

*A Kay Tracey Mystery*

# THE LONE FOOTPRINT

Mystery and danger plague Kay and her friends  
on a vacation

**FRANCES K. JUDD**



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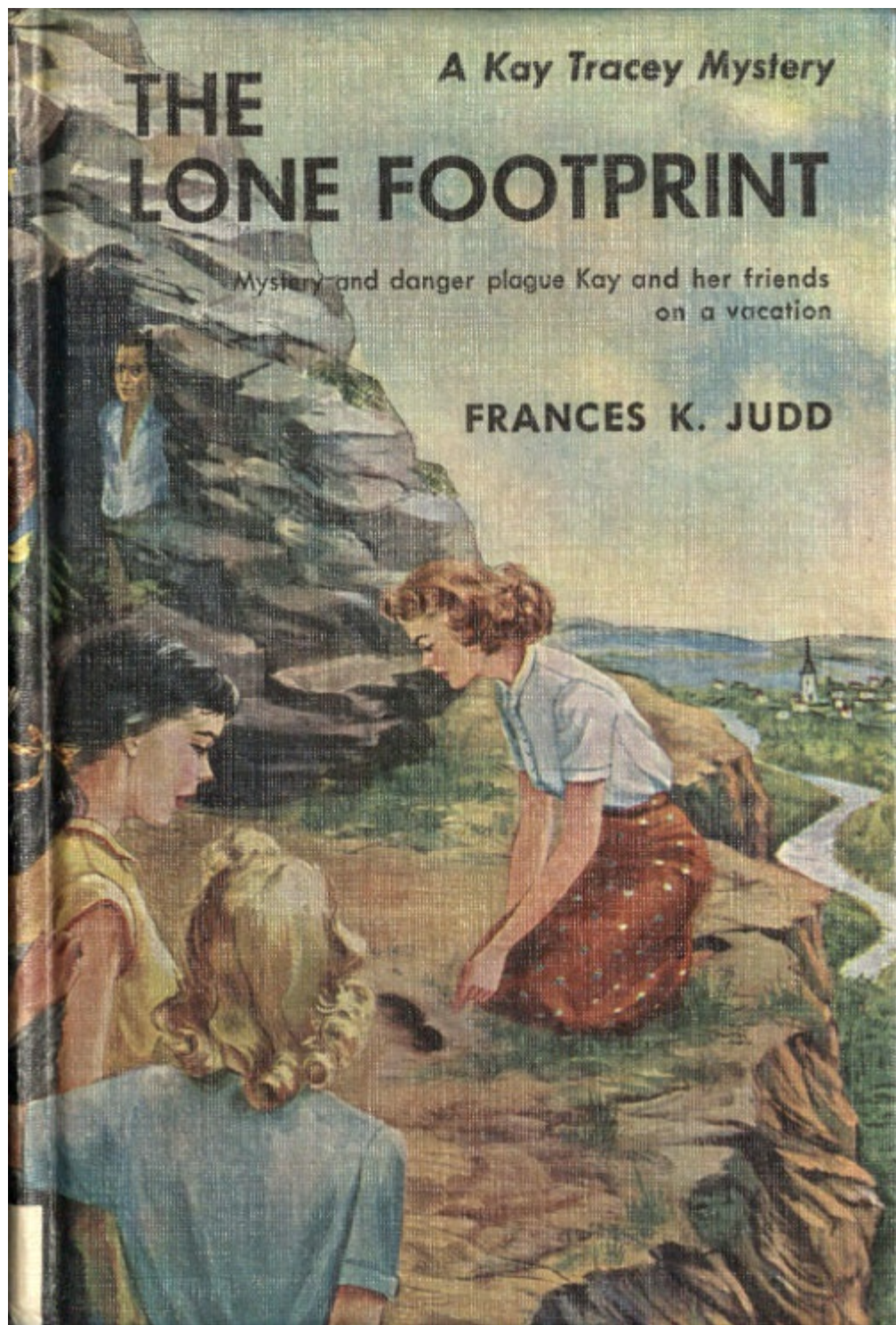


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**Kay Tracey was trapped!**

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# THE LONE FOOTPRINT

# CHAPTER I

## MYSTERY AT OWL'S HOLE

“I wish Cousin Bill would hurry,” said Kay Tracey, speaking of the young lawyer who was to lunch with her and her chums.

“Didn’t you say he was a bit mysterious about what he was going to tell you?” asked dark-haired Wilma.

“Yes,” Kay replied. “It seems some relative of ours is in need of legal advice to combat certain strange happenings.”

“And of course you’ll be most delighted to lend your aid!” teased Betty, who with her twin sister Wilma had helped Kay in solving several mysteries.

The three high school girls who sat at a table talking were firm friends. The two sisters, unlike most twins, were entirely different from each other. Lively Betty was blonde, jolly and talkative, while quiet Wilma was dark with a rather wistful expression on her serious face.

Kay, decidedly the leader, had attractive wavy brown hair which framed a clever and interesting face. Her clear, straight-forward brown eyes were distinctive. A compelling personality made her noticeable in any group.

Wilma now turned to her and said, "It is certainly very kind of your busy Cousin Bill to treat us to luncheon today."

2

"This is business as well as pleasure," Kay explained. "Our distant relative, an old bachelor who wants to consult Cousin Bill on some matter, has arranged to eat with us too. He's really a third cousin, but because of his age we call him Uncle. Perhaps you know him," Kay added. "His name is Byram Brown."

"Byram Brown?" puzzled Betty. "Where have I heard that name before?"

"Oh, wasn't he president of the Lincoln Bank?" asked Wilma suddenly.

"Yes, at one time, but he is retired now," replied Kay, her eyes on the door watching for the young lawyer.

She failed to see the quick exchange of glances between the twins. Wilma's eyebrow, significantly uplifted, signalled to Betty. Both girls recalled an old scandal about Mr. Brown's being the cause of the Lincoln Bank's unfortunate failure, but they were too considerate of Kay to mention this. In the state where the chums lived, there were people who felt bitterly about having lost money in that bank failure, and they blamed Mr. Brown, justly or not, for the loss.

"Here comes Cousin Bill at last!" said Kay.

3

The young man, tall and handsome, strode smilingly toward the girls.

“Sorry to be late,” he greeted them briskly, “but I see that old Uncle Byram hasn’t come yet. Perhaps we had better eat, as I haven’t much time.”

He put in an order for sizzling steaks with all the trimmings that made Betty sigh rapturously.

“Before Uncle Byram appears,” said Kay, “do tell me, Cousin Bill, what he is consulting you about.”

“Well,” answered the lawyer, “after Uncle By retired from the bank he grew weary of remaining idle, so he decided to devote his time and money to developing some property he owns along Bass River.”

“You mean that pretty little cove where the river winds through the woods?” Kay asked.

“Yes. Owl’s Hole it is called.”

“Oh,” cried Betty enthusiastically, “we know that place! The cutest cottages are being built there, overlooking the river. It’s most attractive!”

“That’s the spot,” nodded Bill Tracey. “Uncle started it as an investment, sinking most of his money into the project and expecting big profits. Instead, it’s bringing him a lot of worry and excitement.”

“Why is that?” questioned Kay.

4

“I don’t know exactly,” answered her cousin. “That is what he wants to consult me about.”

“Here he comes now,” announced Kay.

A worried looking, elderly man was approaching with quick, nervous steps. His face was wrinkled with anxiety and he stooped as if he were under a weight of care. As he drew near, the girls could see that he was far from well, for his figure was frail and thin, blue veins showing through his waxen skin.

“Ah, here you are, William,” he exclaimed in relief. “And Kay.”

“Yes, here we are. I’d like you to meet Betty and Wilma Worth. We already have ordered. What will you have for luncheon?”

“Nothing much,” replied Mr. Brown with a sigh. “I suffer from miserable stomach trouble, brought on by nervousness, no doubt.” With trembling fingers he drew a large pill from his pocket and washed it down with a gulp of water. “Just a little clear soup,” he ordered, explaining, “I feel much too upset to eat.”

“What has upset you, Uncle?” inquired Kay sympathetically. “Don’t mind discussing matters before us. These friends, Betty and Wilma Worth, are admirers of Owl’s Hole. Tell us what disturbs you.”

Mr. Brown, who had not noticed the girls before, now turned his anxious gaze upon them and replied abruptly, “GHOSTS!”

5

“Ghosts!” gasped Kay and Wilma together, while Betty gave a startled squeak and Bill Tracey laughed heartily.



“It’s far from funny!” shrilled the old man indignantly.

“Tell us about it,” coaxed Kay in a soothing tone.

Somewhat pacified, the old gentleman began his tale of woe.

“Owl’s Hole has brought me nothing but trouble since the day I began developing it,” he proclaimed. “It was bad enough at first, what with cellars caving in, pipes bursting, plaster cracking, and what not. But now it is positively supernatural, the goings-on there by night.

“I have rented or sold most of the cottages to very good tenants and now everybody is leaving! They can’t put up with the uncanny things that alarm them after dark. Mysterious fires break out. Things vanish. Weird voices groan. Dark shapes follow people. Gets on one’s nerves. I can’t blame anyone for refusing to stay there.

“Yet I can’t lay my hand on anything definite. That’s the maddening part of it and before I can solve it,” lamented the old man, “I shall be in the poor house. I wish I could sell the whole outfit, but the place has gained such a bad reputation now that nobody would dream of buying it.”

6

“I doubt whether legal advice will apply to spooks,” chuckled Lawyer Bill as Mr. Brown consulted him on the right of tenants to break their contracts.

Luncheon was being served now, but Kay’s attention remained on the elderly man’s predicament. Here was real mystery! She could not help feeling sorry for him and asked shrewdly:

“Have you any enemies who might want to make trouble for you?”

To this suggestion Cousin Bill added, “I suppose there are people who are envious of your wealth and might wish you harm.”

Byram Brown pooh-poohed this idea as nonsense, but Wilma once more raised an eyebrow significantly at her twin. Betty paused with fork in air as the idea caught her fancy that someone might be taking vengeance for the bank failure.

This idea also occurred to Kay. While Cousin Bill discussed and advised, she became absorbed in this aspect of the problem. By the end of the meal she had a plan to offer.

“Uncle Byram,” she exclaimed, “I have an idea. Why not let us stay in one of your cottages at Owl’s Hole? When we are right on the spot, perhaps we can find a clue to the mystery out there. I am sure Mother would go, and Betty and Wilma too.”

7

The Worth girls agreed eagerly. The old man seemed pleased at their warm interest.

