Jessie would not permit them to cut down a single brier bush.

In Clarence Castner's presence the woman still kept up the pretense that Baby Rose was her own. Yet when he asked if he might see the infant, she gave no sign that she had

even heard the question. Clarence took the hint and spoke no more of the child.

Kay wondered how much the man suspected. He was so reticent that it was impossible to guess. However, one afternoon when Aunt Jessie had gone to Cherryville, she invited him into the house to see the baby.

“The infant doesn’t look much like your aunt,” he remarked.

“No,” Kay answered briefly.

Since the arrival of the baby at the farm, Aunt Jessie’s energy had been amazing. When she was not taking care of Baby Rose, she kept busy superintending the reconstruction work. At times she was downright bossy, but neither of the men seemed to mind. They were proud of their work and pleased to note the remarkable improvement of the property.

Although the season was late, Aunt Jessie announced that she must have a garden. The soil was thoroughly prepared and plants were brought from Ned Tucker’s place. Kay spent half a day under a scorching sun helping Clarence set them out. She had never worked harder in her life, but she thoroughly enjoyed it. Only a small part of the garden was devoted to flowers; the major portion was planted in vegetables.

“I’ll need fresh ones for Rose,” Aunt Jessie declared.

“And I want them crisp out of the earth.”

“Perhaps by the time the garden has grown, someone will try to take the baby from you, Jessie,” Mrs. Tracey remarked.

“I’d like to see anyone try!” the woman snapped, with an outward thrust of her pointed chin.

“But Aunt Jessie—” Kay protested, “the baby isn’t really yours unless you legally adopt it.”

“I mean to talk with Bill about that when he comes,” Mrs. Stoke returned. “I’m glad you brought up the matter.”

Kay and Mrs. Tracey were relieved to receive a note from the young attorney saying that he would try to drive down to the farm within a few days. In the meantime they would allow the matter to rest.

Kay had gone to bed rather early one night and was sleeping soundly when suddenly someone shook her arm.

“Wake up! Wake up!” a voice said urgently.

With an effort Kay aroused herself and became aware that Aunt Jessie was standing over the bed.

“What is it?” she questioned drowsily.

“Baby Rose is dreadfully ill,” the girl’s relative answered tensely. “You must dress quickly and go to Cherryville for a doctor!”

CHAPTER VIII

A MIDNIGHT SUMMONS

Kay was out of bed in an instant, asking anxious questions as she dressed.

“I don’t know what is wrong with the baby,” Aunt Jessie answered quaveringly as she started back toward the nursery. “The little thing woke up about ten minutes ago screaming with pain. Now she’s deathly white and very still. Oh, Kay, if Rose should die——”

“I’ll have the doctor here just as quickly as I can. He’ll know what to do.”

Mrs. Tracey was awake by this time. Pulling on her bathrobe, she hurried to the nursery to see what she could do to help. As Kay was putting on her shoes, her mother rushed to the bedroom.

“The baby really is desperately ill,” she told her daughter. “Kay, hurry just as fast as you can or it may be too late.”

“I’m starting now. I only hope I can find a doctor.”

“I think the Tucker farm has a telephone.”

“I’ll try there first,” her daughter answered.

Catching up her coat, she ran down the stairs and out of the house. The Tucker home was dark as the girl drove her car into the farmyard. She honked the horn several times. Then, running to the front door, she pounded on it. After a long wait, the owner thrust his head out of an upstairs window.

60

“What’s wanted?” he asked crossly. “Who is it?”

“Kay Tracey. There’s someone sick at our house and we need a doctor. May I use your phone?”

“I’ll be right down,” the farmer replied with an abrupt change of tone.

A few minutes later he unlocked the door and led Kay to the telephone, an old-time one.

“It’s one long ring to get Cherryville central,” he explained. “Are you calling Doc Whimple?”

“Any doctor I can get quickly.”

“Doc Cornell is the best. Here, you don’t seem to know how to handle that contraption. I’ll call for you.”

Kay was glad to have the man do it, for a country telephone was indeed a deep mystery to her. Farmer Tucker “rang” at least a dozen times before the central office answered. Then there was another long delay before he reached the Cornell residence. At last the connection was made. The doctor had

difficulty in understanding and Mr. Tucker had to shout over and over that someone was ill at the old Wendell farm.

“Do you think he really understood?” Kay asked anxiously as the farmer hung up the receiver, somewhat exhausted by his efforts.

61

“Oh, yes, Doc Cornell will be out just as quick as he can dress. Is it your aunt that was took sick?”

Kay shook her head.

“Oh, your mother,” Mr. Tucker assumed. “I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“I’ll have to go right back,” Kay said hurriedly. “Thank you ever so much for letting me make the call.”

“Glad to do what little I can,” the farmer answered heartily. “I’ll drive back with you if there’s anything I can do.”

Kay thanked him for his kindness but assured him that only the doctor could be of aid. She returned to Crimson Brier Farm which was aglow with lights.

Mrs. Tracey and Aunt Jessie had done all they could for the baby during the girl’s absence, but the infant seemed no better and they were relieved to learn that the doctor was on his way. When Kay heard a car in the lane, she raced downstairs to open the door. A portly man with a little black bag alighted from the coupe. His calm smile was reassuring.

“Where is the patient?” he inquired.

Kay led the man up the steps to the room where the baby lay white and still in its crib. Aunt Jessie began to talk excitedly to the doctor, but he scarcely listened. His eyes were upon the infant. He removed his coat and took out a stethoscope from his bag. He made a brief examination and then asked a few terse questions.

“What have you been feeding this baby?”

“Why, only good quality milk, and the very best of vegetables,” Aunt Jessie answered in a stricken tone. “I’m sure it couldn’t be the food——”

“The baby has every indication of suffering from some sort of poison. Bring me sterile water from the kitchen, please.”

“I let the baby play on the floor for a few minutes late in the afternoon,” Mrs. Stoke murmured. “But I don’t see how she could have picked up anything. Oh, Doctor, will she die?”

“The child is very ill,” the man answered gravely.

“Fortunately I brought a stomach pump along with me. If I knew what it was she had eaten it would be much easier to offer an opinion.”

Doctor Cornell went to work in a calm, deliberate way, calling upon Kay and her mother to assist him. Aunt Jessie was too excited to be of the slightest aid. When the stomach pump was being used she collapsed in a chair, weeping softly.

When the treatment was over, and Doctor Cornell announced that Baby Rose would recover, Aunt Jessie tried to thank him, but broke down completely. He gave her a sleeping tablet and

urged her to go to bed while Mrs. Tracey remained with the baby. Kay escorted the physician downstairs, offering him a cup of coffee.

“Yes, I will take it,” he accepted gratefully. “It will brace me up for the drive back to town.”

63

While the doctor sipped the beverage, Kay sat at the table with him. They chatted pleasantly, and soon the girl found herself telling him about the nurse whose conversation she had overheard at the Rainbow Tea Room. She was able to furnish only a meager description of the woman.

“I believe you’re referring to Norma Jones,” Doctor Cornell said reflectively. “At least your description fits her. But she’s not really a nurse any more.”

“She gave it up, you mean?”

“At the request of the state,” the doctor smiled. “I had Miss Jones on a case years ago and didn’t like her work. Later I heard she had been disbarred for questionable practices.”

“And can you tell me where Miss Jones is at the present time?” Kay inquired eagerly.

Doctor Cornell shook his head as he poured himself a second cup of coffee.

“No, the last I heard of her she was working at a factory in Northampton, making nurses’ uniforms. By this time she may be in another state.”

Kay took mental note of the name, determining to make use of it at some future time. Later she accompanied the doctor to the door. After his car had driven away, she stumbled wearily up to bed.

In the morning Baby Rose was greatly improved. Doctor Cornell called again in the afternoon, but spent only a few minutes at the farmhouse since he was satisfied with the infant's condition. As he was leaving, Aunt Jessie followed him to the door.

64

“I wish you'd not say anything to folks in Cherryville about my baby being sick, Doctor.”

“I never talk about any of my cases, Mrs. Stoke.”

With Baby Rose once more healthy and happy, the household settled down to its former routine. The week-end brought young Bill Tracey to Crimson Brier Farm. Aunt Jessie warned Kay that she was not to tell him very much about the infant, but despite this the girl drew her genial cousin aside and explained just how the baby had come into their possession.

“I found Rose wrapped in a blanket under the crimson briers,” she revealed, “but Aunt Jessie seems to think I have no rights in the matter at all.”

“You don't want to adopt the baby yourself?” Cousin Bill teased.

“No,” Kay smiled, “but I'd like to solve the mystery of the little girl's parentage, and if possible restore her to her mother and father. Aunt Jessie opposes the idea.”

“I knew something was wrong when I received your mother’s note,” Mr. Tracey chuckled. “I doubt that I can do anything with Aunt Jessie either, but I’m willing to try. By the way, where did you say you found the baby?”

Kay led her cousin outside, and after a cautious glance about to be certain that Aunt Jessie was nowhere in the vicinity, showed him the fateful crimson brier bush.

65

“And no note was attached to the bundle?” the young lawyer inquired thoughtfully.

“No, we found no clue at all. So far, the only significant thing I have learned is that Mrs. Lare appears to have lost a baby. Whether or not it is little Rose remains to be discovered. I’ve tried to trace the woman——”

Kay broke off abruptly as Cousin Bill suddenly stooped down and picked up an object from beneath the brier bush.

“What is it?” the girl asked in astonishment.

Cousin Bill displayed a stained leather eyeglass case. It had been half buried in the moist soft earth, and partially covered with leaves.

“I guess I’m not much of a detective after all,” Kay murmured. “At least I overlooked that clue, and I don’t see how I did, either. Of course, I didn’t examine the ground under the brier bush very carefully. I was too excited at finding the baby.”

Cousin Bill, proud of his discovery, turned the leather case

over to look at the optician's imprint which was stamped on it. The words were difficult to make out.

"Sigler, Clinton," he finally read aloud.

"Why, Clinton isn't far from here!" Kay exclaimed. "It was there that I learned about Mrs. Lare."

"Then you may be right about the baby belonging to her," Cousin Bill declared. "This clue may lead to something, Kay."

66

"The eyeglass case looks as if it had been lying on the ground for a long while," the girl replied doubtfully. "Excuse me for saying so, Cousin Bill, but I wonder if it has any connection with Baby Rose at all?"

"Oh, you're just jealous because you didn't find the clue yourself!" the young lawyer retorted teasingly.

"No, I'm not! But you can see for yourself that the thing has been lying on the ground for weeks."

"One rain might make it look stained and old."

"Not that old."

"The optician at Clinton should be able to identify the case, Kay, and I'm still convinced the clue is worth tracing."

"Why don't you track it down yourself?" Kay laughed.

"Maybe I shall," Cousin Bill answered, pocketing the

eyeglass case.

A little while later he casually invited Kay to go to a movie that afternoon at Clinton. She promptly accepted, but was secretly amused, for she suspected that the moving picture show was merely a pretext for visiting the Sigler establishment.

After luncheon Cousin Bill had a long talk with Aunt Jessie regarding her plan of remaining at the farm. He pointed out that after Kay and Mrs. Tracey would have returned to Brantwood, she would be left alone in an isolated locality.

67

“Why don’t you get a watchdog?” he proposed. “At least you would have some protection then.”

“I should like a dog that would keep strangers away from the farm,” Aunt Jessie nodded. “Do you think you could find me a good one?”

Cousin Bill promised to try. Abandoning the proposed trip to Clinton, he and Kay accompanied Aunt Jessie to Cherryville. There they purchased a purebred police dog which had been competently trained, or so they were told by the owner, who insisted that the animal was a safe companion for a baby.

From the very first Rudy attached himself to little Rose, and usually they took their sunbaths together, the infant in her basket, the dog stretched out alongside. Rudy would allow only members of the family to approach, and so faithful was he to his trust, that Aunt Jessie did not hesitate staying away from the scene for long periods at a time.

The third morning after Cousin Bill's arrival, Mrs. Stoke left the baby out in the open air longer than usual. She and Kay were making strawberry jelly and the hours seemed to fly. Suddenly the woman glanced at the clock and saw that it was after eleven.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed. "It's past Rose's feeding time!"

Leaving Kay to clean up the kitchen, the woman hastened outside. The next minute those inside the house were startled to hear a shrill cry from her.

68

"What is it?" Kay gasped, hurrying to the kitchen door.

She found Aunt Jessie staring almost stupidly at the empty baby basket. Both Rudy and his young charge were gone!

69

CHAPTER IX

THE MISSING BABY

Aunt Jessie, overwhelmed by the disappearance of little Rose, began to weep hysterically.

“Someone has stolen the baby!” she wailed. “Oh, I shouldn’t have left her alone even for a minute. What shall we do? What shall we do?”

By this time Mrs. Tracey and Cousin Bill had hurried from the house, attracted by the woman’s screams. They tried to comfort her, but she would not listen to them. Jessie Stoke was grief stricken. The thought came to Kay that should the baby not be returned, the woman might become gravely ill. This must not happen.

Clarence Castner came running from the barn to ask what was wrong, and upon learning that the child had disappeared from its basket, he became nearly as excited as Aunt Jessie. Kay asked the man if he had seen any stranger approach the farmhouse during the past two hours.

“No one,” he reported.

It occurred to Kay that the dog might have dragged the infant away, and with this thought she examined the ground near the

basinet.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “Here are dog tracks!”

70

“And you can see where some object has been pulled over the grass,” Mrs. Tracey added in alarm.

It was impossible to follow the trail more than a few feet, but by this time everyone was convinced that Rudy had been responsible for the deed.

The dog was discovered in a nearby field, and he cringed in fear as Clarence Castner grasped him roughly by the collar.

“What have you done with the baby?” he demanded. “Lead us to her, Rudy.” The animal, however, only barked excitedly.

No trace of the infant could be found in the field. As the search went on, Aunt Jessie became even more hysterical, and finally Mrs. Tracey was compelled to take the woman to the house.

When the excitement was at its height, a car was heard in the lane. Doctor Cornell drove into the farm yard, and upon learning of the baby’s disappearance, promptly joined the searchers.

Kay suddenly gave a cry which brought the others to the scene. She held up a scrap of white cloth which she had discovered on the ground.

“It’s a piece from the baby’s dress! I found it here.”

Kay indicated an old well which had been built under a sagging shed. It had been abandoned years before because it usually went dry during the summer months and served no practical use. Even the wooden cover which protected it had rotted away. Aunt Jessie had delayed making any repairs, but she considered the well dangerous and intended to have it filled with dirt.

Now fear gripped the hearts of the searchers as they realized that Rudy might have dragged the baby to the edge of the hole. The feeling of deep dread became intensified as Rudy began to bark excitedly again.

“I’m afraid to think of what we may find in that black opening,” Kay murmured.

Cousin Bill stretched himself full length on the ground and peered over the edge of the well.

“I can’t see a thing,” he reported. “It’s too dark.”

Clarence Castner ran to the barn for a ladder but Kay could not endure the suspense of awaiting his return. The well was shallow and she was both nimble and slim. With Cousin Bill steadying her from above, she lowered herself over the edge, clinging there until her feet found a projection which offered a foothold. She then dropped the remaining distance into a few inches of water.

Kay was splashing about in the dark, damp hole when she heard a triumphant shout from above. Cousin Bill’s voice echoed strangely as it came down to her.

“Doctor Cornell has just found the baby safe and sound! We’ll get you out of that place in just a minute, Kay.”

Clarence Castner brought a ladder, and the girl climbed out. Her shoes and stockings were wet, her clothing streaked with dirt and her hair disheveled, but she did not care about herself. Her only thought was for the baby. 72

Doctor Cornell had found little Rose lying on a bed of straw not far from the well. Obviously the dog had carried her there still snugly wrapped in her blankets.

“The babe doesn’t appear any the worse for her experience,” the physician declared as the party started toward the house.

“Don’t tell Aunt Jessie about what I did,” Kay warned. “She’s half hysterical now.”

Mrs. Stoke indeed was in a deplorable state, and Mrs. Tracey had been unable to offer satisfactory consolation. At sight of Baby Rose, Aunt Jessie began to laugh and cry. She cuddled the infant and whispered endearments.

“Such a horrible ordeal for a tiny baby—to be carried away by a dog!” she shuddered. “Oh, Doctor, will she survive?”

“The child hasn’t been harmed a particle except for a few trifling scratches,” the physician replied. “I’ll treat those. But I strongly advise you to go to bed, Mrs. Stoke. You are completely upset.”

“There’s no use in my doing so. I won’t be able to sleep.”

The doctor unlocked his bag and took out a vial of tablets.

“Take two of these in a glass of water,” he ordered, “and I’ll guarantee that you’ll sleep.”

Kay and Mrs. Tracey helped Mrs. Stoke to undress.

73

Under protest she did go to bed, but first she drank the medicine which was prepared for her. It did not take effect at once, and she kept tossing her head nervously on the pillow.

“I’ll sit here by the bedside until she drops off to sleep,” the doctor promised Mrs. Tracey.

In a few minutes Mrs. Stoke fell into a troubled slumber, but she continued to roll her head nervously, muttering and moaning all the while.

“They can’t take the baby away from me,” she said in a voice which was clearly audible to everyone in the room. “Even if she isn’t mine, I shall keep her!”

After observing the patient for a few minutes, Doctor Cornell picked up his medicine case and went downstairs again. In the kitchen he had a quiet talk with Mrs. Tracey which later was reported to Kay. The man had been puzzled by Mrs. Stoke’s strange reference to the baby, and it was his opinion that the woman might be losing her mind.

“I didn’t tell him the whole truth,” Mrs. Tracey said to Kay. “But you can picture my embarrassment. It would certainly simplify matters if Jessie would tell people how the child came into her possession.”

The following day everyone was relieved because Mrs. Stoke appeared very nearly her normal self. Baby Rose had suffered no ill effects from her misadventure.

“Rudy must be taken back to Cherryville,” Aunt Jessie proclaimed. “I’ll not have the dog on my place after this.”

74

Kay and Cousin Bill offered to dispose of the animal. They returned it to its original owner, and at the attorney’s suggestion drove on to Clinton where they attended a movie. At the conclusion of the picture the young lawyer explained rather elaborately that he had an errand to do.

“You wait in the car,” he told Kay. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

His cousin watched him disappear down the street, but she was not to be deceived. She felt certain that Bill was heading straight for the Sigler establishment.

“Here is where I’ll have a little fun,” she chuckled as she prepared to trail him. “He intends to check up on that eyeglass case we found beneath the crimson brier bush. If the clue turns out to be worthless, he’ll say nothing about it to me!”

Unaware that he was being followed, Cousin Bill went directly to the optician’s shop, the location of which he had noted earlier in the day. Kay, watching from outside, saw him hand over the leather case to the proprietor. The two men talked for a couple of minutes, after which the shop keeper went to the rear of his place to look through a filing case.

“Cousin Bill has requested the owner to check up through his records,” Kay decided with a delighted chuckle. “This is the cue for me to make my appearance.”

She walked blithely into the store, thoroughly enjoying Cousin Bill’s look of consternation.

75

“Well, well, I rather thought I’d find you here,” she said.

“You did, eh?” the young attorney responded ruefully. “I might have known you’d see through my little scheme.”