“I should be only too glad to let you have a cottage as long as you care to stay,” he said. “I should not want you to have any unpleasant experiences, but it certainly would save me from financial ruin if you could solve this strange situation.”

“We’ll do it!” Kay promised gaily. “There is nothing I enjoy as much as a good puzzle!”

The next afternoon the chums with Mrs. Tracey drove up the lovely winding river road to Owl's Hole. The sunshine was so warm and so bright that nothing seemed more unreal than the notion of ghostly performances by night.

"It is perfectly delightful here," declared Mrs. Tracey as the visitors trooped into the attractive cottage Mr. Brown had put at their disposal.

Wren's Nest had a wide screened porch overlooking the sparkling river. A huge stone fireplace suggested coziness for cool evenings. The twins were to share a room with fascinating double deck bunks, Kay to sleep with her mother.

The three chums enjoyed a stroll which gave them an opportunity to meet other cottagers and question them about the place. Some of the tenants were packing up to move out hastily before nightfall, grumbling about mysterious disturbances.

Just before dusk Uncle Byram drove in and ate a light supper. He talked nervously about evil forces working against him and seemed glad to hurry away before it became dark.

8

The girls laughed lightheartedly at his uneasiness. After tidying up the kitchen, they settled down for a cozy evening. Mrs. Tracey sat knitting placidly in the lamp light. Kay was soon lost in a new detective novel, while Betty industriously scribbled letters. Wilma, inspired by the quiet night with its pine-scented breezes, was intently composing poetry. She was regarding these lines which she had written:

“Oh, clattering Day, you goad us on,  
With many tasks hard-pressed.  
Oh, Healing Night, you bring sweet peace  
To hearts by Day distressed!”

when a violent yawn exploded in her ear.

She realized that her twin was reading the verse over her shoulder and warbling cheerfully:

“Oh, Healing Night, you make me sleepy!  
Oh, Spooks, I hope you won’t be creepy.”

This shattered Wilma’s pensive mood, but she could not help laughing. Drowsily she agreed when Kay suggested bed. There was a good deal of shrieking from the twins’ room as lively Betty scrambled aloft to her upper bunk and thumped a pillow down upon the poet, but soon the giggling died away and all was quiet for the night. 9

Suddenly the silence was torn by a fearful moaning that rose on their very doorstep. It was a blood-curdling wail as if from someone in mortal agony. It rose in horrid crescendo and then died down, only to rise again louder and more frightful than before.

Betty and Wilma were terrified and dived under the covers. Kay, who had been looking forward to some ghostly demonstration, sprang out of bed and seized her flashlight.

“Kay! Do be careful!” her startled mother warned her.

Resolutely the girl dashed to the door and cut the darkness

with her flashlight. Nothing was to be seen on porch or path, so she ventured farther. Stepping boldly off the porch, she moved cautiously around in the direction from which the unearthly moaning had seemed to come.

Suddenly her foot struck a soft, black shape that lay huddled on the grass. She jumped back, a quick prickle of fright running down her spine! Then she swung her searchlight. In its glare she beheld a strange object.

A man's figure lay there, limp and silent.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LONE FOOTPRINT

For a moment even the dauntless Kay was dismayed. Then, recovering her composure, she leaned over the figure and gave it a poke, half expecting the creature to utter a groan. As it made no sound or movement, she tried gingerly to lift it. A man's dark hat fell off, and the head wobbled and sank back. Suddenly an idea prompted Kay to drag her burden to the porch.

A light in the doorway snapped on, revealing the twins who clutched each other fearfully as they peered without. Mrs. Tracey was hastening outside just as Kay pulled her limp victim up the porch steps. One glimpse at that wobbling neck as the figure collapsed in a heap, sent the Worth girls into shrieks. Their chum burst into merry laughter.

“Kay Tracey!” reproved her mother sharply, “what is this? Can you laugh at someone being hurt or is it just some silly joke you have played to scare us?”

“It's a silly joke, but I didn't play it!” answered her daughter. “Look!”

No wonder she laughed! The figure was nothing but a man's old suit of clothes stuffed out with straw, like a

scarecrow! Its wobbling head was merely a flour bag filled with hay.

“It’s a Hallowe’en stunt, out of season, intended to scare us. I wonder why?” mused Kay.

“It’s an outrage!” stormed her mother.

“The moaning must have been done by some mischievous boy,” remarked Kay speculatively. “I am certainly going to catch him and clear up this trouble!”

She lay awake trying to make sense of the puzzle. In doing this she was reflecting characteristics of her deceased father, who had enjoyed solving mysteries. Since his death she, her mother and the young lawyer, Cousin Bill Tracey, had lived together in a cozy little house in Brantwood.

Kay and her twin chums, Betty and Wilma Worth, attended high school in the neighboring town of Carmont where the former had made herself popular by her good sportsmanship not only in the student activities, but in the many mysteries which she had helped to solve. Ever since Kay’s first attempt at sleuthing, in which she skillfully untangled a riddle that seemed to have everybody else baffled, people came to her with their unsolved problems. Now apparently she was about to launch upon another mystery. Could this one be solved by simple deduction?

Easier said than done! There was no way of tracing the prowler in the dark. Reluctantly all returned uneasily to bed, after making doubly sure that doors and windows were well fastened.

Kay was not the only one in the cottage at Owl's Hole who could not sleep. Each one lay rigid, listening fearfully for every sound. Was that a stealthy footstep? Was someone fumbling at the door?

Suddenly a long, loud wail arose! It echoed eerily through the woods, too close for comfort.

"What's that?" gasped Betty, sitting bolt upright in great alarm.

Once more the melancholy cry came through the night.

"Don't let it frighten you, girls," called Mrs. Tracey in calm, common-sense tones. "It's just a screech owl. This place gets its name from those birds."

Betty sank back and put a pillow over her head to muffle all future sounds. Wilma, wide awake, asked:

"Do you hear something? I am positive a prowler is in the hall!"

Betty firmly crammed the pillow tighter over her head. Something certainly was moving in the hallway. There was the soft lisp of stealthy motion, then a bump. What could it be?

Quietly Wilma slid out of bed and tiptoed to her door. She poked her head into the hall and instantly skipped back. An invisible being had swept so closely past her that it fanned the hair from her forehead.



Again it whirled by, and there followed a loud crash of breaking glass. Everyone sprang up and lights flashed on. A vase, knocked from a shelf, lay shattered on the floor, and a black, velvety object was flattened against the wall above the wreck.

“Nothing but a bat, girls,” said Mrs. Tracey. She got a broom and whisked the little creature out of doors. “Now I hope we get some sleep!” she said.

As Wilma snuggled back into bed she began to compose poetry, starting:

“Invisible caller of the night,  
Who flits on secret wing——”

but how to work in the word “fright,” which seemed to have both rhyme and reason, baffled her until she fell asleep.

When she woke up it was morning. Already Betty and Mrs. Tracey were at breakfast.

“Kay vanished early,” said the girl’s mother.

“Sleuthing, no doubt,” added Betty.

She was right. Kay had wasted no time in trying to track down the mysterious prowler who had scared them by leaving the scarecrow at the door.

“I am sure he left some trace,” she had said to herself. “I must look for it before anyone else walks over the ground this morning.”

So she had gone out before the others were awake. Stepping onto the dewy grass, Kay noticed that the only sign to show where the scarecrow had come from was a wisp of hay. Probably this had tumbled from the stuffed head.

Eyeing the ground sharply, she also found a few straws. In stooping over to trace these wisps which the breezes had tossed out of place, Kay suddenly found a real clue.

It was the footprint of a man!

Definitely the track was that of a right shoe. Kay knelt down on the look-out for its mate, the mark of the man's left foot. To her surprise, not a left footprint appeared, but another right one, then another and another. No print of the left foot was visible anywhere!

"How queer!" exclaimed Kay, and followed the tracks off through the woods until they vanished on a stretch of hard, rocky ground.

"This is certainly the Mystery of the Lone Footprint!" Kay reported to the others when she returned home for breakfast.

"A one-legged man must be playing tricks," deduced Betty.

"Does anyone know of a one-legged man around here?" queried Wilma.

"That is what we must find out," Kay declared.

"Here comes your uncle," cried Betty, as the old gentleman appeared hastening up the path in his quick,

nervous manner.

“Perhaps he knows whether there is a one-legged man in this neighborhood.”

The girls flew down the path to greet Mr. Brown. They were soon chattering about the experiences of the night before. The man was deeply chagrined to hear that they had been troubled. In reply to their query as to who might have left the lone footprint, he replied:

“There is a one-legged man by the name of Jed Farkin who tends the drawbridge over the river a few miles from here.”

“Would there be any reason why he might want to drive your tenants away, or harm your property to get even with you?” asked Kay.

“No reason at all,” he answered positively.

“Perhaps it is just some bad boy playing tricks,” suggested Betty.

Kay felt that the affair went deeper than that, and she made up her mind to investigate the crippled bridge master at the earliest opportunity. At the moment, however, Mr. Brown offered them a diversion to make up for the disturbance caused by the scarecrow trick.

“I should like to give you a little pleasure trip in return for your help here,” he said.

Uncle Byram led the way to a boat landing at the river’s

edge. Moored there was a beautiful motor launch which the elderly man urged the girls to use whenever they might wish.

This cabin cruiser was brand new. Its smooth mahogany was polished to a piano finish, its gleaming brass shone brightly in the sun and every rope was coiled on deck with the greatest precision. The boat's name, *Purple Pansy*, was reflected in the royal purple of its leather cushioned seats, and in the purple flag that fluttered in the breeze.

Altogether, the spic and span craft was a delight to behold and the girls exclaimed in joy. Mr. Brown, pleased with their appreciation, gave them a faint smile and ambled off on business of his own.

“Oh, let's take a run up the river right away. It's a perfect day for a cruise!” begged the twins.

“A good idea,” agreed Kay. “We can see the lay of the land along the river and also interview that one-legged bridge master.”

“Ahoy! And likewise Avast! and also, Belay, my Hearties!” cheered Betty with nautical fervor as the eager crew hopped from dock to deck. Captain Kay took the wheel. Up the river they sped, the motor purring smoothly while the green water was sheared into white foam and silver spray.

“We certainly have the river to ourselves this morning,” Kay remarked.

The river, indeed, was almost deserted at that hour. Here

and there little sailboats bobbed at their moorings like placid ducks. Anchored ahead of them was a red rowboat in which some sunburned little boys were fishing. As the *Pansy* whirled by, her waves rocked the little craft. Kay cut down her speed so that the spray from the larger boat would not splash the youngsters. The boys, appreciating this courtesy, waved and grinned.