“It was pretty transparent, all right. But I really am curious to learn who is the owner of the eyeglass case.”

“I suspect you came here to witness my downfall. But the joke may be on you yet, young lady. Here comes Mr. Sigler now with the records.”

The optician approached, carrying several typewritten filing cards.

“I have the information you requested, Mr. Tracey.”

“Good! Let’s hear it.”

76

CHAPTER X

VISITORS AT THE FARM

“The eyeglass case is a very old one,” the optician explained to the Traceys. “I sold it to a farmer years ago.”

“And his name?” Cousin Bill questioned.

“Wendell.”

As soon as Kay and the lawyer left the shop, the girl burst into a gale of laughter.

“I guess the joke is on you, Cousin Bill,” she teased. “If my memory serves me correctly, Mr. Wendell was the former owner of Aunt Jessie’s farm!”

“Yes, the joke seems to be on me all right,” Bill Tracey acknowledged ruefully. “The eyeglass case probably was dropped by Mr. Wendell years ago under the crimson brier bush.”

“I don’t see how it could have the slightest connection with the present affair,” Kay said significantly.

“It couldn’t. As a detective I’ll admit I’m not so good. But have some mercy and don’t rub it in!”

Enroute to the farm, the young lawyer told Kay that he must return to Brantwood the following day surely.

“So soon?” she inquired in disappointment.

77

“Yes, I’ve been away from my office too long now. Besides, I don’t seem to be of much use here.”

“Why, you’ve helped a lot, especially with advice.”

“I guess I’m better at that than I am at finding clues. Write me now and then, Kay, and let me know how the Lare case progresses.”

The next day Cousin Bill drove back to Brantwood. Shortly after his departure the postman delivered a letter for Kay. It was from Betty and Wilma Worth.

The girl read only a few lines, then ran over to the kitchen to tell her mother and Aunt Jessie an exciting bit of news.

“Just listen to this!” she cried. “Mr. and Mrs. Worth are leaving for Europe next week!”

“Next week!” Mrs. Tracey exclaimed. “Why, that’s the first I knew they were going abroad.”

“The twins write that their parents decided to go on the spur of the moment.”

“And will Betty and Wilma accompany them?”

“No, they’re to stay at home. They think possibly they’ll visit

an aunt in Chicago, but they're not very enthusiastic about the idea."

"It's a shame you girls can't be together," Mrs. Tracey remarked, for she knew that Kay had missed her friends.

"Well, why can't she invite them here?" Aunt Jessie asked tersely. "We have plenty of room."

"Oh, would you like to have the girls?" Kay questioned eagerly.

78

"If you would, it will be perfectly all right with me," Mrs. Stoke replied. "That is, if they're not too talkative."

"Oh, Betty and Wilma are quiet girls," Kay assured her. "And I'm certain they'll not tell anyone about the baby, if that is what you fear might happen."

"Write the letter and invite them to come," Mrs. Stoke urged.

Although the woman had recovered from her recent indisposition, she was not strong enough to do very much work. She preferred to spend all her time attending to the needs of Baby Rose. Mrs. Tracey and Kay were both delighted when they received word that the twins would spend a few weeks at Crimson Brier Farm, and knew Betty and Wilma would assist with the work.

Kay drove to the Cherryville station to meet the girls. During the ride back to the farm she had an opportunity to inform her friends that Aunt Jessie was decidedly eccentric.

“I’m curious to see Crimson Brier Farm,” Wilma declared as they bumped along the rutty road. “Your letters have sounded very mysterious of late.”

“Yes, you may as well ’fess up and tell everything,” Betty chuckled, “for we’ll learn it sooner or later.”

“We do have a mystery at Crimson Brier Farm,” Kay replied, laughing. “Her name is Rose.”

79

“*Her* name!” Betty echoed. “Well, you have been keeping secrets, Kay Tracey!”

“Only because Aunt Jessie has insisted. Now that you’re going to stay at the farm, I may as well tell you all about it.”

She then revealed how she had found the baby under the bush, mentioned her meeting with Ethel Eaton and told about Mrs. Lare.

“Ethel is back home now,” Wilma told her chum. “She’s been boasting outrageously about her detective work which she claims you interrupted. We thought she was making it all up.”

“No, there was some truth in Ethel’s story,” Kay replied soberly. “Mrs. Lare apparently did ask her to help locate a missing baby. Mother and I are afraid it may be the one Aunt Jessie claims as her own. But please don’t act as if I’ve told you all this.”

“Of course not,” Betty promised, and Wilma nodded.

The car had reached Crimson Brier Farm, and as the twins

obtained their first view of the lovely spot they exclaimed in delight.

“Such gorgeous red bushes,” Betty cried. “You didn’t do justice to them in your letter, Kay.”

“No one could.”

Wilma, who was inclined to become poetical upon the slightest pretext, now began to recite:

“The rose may boast a bloom of fire
And Beauty be her name;
But credit ye the bush of brier
That caused the rose to flame.”

80

“You must quote that verse to Aunt Jessie,” Kay declared. “She disliked the brier bushes at first but since Rose was found she likes them.”

The car soon reached the farmhouse. After a leisurely stroll about the garden, the girls went indoors to find Aunt Jessie bending over the baby’s crib. Without waiting for Kay to introduce them, the twins crowded close to the child’s bed and Betty exclaimed:

“Oh, isn’t she cunning! And to think she was found under the brier bush.”

“Listen, my dear,” said Mrs. Stoke positively, “Where this babe was found is nobody’s business. Please never mention it again.”

Betty was somewhat stunned by the woman's words, but when she recalled that Mrs. Stoke was somewhat eccentric, she tried to pass the matter off as being of no consequence. Then Kay came to the rescue with the delayed introductions.

"Aunt Jessie," she said half banteringly, "here we have the famous Worth twins. This is Betty, and here is Wilma, known far and wide as a poetess."

"A poetess," the woman responded, visibly impressed. "Do tell. I always liked 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.' Can you recite one of your poems for me?"

81

Wilma could and did, and when she had finished, her listener's whole countenance proclaimed approval. Meanwhile Betty busied herself with the baby. She played "patty-cake" with the child's feet instead of its hands. The result was highly amusing to the infant.

The twins soon won their way into Aunt Jessie's confidence. They were quick to see anything that needed attention and were even quicker at accomplishing it.

The following day Mrs. Tracey took the three girls with her to the village on a shopping trip, and Aunt Jessie was left alone with Baby Rose. As she stood in the kitchen preparing the child's food, she was startled to hear a knock at the front door.

Cautiously Mrs. Stoke peered out the window at a dusty, disheveled looking young man whom she had never seen before. She quickly concluded that he was after the baby and in a frenzy of fear the poor woman rushed from window to window, lowering them and drawing the shades.

The young man was both amused and bewildered at Mrs. Stoke's strange actions, for he chanced to be Ronald Earle. Kay had written to him, describing the farm, and he felt certain he had come to the right place. The trip had been planned as a surprise, and he did not wish to return to Brantwood without finding the Tracey girl.

After knocking again on the door, the lad strolled about the lawn, stopping to admire the crimson brier bushes which Kay had described so glowingly. This act alarmed Mrs. Stoke even more and she watched him anxiously through a crack in a curtain. 82

A car was heard coming up the lane. Aunt Jessie was hopeful that it might be Mrs. Tracey and the girls returning from Cherryville. Great was her dismay to see a policeman alight instead. He approached Ronald Earle to talk to him about speeding. Mrs. Stoke assumed that the officer intended to question her regarding Baby Rose. In desperation she seized the infant from its crib and darted out the back door.

The frantic woman's first thought was to seek the protection of the forest which came up nearly to the rear of the house. She plunged farther and farther into its depths, darting this way and that, until eventually she lost all sense of direction and had not the slightest idea where she was.

Meanwhile, the unjustly accused Ronald had convinced the officer that he could not possibly have been driving more than thirty-five miles an hour. When the trooper drove away, the young man, for want of a more exciting occupation, curled upon the front porch and fell asleep. An hour later Mrs.

Tracey and the girls, returning from their shopping tour, found him there.

“Why, Ronald Earle!” Kay exclaimed, as she shook his arm. “Imagine finding you stretched out on our doorstep! Why didn’t you go inside and ask Aunt Jessie for a comfortable bed?”

83

“Hello, Kay,” Ronald grinned sheepishly. “I must have dozed off for a minute. You’ll have to excuse my appearance. I’m a bit travel-worn.”

“When we drove up we thought at first you were a tramp,” Betty giggled.

“I guess that’s what Kay’s aunt thought too,” Ronald said ruefully. “At least some person pulled down all the shades and wouldn’t let me inside the house.”

Mrs. Tracey and the girls exchanged quick, embarrassed glances.

“Of course Aunt Jessie couldn’t have known who you are,” Kay said apologetically. “Clarence Castner, our hired man, is away for the day, and I suppose she was nervous at being left entirely alone. She seems to have a strange fear that someone will run away with Baby Rose.”

The woman had locked the front door, so Mrs. Tracey and the young people were compelled to go around to the rear.

“I suppose you’ve heard the latest about Ethel Eaton,” Ronald remarked casually.

“Wilma and Betty told me a little,” Kay replied, “but it’s hard to keep up with Ethel’s movements.”

“She’s at home now, and her parents will hardly let her outside the house. There’s some talk she may be expelled from summer school, too.”

Kay was not paying a great deal of attention to Ronald’s words, for it troubled her to find that the rear door was standing ajar.

“Aunt Jessie!” she called, as the group entered. There was no reply.

“I’d like to see the baby,” Ronald declared, gazing about the farmhouse with interest.

“Her crib is in the next room,” Kay said, leading the way. “I can’t understand what has become of Aunt Jessie——”

She broke off in startled dismay as her gaze fell upon the empty crib.

“The baby is gone!” she gasped as the others crowded about.

“Rose must be with Jessie,” Mrs. Tracey said, seeking to allay the girl’s fears.

“But where is she?” Kay murmured in perplexity.

They searched the house both upstairs and down. The girls even entered the barn and other out-buildings. Thoroughly alarmed, Mrs. Tracey had Ronald drive down to the Tucker

farm and telephone to various neighbors, asking them to join in the hunt.

As Kay tried to reconstruct the situation, she was uncertain of Aunt Jessie's motive in fleeing with the baby. She wondered if the woman might not be mentally ill and in consequence had formed an unreasoning distrust of all strangers.

However, the immediate need was to get organized and conduct a more thorough search. She sent Ronald and a group of men to explore the fields north of the house. Her mother, Wilma and Betty went to cover carefully a tangled meadow to the south.

85

There remained only the forest. Mr. Tucker and the men had been of the opinion that Mrs. Stoke would never venture into the woods, but Kay thought otherwise.

The last rays of the setting sun lighted the tall tree-tops, but darkness already had claimed the forest itself. An eerie stillness that seemed to forebode calamity hovered over everything.

Kay shivered and drew her sweater more closely about her. A sudden conviction came over her that Aunt Jessie was lost somewhere in the dense woods. She turned as if to signal the searchers in the fields, but she saw that the men were too far away to hear her shouts. The girl hesitated; then, with unflinching courage, she walked into the forest alone.

86

CHAPTER XI

A FOREST FIRE

Before Kay had gone very far into the woods she found a freshly broken stick which indicated that someone had passed that way within the past few hours. A little farther on she noticed a woman's shoe print in the soft earth, and finally her gaze fell upon an infant's white sock which had caught upon a thorny bush.

Kay snatched up the little stocking, certain it belonged to Baby Rose. She was now convinced that Mrs. Stoke had sought refuge in the forest.

"Aunt Jessie!" she called frantically. "Aunt Jessie!"

Her voice echoed weirdly in the woods. Kay hastened on, pausing at frequent intervals to repeat her cry. Once she thought she heard an answering call. But she could not be certain that it was a human voice.

The forest was dark, and Kay feared that she might lose her way. Too late did she realize that she should have equipped herself with a lantern and waited for the other members of the searching party.

Suddenly the girl halted and sniffed the air. She was

certain she could detect the odor of smoke.

“I don’t believe it’s a forest fire,” she thought nervously. “But if it should be——”

Conscious that the breeze was steadily freshening as it whipped the branches of the pine trees, the girl hurried on faster than before. She stumbled over vines and tore her clothing on thorny bushes. The air was growing thick with smoke.

“It *is* the start of a forest fire!” Kay thought in panic. “And I’m moving straight toward it! Oh, what shall I do?”

Her better judgment told her that she should turn back before it got too late. But Kay was fearful that Aunt Jessie and Baby Rose might be trapped somewhere behind that onswEEPing wall of flame. She could not bear to desert them even though it might mean the loss of her own life to remain in the forest.

“Aunt Jessie!” Kay called again.

This time there came an answering scream, and with joy the girl recognized the woman’s voice. But the next instant she felt the cold grip of terror as the knowledge came to her that the two were trapped behind the flames. She must save them!

Shouting reassuringly to her aunt, Kay plunged on through the woods, but soon she was forced to halt. The heat was oppressive, and she could see flames spreading through the undergrowth.

A small stream meandered near by, and the girl turned to

it as her only hope. Stepping from one stone to another, now and then plunging into water up to her knees, she pushed on bravely, calling encouragement to her aunt all the while.

Mrs. Stoke heard Kay's cry, but she had scant hope that anyone could save her from the flames. Hugging Baby Rose convulsively to her, she leaned against a tree trunk and wept.

Since entering the forest the woman had stumbled blindly along with no thought as to where she was going. When finally she sank down on a log to regain her breath and comfort the crying child, she became aware of how dark the forest had grown. Thoroughly frightened, she sprang up and tried to retrace her steps. But she could not pick up her own trail, and soon she realized that she was lost.

Aunt Jessie had become panic-stricken. She had darted here and there until she was completely exhausted. Finally she had sunk down on the ground.

How long she had rested the woman was unable to guess, but presently she had become aware of the smoke-laden air. At first she had not considered it a matter of great significance. She had assumed that someone had built a camp fire near by, and had wondered vaguely if she would have the strength to try to reach it.

A group of persons from Cherryville had held a picnic in the woods, roasting meat and toasting marshmallows over the fire. Some hours before they had returned home, however, carelessly leaving the glowing coals. The fire had spread to a bed of leaves, and when the wind had freshened it

had scattered the flames in every direction.

Unaware of her great danger, Aunt Jessie had sat still with the baby clasped in her arms. Not until the smoke had become very thick did it dawn upon her that the woods were ablaze.

Springing to her feet, she had screamed in terror and run blindly forward. Soon she had been brought up short by an advancing wall of flame. She had wheeled about and hurried in the opposite direction. A long, jagged line of fire met her gaze.

Trapped!

There had seemed no way for Aunt Jessie to turn. In sheer terror she had leaned weakly against a tree trunk and shouted for help. She had held no hope that anyone would hear her. Was it her imagination, or had she actually distinguished an answering shout?

“Stay where you are, and keep calling!” a shrill voice had directed. “I’m coming!”

“Here, here! By this tree!” Aunt Jessie had screamed.

Following the sound, Kay picked her way along the bed of the stream. By this time sparks were dropping everywhere, igniting dry leaves along the creek.

“Where are you, Aunt Jessie?” Kay called again in desperation. Moments were precious now.

“Here! Here!” the woman shouted.

Kay thought the sound came from her right, some distance beyond the bank. Dipping her scarf in the water and throwing the cloth about her face as a protection against the intense heat, she darted through the woods.

She groped about, and guided by the woman's cries she finally came upon her and Baby Rose.

"Kay!" Mrs. Stoke gasped, recognizing the girl. "Oh, you shouldn't have tried to save me. Now we'll all perish."

"We can still escape," the girl answered tersely. "But there's not a second to lose. The flames are spreading fast."

"I'm all in, Kay. I can't walk a step farther. Take the baby and try to get through alone."

"No," her niece answered firmly. "You can muster your courage and keep on for a little way. Here, I'll carry the baby."

She relieved Aunt Jessie of her burden, but even then the woman staggered as she attempted to follow Kay. By her sheer strength of will the girl compelled her aunt to continue.

They retreated toward the creek. A burning brand struck the baby's dress. Kay brushed it aside before it ignited and stamped out the sparks, but other embers were falling all about.

"We're lost," Aunt Jessie murmured in despair. "It's no use."

"Yes, it is! Keep on! We're nearly back to the creek now."

A short distance farther along the girl stopped aghast. They were within view of the stream, but the underbrush only a short distance back from the water was ablaze. It had been ignited by one of the flying embers.

“I knew it,” Aunt Jessie moaned. “We are trapped, Kay!”

“We can still get downstream, I think,” Kay insisted courageously. “Into the water!”

“It’s no use, Kay.”

The girl caught her aunt’s hand and pulled her into the water. She then went on ahead but was forced to halt when her relative collapsed against a log which blocked the creek.

“I’m completely exhausted, Kay. I must rest.”

They stood together, waist deep in water with the girl holding the baby high so that the blankets around it would not get wet. Anxiously they watched the approaching wall of flame.

“The wind is driving it toward us,” Kay said apprehensively.

“As soon as you’ve caught your breath, Aunt Jessie——”

Mrs. Stoke shook her head.

“I can never make it, not even with your help. Take the baby and go while there is still time.”

Kay glanced again toward the flaming trees.

“No, I can’t desert you even to save little Rose,” she answered

quietly. “I believe we’ll be safe here in the water, but if not, we’ll die together.”

CHAPTER XII

RESCUE

Kay and Mrs. Stoke huddled together by the half submerged log. The heat seared their faces while the water chilled their bodies. The exhausted woman leaned heavily against the girl, who, burdened with the weight of the baby, found her own strength ebbing away.

“I must not faint,” she told herself.

Kay kept her eyes upon the encroaching flames, wondering dully how long it would be before the fire would reach the banks of the stream. But to her amazement the blaze, after spreading rapidly, seemed to remain almost stationary. Suddenly the girl realized why. The capricious wind had veered again, so that the fire no longer was being driven toward the stream.

“If only our strength holds out we’ll be saved,” Kay told her aunt. “A searching party is bound to come this way soon.”

Mrs. Stoke took heart at the words. During the next half hour as they huddled together she offered no complaint. She worried about the baby and repeatedly urged Kay to take the infant and return to the farmhouse. The girl was afraid to leave her aunt alone lest in her exhausted condition she slip

down into the water and drown. Instead, she shouted for help, hoping that members of the original searching party might happen that way presently.

Kay had been missed very shortly after she had entered the forest. The farmers had separated into several groups to comb the woods. Scarcely had they started when the outbreak of the fire had drawn everyone's attention. Those of the group whose homes bordered the forest had hastened away to warn their families of danger. Nearly all who remained had armed themselves with fire fighting equipment and had sought to combat the blaze.

Ronald Earle, Mrs. Tracey, Ned Tucker, and Clarence Castner, who had arrived at the farm late, had continued the search for Kay and Mrs. Stoke. It was the lad who first had heard the girl's cries for assistance.

A few minutes later the party reached the creek. Kay was relieved of the baby, and the men lifted Mrs. Stoke upon their shoulders and carried her back to the farmhouse. She was put to bed and a doctor was called to attend her.

Everyone was curious to know how the woman had chanced to be in the forest with the child, but Mrs. Stoke was in no condition to answer any questions. Kay and Mrs. Tracey permitted strangers to form their own opinions, and it was generally assumed that the woman had attended a picnic with a group of "city folks."

It was unnecessary for Ronald or Clarence to join the fire fighters as the blaze soon was put under control.

However, until the wind veered the farmers had been fearful lest many homes be destroyed.

It was nine o'clock before anyone even thought of having supper. By that time Doctor Cornell had called to examine Mrs. Stoke. He assured Mrs. Tracey and Kay that their relative would suffer no ill effects from her experience, but suggested that she remain in bed for at least twenty-four hours. Baby Rose had gone to sleep in her crib immediately after being fed, and to all appearances was her usual contented little self.

“It’s time I started back for Brantwood,” Ronald announced after the doctor had left. “I meant to do so before this.”

“Oh, it’s so late you mustn’t leave now,” Mrs. Tracey protested. “You must stay, Ronald. There is an extra room all ready for you.”

The lad let himself be persuaded rather easily, for he did not look forward to the long night drive back to Brantwood. Like the other members of the household who were completely worn out from the day’s harrowing events, he was glad to retire early. By ten o’clock the old farmhouse was dark.

Ronald slept soundly for several hours. Then, for no reason at all, he found himself wide awake. He lay for some time staring at the beam of moonlight which flooded through the open bedroom window. Suddenly he was startled by the sound of a creaking board, which seemed to come from the hallway.

Instantly he sat up in bed, listening intently. He was certain

that someone was moving stealthily along the corridor. Convinced that it was an intruder who meant to steal, the young man rolled noiselessly out of bed and began putting on his clothes.

Opening the door cautiously, he peered into the dark hall. At the far end a shadowy figure was visible. Apparently the person was testing the doors. Ronald was dismayed to hear the intruder mutter:

“I must get the baby. I must get the baby.”

Concluding that the unknown person intended to abscond with Baby Rose, the youth stole quietly down the hall and hurled himself at the figure. As he and his victim rolled over and over on the carpet, he heard a muffled gasp and then an angry screech.

“Let me go! Let me go!” a shrill feminine voice shouted.

Ronald was so stunned that he released his hold. All along the hallway doors flew open. Mrs. Tracey came running with a flashlight in her hand.

“Gracious!” she exclaimed as a beam of light fell upon the pair who were sitting on the floor glaring at each other. “Aunt Jessie, what are you trying to do?”

“This maniac leaped upon me and threw me down!” Mrs. Stoke accused hysterically. “I was sleeping peacefully in my bed until he dragged me out here in the hall and started pounding me!”

“I never dreamed it was you, Mrs. Stoke,” Ronald muttered in deep embarrassment. “I heard some one prowling down the hall and——”

“I never prowl, young man!” Aunt Jessie retorted angrily as Kay and Mrs. Tracey helped her to her feet.

“You have been known to walk in your sleep, Jessie,” Mrs. Tracey replied suggestively.

“I think that must have been the way it was,” Ronald said apologetically. “Gosh, I’m terribly sorry. I heard her muttering to herself, saying something about getting the baby, and I was sure it was a kidnaper.”

“I did seem to be having a dream when I was so rudely awakened,” Mrs. Stoke admitted reluctantly. “It was about the baby, but I can’t seem to remember——”

“You must come back to bed before you catch cold,” Kay urged. “It was all just an amusing mistake, but fortunately no harm has been done.”

“You’d not think it so amusing if someone should spring upon you in the dark!” Aunt Jessie retorted coldly as she permitted the girl to lead her toward her own room.

“I apologize deeply for my actions, Mrs. Stoke,” Ronald said contritely. “I thought I was protecting the baby.”

At this the woman softened a trifle, but she offered no apology of her own, refusing to acknowledge that she had been in any way to blame for the mix-up. Ronald felt very

bad, but Mrs. Tracey tried to assure him that his mistake was a perfectly natural one.

In the morning Mrs. Stoke ignored the painful subject of the night before. She was coldly polite to Ronald, and it was slight wonder that the young man refused to remain to breakfast, declaring that he must leave at once for Brantwood.

“Please don’t mind Aunt Jessie,” Kay pleaded as she told him good-bye. “She simply hasn’t been like herself since the baby was found. Do come again, and you’ll find she will have forgotten all about the incident.”

“I hope so,” Ronald grinned.

After he had left, Mrs. Stoke expressed great surprise when Kay and Mrs. Tracey told her that they were afraid Ronald had been offended by her austere manner.

“Fiddlesticks!” she retorted. “You couldn’t keep him away—not while Kay is here.”

“It was Ronald who led the rescue party into the woods,” Mrs. Tracey reminded the woman a trifle severely. “I really think you should have been a little more cordial to him.”

At times Kay and her mother did not know what to make of Aunt Jessie. She adored Wilma and Betty, but the twins felt a bit constrained in her presence, fearing that they might offend her unwittingly. However, she did not realize this.

The next day Kay suggested to the girls that they all drive over to Northampton, which was not many miles

distant. Betty and Wilma accepted eagerly, for in truth Mrs. Stoke had begun to wear upon their nerves a bit.

Not until they reached the town did Kay explain her purpose in making the trip. Acting upon the information given her by Doctor Cornell, she planned to search for the nurse, Norma Jones, who had been employed at a Northampton factory.

“Do you know the name of the place where the woman works?” Betty inquired as they parked in the business section.

“No,” Kay admitted, “but Northampton isn’t very large, and probably there will only be one or two factories where nurses’ uniforms are manufactured.”

In this theory the girl was entirely correct. Inquiry revealed that the establishment she sought, named the Howard Manufacturing Company, was located in the industrial section, not far from the railroad tracks. Kay had no difficulty in finding the factory.

Wilma and Betty accompanied their chum to the little office at the front of the building. There the girls asked if anyone by the name of Norma Jones was employed at the plant.

“Yes, I think so,” the woman in charge of the desk replied. “Just a minute, please.”

While the girls waited hopefully she went over to a filing case. After examining the cards she came back to the counter again.

“I was mistaken,” she reported. “Miss Jones no longer is in

our employ.”

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE TRAIL

“Have you any idea where Norma Jones went after she left this place?” Kay inquired, visibly disappointed at the news.

“No,” the woman replied. “She has been gone nearly a month. According to our records, she was discharged for inefficient work. Is it important that you reach her?”

“Yes, very.”

“There is a Miss Atkins here who roomed with Norma Jones for a time, I believe. She might be able to tell you where she is.”

“May I see Miss Atkins now?”

“Well, it would be better if you were to wait until after working hours. She’ll be through in about twenty minutes.”

“I’ll be glad to wait,” Kay declared. “We’ll sit out under the trees.”

The girls found a bench in a shady place on the grounds. Soon the workers began to pour forth from the buildings. Presently a woman came toward them.

“Is one of you Miss Tracey?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Kay. “You are Miss Atkins?”

101

When the other nodded she added, “I am trying to find a Norma Jones. Do you know her?”

“I don’t think anyone has ever known Norma Jones very well,” replied the worker. “We roomed together for about a week, but neither of us liked the arrangement so we broke it up.”

“Have you any idea where she is now?”

“No. After she lost her job here she may have gone back to taking care of babies.”

“Oh, was she interested in that type of work?” Kay inquired innocently.

“Yes, Norma was a trained nurse, but for some reason she couldn’t go out on regular cases. She took care of children in the evenings, and at one time I think she held a pretty good full-time job.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Oh, dear, I can’t remember.”

“The position couldn’t have been with a woman named Mrs. Lare?”

“Lare? Now, I’m not sure. It seems to me I did hear Norma

mention that name. Only I don't believe it was in connection with a baby case. I think the woman owed her money."

Kay nodded thoughtfully. This information tallied with the conversation she had overheard in the Rainbow Tea Room.

"Tell me, Miss Atkins," she said encouragingly, "while Norma was rooming with you did she ever receive any mail addressed to another person?"

"Oh, I don't think so. What has Norma done, anyway? She's not a criminal, is she?"

102

"No, she's under no suspicion," Kay smiled. "My interest in the young woman is purely one of friendliness."

"Well, I'm sorry I can't help you out," the other responded as she turned away. "Excuse me, but I have to hurry. My girl friend is waiting and we have a date."

Kay and the twins returned to their car, driving slowly back to Crimson Brier Farm.

"We didn't learn very much," Wilma commented in disappointment.

"You're right," Kay agreed. "I don't know how to locate Norma Jones now."

"And if you should find her, what then?" Betty asked quickly.

Kay glanced at her friend in astonishment. "Why, I'd question her about Mrs. Lare and the missing baby."

“And if the infant should turn out to be Baby Rose?” Betty persisted. “What could you do then? You’d be morally bound to return the child to its mother. That procedure would practically kill your aunt.”

“Yes, I believe it would,” Kay admitted soberly. “That’s one reason why I’ve not spent much energy on the mystery which surrounds the infant’s parentage. I’d like to solve it—yet I’m almost afraid to do so.”

“It seems to me you’ve done everything you can,” Wilma commented. “Why not let well enough alone without inviting trouble? Baby Rose is satisfied and so is Mrs. Stoke.”

103

“Everyone except Mrs. Lare,” Kay replied gravely. “When I think about her my conscience bothers me.”

“Ethel Eaton is working on that case,” Betty said with a giggle. “I’d let her do the worrying, Kay.”

The days passed swiftly at Crimson Brier Farm. They were very happy ones for the occupants of the old house. The baby thrived under the splendid care she received, and Aunt Jessie, comforted by the fact that no one had come to claim the infant, seemed less nervous than at any time since leaving the city.

Clarence Castner toiled faithfully from early morning until dusk, yet he always had time to talk with the girls and to look after little Rose while the others went for a brief ride. His devotion to the child delighted Aunt Jessie, and one day she surprised everyone by ordering the young man to move his

belongings into an upstairs bedroom. When Kay slyly teased her relative about softening in her attitude toward Clarence, Mrs. Stoke retorted that she needed the shed for other purposes. However, it was obvious to everyone that Baby Rose had made a great difference in the woman's life.

“She needed someone to love,” Mrs. Tracey confided to her daughter. “The baby is the nicest thing that ever happened to her, but I shudder to think how she would react if anyone should ever try to make her give it up.”

104

“Yes,” Kay agreed soberly, “Aunt Jessie would be certain to go to pieces mentally. And the same thing would happen if Rose should become ill.”

“Thank goodness, the little girl is the picture of health.”

“Did you ever notice her eyes, Mother?” Kay asked abruptly.

“Only to see that they are a lovely shade of blue.”

“I mean, haven't you observed the queer way she stares sometimes—almost as if she weren't seeing things?”

“Oh, all babies do that,” Mrs. Tracey laughed. “Their little minds just wander off into space, I guess. You frightened me for an instant, Kay.”

Two delightful, uneventful weeks elapsed. One sunny afternoon Kay and the twins drove to Clinton where they attended a moving picture show. The play was not very entertaining. As they were leaving the theatre early, Betty suddenly gripped her sister's hand.

“Look who’s coming down the street!”

“Ethel Eaton!” Wilma exclaimed. “I wonder what she’s doing here?”

Kay had an idea as to the purpose that had brought Ethel to Clinton. She felt sure the girl intended to see Mrs. Lare again.

“Hello, Ethel,” Kay greeted a moment later as the four met face to face. “I thought you were in summer school.”

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“I guess you did your best to keep me there,” Ethel retorted unpleasantly. “This time my parents said I could spend the day here, so I’d advise you not to try to interfere with my plans.”

“Why, I never dreamed of doing such a thing, Ethel. I suppose you came to Clinton to work on your case. Have you talked with Mrs. Lare yet?”

Obviously startled at hearing the woman’s name, Ethel gave Kay a quick glance. But she answered evenly:

“I’ll see her very soon at her farm. Right now I am checking up on an important clue. I’m sorry, but I haven’t time to waste talking now. I must hurry.”

The girls had difficulty in concealing their amusement as Ethel hastened away. Kay previously had told Wilma and Betty how she had led Ethel to believe that Mrs. Lare lived at Crimson Brier Farm.

“Let’s follow her and see where she goes,” Kay proposed to her chums in a whisper. “We may learn a few things about detective work from her!”

“Ethel is such a novice in that respect I’m sure she’ll not even find out that we’re shadowing her,” Betty laughed.

It was soon evident to the girls that Ethel had no urgent appointment with anyone. Instead, she went from one store to another, looking at everything but buying almost nothing. Wilma and Betty became bored following the extremely flighty girl.

“Oh, let’s trail her just a little longer,” Kay pleaded. “She must have come to this town for some purpose other than to shop.”

106

At length Ethel did return to the Clinton Hotel, where she picked up a light bag she had left in the checkroom. She then walked hurriedly to the railroad station. Through a window of the waiting room the girls saw her purchase a ticket.

In a few minutes a train thundered into the station and Ethel boarded it, still unaware that Kay and her chums were taking note of her movements.

The girls slipped quietly into the waiting room to talk with the station agent. He remembered Ethel, for she had been the last passenger to purchase a ticket. He revealed that she was on her way to Cherryville.

“Just as I suspected!” Kay cried gleefully. “Ethel intends to meet Mrs. Lare, but of course there will be no Mrs. Lare.

What fun if we could get to Cherryville ahead of her!”

“We couldn’t possibly do it,” Wilma declared. “The train is pulling out now.”

Kay’s automobile was parked just back of the station. She recalled that the road leading to Cherryville ran in a practically straight line for many miles following the railroad right-of-way.

“The train is a slow one and we may get there before it does!” she exclaimed, pulling Wilma and Betty toward the door. “Come on, let’s try!”

Wilma protested that it was silly to attempt it, but Betty and Kay paid no heed to her. They thought it would be fun to race the train.

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The Tracey girl had the motor started in a twinkling. Before Wilma was even seated, they were off. The heavy train with seven cars was slow to get under way. The automobile quickly overtook it, then began to fall behind again as the train gathered up speed.

“Oh, let’s drop this wild race!” Wilma pleaded as she clung to the seat. “We’re likely to end up in a ditch.”

“There’s not any real danger of that,” Kay protested, her eyes glued on the road. “We don’t cross the tracks at any point.”

“A tire might blow out,” Wilma insisted. “What of it if Ethel does get to Cherryville ahead of us?”

Kay and Betty were both in favor of putting on more speed, but when the car wheels struck a hole in the pavement which tossed them against the top, they reluctantly agreed that it might be wiser to let the engineer win the race. Accordingly Kay slowed down, and they saw the rear end of the train vanish beyond a curve.

Ethel Eaton arrived at Cherryville a scant ten minutes ahead of the pursuing car. Entering the station, she asked the agent to direct her to the Lare farm. The agent, of course, had never heard of anyone by that name but assumed that the girl meant old Mr. Leer, who lived about a mile from Cherryville. Accordingly he directed her to that man's homestead.

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While Ethel was trudging along the dusty road, her bag in her hand, Kay and her chums arrived at the station only to find it deserted. Some time elapsed before they were able to learn what had become of Ethel. Then they were undecided whether or not to trail the girl to the Leer farm.

“It would be fun to see how Ethel is received there,” Kay chuckled. “Old Mr. Leer is very deaf and doesn't welcome visitors.”

The girls could not resist the temptation of driving past the old house. From far up the road they could see Ethel standing at the back door. She was gesturing wildly, obviously irritated because she could not make Mr. Leer understand that she wished to speak with Mrs. Lare. When Ethel inadvertently stepped on the tail of a sleepy black cat which was sunning itself on the walk, Kay and the twins burst into uncontrollable

laughter. The animal cried out, the old man berated Ethel for injuring his pet, and the confusion was general. Thoroughly disgusted, the Eaton girl picked up her bag and walked angrily away from the house.

“Oh, she’s coming straight toward us,” Betty murmured. “We’ll be recognized.”

“Duck down out of sight!” Kay commanded, and at the same time she crouched low behind the steering wheel.

With a sudden burst of speed the car passed Ethel, covering her with a great cloud of dust.

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“She didn’t even glance up,” Wilma laughed as her chum slowed down again.

A short distance down the road they turned the car around. After giving Ethel time to reach the outskirts of town, they retraced their route.

“I hope no one directs her to Crimson Brier Farm,” Kay said a trifle anxiously as the girls parked opposite the Cherryville General Store. “If she should learn about the baby she’d be certain to make trouble for Aunt Jessie.”

“Here she comes now,” Betty warned. “Duck!”

The three girls crouched low in the car, remaining out of sight until some time after Ethel had passed by. Kay was somewhat disturbed to see the newcomer enter the store.

“Probably she intends to make further inquiry about Mrs.

Lare,” she said thoughtfully. “Do you suppose the proprietor will send her out to our farm?”

“Ever since the forest fire almost everyone at Cherryville seems to know about the baby,” Betty replied gravely.

“The storekeeper will surely tell Ethel,” Kay nodded gloomily. “I’m going to try to find out just how much she does discover.”

Leaving Betty and Wilma in the car, she walked noiselessly to the front entrance of the shop. Ethel was the only customer inside, and it was easy to hear what she was saying, for she was standing close to the screen door, and talking in a loud voice.

“I am trying to locate a woman named Mrs. Lare,” she explained to the clerk. “The station agent sent me on a wild chase out to see an old farmer who was stone deaf.”

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“That must have been Mr. Leer.”

“Well, it wasn’t the right place anyway,” Ethel said crossly. “I know Mrs. Lare lives on a farm near Cherryville and I must find her.”

“I’m acquainted with most everyone in this part of the country,” the store owner replied. “There’s no one by that name living around here.”

“But there *must* be,” Ethel cried in exasperation. “Mrs. Lare even told me the name of the place. Let me see—it was Crimson Brier Farm!”

“Crimson Brier,” the aged storekeeper repeated thoughtfully, shaking his head. “Say, maybe you mean the old Wendell place!”

“Does a Lare woman live there?”

“Well now, I couldn’t tell you that. There’s a house full of folks from the city, and they come and go so often I can’t keep track of them. But the other day the woman who owns the farm took her baby and wandered into the forest. She was nearly burned to death—you probably heard about the fire.”

“A woman with a baby?” Ethel inquired alertly.

“Yes, folks say she’s pretty secretive about the child. It was queer the way she snatched the infant from its crib and without telling anyone headed straight into the woods.”

“Yes, I should think so,” Ethel agreed in grim satisfaction. And to Kay Tracey’s genuine alarm she added, “Thank you for the information. Now, if you’ll just tell me how to reach the old Wendell place, I’ll go right out there.”

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CHAPTER XIV

BETTY'S ACCIDENT

Kay waited to hear no more. Hastily she fled back to the car where Wilma and Betty were waiting.

“It was just as I feared,” she reported. “Ethel is starting now for Crimson Brier Farm. If she finds the baby there she’s certain to make trouble.”

“What can you do?” Betty asked anxiously.

“We must get back there as quickly as we can and warn Aunt Jessie. Perhaps I’ll think of some scheme on the way.”

Kay knew that the present trouble was of her own making. She wished now that she had never mentioned Crimson Brier Farm to Ethel. The joke was turning out rather grimly!

Taking the shortest road home, the three girls quickly acquainted Mrs. Tracey and Mrs. Stoke of Ethel Eaton’s plan to visit the farmhouse.

“She’ll be here any minute now,” Kay told her aunt, “and if I know Ethel, she’ll ask you a million questions about the baby.”

“We’ll lock all the doors and ignore her knock.”