Having passed them, Kay resumed speed and was spinning along at a good clip when the drone of a motor boat was heard. So fast was it going that the waves set all the small craft rocking violently.

“I hope they watch where they’re going,” cried out Wilma in alarm.

“They better!” answered Kay grimly. “If they don’t, in this narrow channel, they’ll make trouble for us.”

On came the speeder, with no regard for anyone else. Although Kay sounded her signal horn to indicate that she was directing her course to starboard, the oncomers did not reply. They ploughed madly along in mid-channel.

Kay had the choice of running aground on the soft mudbottom, or taking a shower bath of spray. Like a good sailor, she thought first of her boat. Regardless of a wetting, she avoided the treacherous shallows and held her own in the channel. Without giving way an inch, the approaching craft bore down upon them, evidently expecting to scare the girls aside.

“Road hogs!” blazed Betty angrily.

Kay could not believe that the men would not give her room to pass. In this she was sadly mistaken. The boat came straight on and before she could swing out of its way, it crashed headlong into the *Pansy*.

“Why don’t you look where you are going?” roared one of two rough men in the other boat.

“Why don’t you observe the laws of river traffic?” retorted Kay furiously. Her one thought was that the smash-up had ruined Mr. Brown’s attractive launch. “Get his license number, Betty!”

The Worth girl leaned over to note the numbers painted on the bow of the other craft. It was a dirty boat which evidently had been used for fishing. It was smelly and much the worse for wear. As it drifted sideways in the river current, faded letters could be seen on the stern, showing that it was the *Fish Hawk*, out of Hartford, a town some twenty miles beyond Owl’s Hole.

The men, like their vessel, were rough, dirty, and unshaven. One of them was a big, fat, greasy-looking fellow. The other was lean and scrawny, with a long, sharp nose and broken yellow teeth. Both men began shouting angrily, accusing the girls of getting in their way and threatening to sue for damages.

“Sue *us* for damages!” exclaimed Kay. “I think you will find it the other way around!”

“I don’t like the looks of those men,” whispered Wilma unhappily.

“Neither do I,” answered her twin. “I believe they are going to make trouble for us.”

## CHAPTER III

### A MAN WITH ONE LEG

“We’ve got your number and you’ll hear from us later!” bellowed one man.

“We have your number too, and we’ll follow this up!” warned Kay, undaunted. “This boat belongs to my uncle and he will not let you off easily, I warn you!”

“You give us your names and we’ll attend to the matter,” shouted the other man.

Names were exchanged, the fat fellow being known as Peter Webb, the thin man with the sharp nose and bad teeth as Jim Silman.

“You can come to Owl’s Hole and ask for us at our cottage, the Wren’s Nest. My uncle will interview you there,” directed Kay.

“We’ll come some time, if and when it’s convenient to us,” replied the big man with an ugly sneer.

“You will see my uncle or I shall report this to the river police,” Kay returned quietly but firmly.



At last a day and time were agreed upon. With a grunt the fat fellow started his boat again. With a loud roar of the engine, the *Fish Hawk* tore down the channel, churning the water white.

“I hope they don’t overturn those boys in the row boat!” cried Wilma anxiously.

Apparently the small fishermen hoped so too, for they crouched low in their little craft as the bigger one swished by, drenching them with spray and rocking their boat so hard that it almost capsized.

“River Pirates!” they screamed, shaking their small fists angrily as the men swept on.

“That shows what kind of crooks they are!” stormed Betty.

“Yes, people who would drown children would not stop at any crime,” said Kay, starting her motor. She swung the *Purple Pansy* around and called out to the boys, “Are you all right? Can you bail out your boat safely?”

“We’re okay,” they answered, adding, “Thanks!”

“Will you testify for us if we need witnesses?” Kay asked the boys quick-wittedly. “You saw the whole thing happen!”

“You bet we will! Glad to!” they shouted.

“That’s a grand idea!” applauded Wilma. “Let’s get their names and addresses in case we need them.”

When this had been attended to, Kay headed the *Purple Pansy* up the river toward the drawbridge.

“We must remember that our main purpose is to see the one-legged man,” she said.

Presently they neared the structure which arched over the river. A small glassed-in watch tower stood in the middle of the span. The girls could see the bridge tender inside this, like a jack-in-the-box.

22

When he spied the *Purple Pansy* approaching, he popped out of his little house. Betty giggled, “Like a cuckoo jumping out of a cuckoo clock.” He leaned over the bridge railing and shouted down:

“If you folks want me to raise the draw why don’t you blow three times like you orter or do you think mebbe I’m a mind reader? How do I know if you want to go through if you don’t toot?”

“Sweet disposition,” tittered Betty in her twin’s ear, while Wilma whispered back, “Look, he is one-legged, sure enough, and he just uses crutches, no wooden leg, either!”

Meanwhile Kay was calling, “No thank you, we don’t want to go through. We’d like to talk to you a few minutes if we may.”

“Well, tie up to the boat dock there then, and come on up,” the man said grudgingly as he hobbled back to his glass house. “Though I don’t see what anybody wants to be talkin’ to me about,” he muttered grumpily.

The girls were not discouraged by this glum invitation and soon presented themselves at the bridge tender's office. One glance at Mr. Farkin made it clear that he certainly might have been the maker of those lone footprints. Not only was he one-legged, but his only foot was the right one! It had been the print of a right foot that Kay had found at the cottage.

"I mustn't judge from circumstantial evidence only," she said to herself. "Of course there are other right-footed, one-legged men in the world, but it is a curious coincidence!"

She then began a conversation, starting with the accident as an opening, and hoping to turn the talk later to some mention of the scarecrow.

"Yes, I seen them fellers run into you," said the cripple, "but I ain't surprised. They go up and down the river a lot. Sometimes I wonder if they're smugglers. They claim to operate the Eagle Realty Company in Hartford. I guess their eagle is always ready to swoop down and catch a victim in its claws!"

The bridge man gave a cackle and shook his head. "It's no wonder they wrecked you," he concluded knowingly.

"We've had plenty of trouble since we came to Owl's Hole," said Kay, leading up to her subject. "Last night someone tried to scare us by moaning hideously outside our door and leaving the stuffed dummy of a man on our path."

As Kay told this, all three girls watched the cripple sharply, but not by so much as the wink of an eye did he

show the least sign of guilt. In fact he was indignant and sympathetic.

“Now what a nasty trick that was!” he said hotly. “I hope you catch whoever did it!”

The girls exchanged glances at this, each wondering whether the man could be entirely innocent or whether he was simply an excellent actor. Kay decided it was best not to mention the lone footprint. To feel her way, she led the man on to talk of various things and suddenly was startled to hear him say:

“The thing I hate worst in this world is banks!”

“Banks!” cried Betty and Wilma, looking significantly at each other, their minds darting back to Mr. Byram Brown and the failure of the institution of which he had been the head.

“Yes, banks!” declared the man. “I had a goodly sum stored away in one once, and the thing closed up and I lost every cent I owned. Everything! If it hadn’t been for that I would have been comfortably off by now, but look at me. Poor as Job’s turkey and having to tend a bridge in my old age. I don’t put my money in banks no more!” said he slyly.

“Where do you put it?” asked Kay, who had flushed uncomfortably at his bitter reference.

“I bury it,” responded the old man. “I bury it deep in the ground,” he said with a wink and a chuckle, adding, “Old Mother Earth’s my bank now, and nothing short of an earthquake will make that one fail.”

“Aren’t you afraid somebody may dig it up?” burst out the twins.

The bridge master shook his head confidently. “Nobody knows where it is!” he said, with another sly wink and a wheeze of satisfaction.

Kay had gone to the bridge master to determine whether or not he was a guilty person. Now she felt guilty herself as she recalled the loss of his savings. Could this have been through her Uncle Byram’s bank? She hated to ask, but if so, it seemed quite likely that the cripple was wreaking vengeance upon Mr. Brown.

Having seen the one-legged man and discovered a possible motive for his spite, Kay felt that the trip to the bridge had been worth while. She thought that they might as well go home now and await further developments.

“We’d better be getting back for lunch!” she suggested.

“Aye, Aye, Captain!” Betty cried out nautically.

With friendly good-byes to the man, the crew of the *Purple Pansy* set off on the voyage home.

“It’s a bad score against that person since he has only his right foot and feels the way he does about bank failures,” summed up Kay.

“Yes, it looks very suspicious,” agreed the twins.

Whatever injury the *Fish Hawk* had inflicted on the *Purple*

*Pansy*, it had not caused any damage that reduced her speed, for the girls spun home in record time.

They were hurrying along the path from the river to their cottage when Betty stopped suddenly and cried out dismally:

“Can I believe my eyes! Look!”

The others gazed where she pointed and were dismayed, for a girl and a woman were moving into one of the cottages marked Oriole’s Nest. The girl was the very last person they wanted to see!

The newcomer was a schoolmate, Ethel Eaton, who always managed to make things disagreeable. The woman with her was an aunt, Mrs. Pinty, a most unattractive widow, whose ill nature showed in the sour expression on her face.

“Oh, dear!” sighed Kay. “As if life here weren’t unpleasant and complicated enough already without Ethel appearing on the scene!”

“You may be sure she will make things worse!” deplored Wilma.

The Eaton girl did not hesitate to live up to her reputation. Catching sight of her classmates, she sauntered over and remarked with an unfriendly smirk:

“Well, fancy meeting you here!”

“Seeing you is an unexpected—pleasure!” returned Betty pertly.

“How did you happen to come to Owl’s Hole?” Ethel asked disapprovingly. A long frown ridged her forehead.

“We are guests of my uncle, Mr. Brown, who owns this development,” replied Kay.

“I thought this was going to be a very exclusive, restricted park,” sighed Ethel’s aunt, haughtily, “but I see all sorts of people are getting in here to spoil it.”

Before anyone could make a suitable reply to this snobbish remark, a red-haired boy of about fifteen interrupted rudely with the offer:

“Carry your bags in, lady? Want me to open up your cottage for you? Any odd jobs?”

He was a very skinny lad, with such long, spindly arms and legs that the girls were not surprised to hear him say, “My name’s Spider. It’s really Stanley Brutch, but everybody calls me Spider. Shall I take your baggage in for you?”

“Yes, you may put our things inside and open the windows and ventilate the place!” ordered Mrs. Pinty.

She turned disdainfully away from the girls and with Ethel followed Spider indoors.

“Whew!” exploded Betty. “What lovely neighbors!”

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“Lovely, indeed,” said Wilma. “Just listen to her now!”