“Ethel would come again if you pretend not to be at home, Aunt Jessie. I think I have a better plan. You and the twins take the child and drive away in the car.”

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“Yes, yes, that is what we will do!” Mrs. Stoke declared gleefully. “We’ll stay until that prying girl has left.”

She quickly bundled up little Rose and fled with Wilma and Betty. Kay then snatched the baby’s wash from the line, picked up a tell-tale rattle which had been dropped on the floor, and cast a critical glance about the front porch to be certain that nothing had been overlooked which might give away the secret. Satisfied that everything was in readiness for the visitor, Kay and her mother established themselves in a lawn swing and waited patiently.

“Here comes Joe Hinkley’s taxi,” Kay sang out a few minutes later as she saw a dilapidated car rise over the hill. “I’m almost certain Ethel will be in it.”

Mrs. Tracey picked up her knitting and was the picture of tranquility as the old fashioned auto entered the lane. Ethel Eaton instructed the driver to wait, but she did not recognize Kay and her mother until she was close to the porch. Then she stopped short, completely dumbfounded.

“Why, Ethel Eaton,” Kay cried, pretending to be surprised. “We weren’t expecting a visit from you. When we met in Clinton you should have told me you were coming and I could have given you a ride here.”

“Do come up and sit in the swing,” Mrs. Tracey invited graciously, making room for the girl. “You look tired and worn. Let Kay make you a glass of cool lemonade.”

“No thanks,” Ethel stammered. “I guess maybe I’ve made a mistake. I was going to the old Wendell farm.”

“This is the Wendell place,” Mrs. Tracey smiled. “It’s called Crimson Brier Farm because of the beautiful rose bushes. Aren’t they gorgeous?”

“Very pretty,” Ethel murmured indifferently. “I don’t understand—you are staying here for the summer?”

“Well, our plans aren’t very definite, but I imagine we shall,” Mrs. Tracey replied. “The country air is so healthful.”

“I don’t like it,” Ethel said shortly. She made no move to sit down but stood on the porch steps, looking ill-at-ease. Then the cab driver called gruffly:

“Say, miss, it looks like rain and I’m in a hurry to get back to town. Are you going with me or staying?”

“Wait!” Ethel commanded. “I’m riding back to Cherryville.”

She murmured a few words to Mrs. Tracey, then left. As she hastened toward the car, the new watch dog which Aunt Jessie had purchased only the day before came running toward her from the direction of the barn. He snarled menacingly.

Thoroughly alarmed, Ethel began to run. She tripped

over a stone, and in trying to save herself from stumbling, allowed her pocketbook to fall from her hand. Its contents spilled out on the ground.

“Call off your ugly dog!” the girl cried in terror.

“Oh, he’ll not hurt you,” Kay laughed, leaving the porch. She picked up Ethel’s purse as well as several of the items which had scattered about.

A slip of paper attracted her attention for it bore the Carmont High School imprint. She saw at a glance that it was a notice from the principal informing Ethel that she had been dismissed from summer school because of indifference to her studies.

Kay had not intended to read the note, and gave no indication that she had learned of the Eaton girl’s latest difficulty. She even felt a trifle sorry for her classmate, who would be forced to take algebra over again when school should start in the fall.

“Here, let me have my pocketbook,” Ethel said irritably. She snatched it from Kay, and with only a curt nod climbed into the cab.

Mrs. Stoke and the twins did not return to the farmhouse until nearly an hour after the girl had left. Wilma and Betty thoroughly enjoyed Kay’s account of her visit, but Aunt Jessie was fearful lest Ethel might come back again and demand to see Baby Rose.

“Sometimes I get terribly depressed,” the woman declared as she gazed fondly at the infant. “Maybe it’s

not right for me to try to keep the child but I love her better than life itself. Lately I've not been able to sleep of nights, thinking that someone may attempt to take little Rose away from me."

"You mustn't give in to morbid thoughts, Mrs. Stoke," Betty said cheerfully.

Wilma began to quote, choosing one of her favorite passages from Keats:

"'Whene'er I wander, at the fall of night,
Where woven boughs shut out the moon's bright ray,
Should sad Despondency my musings fright,
And frown, to drive fair Cheerfulness away,
Peep with the moon-beams through the leaky roof,
And keep that fiend Despondence far aloof.'"

"The poem is very lovely," Mrs. Stoke replied, "and the sentiment is fine. I really should try to be more cheerful."

"Speaking of leaky roofs," Kay said with a broad smile, "Clarence Castner asked me to tell you that if he can get your permission to buy some shingles he will repair the place over the upstairs bedroom which has been giving us so much trouble every time it rains."

"I don't know what I'd do without that man," Mrs. Stoke murmured. "He's a fine hired hand."

"You might raise his wages, Aunt Jessie," Kay suggested slyly. "He's not getting much except board and room."

“Maybe I will,” her relative agreed thoughtfully. “I’d hate to have him leave me. He’s a very deserving young fellow.”

As Kay and her mother had observed upon many occasions, Aunt Jessie’s entire outlook on life seemed to be changing. She thought less of her own comfort and actually tried to be agreeable to her guests. However, the girls were fairly stunned when she remarked one day:

“It must be dull for you around here with no amusements. You ought to take more exercise in the open.”

“We manage to get a good bit of that doing the work,” Kay responded with a smile.

“I mean exercise that’s fun at the same time. You should go horseback riding. I purchased three young mares from Mr. Tucker the other day, and if I remember correctly he said they’d be delivered this afternoon.”

“You bought three horses?” Kay demanded incredulously. “Oh, Aunt Jessie! How perfectly grand!”

“Take care you don’t kill yourselves,” Mrs. Stoke smiled. “I told Mr. Tucker the animals are too frisky, but he said a good rider would have no trouble with them.”

The girls were thrilled at the prospect of having horses of their own, and could hardly wait until Mr. Tucker would bring them to the farm.

“Let’s try them out right away,” Wilma proposed

eagerly, when they did arrive. “I’d like the black one if no one objects, for she has such friendly brown eyes.”

Kay waited politely for Betty to make her choice. The girl took a liking to the roan horse which seemed higher spirited than its companions.

“Are you a good rider?” Mr. Tucker asked a trifle dubiously. “Brownie is a mite skittish sometimes and requires a firm rein.”

“I think I can handle her,” Betty insisted.

Ned Tucker helped Kay and the twins to mount the horses, watching Betty anxiously as she trotted Brownie around the farmyard.

“Think you can handle her?” he asked. He had noticed that Kay was a better rider than Betty and it was his opinion that the girls should change horses.

“Oh, yes, I’ll have no trouble,” the Worth girl answered confidently.

Mr. Tucker opened the gate and the girls walked their mounts down the lane to the road.

“Watch out for cars,” the farmer called after them. “Brownie is apt to shy if one passes her too closely.”

Betty did not hear the warning for she had urged her horse into a gallop. She quickly outdistanced Wilma and Kay, whose steeds were slower. Presently, observing that she was

far ahead, Betty tried to draw rein, but Brownie did not wish to stop.

“Whoa! Whoa!” she commanded firmly, and was just gaining control of the animal when an automobile whizzed by.

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Brownie shied, and throwing her head about wildly, broke into a run. Taken completely by surprise, Betty was thrown off balance and flung from the saddle. Yet she managed to keep hold of the reins and was dragged for several feet before she finally let go.

Kay and Wilma had witnessed the accident but they were some distance away. Before they could reach the girl, another automobile came down the road. The driver, a woman of early middle age, drew up at the edge of the highway and ran to help Betty.

“Are you hurt?” she asked anxiously, bending over her.

With the woman’s aid the girl slowly raised herself to a sitting position. Her arm had been skinned and her forehead bore a large red mark.

“I’m all right,” Betty insisted ruefully. “The horse just knocked the breath out of me for an instant.”

By this time Kay and Wilma had reached the scene. Leaping from their saddles, they hastened to Betty’s side, greatly relieved to find that she had not been seriously injured.

“Well, Ned Tucker was right,” Betty said, trying to laugh.

“Brownie is too frisky for me. What will Mrs. Stoke say when she hears I’ve lost her horse?”

“It was the horse that lost you,” Wilma chuckled.

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“Don’t worry about Brownie,” Kay assured her. “It will probably go back to the Tucker farm.”

Although Betty protested that she was quite all right, the strange woman insisted upon examining her to see if any bones had been broken.

“You go about it exactly as if you were a doctor,” Kay observed, smiling because the woman was so thorough.

“I am a nurse.”

“Really?” Kay asked in pleased surprise. Then impulsively she added, “I don’t suppose you happen to know a nurse by the name of Norma Jones?”

The woman straightened up to stare at the girl. For a moment she did not speak. Then, when she answered, her face suddenly became mask-like, and her expression guarded.

“I am Norma Jones,” she replied quietly, “but to my knowledge we have never met before.”

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CHAPTER XV

GLEANINGS FROM THE ATTIC

“No, I am sure we have never met,” Kay agreed, smiling as she gave her own name and those of her chums. “However, for some time I have hoped to locate you since I have been told that you are acquainted with a Mrs. Lare.”

“Alice Lare?” the other asked quickly.

“Yes.”

“Indeed I do know her,” the nurse replied. “She owes me over a thousand dollars. I lent the money to her and now she won’t repay me.”

“Can’t you force her to settle the debt?”

“Oh, she claims she hasn’t the money. I was very foolish to let her have nearly all of my savings. I took care of her baby for over a year, yet she never paid me one cent, although she promised me a good salary.”

“Why don’t you take the case to a lawyer?” Kay suggested.

“I doubt that would do any good. You see, Mrs. Lare claimed that her husband would inherit twenty-five

thousand dollars from his grandfather's estate, but I think now she just made up the story. Anyway, Mr. Lare disappeared with the baby, or so his wife says, and she insists she has no money to live on."

This information was of great interest to Kay. Noting the girl's deep interest, the woman was encouraged to relate more details.

"Mrs. Lare has disappeared now," the nurse went on in a grieved tone. "At my request she met me at a tea room not far from here some time ago. When I wrote her later my letter was returned unopened."

"Perhaps Mrs. Lare is at Clinton."

"She lived there years ago, but I'm quite certain she has moved to another city, probably to escape paying her debts!"

"I'm very eager to find Mrs. Lare," Kay explained. "If you should ever get in touch with her again I'd be grateful if you would notify me."

"Why yes, I'll be glad to do it. I suppose Mrs. Lare owes you money, too."

Kay did not correct this impression. She gave the nurse her address, and as the woman prepared to drive away in her car, she casually asked her if Mrs. Lare's baby was a boy or a girl.

"A little girl," the nurse answered. "She's the sweetest thing you ever saw. That was one of the reasons why I worked there so long without pay. I hated to leave the child."

After the nurse had driven on down the road, Kay and the twins led their horses back to the old Wendell farm. Betty limped a trifle as she walked, but she insisted that the fall had not really hurt her.

“It served me right for being so confident that I could manage the animal,” she laughed ruefully. “Next time I’ll not be so daring.”

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“It was a lucky fall as far as I was concerned,” Kay declared. “Otherwise I’d not have met Norma Jones. By the way, she wasn’t the type of person I expected her to be.”

“She seems to harbor a just grievance against Mrs. Lare,” Wilma remarked. “Do you suppose there is any truth in the story about Mr. Lare running away with the baby?”

“I don’t know,” Kay admitted with a troubled frown. “Ethel Eaton seemed to believe the tale. I’m inclined to think it may be true.”

“And do you think that the child is the same one that was left beneath the crimson brier bush?” inquired Betty.

“Don’t ask me that. I’m afraid to draw any conclusions. If Baby Rose should belong to Mrs. Lare, Aunt Jessie would never recover from the blow of having to give up the child.”

Since Kay and her friends had arrived at Crimson Brier Farm the weather had been ideal. Now, however, there came many cold, rainy days when the girls were forced to remain indoors. The nights too were so chilly that one morning Kay decided to go to the attic in search of additional blankets which were

stored in an old trunk. She selected the coverlets and was about to close down the lid when her elbow chanced to strike a projection on the inside.

“Oh! Oh! My crazy bone!” Kay exclaimed, hopping about on one foot.

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When the pain had subsided she gave another cry, this time one of delight and surprise. A secret panel in the lid of the trunk had fallen forward, revealing a recess large enough to hold any flat object.

Kay thrust her hand into the opening and pulled out a paper. She glanced at it. Then, running to the top of the stairs she called to her chums:

“Wilma! Betty! Come here quickly!”

The twins came up the stairs two at a time, fearful that Kay might have injured herself. Mrs. Tracey and Aunt Jessie were not far behind them.

“See what I found in this old trunk!” the girl cried triumphantly, waving the paper excitedly.

“What is it?” Betty asked. “An old will?”

Kay shook her head and spread the sheet out on a table so that the others could see it.

“It’s some sort of statement from the Nottingham Orphan Asylum—a certificate saying that William Wendell was reared there.”

“Why, I never knew the name of the institution before,” Mrs. Stoke declared in surprise. “Mr. Wendell was my husband’s grand-uncle, and because of the relationship existing this property was willed to our family. Mr. Wendell never talked much about himself or his past life.”

Kay scarcely heard her aunt’s words, for she had made another interesting discovery as she perused the paper further.

“Just listen to this,” she directed. “It says here that William Wendell was apprenticed to a man named *Clarence Castner!*”

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“Why, he’s the hired man!” Betty gasped. “Of course that can’t be correct.”

“You may read the name for yourself,” Kay said. “But I agree that William Wendell couldn’t have been apprenticed to the Clarence Castner we know. He might have been to one of his relatives, though.”

“Castner is a fairly common name, I suppose,” Mrs. Tracey remarked. “Yet it is all very strange, isn’t it?”

“Let’s ask Clarence what he knows about the matter,” Kay proposed. “Perhaps he had a relative with the same name.”

Taking the paper with them, the girls hastened downstairs in search of the hired man. They found him weeding the garden. He stared at the certificate for a long while without speaking. Then he said quietly:

“This is very interesting, but I’m afraid I can’t clear up the

mystery.”

“We thought perhaps your father or some other member of your family might have the same name,” Kay remarked encouragingly.

“Clarence Castner is not unusual sounding,” the young man evaded, lowering his eyes.

The girls waited expectantly, thinking that he would tell them where he was born and something of his family, but he stood silent. It was obvious that he did not wish to divulge anything about himself. The girls rather imagined that he had run away from college to hitch-hike his way across the country, and was reticent about himself because he feared he would be traced.

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“At any rate he’s no ordinary hitch-hiker,” Kay declared to Betty and Wilma a few minutes later when the three girls had returned to the house. “He’s well educated and very nice.”

“Yes,” Wilma agreed, “but I don’t see why he has to be so secretive about his past—that is, unless he’s ashamed of it.”

“When we first showed him that certificate I thought he would be able to explain it,” Kay said thoughtfully. “I still wonder if he doesn’t know more than he is willing to tell.”

The rain had ceased. Mrs. Stoke came outside to talk with the girls, saying that she wished she might ride to Cherryville to buy yarn for a baby sweater. The twins immediately offered to go with her. Kay was relieved at this since she preferred to remain at home and read a book.

However, no sooner had Mrs. Stoke and the twins driven away when Baby Rose began to cry fretfully. Mrs. Tracey and Kay both were kept busy trying to comfort the little one.

“There’s something decidedly wrong with this child,” Mrs. Tracey told her daughter anxiously. “The last few days Rose has been very cross. I’m afraid she is getting sick.”

“I’ve noticed she rubs her eyes a great deal, Mother. I wonder if they hurt her?”

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“I’ve washed them with boric acid water twice today. I don’t know what more to do.”

Their conversation was interrupted just then, for someone knocked on the door. Neither Kay nor her mother had observed Doctor Cornell trudging wearily up the lane.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted Kay cheerfully as she admitted him. “Is your hired man anywhere about the premises?”

“Yes, I believe he is at the barn.”

“My car is stalled a quarter of a mile down the road,” the physician explained. “I ran out of gasoline and thought I might be able to induce Clarence to get me some at the nearest place.”

“Why, Aunt Jessie keeps a reserve tank in the shed,” Kay answered. “Come inside and rest while I ask Clarence to get a few gallons for you.”

The girl ran to the barn where she found the hired man. He

was glad to be of service to the kindly old doctor and said that he would carry the heavy gasoline can to the car.

Returning to the house, Kay discovered that her mother had prevailed upon Doctor Cornell to examine Baby Rose. He was sitting near a window holding the child on his lap. As the girl entered the living room she heard her mother say anxiously:

“You don’t think there is anything really serious the matter, do you, Doctor?”

The man did not reply. Instead, he rolled back the baby’s eyelids and examined the eyeballs minutely. His very silence frightened Mrs. Tracey and Kay.

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“There *is* something wrong,” the girl’s mother murmured. “Tell me the truth, Doctor.”

“This babe’s eyes were neglected at birth. The doctor in attendance must have been criminally careless.”

“What can be done?” Mrs. Tracey asked with growing apprehension.

“I fear it may be too late.”

“You don’t mean——”

“Yes,” Doctor Cornell answered soberly, “the infant is practically blind. If her eyes are to be saved she must be taken at once to a specialist.”

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CHAPTER XVI

AN IMPORTANT DECISION

When Doctor Cornell made his tragic statement about the baby's eyes, Mrs. Tracey and Kay recoiled as if they had received a physical blow. However, before they were able to comment one way or another, Aunt Jessie and the Worth twins returned from Cherryville.

Mrs. Stoke hurried to the child's crib without noting the physician's presence. When she found the bed empty she whirled about in alarm to see the infant resting on the doctor's knee. She noticed then that Kay and her mother were greatly agitated.

"Doctor Cornell has been examining Rose," Mrs. Tracey explained. "Jessie, I scarcely know how to tell you——"

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Stoke exclaimed, almost beside herself.

Kay's mother gazed at the doctor, her eyes pleading with him to reveal the distressing news.

"I am very sorry to have to say this," the kindly old physician said, "but unless the child receives immediate surgical treatment she will assuredly lose her eyesight."

Aunt Jessie did not seem to comprehend the statement for a moment. She stood gazing at the doctor almost stupidly. Then with a little cry she moved forward and took the baby from the physician, cuddling her caressingly.

“Poor little dear,” she murmured. Unable to control her emotions, the poor woman began to weep bitterly.

Kay tried to comfort her relative while Mrs. Tracey tucked the child back into the basinet.

“I always tell my patients the truth in these matters,” the doctor said presently. “One must recognize the facts, and in this case approaching blindness is clearly indicated. In my opinion there is but one chance for the child and that is an operation.”

“But tell me,” Aunt Jessie inquired, “would the operation be successful?”

“In the hands of an ordinary surgeon, no. But performed by Doctor Rhinehardt, the celebrated eye specialist in Clinton, the chances of success would be very good.”

“Doctor Rhinehardt!” Mrs. Tracey exclaimed at mention of the famous man’s name. “But wouldn’t his fee be prohibitive? I’ve heard he is a rich man’s physician.”

“It might be large, but Doctor Rhinehardt would not permit a child to go through life blind. Money would be no item with him in such a case.”

Aunt Jessie had recovered her composure by this time.

She assured the physician that she would defray all expenses and that he should make the necessary arrangements for the operation at once.

At that moment Clarence Castner drove the doctor's car up to the house, honking the horn lustily as he did so. The physician picked up his hat and coat and turned to leave.

“I should like to have you take the baby to Prospect Hospital for observation,” he suggested, “and the sooner the better. I will talk with Doctor Rhinehardt this afternoon and ask him to examine the child.”

After Doctor Cornell had left, Clarence Castner came to the rear door rather timidly to inquire if anything were amiss. Kay told him about the baby's eyes, and he listened with sympathetic interest to her every word. The girl noticed that he seemed deeply disturbed for the remainder of the day and neglected his usual work.

Kay was very much troubled by the distressing turn of events. She loved little Rose clearly as did everyone in the household, yet she wondered if Aunt Jessie might not be exposing herself to a damage suit if she should sign for the operation. The real parents of the child might appear any day to claim the babe, and should the treatment prove unsuccessful, Aunt Jessie would be liable.

After long and serious consideration Kay decided that there was only one thing for her to do. She must send for her Cousin Bill. The young lawyer had come to her assistance many a time before and she was confident he

would not fail her now. Nor did he. His cheery voice answered hers on long distance telephone, promising that he would drive to the farm early the next morning.

At the first opportunity Kay drew her cousin aside, for she wished to talk with him privately. As they strolled about the fields she told him the way matters stood and asked his advice as to how to proceed.

From a humanitarian standpoint the lawyer was inclined to favor an immediate operation; but from a legal angle he was afraid that Mrs. Stoke might involve herself in litigation which would ruin her financially.

“The baby might better be taken to a state institution rather than to a private hospital,” the young attorney suggested. “If the officials there authorize the operation, Aunt Jessie would be spared the responsibility of having ordered it.”

“Yes,” Kay agreed slowly, “but Aunt Jessie insists upon keeping up the pretense that the child is her own. She would never admit that she is not the mother of Baby Rose.”

Cousin Bill shrugged. “In that case I don’t see what can be done to protect her. However, it’s not very likely that the parents will claim the little girl.”

“I’m not so sure,” Kay rejoined, and told him everything she had learned regarding Mrs. Lare’s missing infant.

“If you think this woman might be the mother, the thing to do is try to locate her at once.”

“I’ve been trying to ever since I came here,” Kay sighed.

“Apparently the only person who knows very much about her is Ethel Eaton.”

“Then why not talk with her?”

“It would be a one-sided conversation, I fear. Perhaps if I were to tell Ethel everything she’d put aside her petty grievances and reveal what she knows about Mrs. Lare.”

“I’m driving back to Brantwood late this afternoon,” Cousin Bill declared. “How about coming with me?”

“I believe I will,” Kay decided after a moment’s thought.

“The baby is to be kept at the hospital under observation for several days, and Aunt Jessie wants to take a room in Clinton until Doctor Rhinehardt has made his examination. I’ll not be needed here.”

“Then by all means come with me. I’ll be glad to have a companion.”

Mrs. Tracey was very willing that Kay should make the trip, for she agreed that every effort should be made to clear up the mystery of the baby’s parentage before the operation should be performed. Late afternoon found the couple enroute to Brantwood.

“Which road are we taking, Cousin Bill?”

“Oh, it makes no difference. I took Number Nine coming down, but there was a bad detour.”

“How about Number Six?” Kay inquired. “It is one of the main highways and is paved.”

“I’ve never been over it,” Cousin Bill admitted. “Won’t it be a few miles longer that way?”

“About ten, I judge,” Kay admitted, measuring distances on the map with her finger. “But the road passes through a village I’d like to visit.”

“And what is that, may I ask?”

“A place called Laretown.”

“Well, well, I might have known you had some special reason for wishing to take that road,” the lawyer chuckled. “Do you think it was named for Mrs. Lare?”

“I’m afraid that would be expecting too much, Cousin Bill. But I believe it might have been named for one of her husband’s ancestors. Possibly some member of the Lare family is still living there.”

Cousin Bill glanced at his watch. “We’re starting late,” he warned. “If we expect to reach Brantwood before morning we won’t dare to kill much time on the way.”

“It won’t take more than fifteen minutes to stop at Laretown,” Kay pleaded, “and I might learn as much there as I will from Ethel Eaton.”

“All right, we’ll stop,” Cousin Bill consented. “I’ll drive fast enough to make up for any time we may lose.”

Dusk found the pair driving into the outskirts of a village of less than two thousand inhabitants. Cousin Bill stopped at an outlying store to inquire if anyone by the name of Lare resided in the locality. He was directed to the home of Mrs. Howard Lare, one of the more prosperous citizens who lived in the hill section. Further inquiry brought Cousin Bill and Kay to a large brick house with well-kept grounds.

“I’ll run in and ask if Alice Lare is known here,” Kay declared as Mr. Tracey parked the car by the curb. “It will take me only a minute.”

She climbed the steps of the terrace and rang the doorbell. The girl could hear someone moving about inside the house, yet no one answered. She tried it again, and then, irritated, held her finger for a moment upon the buzzer so that it rang steadily.

“There, that surely ought to bring someone!” she thought.

The door opened suddenly and a matronly woman with a haughty stare regarded her disapprovingly.

“Are you Mrs. Lare?” Kay inquired in her most polite voice.

“Yes, I am,” the woman replied coldly, “but I never buy anything from agents.”

With these words she rudely closed the door in Kay’s face.

CHAPTER XVII

IN SEARCH OF A CLUE

Kay's first impulse was to turn and leave, but she did not wish to drive away from Laretown without making at least one effort to gain information regarding the elusive Alice Lare. Although she knew that her action would be certain to infuriate the haughty occupant of the house, she deliberately placed her finger on the buzzer again and held it there until the door was flung wide open.

"I told you once I wouldn't buy anything!" the woman exclaimed angrily. "Stop ringing my doorbell or I'll call the police."

"I am not an agent," Kay said impatiently. "I wish you would give me an opportunity to explain."

The woman's countenance underwent a sudden change, but she still regarded her visitor coldly.

"I am sorry," she apologized without warmth.

"I am seeking information about a woman named Mrs. Alice Lare. Since your name is the same——"

"I don't know the woman and I really am not interested."

“But the matter is of vital importance,” Kay said in quick protest. “I thought that possibly someone in this town might be related to her.”

“You will have to go elsewhere for your information. My husband is a Lare but I am very happy to say that the family is related to me only through marriage.”

“Then you do know an Alice——”

“No, I do not,” the woman interrupted crossly.

“May I ask if your husband is the only person in Laretown who bears that name?” Kay questioned, refusing to be rebuffed.

“The town is fairly overrun with Lares,” the woman replied with a toss of her head. “Most of them are very poor and are only distantly related to us. Please, I don’t care to discuss the subject.”

By this time Kay had grasped the idea that probably certain members of the family were not on good terms with one another. After asking several more questions she realized that she was getting nowhere. Thoroughly disgusted, she returned to Cousin Bill.

“We’ll drive back to the business section,” the lawyer declared after Kay had repeated the conversation to him. “We’ll find someone who will tell us about these people.”

An obliging storekeeper gladly directed Kay and her cousin to the home of one William Lare. The man had a large family

and lived in a small house not far from the railroad tracks. There the Traceys were pleasantly received, but were unable to glean any useful information from that source.

Considerable time had been consumed in driving about the town, and Cousin Bill warned Kay that they must be motoring on to Brantwood, so she agreed reluctantly. As they were driving out of the village she chanced to observe the name “Harry E. Lare, Real Estate,” printed on the front of an office. She called her relative’s attention to it, asking him if they could not stop for just a moment. 138

“All right,” Cousin Bill agreed, glancing at his watch, “but this is absolutely the last place.”

“I have an idea we may learn something here,” Kay declared optimistically. “I have never known a real estate agent who was unwilling to talk!”

As the pair entered the shabby little office, a heavy-set man behind a battered desk arose and grasped Cousin Bill’s hand, pushing him gently into the nearest chair. He did not allow Kay and her cousin to say a word after they had introduced themselves. Instead, assuming that they were prospective buyers, he launched into a glowing account of a vacant lot which could be purchased for three hundred dollars down.

“We’re not interested in vacant lots,” the attorney interposed, but again the agent cut him short.

“Oh, you probably saw my advertisement in the Laretown Star about the farm for sale. Now, there is a real buy. Fertile land, fine buildings——”

“We’re not interested in buying anything,” Cousin Bill said impatiently. “We have come here to ask for information.”

“I’ll be glad to tell you anything I know about real estate,” Mr. Lare smiled cheerfully. “I’ve been in the business for twelve years and I know it from A to Z. My father helped lay out the town.”

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“And it was named for him?” Kay inquired, determined to glean a few facts.

“Yes, Henry Lare was one of the leading citizens of the county. My father had six children. When he died there was a misunderstanding about the property, and as a result the various members of the family are estranged.”

“By any chance, have you a sister-in-law named Alice?” Kay questioned eagerly.

“No, but I have one named Mabel who lives up on the hill. She thinks she owns the town and is too good to speak to the other Lares.”

“We’ve already met her,” Kay smiled. “Tell me, haven’t you *any* relative named Alice?”

“Oh, a distant cousin, I guess,” the man answered carelessly.

He tried to switch the subject to real estate again, but Kay was persistent in her aim. Mr. Lare did not wish to talk about his cousin and insisted that he did not know where she was living at the present time.

“Has Mrs. Alice Lare a baby?” Mr. Tracey inquired.

“Yes, I think she has. It seems to me my wife was saying something about it the other day. Tom and Alice have had plenty of trouble since they married. They were expecting to inherit a good bit of money from Tom’s grandfather, but I suspect the old gentleman left them a mess of debts instead.”

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Kay and her cousin, encouraged to learn this much, asked other questions, but the realtor could provide them with no additional information. He repeated that he had no idea as to where his cousin or her husband resided.

When Mr. Lare became curious as to the purpose of the inquiry about his family, Kay and Bill Tracey hastily left. An hour’s drive brought them to Brantwood.

While the car was being put away, Kay unlocked the back door. Immediately upon entering the house she was startled to hear the sound of running water. The air inside was damp and musty.

Fearful of some household disaster, the girl rushed to the kitchen. The floor was covered with several inches of water, the ceiling plaster had fallen, and a steady stream trickled down from above. Kay retreated to a window, and raising it, she called frantically to her companion.

“Cousin Bill! Cousin Bill! The house is flooded!”

Without waiting for him she ran upstairs, fully expecting that someone had gone away leaving a bathroom faucet turned on.

The disaster was even greater than she had anticipated. During the absence of the family a corroded water pipe under the bathroom floor had burst.

Cousin Bill came running from the garage. Seizing a wrench, he hastened to the basement and turned off the main water connection.

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“Such a mess!” Kay exclaimed, surveying the wreckage. She sloshed through it and opened a cupboard door. A paper sack of sugar had dissolved; flour and water had combined to make a sticky paste which covered the shelves.

“Your mother will be ill when she sees this,” Cousin Bill exclaimed.

“She’ll not see it. We’ll clean the worst of it up ourselves and have a decorator refinish the kitchen. It was lucky that we drove back here today or the entire lower floor would have been ruined.”

It was too late to telephone for a plumber to come to the house, so the two got rid of the water, then went to bed. The next morning Kay put on her oldest clothing and started to work. She was cleaning out the kitchen cupboards when the doorbell rang. Then she heard Ronald Earle’s familiar voice.

“Anyone home?” he called through the screen.

“Oh, hello, Ronnie,” Kay replied, laughing to hide her embarrassment. “How would you like a job?”

“Say, this place looks as if it had been through a flood,” the

young man exclaimed as he looked about. “Sure, give me a mop and I’ll help.”

“Not in those clothes. Cousin Bill is upstairs. Maybe he’ll lend you an old bathing suit.”

By the time a plumber arrived, the kitchen was fairly presentable again, for Kay, Ronald and Cousin Bill had worked with a will.

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“At least one can walk through the place now without needing boots,” Kay declared wearily. “But there’s still plenty of cleaning to do.”

Ronald apologized because he must leave, but he was wanted at home. Not until the young man had left did Kay realize how time had flown.

“I must get in touch with Ethel Eaton,” she told her cousin anxiously. “I believe I’ll ask her to come here.”

Kay half expected the girl to refuse the request, for her classmate seldom was obliging.

“I must see you about a very urgent matter, Ethel,” she explained over the telephone. “I wonder—could you come over to the house right away?”

Without the slightest hesitation the other answered in the affirmative, but her voice was cold and haughty.

“Yes, I’ll come immediately, Kay,” she promised. “You see, I have a very special matter which I want to talk over with

you.”

CHAPTER XVIII

ETHEL'S REVELATION

While she continued to clean the kitchen, Kay pondered over what Ethel Eaton had meant. She could think of no reason why the girl should wish to talk to her unless she had found out somewhere that Baby Rose was being kept at the old Wendell farm.

“Ethel is angry about something,” Kay reflected. “I must handle her tactfully or she’ll tell me nothing.”

It was nearing lunch time, and both Kay and Cousin Bill were hungry, as they had had only canned fruit for breakfast. The latter proposed that they go to a restaurant.

“If we do, I’m afraid I’ll miss seeing Ethel,” Kay protested. “I think I should stay here until she comes.”

“Then I’ll go down to the store and pick up a few things,” the young lawyer offered. “Would salad and sandwiches suit you?”

“That sounds grand, Cousin Bill. I’m so hungry that I can eat a double portion!”

Scarcely had Mr. Tracey left the house when Ethel

Eaton arrived. Kay was still in her old clothes and apologized for her appearance as she invited the girl into the kitchen.

“I hope you don’t mind if I go right on with this work. I’m determined to finish tonight. We’ve had the plumber here and _____”

“Old houses do require a lot of fixing, don’t they?” Ethel remarked maliciously as she gazed about. “My, what a queer odor!”

“That comes from the damp walls,” Kay explained with growing irritation. “This house isn’t old at all. A water pipe broke while we were away and flooded everything.”

“My father says that cheaply built houses often turn out this way.”

Kay could not trust herself to make a reply. If she were to do so she knew she soon would be quarreling with Ethel. In that case she probably would learn nothing. She ignored the remark and after offering the girl a chair, calmly went on cleaning the woodwork. The caller sat watching her for a minute or two, and finally aired her grievance.

“You remember that day I visited the farm and dropped my pocketbook?”

“Yes.”

“Well, a paper fell out and you picked it up, Kay Tracey!”

“If I remember correctly I picked up several articles.”

“Oh, stop hedging. You know what I mean. You saw that letter from the principal of Carmont High School, didn’t you?”

“Well, perhaps I did.”

“I suppose you’ll go around telling everyone I was dismissed from summer school.”

“I’ve told no one so far,” Kay answered with a quick glance directed at Ethel. It had suddenly occurred to her that she held a powerful weapon with which to deal with the girl.

“I hated school and I was glad to quit,” Ethel said bitterly, “but I don’t want it spread all over Brantwood why I did. You’ll keep it to yourself, won’t you, Kay?”

“Have you already told people a different story, Ethel?”

“Well, a few of my friends think my parents took me out of school.”

“I see.”

“Oh, don’t be so superior!” Ethel said angrily. “Will you keep still about it or not?”

“Yes, upon one condition.”

“What is that?”

“You must tell me everything about your connection with Mrs. Lare.”

Ethel hesitated, then said, “There’s nothing to reveal. She is merely an acquaintance.”

“You’ve already told me you were trying to find her baby for her,” Kay said severely. “But I’ll not plead with you. If you care to give me the information I’ll keep your secret. Otherwise——”

“All right,” Ethel said crossly, “I’ll tell you everything, but first I want to know why you’re so eager to find out about Mrs. Lare.”

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“That question is fair enough,” Kay agreed. “Some weeks ago while I was at the old Wendell farm I found a baby whom someone had abandoned under a crimson brier bush. My aunt has been taking care of the infant. Now the doctor says that unless an operation is performed upon her eyes immediately the child will go blind. We are trying to find the parents so that they may give their consent to it.”

“And you think Mrs. Lare may be the mother?”

“Such a possibility occurred to me. That is the reason why I want you to tell everything you know about the woman.”

“You just made up that story,” Ethel accused. “I know very well you didn’t find a baby.”

“Have it your own way, but remember, if you don’t keep your promise I’ll let everyone in Brantwood know why you were

dismissed from summer school.”

“I was only joking,” Ethel said hastily. “I’ll tell you all I know.”

Her tale was so fantastic that Kay scarcely knew whether or not to believe it. Ethel related that the entire affair had started when she had visited a tea-leaf reader. The woman had said that the girl would meet a strange blond woman whose baby was missing.

“You see,” Ethel continued with an important air, “I was picked by the stars above for the task of restoring the infant to her mother.”

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“How did you actually meet Mrs. Lare?” Kay asked.

“I overheard a conversation between her and a nurse.”

“Norma Jones?” Kay supplied questioningly.

“Yes, that was her name. Mrs. Lare was telling the woman that her husband had left her after a quarrel over money. He went away from home and took the baby with him.”

“And did you step forward and offer your services in recovering the child?”

“Not just then. I later consulted the tea-leaf reader again. I told her about a dream I had had—that I would find Mrs. Lare waiting for me at a hotel in Clinton.”

“So you went there, and happened to find her?”

“Yes, the tea-leaf reader advised me to do so, and she requested me to bring Mrs. Lare to her.”

“Did the psychic ask another fee for this service?” Kay inquired with a scornful smile.

“Yes, her advice was expensive but it was worth the price. Mrs. Lare was greatly comforted after talking with the woman.”

“I take it the baby was not recovered.”

“Well, there hasn’t been time enough for that yet,” Ethel said irritably. “But the tea-leaf woman introduced Mrs. Lare to a handsome man who is helping her all he can. She has given him a lock of the baby’s hair and some of the infant’s clothes. He has promised to say prayers over them for the child’s safe return.”

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“What are you saying, Ethel?” Kay gasped. “I never heard such nonsense before in all my life.”

“Oh, this man is wonderful,” the caller rejoined in a dreamy tone. “I’ve met him several times myself. He has such attractive brown eyes, and he’s tall and dark——”

“I hope Mrs. Lare hasn’t given him any money,” Kay interrupted. “From your description he sounds like a schemer to me.”

An outside door slammed, and Cousin Bill came into the kitchen with an armful of bundles. Kay could not refrain from re-telling a part of the story. The young lawyer listened in

grim silence. When she had finished he turned rather scornfully toward Ethel.

“No sensible person would take any stock in such outlandish hocus. You and Mrs. Lare have fallen into the clutches of a pair of scheming crooks!”

“It’s not true,” Ethel cried furiously, “and you can’t say such insulting things to me, either. I’m going home.”

“I didn’t intend to insult you,” Cousin Bill said apologetically. “I meant my words as a warning. If I were you I’d have nothing more to do with that couple.”

“When I want advice from you I’ll ask for it,” Ethel retorted coldly. “Since you’re in a mood to reform folks you might start on Kay. At least I’m not the prevaricator she is! The idea of her claiming she actually found a baby!”

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“I told you the truth.”

Kay accompanied the girl to the door, trying to reason with her, but Ethel would not listen. However, upon Kay’s insistence she did give her the name of the tea-leaf reader whom she claimed to have consulted.

Afternoon found Kay at the elaborate establishment of Madame Renault. Without giving the slightest hint as to why she had come, the girl pretended that she wished to have her fortune told. After listening to ten minutes of silly chatter she asked the woman if a baby ever would influence her life.