Mrs. Pinty’s voice could be heard snapping out orders in acid

tones while her niece joined in to boss the boy about.

“Come, come, don’t be so slow and lazy!” shrilled the woman’s voice.

“Hurry, boy, don’t be so stupid!” added Ethel.

“I shall be very much surprised,” prophesied Kay, “if a boy with hair as red as that one’s takes such abuse without losing his temper.”

“He seems to be talking back now,” Wilma said worriedly. “Oh dear, I hope we shan’t have a horrid disturbance.” Peace-loving Wilma looked miserable. The others could not help but enjoy the argument which now was rising louder and louder.

“If that’s all you’re going to pay me, you’re a couple of old skinflints!” they heard the boy shout.

“I consider that I have overpaid you! Now leave my house!” scolded Mrs. Pinty.

Out stormed the lad and ran, his arms and legs going like a windmill. He shrieked, “You’ll be sorry! I’ll get even with you!”

The girls were glad to walk away and seek the peace of their own cottage where they related to Mrs. Tracey all that had taken place. As they finished telling about the unwelcome arrival of Ethel Eaton and her aunt, Kay’s mother reported from the window:

“There they go now, to do their marketing, I suppose. Well,



come and have your lunch. You must be starving!”

The mariners were, indeed, ravenous and the delectable meal which Mrs. Tracey was preparing gave off the most tantalizing odors.

“That delicious cooking makes my mouth water!” declared Betty yearningly.

“What is that awful odor?” suddenly asked Mrs. Tracey, stopping to sniff and make a face.

“It’s taking my appetite away,” said Betty.

Poor Wilma’s face had turned a sea-sickly green and she was holding her nose in despair.

“It makes me feel positively faint,” choked Mrs. Tracey, collapsing into the nearest chair.

“I’ll go and see,” offered Kay, and dashed outside to find the cause of the annoyance.

There was no trouble in tracing the scent. It led her directly to the porch of Oriole’s Nest. There on the doormat lay a dead skunk! Evidently the poor thing had been killed in the road by a car. Someone purposely had shovelled it up and dumped it at the cottage to offend Ethel and her aunt.

“Spider did it!” was Kay’s immediate conclusion.

Just then a car drove up speedily. Ethel and her aunt were returning! There lay the dead skunk upon their porch. Kay

stood beside it!

“Kay Tracey, you played this dirty trick upon us,” accused the Eaton girl, “and you shall pay for it!”

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HAUNTED SITE

Kay was so dumbfounded at Ethel's idea, that she could not utter one word. She stood for a moment, silent, staring. Then came her mother's voice, calling her. Glad of this excuse to go, she turned and walked away without so much as a glance in the direction of the occupants of Oriole's Nest.

"Well!" snorted Mrs. Pinty disagreeably. "She certainly didn't deny her guilt!"

Left to the task of cleaning up the porch, Ethel grumbled that Kay should have been made to do it, or that the chore-boy Spider be required to. As the lad was nowhere to be seen, the Eaton girl, groaning, had to get to work.

Meanwhile Kay, running through the grove, reached her mother, who was listening sympathetically to complaints of old Mr. Brown. The gentleman was all a-flutter over a new disaster. Wringing his hands, he announced gloomily:

"My best tenants are leaving! I rented the Robin's Nest Cottage to a splendid family and now they too are moving out! They have been annoyed both day and night! Mud was thrown at their windows. Clotheslines were cut down and clean wash dropped in the dirt. Windows were

broken, their doorbell rung in the middle of the night. I don't know what to do.”

“It is outrageous!” denounced Mrs. Tracey.

“Tomorrow, Uncle, we'll go up to Robin's Nest and investigate,” promised Kay. “We'll give the place a thorough search.”

Accordingly, the girls and Mrs. Tracey went to Robin's Nest early the next day. Wreckage greeted their eyes. The cottage, one of the nicest in the little colony, was a forlorn ruin. Every window had been smashed. The gleaming white paint had been spattered with daubs of thick mud slapped upon it from every side.

As the house had been broken into it was easy to enter. The investigators paused in the hall to behold the devastation. Mud had been thrown all over pretty wall-paper, plaster was broken, light fixtures smashed, and ashes strewn over the polished floors. A melancholy chorus of “O-o-o-o-ohs!” broke from the dismayed onlookers.

“Quiet!” whispered Kay sharply. The tramp of a man's foot echoed overhead. In a moment Mr. Brown himself thumped downstairs, muttering his indignation.

“The tenants themselves did not wreck this place, did they?” inquired Kay.

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“Oh, no, no!” spluttered the old man emphatically. “They were fine people and left the place only last night in perfect condition. I saw it myself. But now look at it!” The aged

banker held his aching head in both hands as he surveyed his property loss.

“Don’t the police patrol the place?” asked Kay, trying to console him.

“We are outside the town limits and haven’t their protection,” he explained, adding, “The constable who is responsible in these parts has not succeeded as yet in finding out who does the damage here.”

“Then,” vowed Kay determinedly, “we’ll make ourselves responsible for your interests!”

“Yes, and woe to the culprit when we catch him!” declared Betty with spirit.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you girls in standing up for me!” quavered the old gentleman tremulously. “I fear that the person behind all this vandalism is wholly unscrupulous and dangerous!”

“That is plain to be seen,” assented Kay. “But it won’t scare us off!” she assured him stoutly.

“There may be danger for you in interfering with desperate vandals,” he protested. “I had a watchman, but he refused to stay. Why, only the other night a handsome yacht belonging to these tenants was mysteriously burned to the water’s edge. This is more than mere mischief! It is downright crime!”

“I dread having you girls come to grips with a criminal,” said

Mrs. Tracey fearfully.

“Anyone who would deliberately set fire to a yacht is certainly a criminal,” commented Wilma.

“Was it actually proved that the fire had been set by someone?” asked Kay practically. “Don’t fires sometimes break out in motorboats if gasoline leaks into the bilge?”

“Yes, but that is more likely to happen in old boats. This one was brand new,” responded Mr. Brown. “The insurance men felt sure it was the work of a fire-bug,” he concluded.

“Uncle, let me ask a question,” said Kay thoughtfully. “Do you know this one-legged bridge tender you spoke of?”

“Oh, yes,” replied her uncle. “I know him quite well.”

“He seems very angry because his savings were wiped out in some bank failure,” Kay remarked. “Do you know where his money happened to be?”

“Yes,” answered her uncle without any hesitation. “He was one of the depositors in the Lincoln Bank at the time it failed. I was president then.”

“Uncle, did it ever occur to you that possibly this one-legged man might be destroying your property in spite for that bank failure and his loss?”

“Now we are getting hot on the trail,” Betty whispered excitedly to her twin.

“I actually believe we are!” Wilma said, but in another minute Mr. Brown brushed aside this suggestion with an emphatic:

“Absurd!”

It was then that a strange coincidence occurred. The chums, Mrs. Tracey and Mr. Brown had come out of the cottage and were walking slowly down the path as they talked. Kay’s eyes, which were thoughtfully cast down upon the ground, beheld something that brought her to an abrupt halt.

“Look there!” she gasped, pointing.

Everyone stared and exclamations broke from each one at what he saw. Clearly pressed into the earth was the unmistakable mark of a man’s shoe. It was the right shoe, and although there was no sign of a left one, the right print appeared again and again.

“The Lone Footprint!” shrieked Betty.

“A one-legged man has been here!” cried Wilma.

“That same one-legged man has wrecked the cottage,” declared Mrs. Tracey.

It certainly seemed reasonable to suppose so, for as all leaned down to examine the ground closely, it was quite plain that someone with one foot had hopped around Robin’s Nest. The marks had trailed off to be lost sight of in the woods. Poor Mr. Brown nervously pressed his trembling hands to his head.

“I doubt if that is the print of a human foot,” he

murmured uneasily. “It seems more like some horrible hopping hobgoblin.”

“I hardly think hobgoblins leave such large steps behind them,” said Kay cheerfully.

“More likely it is that crippled bridge master,” declared Wilma.

Again Mr. Brown rejected this idea. “No, I know Jed Farkin and I’m sure he would never do a thing of this kind,” he insisted.

“It’s plain that both this time and last time a one-legged man was on the premises when mischief was done,” Betty argued.

“Yes, that’s plain enough,” agreed Mr. Brown, “but I cannot believe Jed Farkin is the man,” he said positively. “What can we do?” moaned the former banker. “The place is becoming a deserted village! How can I restore a good reputation to this spot so that tenants will come back before I lose my last cent?”

“I have an idea,” said Kay. “Let us put on some attractions that will encourage people to settle here because of the good times at Owl’s Nest. Folks must think of this place for its fun, not for its trouble and mystery.”

“A good enough idea,” conceded Mr. Brown gloomily, “but easier said than done. What in the world could you arrange to take attention away from the annoyances, frights and vandalism that have occurred here from the very beginning?”



“We should have to work up a good program and keep things happening every minute so that no one would have time to worry,” answered Kay.

“Just what could we do, for instance?” asked Betty inquisitively.

“Well, tournaments, for one thing,” said Kay, “and perhaps a series of yacht races on the river, with trophies for winners. We must develop a lively yacht club with plenty of entertainment going on.”

“Speaking of yachts,” reminded Wilma, “don’t forget that we are due to meet those awful men who ran into the *Purple Pansy*. We must be sure to be at the dock when they arrive or they may go away and never settle for the damage to that lovely boat.”

“Yes, we should be there now,” answered Kay, looking at her watch, “and we shall be very glad to have you talk to those men for us, Uncle,” she added with a sigh of relief.

Mr. Brown straightened his bent shoulders at the tone of confidence in Kay’s voice, and led the way to the dock to interview the two men who had agreed to be there.

“I wonder if they will come,” said Betty.

“I doubt it,” sniffed Wilma.

“Yes, there they are!” exclaimed Kay.

Sure enough, the two toughs were slowing down their motor

boat to tie up at the pier. As they did so they eyed the dainty *Pansy* which was bobbing at her mooring near by. The men crowded their dirty craft close to it; so close, in fact, that they scraped her shining side.

At that Mr. Brown gave an angry shout and the rough men turned around. Seeing him, they began muttering to each other. The fat man, called Pete, pointed a threatening finger at the trim craft, while the thin fellow, Jim, jerked a warning thumb in its owner's direction. The men seemed to be arguing together in low tones. The thin man tossed his head back to refer, evidently, to the approaching girls.

With a growl Pete surprised everyone by suddenly straddling from his boat to the *Pansy* and boarding her. The little boat lurched with his weight, then bounced up and down as the thin man jumped aboard her. Mr. Brown broke into a nervous little trot and shouted again, waving his arms to order the men off. Instead they yelled something about looking to see what damage had been done.

“That’s a funny way to look for damage,” said Betty, scowling with intense disapproval.

The thin man was untying the mooring rope and pushing the *Pansy* free. At the same time the fat man was bending over to tinker with the motor. Suddenly the engine coughed, then purred.

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“They are taking her away!” cried Kay in dismay.

“Stop, thief!” screamed Mr. Brown with all his might, until his shrill voice cracked in fury.

“Just a trial spin to see if she’s hurt,” called back the thin man with a sneer that showed his broken yellow teeth unpleasantly.

The fat man now increased speed and the quick little boat darted away. Kay yelled in amazement:

“Look! They are towing the *Fish Hawk* behind! It’s a get-away!”

The grinning Jim Silman, indeed, was hanging over the stern dragging his boat along behind by a long, wet rope. As they sped away he made a mocking gesture of farewell. This infuriated Mr. Brown who fairly jumped up and down in anger, gritting his teeth. He shook his fist at the escaping men who shook theirs in return, then doubled up with loud guffaws of laughter.

“Quick! Quick!” screamed Kay. “We must follow them!”

“How?” asked Betty.

Mrs. Tracey already was running back to the house to telephone for the constable.

“Isn’t there another boat we could take to chase them?” asked Kay frantically.

Poor Mr. Brown was too flustered to answer, but quiet Wilma, who had kept her head in all the excitement, now was hastily unfastening a rope that tied a slim speed boat to the dock.

“Couldn’t we borrow this in an emergency?” she asked, tugging feverishly at a knot.

“Whose boat is it?” asked Betty doubtfully.

“It’s all right, all right!” affirmed Mr. Brown. “It’s the *Elf*, belonging to a good friend of mine. He would be the first to lend it to chase robbers!”

With this encouragement the girls tore loose the mooring rope and bundled the bewildered old gentleman aboard. Kay leaped nimbly to the wheel, while Betty promptly started the engine. In a whirl of spray they were off, streaking up the river after the runaway pirates.

“They have a terrific head start,” groaned Wilma. “Do you think we can catch them?”

“We’ll try!” declared Kay grimly, and threw the lever over for more speed.

## CHAPTER V

### OVERBOARD!

The swift *Elf* raced upstream after the escaping pirates.

“Whew!” gasped Betty, as the craft bounced along the rough water, tipping, rearing and plunging in a mad chase.

“This is worse than an amusement park roller-coaster!” breathed Wilma, clutching wildly for the rail.

Mr. Brown, crouching low, could not speak.

“Watch out!” warned Betty. “There’s a fisherman in a rowboat, and you’re going to swamp him, sure!”

“Here comes a cruiser racing along at full speed!” shrilled Wilma.

As Kay cautiously slowed down the boat, Mr. Brown became worried about the pirates escaping. He leaned over perilously for a glimpse of the vanishing *Pansy*. A heavy wash from the passing boat struck him.

“He’s overboard!” screamed Betty.

The frightened girls caught a glimpse of the frail old

man floundering feebly. He bobbed and beat about helplessly for a moment in the foam, then disappeared. The other boat proceeded unconcernedly upon her way.

Instantly Kay swung the *Elf* around, but the current had washed the old gentleman quickly downstream. She had to hunt for him.

“There he is. I see bubbles!” piped Betty. “Careful, Kay, don’t catch him in the propeller!”

“Throw this!” begged Wilma, who had the presence of mind to grab a life preserver.

“You throw it, Kay,” pleaded Betty, “I never could reach him.”

“Take the helm, then,” commanded Skipper Kay, seizing the cork ring.

She threw the life preserver overboard well beyond Mr. Brown’s head. The line, fastened to the ring, unwound smoothly. As the old man frantically thrashed to keep his nose above water, Kay pulled the floating ring by the rope and it moved directly toward the victim.

“Catch hold, Uncle!” she shouted.

His feeble hands only pawed the water helplessly. The old man sank, then came up strangling. He could not grasp the life preserver.

“I must jump in and get him,” said Kay, kicking off her shoes.

“I’ll get him. Hold everything!” called a new voice.

The nearby fisherman, whose rowboat had been swamped by the wash of the cruiser, dived into the river. He went rapidly to the rescue.

“Where is he?” gurgled the swimmer, blinking, spouting, and looking around as Mr. Brown sank out of sight again.

“There!” shrieked the girls as a gray head bobbed up behind him.

Old Mr. Brown rose, terrified, and flung both arms desperately around the other man’s neck. Both went down, choking and battling. Up they rose again, struggling in a mad embrace.

“Get the boat hook!” ordered Kay, and Wilma handed it to her.

With a violent wrench the strong young fisherman broke from the deadly grip. Kay then caught her uncle’s collar with the long-handled hook and dragged him to the boat. The young fellow boosted him out of the water. All three girls tugged from above and hauled Mr. Brown on board, but he collapsed on deck, unconscious and black in the face.

“Quick, we must revive him or he’ll die!” cried Kay. Turning him face down, she squatted astride his legs and began pressing on his ribs.

“Hurry to that doctor’s dock,” she called.

Pausing only long enough for the young man to clamber aboard, Betty started the boat speeding once more. Wilma piled sweaters over the cold, wet form of the old gentleman.

“Loosen his collar and belt,” advised Kay, busily pressing down and snapping back as she continued her first aid treatment.

“Keep it up, he’s coming to,” encouraged Wilma.

Kay kept pumping steadily and was rewarded by a groan from the reviving victim.

“Hooray, he’s breathing!” cheered Wilma.

“And here we are at the doctor’s dock!” called Betty, approaching the landing.

At her frantic toot a young man came out and took charge. Kay was relieved to turn her uncle over to the physician, asking him to give the patient the very best of care.

“I must tell Mother at once,” she said to the group.

“A narrow squeak,” panted the exhausted fisherman. “He nearly drowned me, too!”

“Oh, we can’t thank you enough!” said Kay feelingly. “You must come and get dry at our cottage.”

Before the rescuer could protest, Betty was speeding for the Owl’s Hole dock. Kay leaped out first as the craft touched the



cove landing. She dashed up the trail to tell her mother of the sad accident.

In short order they all were sipping hot drinks in Mrs. Tracey's kitchen. The young stranger introduced himself as Dave Halpen, a college student who was looking for work that summer to help pay his expenses. 45

“The worst of it is, we did not catch those pirates!” said Kay, explaining the chase.

“Perhaps we can trace them,” said Wilma. “You remember the one-legged man told us that they are with the Eagle Realty Company up the river.”

“Possibly those are the men who are causing all the trouble here,” suggested Dave Halpen. “If they are in the real estate business themselves, they may want to wreck Owl's Hole so they can run another place without competition.”

“Another clue,” sighed Betty, bewildered. “First, the lone footprint, then Spider or the skunk marauder, and now pirates.”

“Those men each had two good legs,” observed Wilma, “so they can't have left the lone footprint.”

“Perhaps the bridge tender is in partnership with them. He seemed to know all about them,” commented Betty suspiciously.

“But Uncle knows the cripple and insists he is above suspicion,” put in Kay.

“More and more confusing!” moaned Betty.

“Yes,” sighed Mrs. Tracey, “but now we must visit Uncle. I phoned the doctor. He has taken him to the hospital.”

“I should like to come too, and see how he is,” offered Dave, so all set off together.

46

The hospital visit proved disheartening. The shock had been too much for the old man’s heart and he was in a serious state of collapse. The doctor, catching Mrs. Tracey’s eye, shook his head discouragingly. Unable to bear the worry of business responsibility, Mr. Brown in a weak voice gave the Traceys authority to handle his affairs.

At the street door the visitors separated. Mrs. Tracey and the girls went downtown to consult the police who reported that as yet they had no clue to the situation. David returned to rescue his abandoned rowboat and get fresh clothes.

Later Kay, Betty and Wilma walked along the path through the woods by the river. Suddenly, behind a thick clump of laurel bushes, they could hear footsteps and conversation.

“One of those boys’ voices sounds familiar,” observed Betty.

“So it does, but I don’t recognize it,” agreed her sister.

“I know!” cried Kay. “I believe it’s Ethel Eaton’s friend Spider! Listen!”

Sure enough. Another boy’s voice cried, “Go on, Spider, tell us your secret!”

“Well, come on then, fellers,” responded the skinny lad. “I’ll show you what I found hidden in the high marsh grass ’way up the river in that swampy place where nobody ever goes.”

“What is it?” demanded another voice curiously.

“It’s a swell motor boat!” announced Spider triumphantly.

A disbelieving chorus of boos greeted this announcement.

“Ah, g’wan, it’s probably some old rusty wreck stuck in the mud,” hooted another boy in disappointment.

“Rusty old wreck nothin’!” Spider insisted. “Wait till you see it! It’s practically brand new and oh, boy, you should see the purple leather cushions and everything.”

“Purple leather cushions!” whispered Kay alertly. “Why, that must be our *Purple Pansy!*”

“Sh!” warned Betty. “I want to hear what else they have to say.”

“Come on, let’s go look at Spider’s old boat!” the boys were laughing.

“Let’s steal it,” suggested Spider eagerly, “and whaddaya say, let’s sail around the world in it?”

“Yay!” greeted the other lawless young ruffians.

“Hooray for adventure!” they cheered and plunged off

through the underbrush.

“We must follow them,” said Kay grimly.

The three determined girls began stalking cautiously after the rough crowd of boys who tramped briskly along the river edge.

48

“We must keep far enough back so that they won’t notice us,” warned Wilma.

“Yes, but not far enough to lose track of them,” answered her twin, puffing along valiantly through mud and briars.

The boys now were charging ahead rapidly and the girls had to break into a breathless trot to keep them in sight. A little farther on the lads loitered to throw stones into the water. Kay and the twins fell back cautiously, pretending to be picking flowers. When the boys finally dashed on again, they disappeared around a turn and Betty groaned.

“Oh, bother, now we’ve lost them!”

Kay, however, after her experience in finding and tracing the lone footprint, was not so easily discouraged.

“We can follow their tracks in the mud and damp sand,” she said. Accordingly, the young sleuths stepped gingerly, noting the marks left by the lads.

“I feel positively like a bloodhound,” giggled the irrepressible Betty.

“Hot on the scent the hunter flew,  
“And a merry note on his horn he blew!”

cried Wilma, breaking into verse as usual.

“Never mind blowing any horn,” objected her sister practically. “I, for one, don’t want Mr. Spider to turn around and see us.”