“No, never,” Madame Renault responded. “No child will ever

enter your life. You are interested in babies, yes?”

This was the opening for which Kay had hoped, and now she told the tea-leaf reader about Mrs. Lare and the missing infant.

“Oh, Mrs. Lare comes to me regularly for advice,” the woman answered. “I have helped her very much.”

“And have you found her baby for her?” Kay questioned, watching the medium closely.

“Oh, yes,” the woman replied glibly. “Through me she met a man who restored the child to her. The case is closed now.”

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“One more question,” Kay began, but the psychic shook her head and arose abruptly.

“No, I can tell you nothing more,” she said nervously. “You must go now.”

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CHAPTER XIX

AT THE HOSPITAL

Kay intended to ask for Mrs. Lare's address, but the woman would tell her nothing further, sensing that the girl had seen through her schemes.

"Go at once!" she commanded. "My time is precious and I have other customers who are waiting."

Kay reluctantly left the establishment, rather provoked that she had failed in her mission.

"I'll get that address somehow," she thought grimly. "And I think I know how I can do it, too!"

Upon reaching home she sat down at the desk telephone and placed a call for Madame Renault. Disguising her voice, she allowed the tea-leaf reader to believe that she was Ethel Eaton. Her request for Mrs. Lare's address was granted immediately.

"That was almost too easy," Kay chuckled as she hung up the receiver. "Now to go and talk with Mrs. Lare."

However, before the girl could leave the desk the telephone rang. She took down the receiver to hear the operator say:

“Long distance calling.”

In a moment the connection was made and Kay heard her mother’s voice at the other end of the line.

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“Hello, is that you, Kay? You must come to Clinton at once. Doctor Rhinehardt has decided to operate on Baby Rose early tomorrow morning. We’re all nervous and worried, and would like to have you here.”

“I’ll take the evening train, Mother,” her daughter promised. “Tell Aunt Jessie to keep up her courage and everything will be all right.”

Kay was forced to give up her plan of visiting Mrs. Lare. She telephoned Cousin Bill at his office and through him made a reservation for the late night train. Morning found her in Clinton. As the girl alighted, Wilma and Betty rushed to meet her.

“We have the car,” the latter said breathlessly. “We’ll take you straight to the hospital.”

“Has the operation been performed?”

“It was set for eight-thirty,” Wilma answered gravely. “You’ll not be able to see the baby, but Mrs. Stoke needs you, Kay. She’s fairly beside herself with anxiety. Oh, what will we do if the operation is a failure?”

“It won’t be,” Kay replied. “It just can’t be.”

When the girls reached the hospital they found Mrs. Stoke

pacing the hall outside the operating room. Mrs. Tracey was walking with her, trying to offer comfort.

“Something must have gone wrong,” the woman moaned. “They’ve been in there such a long while.”

“No, only a few minutes,” Mrs. Tracey corrected gently. “It seems long because we are waiting.”

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The odor of ether was strong in the hallway. Finally Aunt Jessie allowed herself to be led downstairs to the waiting room. Kay felt sorry for her aunt, who was suffering more intensely than if she were facing an operation herself. Once more the girl reflected that should anything happen to the baby, Mrs. Stoke might never recover from the blow.

“I don’t know what to do about Mrs. Lare,” Kay thought unhappily as she and the twins waited upstairs. “If Baby Rose does belong to her and she were to take her away from Aunt Jessie, I’d never be forgiven for having investigated and caused such a thing to happen.”

The girl did not like to think of Mrs. Lare as the mother of little Rose, for from all she had seen and heard of the woman, she was inclined to believe her to be somewhat shallow-minded. While all of Ethel Eaton’s strange story might not be true, certainly the part was in which Mrs. Lare had depended upon the tea-leaf reader to recover her child for her.

The morning sun had entirely disappeared beneath a heavy black cloud, though no one in the hospital had noticed it. Not until the electric lights were snapped on all over the institution did the Tracey party realize how dark it had grown.

Rain began to pelt against the windows and vivid flashes of lightning to cut zigzag paths across an inky sky. The claps of thunder that followed were almost ear-splitting.

“That was close!” Betty shivered, drawing near Kay and Wilma as a particularly bright flash of lightning illuminated the sky.

“And the little baby is still in the operating room,” Wilma murmured anxiously. “Oh, this storm is almost like an evil omen.”

Wilma’s words proved to be only too prophetic. Scarcely had she ceased speaking when the electric lights blinked uncertainly. Then, without further warning, they went out completely. It was so dark that objects could not be distinguished ten feet away.

“Kay! Betty!” Wilma cried in terror. “Where are you?”

Kay seized the frightened girl’s hand and spoke a few reassuring words to her.

Pandemonium let loose in the darkened institution. From the wards opening into the long halls there came the alarmed cries of the patients. The girls could hear the swift-moving feet of nurses as they scurried to their assistance. But there were many more patients than there were attendants, and all could not be taken care of. The cries for help were pitiful and heart-rending.

Suddenly an interne came rushing down the hall carrying a

flashlight. He trained the beam on Kay. Reaching into his pocket, he produced several of them which he thrust into the girls' hands.

“Take these,” he commanded, “and help us quiet the patients. We need more attendants desperately.”

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Kay seized the flashlight and was off in an instant. She heard a rattling sound near a fire escape. Training her light on the spot, she was startled to see an old lady in a nightgown jerking violently at the door. In another moment she would be outside and in danger of a fatal fall.

With kind words and an assuring manner Kay succeeded in quieting the patient. By the aid of the flashlight she led the old lady back to her room and closed the door.

By this time the noise in the hospital had subsided somewhat. As Kay hurried down the hall, she saw Wilma sitting dejectedly near the door of an operating room.

“Oh, Kay,” she murmured, “Baby Rose is in there. They have suspended her operation until the lights come on.”

“Have you been inside?” Kay asked quickly.

“No. An interne told me.”

“I’ll see what is happening,” Kay said, and knocked on the door.

A nurse appeared and assured her that the operation had hardly started when the lights had failed. The infant, though

unconscious, was in no danger. As soon as there should be illumination again, the surgeon would take up the case once more.

Immensely relieved, Kay and Wilma sought Betty and then carried their good tidings to Aunt Jessie. Presently the lights came on again, and the hospital settled down to its former routine. Outside the rain still pelted against the window panes, but the worst of the storm was over.

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Kay wandered toward the front entrance. A man stood by the information desk, his back turned toward her.

“Tell me,” she heard him request in an unsteady voice, “how is Mrs. Stoke’s little baby? Was the operation successful?”

Kay moved forward to see who the speaker might be. Then her face brightened as she recognized him.

“Clarence Castner!” she cried. “We thought you were on the farm!”

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CHAPTER XX

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

Clarence Castner smiled with embarrassment as he gravely shook Kay's hand. He had intended that no one should know of his deep attachment for the baby. Now that the secret was out, he did not offer an apology.

"I've been worried about the child," he said simply. "I decided to come over here and find out how Rose made out."

"The operation hasn't been performed yet," Kay explained. "The electric storm extinguished the lights all over the hospital. Now that they're on again, I suppose the operation will be continued."

She brought Clarence to see Mrs. Stoke and her mother, who were still in the waiting room. Presently an attendant brought word that the surgeon had resumed his work. Aunt Jessie began to weep softly into her handkerchief.

Kay and the twins presently went outside and wandered aimlessly about the hospital grounds. Time passed very slowly.

"Wouldn't it be dreadful if the operation should be a failure?" Betty murmured as they sat down for a

moment on one of the rain-soaked benches.

“Don’t even think of such a thing,” Wilma reproved sternly.

After a long period of gloomy silence, Kay told the twins about the information she had gleaned from Ethel Eaton while she was in Brantwood.

“Why don’t you give up the search for the baby’s parents?” Betty asked abruptly. “After all the misery and suspense your aunt has been through, she deserves to keep little Rose.”

“Unless the child’s parents are traced, Aunt Jessie will always be afraid she’ll lose the infant,” Kay returned quickly. “The fear of it will prey upon her mind.”

“Yes,” Wilma admitted reluctantly, “but what will be gained if the baby is turned back to shiftless parents who will not care for her properly? After all, Rose’s interests should be considered.”

“I have gone over the case from every angle,” Kay rejoined. “The parents may be very worthy people.”

“They must be—to leave a helpless baby lying beneath a crimson brier bush!” Betty exclaimed with a note of sarcasm in her voice.

“We don’t know who abandoned the child,” Kay argued. “Someone may have stolen the infant from its parents.”

“Well, go ahead and try to find them,” Betty said with a resigned sigh. “If the mother should turn out to be the

superstitious Mrs. Lare, don't expect me to praise you for your clever detective work."

"I don't expect praise for anything," Kay replied. "I merely want to ease my conscience in the matter. After all, I found Baby Rose and have a certain feeling of responsibility toward her."

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The twins could not share Kay's feelings in the matter, so they prudently refrained from discussing the subject further. The three girls soon went back to the waiting room, and were greatly relieved to learn that the operation was over.

"And will Rose be able to see once more?" Kay asked her mother eagerly.

"It is too soon to tell. The bandage will not be removed for many days. But the immediate danger is past."

Mrs. Stoke wished to be near Rose when she should come out of the ether, so she arranged to stay at the hospital. The other members of the party motored back to the farm.

The next morning a note came from Aunt Jessie saying that the baby was improving steadily, and while she must wear the bandage for many days, the doctors had promised that if all should go well the infant might be taken home by the end of the week.

At last the day of the homecoming arrived. Great was the rejoicing at Crimson Brier Farm, for the doctor had announced that he felt sure the operation had been successful. Clarence and Kay decorated the house with garden flowers,

while the twins helped Mrs. Tracey prepare a wonderful chicken dinner.

“Don’t forget to make lots of gravy,” Kay suggested as she polished silverware for the table.

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Finally an automobile was sighted coming up the lane, and everyone rushed from the house to greet Aunt Jessie and the baby. Doctor Cornell had driven them from the hospital in his coupe.

“Now remember, don’t subject the baby to any excitement,” the physician warned in leaving. “She’s still weak from the operation and must have absolute quiet. I’ll stop around in a few days to remove the bandages permanently from her eyes.”

Baby Rose was carried tenderly to her own room and there left to sleep. For a time all the conversation was on the subject of the wonderful turn of events. Then finally Betty called gaily from the kitchen:

“Dinner is ready. We fried six chickens for the occasion, Aunt Jessie.”

“Six!” the woman echoed in dismay. “Why, that’s one for each of us.”

“We wanted everyone to have his favorite piece,” Kay chuckled. “I hope you don’t mind our extravagance.”

“No,” Mrs. Stoke smiled, “this is a gala dinner and we want it to be fine. But after this, I may have to economize more than I’ve ever done before.”

“Because of the doctor’s bill?” Kay asked with quick sympathy.

Mrs. Stoke nodded. “Yes, it was larger even than I expected.” She added hastily, “But if the operation is a success I’ll not begrudge the man a penny of the money.”

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Since Cousin Bill was not present at dinner, Clarence Castner was given a chair at the head of the table. He served the food with grace and ease, and Kay in watching him thought again that he had not always been a drifter, but had seen better days.

In the midst of the gaiety a car was heard in the lane. From her seat opposite the window Kay saw a stranger alight and come toward the side door.

“Is it Doctor Cornell or Mr. Tucker?” Aunt Jessie inquired. “If so, ask him in. I declare, there’s enough food for an army.”

“I never saw the man before,” Kay replied. “No, don’t get up, Aunt Jessie. I’ll see what he wants.”

She waited for the knock and then went to the door. Kay did not like the man’s appearance. He was tall and dark, with eyes that had an unpleasant way of looking straight through one, and a glance that was almost insolent.

“Does a Mrs. Stoke live here?” he inquired.

“Yes, she does,” Kay admitted. “Right now she is at the dinner table. May I take your message?”

“You may not. I wish to speak with Mrs. Stoke.”

“Very well, I’ll call her,” Kay said shortly.

The woman had overheard the conversation. She nervously arose, and with a questioning glance directed at her niece came to the door.

“What is it you want?” she asked a trifle sharply.

“My name is Yost,” the man said, introducing himself.

“Fenwick Yost. I am seeking information about a baby.”

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Mrs. Stoke drew in her breath sharply and took a step backward. Her face mirrored panic.

“I can tell you nothing,” she stammered. “Nothing. Go away and don’t trouble me.”

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CHAPTER XXI

AT THE CARNIVAL

Kay came quickly to the rescue of her bewildered aunt, softening the woman's words by saying to the stranger:

"Your visit comes at an awkward moment. You see, we are having a gala dinner party. Now, if you could only return some other time I am sure my aunt will be glad to answer any questions you might wish to ask her."

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Stoke agreed a bit too eagerly. "Come tomorrow or the next day and I will talk with you."

The stranger regarded her shrewdly, but he bowed affably enough.

"I am very sorry to have intruded. Yes, I will call again as you request."

As he turned to leave, Kay was suddenly impressed by the fact that his appearance was not unlike that of the "dark, handsome man" whom Ethel Eaton had described so glowingly. Could this be the stranger who knew Mrs. Lare? The conviction grew upon her that he was the same person.

"Are you staying in Cherryville?" she asked in a tone

which she tried to make sound casual. “If so, my aunt and I might interview you there.”

“No, I’ll not be in town for a few days,” the man answered hastily. “I will be glad to return here. You may expect me within a week.”

Kay was disappointed, and Mrs. Stoke accepted the message with misgivings. For them the gala dinner had lost its zest, and they both were quiet for the remainder of the day.

“Why do you suppose that man came here?” Mrs. Stoke questioned her niece nervously when they were alone. “If he wants to ask me about a baby he must think Rose isn’t my child. I’ll never let him have her! Never!”

“Perhaps that isn’t why he came, Aunt Jessie.”

“I feel sure his call had something to do with Rose,” the woman replied thoughtfully. “I must think of some way to keep the child out of his sight.”

Mrs. Stoke moved about the house with an air of preoccupation. Now and then her remarks led Kay to think that she might be planning to hide the infant. While the girl sympathized deeply with her aunt in wishing to keep Rose, she felt that it would be a mistake to try to deceive the stranger.

Aunt Jessie did not speak of the matter for several days, and Kay made a point of not mentioning it. Her time became occupied with preparations for a carnival to be held at Cherryville. She and the twins had promised to make and help

sell candy at a booth sponsored by one of the local organizations.

Everyone in the household was overjoyed because little Rose continued to make a steady gain in strength.

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Doctor Cornell came to remove the bandages, and gave his verdict that the operation had been completely successful.

Aunt Jessie wept with joy, and when the baby gave positive proof that she could see by stretching out one of her tiny hands toward an object, the good woman called everyone to witness the miracle.

Clarence Castner devoted his spare time to doing carpenter work, and would let no one know what he was making in the woodshed. One morning, however, he proudly presented Baby Rose with a play pen and a rocking horse chair.

The gifts pleased Aunt Jessie. She fell into the habit of talking a great deal with the young man, often sitting by the garden as he weeded it. In truth, the woman had been thinking of enlisting Clarence's aid in hiding the infant from Fenwick Yost, but she could not quite bring herself to speak of the matter to him.

Kay had confided to her mother that she felt certain Aunt Jessie meant to take Baby Rose away from the farm. Deeply troubled by the information, Mrs. Tracey wrote to Cousin Bill, and was gratified to receive an answer from him by return mail.

The young attorney warned her that under no circumstances should Mrs. Stoke be allowed to carry

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out her plans. To hide the baby when the stranger might call could easily involve the woman with the law, as she could be accused of kidnaping. This letter Mrs. Tracey gave to Kay, who in turn told the twins of its contents.

“I’ll talk to Jessie at the first opportunity,” the girl’s mother said, “but I’ll not show her the note. I don’t want her to think I am deliberately interfering in her affairs.”

She intended to destroy the communication, but instead carelessly thrust it between the leaves of a magazine. Later in picking up that same periodical Aunt Jessie found the missive and read what Cousin Bill had written.

“I don’t know what to do now,” she murmured to herself. “I want to do the right and just thing in the matter, but I can’t bear to give up the baby.”

In an agony of indecision, Mrs. Stoke allowed the days to slip by. She kept hoping that the stranger might never return to the farmhouse.

Kay too began to think that Fenwick Yost’s call had been a casual one. Her time was taken up with candy making and decorating a booth at the carnival sponsored by the Cherryville Improvement Association.

When at last the festival night arrived, she and the twins were delighted to observe that their booth was by far the most attractive of any on the grounds. By nine o’clock their wares had been sold and they were then free to walk about and visit the other stands and concessions.

“We’ve made over twenty-five dollars,” Kay announced proudly when she had finished counting the receipts. “Twenty-five forty-three, to be exact.”

“That’s much better than I expected,” Betty replied. “I doubt if any other booth cleared as much.”

“We’re to turn it over to the president of the association, Mr. Oscar Farrell,” Kay said. “Let’s do it right now before we lose any of it.”

They carried the funds in a small canvas bag, which was in turn placed in the hands of Mr. Farrell. The man counted it twice to make certain there was no mistake in the figures.

“Twenty-five forty-three,” he announced as he placed the money in a large tin box. “So far that’s the best any booth has done. You young ladies are to be congratulated.”

“We could have cleared more than that, only we ran out of candy!” Betty explained. “We should have charged more for each pound.”

“How much will the association make this evening, do you think?” Kay inquired with interest.

“Oh, we’re doing well. Over three hundred dollars has been turned in already, and we will receive also a certain percentage of the hired concessions. They’ll not turn in their reports until later.”

The girls wandered about the carnival grounds, encountering many neighbors.

At eleven o'clock nearly all of the booths had been sold out, and the greater part of the crowd had deserted the grounds.

“We may as well go, too,” Wilma proposed with a yawn. “The excitement is all over now and I’m tired.”

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“Let’s ask Mr. Farrell how much was really made,” Kay suggested as they were passing his booth. “A great deal more money must have come in.”

“I hear the association plans to make a baseball park and build a swimming pool for the children,” Betty commented. “It’s wonderful that the affair was such a success, and I’m glad we had a part in it.”

“So am I,” Kay agreed. “If little Rose should live with Aunt Jessie she’ll soon grow up and be able to splash around in that pool.”

Mr. Farrell was counting a large pile of dimes as the girls came up to his booth, and for several minutes he did not even glance in their direction.

“What a job!” he sighed as he finished the task and wrote down a figure on a piece of paper. “But it’s almost finished now. I’ll be glad to get the money to the bank.”

“Where will you keep it tonight?” Kay asked curiously.

“I suppose I’ll have to take it home with me, but I don’t like to do that. The sum of money is large and I might be robbed.”

“How much has been taken in?” inquired Wilma.

“I figure it will be around six hundred dollars. It’s all in that large tin box under the counter. If one of you will hand it to me I’ll get rid of these dimes, now that I’ve counted them.”

Kay obligingly stepped behind Mr. Farrell and searched the shelf which he indicated.

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“I don’t seem to be able to find it,” she said after a moment. “The light isn’t very good.”

“Never mind, I’ll get it myself,” the president of the association declared, pushing back his chair.

He confidently ran his hand under the counter. Then a stunned expression came over his face. Crouching down, he examined the entire shelf.