49

“There he is,” announced Kay, “so let’s lie low in these bushes for a bit until we see just what they are up to.”

The girls took cover in a woodsy nook and peered from the bushes at the boys ahead. They were now plunging into a swampy bend of the river where tall marsh grass and cat-tails grew thickly and hid all secrets with a wet green screen. Into this hiding place the young ruffians pushed, regardless of sinking knee-deep into muddy water.

“We’ll ruin our clothes,” groaned Wilma, “if we follow.”

“Never mind your clothes if we can find the *Pansy*,” urged Kay, wading boldly into the swamp.

“Ouch!” grunted Betty. “These stiff grasses cut like knives!” She sucked a finger ruefully.

“Help!” panted Wilma, “this squashy mud is as bad as quicksand! Ow, I’m practically sinking out of sight.”

Kay and Betty gave her a jerk and they blundered on, guided in the high grass jungle by the swishing of cat-tails ahead, the echo of boys’ voices and the sound of their boots squashing

through the mire.

“Wait!” whispered Kay sharply, for the boys had stopped and were grumbling among themselves.

“Somebody’s follerin’ us,” hissed Spider in alarm.

“We’ll get into trouble,” mumbled another boy uneasily.

50

At that Spider stepped out and looked back toward the girls.

“Whatcha follerin’ us for?” he yelled threateningly.

51

## CHAPTER VI

### ETHEL'S FRIGHT

The twins stood stock still, speechless. Kay, however, was at no loss for words. She said sharply:

“Don’t make such a noise!”

“Why not?” demanded Spider uncertainly.

“Because you’ll scare them,” she answered mysteriously.

Spider’s curiosity was aroused. “Scare what?” he asked sullenly.

“Why, the big blue herons, of course,” Kay replied. “We’re on a hike to see those big birds that nest in these parts! Don’t scare them all away, please!”

“Oh, now you’ve frightened away a plover,” cried Betty in complaining tones as a brown bird suddenly whirled off on startled wings.

“There’s no use, Kay,” added Wilma cleverly, taking her cue from Kay’s pretense, “we’ll never find all the birds we’re looking for with so many people stamping around. We may as well go home.”

“Yes, you better go home,” said Spider sourly, “and the sooner the better.”

“This is our private hide-out,” put in another boy resentfully, “and we don’t want a lot of girls poking into it.”

52

“I don’t believe all that bird business,” growled another boy in the group. “Those girls are just snooping and spying on us, Spider.”

“What would there be to spy on?” asked Kay innocently, as she busied herself trying to pull a cattail.

“Never you mind what there might be to spy on,” snarled Spider. “Just git outa here before you git hurt.” He threw a stick which unfortunately hit Kay hard in the face and cut her forehead.

“Now see what you’ve done!” cried Betty. “It’s bleeding!” she exclaimed as she began to examine her friend’s brow.

“Get out or you’ll be next!” threatened Spider, while another boy who brandished a club let it fly viciously.

“Ouch!” howled Betty as it struck her ankle.

Wilma dodged and ran, her twin stumbling after her. Kay, holding her head, followed reluctantly. As the girls retreated, the ruffians uttered rough cheers and stampeded after them. The chums slopped through the swamp, the boys in hot pursuit, and scrambled frantically into the woods beyond.



The pursuers were gaining rapidly when a lucky accident to Kay saved the day. Being able to run faster than either of her chums she had forged ahead. Suddenly she stubbed her toe. Wilma, close at her heels, was amazed to see her friend suddenly swallowed up by the earth and vanish from sight.

Checking herself, the twin stopped abruptly but right in Betty's way. The latter, running full tilt, bumped into her. Down the two tumbled and then found themselves rolling and falling until they came to a halt at the bottom of a hole.

"Ow!" protested a voice, and the twins realized that they had found the vanishing Kay by means of falling on top of her.

Breathless, all three lay flat, gazing up toward the sky. But the sky was not there! Furthermore, the girls were covered from sight completely by a perfect roof of bushes and vines.

"What in the world—?" gasped Wilma.

"It must be an old quarry hole," explained Kay.

"The boys can never find us here," triumphed Betty.

Only too glad to remain hidden, the twins huddled together out of sight. Kay, however, had now regained her breath and her daring. Cautiously she climbed out in spite of her chums' protests, and crawled, Indian fashion, after the lads. They were returning to the swamp.

Suddenly she was rewarded for her effort. The boys could be seen pushing the boat that had been hidden there. The purple trimming and cushions were clearly

noticeable, and finally Kay made out the gold lettering that spelled *Purple Pansy*.

“Found at last,” she exulted, rising and forgetting the blow on her head which was now swelling and turning black and blue.

It must be admitted that Kay was uncertain as to how to capture the craft from the hands of an overpowering number of tough boys. While she was wondering what to do someone yelled furiously:

“Leave that boat alone!”

The ruffians paused, startled. Two men were running toward them. Kay instantly recognized the pair as fat Pete Webb and skinny Jim Silman, the pirates themselves!

“Well!” thought the girl. “Set a thief to catch a thief! Now what?”

“Leave that boat alone!” the men repeated.

“It’s ours!” snapped Spider defiantly.

“It is not!” bawled Pete.

“Well, it isn’t yours either!” said Spider slyly. “What if we report to the police that we found it hidden here?”

“What do you want it for?” asked another boy boldly.

“Smuggling, maybe?”

With a yell of rage the two men leaped into the boat,

knocking the lads down. With a roar of the motor they shot out of the swamp and cut a wake of white foam in the river. The surprised young fellows were left to pick themselves up and grumble about their loss.

Kay flew back to the caved-in place and called, “Quick! I’ve seen the *Pansy*. We must hurry back to notify the police!”

The twins popped out of their hole in the ground like a pair of rabbits, and the three girls raced home. Mrs. Tracey, alarmed at Kay’s appearance with the ugly cut on her forehead, listened to their adventures disapprovingly.

“I am afraid you will come to worse harm than a blow on the head,” she said, “if you persist in taking such active part in criminal hunts.”

She then went to the telephone and reported the latest development to the police. She also tried to reach Cousin Bill but could not get him. Then she started to pace impatiently up and down the room, saying:

“If only some progress were being made in solving all this lawlessness! I believe things are getting worse every day. It might be better for us to give up now and go back home before anything more happens.”

“Oh, Mother,” chided Kay reproachfully, “you surely wouldn’t leave now when poor Uncle Byram is depending upon us.”

“I suppose not,” sighed her mother wearily, “but Owl’s Nest presents so many problems. It is pretty wearing to

have thievery going on right under our noses and every day more tenants coming to complain to us.”

“Here comes someone else to lodge a complaint, if I am not mistaken,” announced Wilma, looking out of the window.

“Our dear friend and schoolmate, Ethel Eaton, and she has fire in her eye,” giggled Betty.

“Probably coming to accuse me of putting dead skunks on her doorstep,” said Kay in disgust.

If this were the caller’s purpose, she did not refer to it. Ignoring Kay and the other girls, she turned to Mrs. Tracey and asked haughtily:

“I must see Mr. Byram Brown at once. Will you be good enough to tell me how to get in touch with him?”

“I am very sorry to tell you that Mr. Brown cannot see anyone at present. He is in the hospital in a serious condition as the result of an accident,” answered Mrs. Tracey.

Unmoved by this news, Ethel flounced impatiently and said, “I have an important business matter to take up with him which can’t wait. I shall be obliged to talk to him about it at the hospital.”

At this Kay spoke up indignantly. “It is absolutely out of the question for anyone to see him now.”

“I am not speaking to you,” said Ethel acidly. “I do not do business with anyone who is low enough to put dead

things on people's porches.”

In vain Kay denied this. Ethel only sniffed. Then the twins tried to point out the likelihood of Spider's responsibility for the mischief. Even when it was explained that he had just been caught red-handed trying to steal a valuable motor boat, Ethel preferred to believe that Kay, not the boy, had offended her.

“Don't try to argue with her,” recommended Wilma. You know:

‘A man convinced against his will,  
Is of the same opinion still.’”

The Eaton girl again insisted upon the necessity of seeing Mr. Brown.

“Why not turn her over to Dave Halpen?” said Kay in a low aside to her mother. “He said he was willing to help us and he has such a forceful way with him I believe he could handle her better than any of us can.”

“A good idea,” returned her mother, who spoke decisively to Ethel. “We cannot permit you to bother Mr. Brown at this time, but I can direct you to Mr. David Halpen, a very attractive and intelligent young man to whom my relative has entrusted some responsibility for the business at Owl's Hole.”

At the words “young” and “attractive,” Ethel pricked up her ears.

“Well,” she hesitated, “where can I get in touch with

him?”

“He is coming here for supper tonight,” Mrs. Tracey informed her, “and you might drop in to see him if your business cannot wait until morning.”

“It most assuredly cannot wait until morning,” retorted Ethel. “I shall be back to interview this agent of Brown’s later.” Off she stalked with her nose in the air.

During the evening she returned to find a good deal of merriment among the group from Brantwood and young Halpen. Her face was quite the opposite of joyful until she spied the attractive Dave. Immediately she gave him her sweetest smile and gazed up at him with her blue eyes wide and appealing.

“I just know you’ll be able to solve my problem,” she cooed sweetly. “I do think women need a man to lean on, don’t you?” she asked.

David, embarrassed by the girl’s unexpected advances, reddened.

“Well, I don’t know that men are so necessary,” he said, jokingly. “These ladies here seem to be very capable on their own resources.”

“Oh, these girls!” exclaimed Ethel, stepping closer to him. “They are such Amazons, but poor little me, I’m afraid I’m just old fashioned and I’m always thankful for a man’s strong right arm and good judgment,” she tittered.

David frowned. “What was it that you wanted to see me about?” he asked in a crisp, business-like manner.

Ethel moved a little nearer to him. “I’m all alone in our cottage with Auntie,” she confided timorously. “Last night our house was broken into by burglars. Oh, I’m so terribly afraid!” and she gave an affected little shiver.

“Burglars!” exploded young David unbelievably. “What makes you think so?”

“Things disappeared and we heard the most terrifying noises and scuttling about and bumping sounds. Oh, it’s s-u-c-h a comfort to feel there is a man around here to protect us!” With these words she tipped her head sideways and looked alluringly up at Dave.

“Exactly what things have disappeared?” asked the young man sternly.

“Food,” chirped Ethel. “Lovely imported, expensive cheese; crackers, cake, cereal—oh, lots of things and even a soft chiffon veil of auntie’s and an adorable fluff of a lace handkerchief that was brought to me from abroad.”