“The tin box is gone!” he exclaimed. “It was here ten minutes ago. What could have happened to it?”

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CHAPTER XXII

THE TIN BOX

“Let’s search again,” Kay suggested quietly. “The box must be here, Mr. Farrell. Are you sure you kept it under the counter?”

“Yes, I hid it there so no one would know I had so much money in the booth,” the man declared, growing more excited. “I’ve kept my eyes on those funds every minute.”

“You had your back turned toward it when we got here,” Betty reminded him. “Someone could have sneaked up at the rear of the booth and made off with the box.”

“I’d have seen the thief.”

“You were concentrating on your counting, perhaps,” Wilma said. “Have many persons been around the booth?”

“Too many to suit me.”

By this time Kay had made a careful search and knew that the money box was nowhere around. As the realization came to Mr. Farrell that the receipts had been stolen from under his very eyes, his face grew pale and his hands began to shake.

“What shall I do?” he asked helplessly. “I’m responsible for all that money. I can’t face the committee. I was so careful——”

“Try to think,” Kay urged. “Do you recall any suspicious looking persons watching you count the funds?”

“Some of the professional carnival folks were around the booth. And there was another fellow who kept asking me a lot of questions.”

“Can you describe him?” Kay asked.

“He wore a blue suit and a white straw hat.”

“Why, Clarence Castner was dressed like that,” Wilma observed before she stopped to think that her remark might direct suspicion toward the young man. “He bought a new Panama hat today.”

“This fellow said he was waiting for three girls,” Mr. Farrell recalled. “He must have been the one! We’ll just talk with that young man!”

“Oh, I’m sure it couldn’t have been Clarence,” Wilma said hastily. “He works out at Crimson Brier Farm, you know.”

“A great many persons probably have on blue suits and Panama hats tonight,” Kay added quickly.

“He’s the hitch-hiker your aunt hired, isn’t he?” Mr. Farrell questioned. “What did she know about him?”

“Well, not a great deal,” Kay admitted reluctantly, “but——”

“We’ll find that young fellow and ask him a few questions.”

By this time a number of other persons had learned of the theft, and an anxious group now gathered about the booth to ask questions and offer suggestions. Members of the carnival troupe were queried but no light could be thrown upon the disappearance of the tin box. 172

Mr. Farrell searched diligently for Clarence Castner, ultimately finding him in the Tracey car where he was waiting for Kay and the twins. The young man, upon questioning, readily admitted that he had lingered about the carnival booth, but denied any knowledge of the missing money box.

“Where do you hail from anyway, Mr. Castner?” one of the committee members asked.

A stony expression came into Clarence’s eyes. “I figure that’s my own business,” he answered shortly.

“A man who is ashamed of his past will usually bear investigating,” Mr. Farrell drawled.

“I’ve never stolen anything in my life!” Clarence Castner retorted with anger. “I don’t know what became of your tin box.”

He stepped into the car and rather curtly asked Kay and the twins if they were riding back to the farm with him. The girls hesitated, then silently entered the automobile. Hostile glances followed them as they were driven away.

Clarence did not speak during the ride back to the farm. The girls could find nothing to say until they were alone in the house.

“What a fine mess you’ve made of things, Wilma Worth,” Betty accused her sister irritably. “Why did you have to bring Clarence’s name into the affair?”

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“I spoke before I thought,” Wilma said uncomfortably. “At least I’m glad they didn’t arrest him.”

“The matter hasn’t been dropped,” Kay replied quietly. “We’ll hear from the committee again, I feel sure.”

True to her prediction, three of the townsmen appeared at the farmhouse the next morning before breakfast. Their voices were raised in loud and bitter argument as they talked with Clarence Castner. Attracted by the sound, Aunt Jessie came to the door to learn what was the matter.

“Why, I’ve never heard of anything so ridiculous before in all my life!” she said when she had been told about the missing tin box. “It’s a wonder you didn’t accuse me! I had just as much to do with the theft. Go away and let Clarence get at his work. There’s plowing to be done, and——”

“It must wait, Mrs. Stoke. Your hired man has refused to answer certain questions. We’re taking him into town with us. If he still refuses——”

“This is persecution!” Mrs. Stoke cried furiously. “Persecution! This young man is as honest as the day is long.”

“What do you know about his past?” Mr. Farrell asked.

“Well, not a great deal, perhaps, but——”

“He’ll have to come along with us and answer a few questions or we’ll turn him over to the police.”

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“I’ll go with you,” Clarence said suddenly. “I don’t want to worry Mrs. Stoke. Let’s get started.”

Aunt Jessie and the girls watched the men drive away. Wilma regretfully confessed that she had been responsible for directing suspicion toward Clarence, but the woman did not chide her.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said. “They’ve no evidence against him. If he just tells them about his past they’ll have no case against him.”

“*If he does,*” Kay repeated with significant emphasis. “However, unless I have misjudged Clarence’s character, he’ll say very little about himself.”

“Well, his past is his own business,” Aunt Jessie answered shortly. “I’ve never asked him who his parents are or where he came from, and I can’t see that these Cherryville folks have any right to do it either.”

The three girls went for their usual morning canter along the countryside. Betty had no use for Brownie since the day of her accident, so she and Kay exchanged horses and the latter experienced little difficulty in keeping her mount under control.

“Shall we take a new road today?” Wilma suggested as they left the lane. “I’m tired of the same old places.”

“We’ve explored almost everywhere,” Betty replied.

“I know one road we haven’t tried,” Kay declared. “I saw it when we first came here. It will mean a long ride, though.”

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She urged Brownie into a trot, leading the way down the road. Soon they came to a branch-off which was shaded by an archway of overhanging tree boughs.

“I’ll race you!” Betty cried gaily as they turned down the highway.

Kay and Wilma did not feel in the mood for any such thing. They reminded Betty that the last time her horse had taken her for a fast ride, things had ended disastrously for her.

The girls alternately walked and trotted their mounts, meanwhile enjoying the wonderful air and the scenery. In the open places the sun beat down upon their backs, making them unpleasantly warm.

“This will be another hot day,” Wilma complained. “We’re a long way from the farm. Don’t you think we should turn back before it gets too warm?”

“All right,” Kay agreed amiably, “only I’d like to see what that thing is directly ahead of us. It looks like a car in the ditch.”

A deep ravine stretched just beyond the right-hand side of the road. As the girls trotted their horses toward it they noted that the object which had attracted Kay's interest was indeed an automobile, but a very old one. Evidently it had been in the ravine many weeks, for the fenders were rusted and passers-by had stripped it of useful parts.

Kay dismounted, and tying Brownie to a convenient tree, walked over to the dilapidated car to examine the wreckage.

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"You're the most inquisitive person I have ever seen," Betty complained. "It's nothing but an ancient auto. Probably the owner didn't want to bother to haul it to a junk yard."

Kay did not answer. Instead, she stooped down and picked up a piece of paper that lay under the car.

"What did you find?" Wilma called as she slid from the saddle.

"Come here, girls!" Kay cried excitedly. "It's a piece of an old envelope."

Wilma and Betty tied their horses to a tree. Before they could reach the ravine, however, their chum screamed again, this time in terror.

"Oh, I almost stepped on a great big snake!" she shuddered, retreating. "It's lying by the car."

Wilma would not come near, but Kay and Betty seized heavy sticks and attacked the reptile. They did not succeed in killing

it for it wriggled away into the deep grass.

“Come on,” Wilma urged impatiently. “I get the creeps even to be near a snake. Though you did frighten him away, he may have a mate.”

Kay did not hear her for she was searching the ground beneath the old car for additional scraps of paper.

“See if you can find some,” she urged Betty. “Someone has torn up an old letter here, and I suspect it may have been the owner of this automobile.”

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“What difference does it make who owned it?” Betty asked, but she obligingly helped with the search.

Almost at once she found a scrap of paper which bore a portion of the name on the envelope—the letters “ce Cas.”

“There!” Kay cried triumphantly as Betty gave her the slip. “That will coincide with the scrap I found.”

She placed the two jagged pieces together, and as Betty peered over her shoulder, both girls gasped in amazement.

The name on the envelope read: “Clarence Castner, New London.”

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CHAPTER XXIII

STOLEN FUNDS

Wilma Worth observed that Kay and Betty had made a startling discovery, and she forgot her fear of snakes as she hurried to join the girls.

“What have you found?” she inquired curiously.

Betty thrust the bits of paper into her twin’s hand. “It’s the name from an old envelope which someone dropped here.”

“Clarence Castner,” Wilma read in bewilderment.

“Yes, this must be his car,” Kay said as she searched the ground for additional clues.

“But Clarence was a hitch-hiker,” Wilma protested. “He never owned a car.”

“We don’t know what he owned before we met him,” Kay replied. “I’m beginning to think that he may have more of a past than we realize.”

“Maybe he did steal the carnival funds,” said Betty musingly.

Kay shook her head. “No, I believe Clarence is honest,

but I'm puzzled about this car. Evidently it has been standing in the ravine for many weeks. That would seem to indicate that Clarence was in this locality before we met him on the road. I think I'll talk with him when we get back to the house."

When the girls reached the farm, they found that Clarence had returned from Cherryville. He came to take their horses, and as Kay dismounted she asked him what had occurred at the meeting in town.

"I told them the truth—that I didn't know anything about the carnival funds."

"Don't you think it might put you in a better light to tell the committee all about yourself?" Kay suggested, watching him closely.

"A man has a right to some privacy," was his only comment.

"Yes, but you came here as a stranger and for that reason some persons are inclined to doubt your word."

"Let them doubt it. My own conscience is clear. If Mrs. Stoke believes in me and my other friends do, that is all I care about."

"My aunt does trust you," Kay answered. "I know that you are honest too, and that's why I intend to plead your case with Mr. Farrell."

"Say, that's good of you. I owe you a lot already. You helped me when I was down and out, getting me this job. I wish I

could repay you for your kindness.”

“You can,” Kay said instantly.

“How?”

“By telling me about that old car which lies abandoned in the ravine.”

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The lines of Clarence Castner’s face became taut, and for just an instant Kay thought he intended to turn down her request for information. After a brief silence he asked:

“What do you wish to know about it?”

“Is the car your own?”

“What made you think it might be?” the hired man countered.

“I found a piece of an old letter there today which bore your name.”

“A letter?” Clarence asked with obvious dismay.

“Only a few scraps of one. Just enough to show that it belonged to you.”

“Oh,” the young man murmured in relief. “Well, I don’t mind admitting the car does belong to me. It is an old wreck and I abandoned it there because I didn’t have money enough to keep it running. Automobiles are an expensive luxury for one in my position.”

“I was not intending to criticise you in any way,” Kay said. “I merely wondered if the car is yours for it gave the appearance of having stood in the ravine for some time.”

Clarence made no response to this. He shifted his feet uneasily and then said earnestly:

“I appreciate my job here at the farm, and I’d hate to give it up. There are some things I can’t very well explain, but I want you to believe that my past is an honorable one. I’m not the type to steal money.”

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“I know you’re not,” Kay smiled kindly. “I’ll talk with Mr. Farrell at the first opportunity. Even if the missing funds are never traced, I don’t see how the blame for the theft can be placed upon you. The evidence is purely circumstantial.”

Clarence Castner assured Kay again of his deep gratitude for her interest in his behalf. A little later she and the Worth twins drove to Cherryville to talk with the president of the Improvement Association. The girls were of the opinion that Mr. Farrell might refuse to listen to their plea, but they found him very receptive. During the night he had reflected upon the matter calmly and had reached the conclusion that young Clarence Castner was innocent.

“Ned Tucker reports that he saw one of the carnival women acting suspiciously about the place,” Mr. Farrell told the girls. “We aim to check up on her next.”

“What is the woman’s name?” Kay Tracey asked curiously.

“Veta Yost. She and her husband ran a fortune-telling stand at

the carnival.”

“Did you say the name was Yost?” Kay questioned alertly, thinking of the tall, dark stranger who had called at the farmhouse.

“Yes. The woman and her husband were supposed to pay us for the privilege of putting up their tent, but so far we’ve not been able to collect a cent. They’re dishonest even if they’re not the ones who took the association funds.”

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“Is Veta Yost still in Cherryville?” Kay inquired, without disclosing her own purpose in wishing to see the woman.

“The fortune telling tent is still pitched on the carnival grounds. In fact, our committee will not allow the owners to remove it until a financial settlement has been made.”

Kay learned all she could about the pair. Then she and the twins bade Mr. Farrell good-bye and hastened to the grounds where the festival had been held. Nearly all the stands had been torn down and papers were scattered everywhere. Electricians were detaching overhead strings of colored lights. Small boys were searching the litter for nickels and pennies that had been dropped by careless customers the previous night.

Kay stopped to talk with one of the workmen who was helping to clean up the grounds, and learned from him that Mrs. Yost was still giving fortune telling readings at the far corner of the lot.

The girls approached the tent warily for they did not wish to

be seen. A murmur of voices from within told them that the woman was giving a reading, so they stationed themselves behind a pile of empty soft-drink boxes not far away.

“Did you ever hear such nonsense?” Betty whispered as they listened to Mrs. Yost’s droning voice. “I call it a crime to charge even ten cents for a fortune such as that!”

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Presently an elderly woman emerged from the tent and walked away slowly. She did not see the girls for they were well hidden behind the shield of boxes.

“Could that be Mrs. Yost?” Wilma whispered.

“No. That person lives in Cherryville,” Kay responded. “The other person is still inside.”

The girls’ patience presently was rewarded. A thin blonde woman with a shrewd, calculating face emerged from the tent and moved away rapidly. The trio followed her without difficulty until she mingled with shoppers on the main street of Cherryville. However, by keeping close behind the woman they were able to trail her to an old boarding house not far from the railroad station. A somewhat bedraggled landlady answered Kay’s ring.

“Have you a roomer here named Mrs. Yost?” the girl inquired politely.

“That circus woman! Yes. She is in the front on the second floor.”

Kay left the twins in the parlor while she herself tiptoed up

the stairway. After locating the room she turned her attention to the adjoining chamber. The door stood ajar, so the girl entered quietly and listened intently.

She could hear Mrs. Yost moving around in the quarters adjoining her, evidently making a bed. Presently there were heavy steps in the hallway. The door to the fortune teller's room opened with a loud squeak and Kay heard a man's voice say:

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“Well, how did it go today, wifey dear?”

“Not so good,” Veta Yost answered wearily. “Everyone seemed to be short of dimes for some reason.”

When Kay first heard the man's voice she thought it sounded strangely familiar. She searched her memory, and finally the thought came to her in a flash that he was Fenwick Yost, the dark stranger who had called at the farm.

“Short of dimes,” the man repeated. Then as he laughed mockingly, he lowered his voice. Kay went into the hall in time to hear him add, “Why should we be concerned with dimes when I have scared up the slickest little racket yet?”

The girl paused, intense with excitement.

“You are always full of bright ideas, Fenwick,” the woman replied wearily. “But unfortunately, they are always failures.”

“This one isn't. Wait until you hear about it.”

Kay listened spellbound as Fenwick Yost revealed to his wife

that he was in possession of the funds which had been stolen from the Cherryville Improvement Association. He had observed the location of the tin box, and while Mr. Farrell had been occupied adding up other money, he had taken the container from under the counter.

Having boasted of this exploit, he explained to his wife that through a girl named Ethel Eaton he had learned about a baby which was being kept at a farm near Cherryville. From what she had said, he gathered that Mrs. Stoke and the Tracey family had no legal right to the child's custody. At first he had doubted the story and had confirmed it by visiting the farmhouse.

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It was his plan to use a portion of the stolen funds to employ the services of a detective agency of unsavory repute which would uncover damaging evidence against the Traceys. That accomplished, the next step would be to blackmail them for concealing the baby.

“Well, Fenwick,” Kay heard the woman say, “this scheme doesn't sound like you—it is far too clever. Probably you have the facts all wrong.”

“I saw with my own eyes that they have a blindfolded baby at the farm. I've been watching that place for days. This will be easy money, Veta.”

“Why not just keep the stolen money and be sure of that much? Let the baby angle slide.”

“Just like a woman,” the man said, a trace of rancor creeping into his voice. “You have a chance to play the winning horse,

and now you want to sell the ticket!”

“Speaking of women, wasn’t it a member of my own sex who tipped you off to the baby deal?”

“You’ve got me on that one,” Fenwick Yost chuckled. “Ethel Eaton. Now *there* is a girl for you!”

CHAPTER XXIV

CAUGHT!

Kay waited to hear no more. Quietly she went downstairs to her chums. Wilma and Betty were shocked to learn that Fenwick Yost was in possession of the stolen funds, and proposed going straight to the police with the information.

“I’m almost afraid to do it,” Kay acknowledged ruefully.

“Why?” demanded Betty. “This is the first time I’ve ever known you to be afraid to expose a crook.”

“Fenwick Yost knows about the baby. Ethel Eaton told him everything, it seems. Now he plans to blackmail all of us.”

“But no wrong has been done,” Wilma protested quickly.

“Aunt Jessie shouldn’t have kept the child, and she has tried to make people believe that it is her own. Oh, I wish Cousin Bill were here. I feel so helpless and bewildered. If I don’t act immediately, Fenwick Yost will escape with the money. If I do act I may involve Aunt Jessie and Mother in a dreadful affair.”

“Why not telephone your cousin long distance?” Wilma proposed suddenly. “Then he could tell you what to

do.”

“That’s a really grand idea!” Kay cried. “You girls stay here and keep watch while I run to the general store. There’s a booth there. It won’t take me long to make the call.”

She left the house, and hastened down the street. Meanwhile Wilma and Betty crept up the stairway to the second floor, taking a position in the vacant room adjoining the Yost quarters. They could hear someone moving about and assumed that both Fenwick and his wife were there. Actually, the man had left the house by a back entrance and now was on his way to the general store.

He too intended to make a telephone call. As he neared the booth he heard Kay’s voice as she talked with her cousin in Brantwood. When his own name was mentioned he listened intently to every word she said.

Slipping quietly from the store before Kay had finished her conversation, he returned to the boarding house. Joining his wife, he communicated his knowledge to her in writing. In her conversation with Cousin Bill Kay unwittingly had revealed the fact that the Worth twins were standing guard in the vacant bedroom.

“We must work fast,” the man warned in a whisper. “And quietly.”

Veta Yost nodded that she understood. They let themselves out of the room and knocked on the door of the adjoining chamber. Wilma and Betty crouched against the wall and made no sound. But that did not save them. Fenwick

Yost pushed open the door, and with his wife boldly entered.

He spoke no word, but his eyes plainly told the girls that he knew they had been listening. Wilma and Betty retreated toward the window. They were too frightened to make a sound.

“All right, Veta,” the man said coldly. “Let them have it.”

The pair moved toward the twins with cat-like agility. Betty tried to scream, but a damp handkerchief was pressed tightly over her face. There was a sweet, sickening odor which assailed her senses. She struggled for a moment, then felt overcome by a great desire to relax and sleep.

Fenwick Yost picked her up as she crumpled to the floor and threw her carelessly on the bed. Wilma met a similar fate.

“Shall we tie them up?” Veta asked her husband.

“It would probably be safer,” he decided, taking a long cord from his pocket. “The effects of this incense will wear off in a short while.”