“Jeepers!” said Betty, “the thieves around here don’t seem to have any system! First they steal motor boats and now lace handkerchiefs!”

“You say you heard the thief when he came and took these things?” inquired Dave.

“O-o-o-h, yes!” cried Ethel with another little shiver.

“We heard him quite plainly, tap-tapping about and knocking things over. Auntie and I just lay stiff and frozen in our beds and didn’t dare to stir! It’s simply awful! Oh, if we only had a great big strong man in the house!”

“Suppose we step over to your cottage and look things over,” said Halpen.

“Oh, do!” begged Ethel, taking his arm. “Last night there was such a clatter in the cellar way, with brooms knocked down the stairs, that we were simply petrified!”

David strode along, Ethel hanging fast to his arm. The three chums followed behind, trying to restrain their smiles.

“Let’s look into that cellar way first,” the young man suggested.

Ethel showed him the door and then retreated with little timid cries of “I wouldn’t dare!” and “Oh, you’re so brave!”

David advanced boldly upon the stairs, fumbled about and then shouted, “I have your burglar, and he’s dead!”

Ethel screamed and collapsed. Kay scowled and stepped forward. Out came David, grinning, and holding in one outstretched hand a dead mouse caught in a trap!

Ethel gave a little moan and seemed about to faint. Betty, to prevent this, threw a glass of water hastily in the girl’s face.

“Well, I must be getting back,” said Dave. “Call on me at any



time burglars bother you! Good night, Miss Eaton.” Thus dismissing her, he walked rapidly back with the other girls to their cottage. “I can see that Ethel might prove to be a problem,” he laughed, when they reached Wren’s Nest.

“Mother seems to be confronted with problems too,” observed Kay as she drew near her own house.

A number of tenants from other Owl’s Hole cottages were assembled, airing their complaints.

“It seems that all these good people are continually annoyed by petty thievery,” she told Halpen and the girls.

An anxious conference was held but there was little hope of changing the minds of the tenants. Most of them wished to break their leases and move out. One spoke up irritably:

“This place ought to be called Thieves Hole.”

“Why don’t we have proper police protection?” growled another.

As one by one they went away, grumbling, Mrs. Tracey put her hand to her forehead and sighed, “We are in a dreadful quandary. What in the world can we do?”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE DISGUISE

“Certainly someone is behind all this trouble,” declared Kay. “It is ridiculous that we can’t lay our hands on the person.”

“Perhaps after we have had a good night’s sleep our brains will be clearer,” said Mrs. Tracey wearily.

“A good idea,” applauded Betty, yawning with fatigue.

Everyone gladly acted upon this suggestion after the strenuous day. As they retired, Wilma mused:

“I wonder what new outrage will pop up in the night?”

It passed peacefully, however, and the morning dawned bright and uneventful.

“What, no complaints from tenants?” Kay laughed, her eyes sparkling. “My wits seem clearer this morning,” she announced. “I think I’ll interview that one-legged man again. I am going over every clue carefully and shall begin with him.” She looked very firm and energetic as she made this vow.

“It seems as if he must know something,” said Betty.

“I am convinced that he knows more than he will tell,”  
Wilma joined in.

The three wasted no time in spinning up the river in the borrowed *Elf* to interview the cripple. Again he came out of his little glass look-out. Again he sympathized with the girls. Again he seemed perfectly innocent.

“Well, ain’t that too bad,” he said when the girls told their tale of the stealing of the *Pansy*. “Come to think of it, I seen them men going upstream in your boat and towing the other. Matter of fact, I opened the draw to let ’em through, but I didn’t think nothin’ of it because I s’posed they was taking it to repair the damage they done when they bumped into you.”

“Where do *you* think they took it?” queried Kay, watching the man closely.

“Oh, I haven’t an idee. Plenty of hiding places along this ole river, but one sure thing I can tell you: you won’t never see it no more.”

“What makes you think that?” Kay asked.

“Because many a boat gets stolen but mighty few ever get found again. Tell you what the thieves always do. They paint a boat a different color to disguise it, and change things around on it so’s the owner can’t recognize it. Yessir, you can bet that if you ever lay eyes on your *Purple Pansy* again she won’t be purple.”

“Well, at least that’s a possible clue,” said Kay, puzzled.

As nothing more seemed forthcoming from the one-legged man, the girls chatted pleasantly for a few minutes, then went on their way.

“Without losing any time about it,” suggested Kay, “I move that we check up immediately at the village store to see if any one really has bought paint recently that might be used on a boat.”

“That sounds a little too good to be true,” said Betty skeptically.

“Well, ‘Hope springs eternal in the human breast’ it’s said,” remarked Wilma cheerfully, “so we may as well try.”

“Paint?” queried the old man behind the counter in the local store. “Lemme see. Yes. Mr. Jupiter Jones was in for red paint but that was for his barn and I know for a fact he painted it. Then there was Sam Titcomb, he bought a lot of white paint the other day for that big old white house of his’n.

“Now lemme see, yes, I do recall a stranger come in here in a big hurry and wanted marine paint. He bought two big buckets of brown paint.”

The old merchant looked very triumphant as he obligingly recalled this important item.

“Can you tell us what the man looked like?” begged Kay anxiously.

“Well, now, lemme see,” and the old fellow rubbed his stubbly chin thoughtfully. “Yes, I remember that feller

real well, because he was so disagreeable and hollered at me.”

The girls exchanged quick glances.

“He was a tall, thin, dirty kind of feller, as I recollect,” went on the storekeeper, “and the thing I remember best about him was he had very bad teeth. They spoiled his looks. Now what did he say his name was?” and the man scratched his head reflectively. “Speller? No, that wasn’t it. Began with an ‘S’ though,” he said forgetfully.

“Was it Silman, Jim Silman?” prompted Kay.

The storekeeper’s face broke into a smile, and he slapped his hand down emphatically on the counter. “Silman! Yes, that’s the name!” he cried.

Thanking him very much for his information, the girls dashed out exultingly.

“A real clue at last!” cried Wilma.

“Jed Farkin was right about the thieves painting the boat to disguise it,” reflected Kay.

“Alas and alack,” said Betty. “The poor *Purple Pansy* is no more! I fear she will be re-christened *Brown Betty*,” she giggled.

“We must be on the lookout for a brown boat from now on,” urged Kay vigorously.

The chums hurried home to report their news only to find

Mrs. Tracey in despair.

“The tenants are all moving out, bag and baggage!” she announced. “The vans are here. To make things worse, they claim that they have had so many of their possessions stolen or damaged here, that they are cleaning out the furnished cottages, taking Uncle’s plates, spoons, bedding, anything they want, to make up for their losses.”

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“When I told them we would sue them,” said Dave Halpen, who had been consoling Mrs. Tracey, “they replied that they would bring counter suit for property loss and mental anguish!”

“Uncle will suffer a relapse if he hears this!” grieved Mrs. Tracey.

“He mustn’t know it,” said Kay decisively.

“Whew!” whistled Betty. “What to do now?”

“We must get a new set of tenants,” said David energetically.

“We’ll have to put some very attractive advertisements in all the newspapers offering inducements for people to move right into the cottages,” Kay planned briskly. “And what’s more, we must begin this very minute to plan various entertainments, dances and other attractions to make Owl’s Hole a desirable place to live in. Of course, we must secure police protection first of all, but we must feature entertainment for the whole summer vacation so that tenants will feel that they are having a good time for their money.”

“We can turn the lodge into a community club house and keep things humming over there all the time,” chimed in Mrs. Tracey, catching the spirit of the thing.

“I could help,” offered David. “I’ve had jobs as entertainment director at hotels and camps and I think I know exactly what you need here. The only difficulty would be if I should get a job, then I shouldn’t have time to work on your project.”

“If you must have a job to help with your college expenses,” said Mrs. Tracey, “why not become director for our community club right here? I am sure the salary could be arranged through my nephew, Bill Tracey, who is a lawyer in charge of Uncle’s affairs.”

“Nothing would suit me better,” David declared, delighted, and a broad grin beamed upon his pleasant face.

“Good. Now that we have a director, let us plan our community club entertainments at once,” Kay urged. “You begin on that, Dave, and we’ll write some ads to coax new tenants here.”

It was Wilma who really wrote the ads. For once Wilma’s passion for poetry was of some use, for she composed a series of amusing jingles inviting the public to enjoy vacations at Owl’s Hole.

Suddenly Betty at the window caught a glimpse of several boys sneaking around through the woods. They were carrying various articles.

“Kay!” she shouted. “There’s Spider and his gang!

They're stealing things from the moving vans."

Instantly the girls and Dave rushed from the house. At that moment the constable appeared and with several waves of a stout club drove off the intruders.

"At last we have protection," sighed Kay in relief. "I guess we can go on with our other scheme now."

When the ruffians had departed, dropping the things they had stolen, the constable approached Kay and her friends. To her eager queries he replied disappointingly that he had nothing to report, so the girls and Halpen left him and went to inspect the possibilities of the old lodge.

"It's ideal for our community club!" Dave declared enthusiastically.

"Let's start off with a dance," begged Betty.

"Oh, yes, let's!" cried Wilma vivaciously, and the twins spun across the floor together in a lively step, gaily humming a catchy tune.

The work on plans for such an entertainment occupied them all day, for there was much to be done and many excursions to the village were required. Betty's clever fingers created dashing posters in bold colors to be tacked about town, advertising the "Cove Community Costume Dance."

"Just as well to call it simply the Cove Community Club and avoid any reference to Owl's Hole," she advised shrewdly.



Wilma mailed notices of the dance to everyone she could think of, while Kay bought out the local stores with favors and bunting for decorating the hall.

“We must get plenty of palms and ferns, too, to keep the big hall from looking bare,” she reminded them.

“I know a good college orchestra I can get,” Dave offered.

The girls and David worked hard far into the night, perfecting their arrangements and decorating the hall. At last, at midnight, Kay, although weary, declared triumphantly from the top of a step-ladder:

“It really looks beautiful and I do believe that our first attempt to popularize poor Owl’s Hole is going to be a real success!”

Tired out, the committee went willingly to bed. The next morning Betty declared that she had dreamed she was aboard a big brown boat where, attired in a ball gown of royal purple, she danced all night long with a gorgeous pirate in skull and cross bones. The music was furnished by Spider, who played tunes on a mouse-trap. At this her listeners howled in merriment.

“The dream was so real that I half expect to find it true this morning!” laughed Betty, as the three ran over to the lodge to inspect their work of the night before. Dave swung open the door.

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“Don’t be disappointed if your—” Kay began.