The twins were bound securely. Then Fenwick Yost and his wife stationed themselves by the door, there to await Kay’s return.

“She’ll walk straight into the trap,” the man chuckled. “Lucky for me I happened into that store when I did. The little snooper meant to give us away to the police.”

Ten minutes later Kay returned to the rooming house.

She climbed the stairs and listened for a moment at the front bedroom. Hearing no sound there, she quietly opened the next door.

A certain sense of intuition warned her that all was not well, but it was too late for her to retreat now. As she hesitated through the doorway, Fenwick Yost gripped her hand. Giving it a sudden jerk, he pulled her into the room. His wife promptly closed the door so that no sound would be heard on the floor below.

Kay's scream was cut short as the man held his hand across her mouth. Mrs. Yost attacked her from the rear. The girl's struggles were frantic but brief. She was no match for the pair and very shortly found herself securely gagged and bound.

"There, I guess that will teach you not to cross Fenwick Yost!" the man muttered as he threw the girl down on the bed beside the unconscious Wilma and Betty. "I'll get some money out of that baby yet!"

Locking the three girls in the bedroom, Yost and his wife went back to their own quarters next door. Quickly putting a few possessions into their traveling bags, they left the house. They then hired an automobile and drove directly to Crimson Brier Farm.

Aunt Jessie was alone with the baby, for Mrs. Tracey and Clarence Castner had driven to town earlier in the day. She saw the couple drive into the farm yard, but she did not recognize them. Observing that the man was accompanied by a woman, she assumed that they were friendly callers.

Assuring himself that Mrs. Stoke was quite alone, Fenwick Yost lost no time in stating the purpose of his visit. He and his wife pushed boldly into the house and closed the door.

“There’s no use beating about the bush,” he said grimly to the terrified woman. “We know that you’re hiding a baby here, and if you want to keep the police from hearing about it you’ll have to pay us to keep still about it.”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Stoke stammered fearfully.

“I mean that you must give us a thousand dollars or we’ll tell the authorities about the baby.”

“Why, that’s nothing short of blackmail!”

“Call it what you will. But either you pay us or you take the consequences.”

“I’ll think it over,” the woman said nervously, hedging for time. “Come back tomorrow.”

“You’ll pay us now.”

“But I haven’t even half that much money here,” Mrs. Stoke murmured.

“How much have you?” Fenwick Yost demanded cunningly.

“Less than four hundred.”

“Well, give us what you have and we’ll call it a first payment,” the man snapped. “Get a move on too because

we're in a hurry.”

“If I pay the money will you promise not to take the baby from me?” Mrs. Stoke asked quaveringly.

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“If you don't give me the money, I'll take the child,” Yost retorted. He was merely bluffing, for in his flight from the police he could not be encumbered with an infant. However, Mrs. Stoke did not know this.

“I'll get the money for you,” she decided after a moment of indecision. “Wait here.”

She went upstairs, but Fenwick Yost stealthily followed her. He saw the woman take a roll of bills from its hiding place under the mattress of her bed. Then she counted out three hundred and eighty dollars. Before she could thrust the remainder back, the man stepped into view and took it from her hand. The entire cache amounted to a little over five hundred dollars.

“Trying to cheat me, were you?” he demanded unpleasantly. “Just for that I've a mind to notify the police anyway.”

“Oh, no, no!” Mrs. Stoke pleaded. “Please, I've done nothing wrong. Let me keep the baby—I love her so.”

Meanwhile, back in Cherryville, Kay was trying desperately to free herself from her fetters. The girl was greatly relieved to see Wilma and Betty show signs of reviving, for she feared that they had been drugged heavily. However, struggle as they might, the three were unable to loosen their bonds. The only thing they could do to try to attract attention to their serious

predicament was to groan.

Unknown to Kay and her chums, Ethel Eaton had traced Fenwick Yost to Cherryville. She believed that the man was greatly attracted to her and she wished to talk with him again. At the carnival grounds she learned the address of his rooming place, and presently drew up in front of it.

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“Why, that looks like the Tracey car!” she exclaimed, as her attention was drawn to an automobile parked only a short distance away. “That means Kay is around here somewhere. I wonder if she’s trying to slip something over on me?”

Ethel walked hurriedly to the car, and when she saw Kay’s sweater lying in the back seat she was certain that the girl had come to the place to interview Fenwick Yost.

The front door was open and Ethel boldly entered. She looked about her uncertainly, but there was no one to direct her where to go, for the landlady was in the basement running a washing machine. After wandering about the girl finally climbed the stairs.

“Why, that sounded almost like a groan,” Ethel thought. “Someone must be in great pain.”

She moved softly down the hall. She was certain that the occupant of one room was in distress. After listening for a moment she knocked on the door.

The groans from within became louder and Ethel heard a muffled cry for help. Thoroughly frightened she turned and fled.

CHAPTER XXV

KAY'S SOLUTION

Ethel backed toward the stairway, and in doing so stumbled and fell. As she clutched wildly for support, her hand struck a picture on the wall and it went clattering down to the floor below her. The commotion brought the owner of the house running from the basement.

“What is going on here anyway?” she questioned severely.
“Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?”

Ethel picked herself up from the bottom of the stairs, nursing a bruised elbow.

“I’d like to know myself what is happening in this place,” she said. “I just heard the most dreadful groans coming from that side room upstairs.”

“What are you talking about?” the landlady asked impatiently.
“That room isn’t even rented. It hasn’t been used in a month.”

By this time Kay had worked off her gag, and the startled pair below now heard a loud, distinct cry for help. Ethel was afraid to investigate, but the landlady had no such qualms. She darted up the stairs and tried the door.

“I didn’t lock up this room!” she exclaimed. “I have always kept it open to air out the place.”

The key was missing, for the Yosts had taken it with them, but the woman found a duplicate. She opened the door, and gasped when she saw the three girls lying on the bed.

“Kay!” Ethel cried. “And the Worth twins! How did you get here? What has happened?”

“Your dark handsome friend is responsible for this,” Kay retorted. “But don’t just stand there. Please untie these cords.”

Ethel recovered sufficiently to help the landlady free the three girls. Tersely Kay explained what had happened and that Fenwick Yost was on his way to the old Wendell farm, there to force Mrs. Stoke to pay blackmail money.

“And this was all your doing, Ethel,” Betty could not refrain from saying severely. “You told him about the baby after Kay gave you the information in confidence.”

“I didn’t know it would do any harm,” Ethel faltered. “I never dreamed the man was a crook. Oh, I’ll feel simply awful if he makes Mrs. Stoke pay him anything.”

“He’ll not succeed in his scheme if I can prevent it,” Kay said grimly.

Turning to the landlady, who had listened to the girls’ conversation in blank amazement, she asked her to go at once to Mr. Farrell and tell him about the man who had stolen the Improvement Association funds. There was still time to

capture him at the old Wendell farm.

“We’ll hurry home and try to keep Yost there until help arrives.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll carry your message,” the woman promised excitedly.

Ethel felt so bad about her part in the affair that Kay refrained from chiding her. She offered no objection when the Eaton girl asked to accompany her to the farm, although secretly she felt that Ethel would be more of a hindrance than a help.

However, she was very glad that she did permit her classmate to ride with them. Enroute to the farm, racing over the bumpy roads at great speed, the girl made a confession which was of important significance to Kay and the twins.

“I haven’t been very honest with you about Mrs. Lare,” Ethel admitted.

“What do you mean?” Kay asked quickly.

“Well, the baby case is really solved.”

“Mrs. Lare hasn’t found her infant?”

“Yes, her husband had it all the time. Day before yesterday he came back and brought the child with him.”

“Is this really the truth, Ethel?”

“Yes, it is,” the girl replied soberly. “Mrs. Lare phoned to me

yesterday because I had been working on the case with her.”

“Then little Rose couldn’t possibly belong to the woman,” Wilma commented in relief.

“No.”

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“But whose baby has Aunt Jessie?” Kay asked. “I have a vague theory I’ve been turning over in my mind——”

She did not finish her sentence, and the twins wisely refrained from urging her to do so, knowing that she might not wish to reveal her thoughts in Ethel’s presence.

Turning into the lane at the old Wendell farm, Kay saw the car which had brought Yost and his wife from town. Not wishing the pair to be warned of their approach, the girls abandoned their own automobile behind a clump of willows and hurried on to the house afoot.

Entering the garden, they heard angry voices from within. Kay stopped short as she recognized Clarence Castner’s gruff tones. Seemingly the hired man and Mrs. Tracey had returned from Cherryville in time to encounter Yost and his wife intimidating Mrs. Stoke.

Feeling that with additional helpers at hand there would be no further need of secrecy, Kay boldly entered the house, followed by the twins and Ethel Eaton. They found Aunt Jessie stretched out on a couch in a faint. Mrs. Tracey was working over her trying to restore her to consciousness.

The floor was littered with paper money which had been

scattered when Clarence Castner had jerked the bills from Fenwick Yost's hand. The crook was speaking boldly.

"I tell you I didn't do anything to the old lady," the carnival man was insisting. "She must have a bad heart. She just keeled over and it wasn't our fault."

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"We came here to talk to her about the baby," Veta Yost added excitedly. "We wanted to pay her to take care of a child for us. This money is ours."

A look of consternation spread over the woman's face as she suddenly noticed Kay and the twins standing in the doorway. She knew then that no lie would save either herself or her husband.

With one accord the dishonest pair made a break for the rear door. The move was so sudden that for a moment it appeared the couple might escape. They reached their car, and before either Clarence or the girls could block the way, had driven off down the lane.

"Quick!" Kay called to the hired man. "Our automobile is parked by the willow clump! We must overtake them!"

The two raced down the road, then abruptly halted. Another car had turned into the lane and had stopped crosswise, making it impossible for the fleeing car to pass.

"It's Mr. Farrell with the Cherryville police!" Kay exclaimed. "The chase is over."

By the time Clarence Castner and the girls reached the Yost

car, the officers had surrounded it. Handcuffs were slipped over the carnival man's wrists.

“Where are the funds which you stole from the booth?” Mr. Farrell demanded of the prisoner. “Hand them over.”

198

Fenwick Yost's only answer was an insolent sneer. Kay directed the police to search the man's luggage which was stowed in the rear compartment of the car. An officer found the stolen money sewn inside the lining of one of Mrs. Yost's garments. Mr. Farrell immediately counted it, announcing with keen satisfaction that only a few dollars of the original amount were missing.

Kay and the twins told the police of the manner in which they had been overpowered at the Cherryville boarding house, promising that they would testify against the man when his case should come up.

“Both he and his wife will receive long prison terms,” an officer assured the girls. “They'll be charged with attempted blackmail as well as theft.”

Later it was learned Fenwick Yost was Madame Renault's brother.

Kay was greatly worried over Aunt Jessie's condition. Before the officers drove away with the prisoners, she and the twins hastened back to the farmhouse. They were glad to find that Mrs. Stoke had regained consciousness during their absence.

“My money—that blackmailer took it all,” she murmured

brokenly. “But if I can only keep Rose it doesn’t matter.”

“Your money is safe,” Kay said soothingly. “And so is the baby.”

Mrs. Stoke shook her head sadly. “No, I can’t keep the child. I realize that now. I’ve been selfish and cruel, for of course Rose’s parents must love her as much as I do. The only honorable thing will be to let them have her again.”

199

Kay and her mother exchanged glances of surprise and pleasure. They had won out at last, and realized how great was Mrs. Stoke’s sacrifice in agreeing to give up the babe she loved better than life itself.

“You’ll be glad you made the decision, Jessie,” Mrs. Tracey declared warmly. “I feel certain of it.”

Clarence Castner had followed the girls to the farmhouse. He now took a letter from his pocket and gave it to Kay to read.

“This was awaiting you at the Cherryville post office,” he said apologetically. “I forgot all about it until this minute.”

Kay glanced at the envelope, which was postmarked Brantwood and addressed in very poor handwriting. She did not recognize it as belonging to any of her acquaintances.

“I can’t imagine who has written to me,” she remarked as she slit open the envelope. Then she scanned the page inside and began to laugh.

“What is it that’s so very funny?” Betty inquired curiously.

“Yes,” Wilma urged, “who is your amusing admirer?”

The Eaton girl sensed that the secret was not for her, and with a display of tact which was decidedly foreign to her nature, she announced that she would return to Cherryville just as soon as anyone would take her there.

200

“Clarence will drive you over right away,” Mrs. Stoke assured her.

“I can’t thank you enough, Ethel, for coming to my rescue when I was locked up in that bedroom,” Kay said kindly as she and the twins accompanied the girl to the car. They could see that she still felt bad over the way matters had turned out.

“Yes,” Wilma added heartily, “if it hadn’t been for you, I’m afraid Fenwick Yost might have escaped with all the money.”

“But if it hadn’t been for me he’d never have known anything about the baby,” Ethel said self-accusingly.

However, she brightened at the praise awarded her and did not reveal the purpose which had brought her to the rooming house.

“I don’t know why I was taken in so easily by that crook,” she murmured. “After this I guess I’ll be more careful in selecting my acquaintances.”

After Mr. Castner and Ethel had left, the twins begged Kay to tell them the contents of the letter.

“No,” the girl refused. “We must wait until Clarence returns

from town.”

“What has he to do with it?” questioned Betty.

“A great deal, if my theory is correct,” Kay returned with a laugh.

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When Clarence finally drove into the yard, the twins ran out to escort him into the house. Kay summoned her mother and Aunt Jessie.

“This takes on the aspect of a directors’ meeting,” Mrs. Tracey smiled as they all sat down and faced Kay.

“Yes, don’t keep us in suspense any longer,” Betty said impatiently. “Tell us about that letter.”

The girl’s eyes sought those of Clarence Castner as she said quietly:

“I believe I have solved the mystery of Rose’s parentage.”

The man looked startled and Aunt Jessie half arose from her chair.

“You have found the baby’s parents, Kay?” she asked in a quavering voice. “Oh, please tell me everything.”

“I think the only one who can do that is Clarence,” Kay replied gravely. Turning to the young man she pleaded, “Won’t you tell us the truth about Rose?”

For a moment he did not speak. Then he said soberly:

“Yes, I will try to explain everything. For weeks I’ve wanted to tell you about her, but I was afraid to say anything.”

“What do you know about the child’s parents?” Mrs. Stoke asked incredulously.

“Clarence is the father of little Rose,” Kay explained as the man groped for words.

202

“Clarence!” Mrs. Stoke exclaimed in a shrill voice. “Why, he’s little more than a boy himself!”

“I am older than I appear,” the young man smiled, “and Kay has told you the truth. The child is mine.”

“Then you should certainly be ashamed of yourself, abandoning the poor thing under a brier bush,” Mrs. Stoke began severely.

“I *am* ashamed,” he acknowledged gravely, “but I didn’t exactly abandon the babe. My wife is dead and there was no one left to look after the infant.”

“Oh, that is different,” Mrs. Stoke murmured, “but why did you bring her to this particular farm?”

“Because I hoped that the baby would appeal to your kindness of heart,” the man confessed. “You see, I had heard of you and thought you would be good to my motherless babe. Your husband had died so recently I felt that Rose might somehow fill the gap in your life.”

“I don’t see how you ever heard of my name,” Mrs. Stoke

said. “Kay brought you here as a hitch-hiker after the baby was found——”

“I knew that you inherited this farm, Mrs. Stoke, and were planning a visit here.”

“How did you learn that?”

“Old Mr. Wendell worked for my grandfather,”

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Clarence explained. “All my life I’ve been interested in this farm and through one means or another I’ve gathered news pertaining to its ownership. First I thought I’d write you a letter, then I decided I’d intercept you at Brantwood.

“I set out in my car, but the baby was ill on the road so that I was late in reaching the city. I was certain I had missed you so I made up my mind to come on to the farm. Upon the spur of the moment I conceived the idea of hiding the child under the crimson brier bushes, hoping that in finding it there you’d feel sorry for her and care for her.”

“You certainly were successful,” Mrs. Stoke commented, not unkindly. “Little Rose has completely walked into my heart.”

“I concealed myself behind the bushes and watched until I saw the baby taken into the house,” Clarence continued his story. “Then I went back to Cherryville. You know the rest. I posted myself along a road which I knew Kay would take, hoping she would offer me a ride.”

“Dear me, why didn’t you tell me all this before?” Mrs. Stoke sighed. “It would have saved so much trouble.”

“I was afraid you might be angry at the deception.”

“Yes, I probably would have been,” Mrs. Stoke admitted. “But I’m so relieved to know the truth at last that I can’t be provoked at anyone.”

“Kay, you’ve not yet told us the contents of your mysterious letter,” Betty chided. “And you’ve never breathed a word about suspecting that Clarence is the father of Rose. I think it’s your turn to make a confession.”

204

“To tell you the truth, I was entirely in the dark myself until that day when we found the dilapidated car in the ravine,” Kay answered modestly. “I couldn’t understand why Clarence should have abandoned it in this particular locality. Of course, I had noticed that he was unusually devoted to the baby, and I began to put isolated clues together.

“I recalled that the elderly porter at the Brantwood station had told me about a man with a baby who drove up to the depot in a rickety old car. So, acting upon an impulse, I took a snapshot of Clarence holding little Rose.”

“I recall the day you took that picture,” Clarence grinned. “I never suspected your purpose at the time.”

“Anyway, I wrote to the elderly porter, enclosing the snapshot. Today I received his answer. He says that the man he saw is the person in the picture.”

“I did stop at the Brantwood station,” Clarence acknowledged. “As it happened, I picked up a scrap of paper which told how to reach this farm. I knew then that Mrs.

Stoke had arrived at the depot ahead of me.”

“Your deduction was a clever one, Kay,” Wilma praised. “Betty and I knew just as much about the case as you did, but we weren’t able to solve the mystery.”

“I felt responsible for Rose because I was the one who found her beneath the brier bush,” Kay smiled.

205

“And now that everything has been cleared up, there’s just one thing more to be decided,” Aunt Jessie said briskly. “Who is to have the baby?”

“Why, I can’t give her up,” Clarence replied in surprise. “She’s my own flesh and blood.”

“I can’t give her up, either,” Mrs. Stoke said grimly.

“May I suggest a compromise?” asked Mrs. Tracey with a broad smile. “Why don’t you both keep her?”

“Yes,” Kay added, her eyes dancing with excitement. “Let Clarence stay here on the farm, perhaps working it on shares. Then you both will be able to rear the baby together.”

“Why, that’s a splendid idea,” Mrs. Stoke approved.

“Nothing could suit me better,” Clarence declared. “It has been my deepest wish from the first.”

“Then it’s all settled,” Aunt Jessie announced.

The cooing infant was brought into the room by Wilma, who

murmured:

“How fair is the Rose! What a beautiful flower.
The glory of April and May.”

“Now tell us, Clarence,” asked Kay, “what the baby’s real name is.”

“Her mother wanted her called Mary,” replied the young father. “But I’ve grown used to thinking of her as Rose.”

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“Why not name her Rosemary?” Kay suggested.

“If she has no middle name,” Wilma added dreamily, “I suggest it be Kay, after the grandest girl in the world.”

“And the best detective.” Betty chuckled.

Clarence’s broad smile gave consent. Rosemary Kay gurgled as if to say:

“I agree.”

THE END



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[The end of *The Crimson Brier Bush* by Frances K. Judd]