Then all of them stood paralyzed. Not only was there no

dream, but there were none of the previous night's decorations either. Every bit of bunting and tissue paper, every streamer and fancy lantern was demolished. Torn down, ripped apart and scattered all over the floor lay everything they had worked on so industriously the day before!

“O-o-o-h!” wailed Wilma, aghast.

“Oh! O-o-o-h!” stormed Betty. “It looks as if a bomb had struck it!”

Kay said nothing, but her face was chalk white.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A THREAT

The tooting of automobile horns announced, some days later, the arrival of gay vacationists, drawn to Owl's Hole by Wilma's clever ads.

"Did you ever see so many people before in your life?" exulted Betty, peeping out of a window.

"Here come those buses Dave chartered from Brantwood, Carmont and Hartford, for the convenience of people who want a day's picnic along this river. We surely ought to get new tenants for the cottages from all that crowd!" said Wilma hopefully.

Hopping down from autos and buses, the picnickers began inspecting the little colony and exclaiming over its lovely location, its view, club house and boating facilities.

"Hurry, we must form an active reception committee to convince them that this is the place to spend a grand vacation!" urged Kay energetically.

The girls, Mrs. Tracey and David lost no time in mingling with the new arrivals and in a friendly way showing off the advantages of the resort. Plainly everything

was making a good impression on the newcomers.

It was while a very nice family was inspecting one of the biggest of the cottages that Ethel Eaton sauntered over. The people had just about made up their minds to rent the house when, with a malicious smile, the girl remarked:

“I wonder whether you would care for the place if you knew all the trouble the former tenants had here?”

“What do you mean?” they asked.

“I’m sure I can’t imagine,” said Mrs. Tracey, who could not recall anything special about this particular cottage.

“Oh, I’m sure you could, if you wanted to be perfectly honest,” sneered Ethel. As Mrs. Tracey flushed angrily, the Eaton girl chattered on, “The people here told me that they never had a night’s rest, for the place is over-run with mice and rats, the plumbing leaks and the stove won’t work. Besides, they felt sure that tramps slept in the cellar as they were annoyed constantly by mysterious sounds and thievery.”

“I fear you have not stuck strictly to the truth,” protested Mrs. Tracey tartly. Her face flushed with displeasure.

“Near enough,” retorted Ethel. “The place has a very bad reputation.”

“Perhaps everyone is not as timid or as discontented as you are,” suggested Mrs. Tracey.

There was no use in her saying more. Ethel had convinced the

people that things were undesirable at Owl's Hole, and they could not be persuaded now to think otherwise.

“If only they do not spread such rumors among the other people here,” thought Kay's mother in despair.

This family, however, did not bother about anything further. Luckily they got into their car and drove off, leaving Ethel's gossip unrepeatd.

Meanwhile Kay was determined to keep up a continual round of gaiety and interests so that no one could have time to talk with Ethel or listen to her. Boating parties sped up and down the river, tennis was in progress, while ping-pong and badminton tournaments kept the young people engaged.

For the most part, everyone was charmed with the place and its possibilities. By nightfall many of the empty cottages had been rented again and most of the vacationists moved in at once.

Rushing about all day, anxiously trying to please all sorts of people, wore Betty out. “Do let's get to bed before my poor feet fall off,” she moaned in mock agony.

“We never could have managed today without that new handyman,” sighed Kay wearily.

“Eddie Doyle, you mean?” asked Wilma.

“Yes. He's worth his weight in gold around here.”

Eddie Doyle, a droll and capable man, had indeed kept

everyone in a good humor and got every tenant settled and satisfied. At midnight he had left the Traceys and their friends, with the entire colony comfortable.

Now everyone settled down for sleep, but Owl's Hole had by no means lost its mysteries. Scarcely had Kay had time to drowse off when a weird creaking noise startled her.

“Now what in the world could that be?” she asked herself curiously.

The sound rose louder and nearer her window. Not wishing to disturb the others, she crept softly out of bed and peered into the darkness.

At first Kay's eyes were unable to see anything in the blackness, but as the creaking grew sharper, she made out the shape of a dim form which seemed to be pulling a cart with a squeaky wheel.

“Oh, it's only Eddie Doyle,” she thought relieved, as the figure moved away stealthily. “He ought to knock off work and get some rest,” she reflected. Kay was about to call out to him when something about the midnight prowler struck her. “That's not Eddie!” she told herself. “It's a stranger, and isn't he limping?”

Whether the figure limped or not, Kay could not be certain, for in a moment he was swallowed up in shadows. The harsh creaking of his ungreased wheel grew fainter until it was hardly more than a squeak.

“Who could be pulling a cart around in the middle of the night

down that woodland trail?” she wondered, and rolled back into bed.

By morning she forgot to mention the incident of the midnight figure of mystery. She and Dave had planned to visit Mr. Brown in the hospital and cheer him with news of improved conditions at Owl’s Hole.

Hope that the old gentleman would be feeling better was dashed by the report that he was worse. The patient appeared feverish and highly excited. The nurse in charge was extremely doubtful about allowing visitors to see him.

Kay finally persuaded her that their good reports would cheer the suffering man, so permission to enter his room was given with some hesitation. They were told not to stay long.

Mr. Brown was too unstrung to pay much attention to anything they said about the new tenants or the community activities. As soon as the nurse left them he fumbled under his pillow and drew out a crumpled and soiled sheet of torn note paper. In a high pitched voice he asked them to read this.

It was a letter, poorly written and badly spelled. The handwriting was scrawled and smudged with crooked letters that ran downhill and ended with a big blot at the bottom of the page.

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Kay and David read it together. It said:

mister brown WARNING! Dont dair to set the Poleese to find out hoo is making trubble at owl hole or if you do

you will come to harm and be mighty sorry.

“What do you make of it?” wheezed the old man, bouncing up in bed in alarm, only to sink back again, breathless.

“Don’t worry too much about it, Uncle,” advised Kay quietly. “Perhaps it is just someone playing a practical joke.”

“No, no, no,” protested the old man in a frenzy, thumping his blue-veined hand on the bed-spread. “It’s no joke, I am sure! I feel that I am in danger! Where are the police that they can’t protect citizens?”

“We’ll have the constable investigate this carefully,” offered David.

This remark had anything but a soothing effect on the patient. Up he bounced once more, crying:

“Investigate! Investigate! That’s all they ever do and whatever comes of all the investigating? Nothing! Nothing at all! No, no, don’t think of giving this to the police! You see what it says. I shall come to more harm if I do! It must be kept a secret!”

“Very well,” promised Kay faithfully, trying to coax her relative to lie back quietly.

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His feeble hands fought her off impatiently, his face turned waxen and his breath came in short gasps from his blue lips. His high shrill voice penetrated the closed door and a doctor and a nurse hurried in.



“His heart!” murmured the woman to the visitors, as the physician quickly applied his stethoscope to the old man’s chest. “Please leave at once!”

David promptly moved off. Kay hesitated long enough to catch up the note and slip it unnoticed into her purse as she hastened out.

## CHAPTER IX

### KAY'S SURPRISE

Returning home, Kay promptly showed the threatening letter to her mother. As both were reading it, the girl spied something that had escaped her sharp eyes before.

“That blot!” she shouted. “Look closely! Is it a real blot or do you think it is meant to represent——”

“THE LONE FOOTPRINT!” ejaculated her mother.

“Exactly what I think!” agreed Kay.

Both gazed at the smudge and came to the same conclusion: it most certainly was meant to be the signature and sign of the person who made the lone footprint.

“There,” cried Betty, “doesn’t this prove that the one-legged bridge master had a finger in the mystery?”

“We must go there again and see if we can trip him into committing himself. At least we can get a sample of his handwriting,” planned Kay.

“The handwriting in this note must be disguised,” said Wilma, “it’s so bad.”

“Oh, of course,” agreed her chum, “and all that bad spelling was done to throw us off the trail.”

“Disguised or not, I am convinced the crippled bridge master is the villain,” declared Wilma.

“My theory is that Spider is your man,” held Betty. “The spelling and handwriting are about what he would naturally do. I think we’d better check on him as well as on the cripple.”

“I thought you had almost decided that the men who stole the boat were in this affair!” cried Mrs. Tracey, confused by it all.

“Maybe they are partners,” said Wilma.

“That would seem to be too many scoundrels for one case!” chuckled Betty.

“Let’s check on the bridge man once more,” prompted Kay, starting off briskly.

The girls trotted down the leafy trail to the river and put off upstream towards the drawbridge in the *Elf*. Once more the one-legged man hobbled out of his little glass house and listened to their story.

“Shucks! Your boat got painted, eh? I told you they’d do it!” he said. “So they made it brown, did they? In honor of that old crook, Mr. Byram Brown, I guess! Maybe they stole his boat but *he* stole a lot more, I can tell you!” the man raved, waving a fist vengefully. “He stole all my savings, as well as a lot of other people’s money.”

Jed Farkin's rage at Mr. Brown seemed so significant that the girls felt they were on the right trail. Kay talked earnestly to the cripple.

"You say these men are in business in Hartford?" she asked innocently. "I wonder if you would be good enough to write their address down for me on a slip of paper. I should be sure to forget it otherwise, and we ought to go there and check up on them."

"Be glad to," the bridge master replied readily, writing out Eagle Realty Co., 600 Main Street, corner of Market, Hartford. "Ask for Webb or Silman."

"Now we have a specimen of his handwriting to compare with that note," exulted Kay, as the man hopped off to help with a truck that had broken down on the bridge.

The big vehicle was loaded with fruit and vegetables. It had not been stalled there long before Spider and his marauding gang came swarming along to do mischief. In no time they were sneaking up to steal from it. The driver was frantic, since he was holding up traffic and blocking the drawbridge for which a boat was tooting. The man struggled with his engine and tried to shoo away the boys at the same time.

"That Spider would steal pennies from a blind man's tin cup!" cried Betty indignantly.

Both she and Kay shouted sharply at the boy to leave the truck alone. The lad only hooted at them and grabbed another handful. As he ran past Kay, she seized him by one arm.

“Drop that stuff!” she ordered.

Spider shook himself loose so roughly that he tore off Kay’s pretty scarf.

“Who do you think you are?” he sneered rudely.

With another jerk he bumped Kay’s forehead which was still sore from the blow he had inflicted upon it the other day. As the girl put up her hand to her head, Spider broke loose and darted away, jeering.

“You’ll be sorry!” he yelled back.

Kay recalled how he had threatened Ethel in a similar manner and how the dead skunk had appeared on her porch shortly afterwards.

“Yes, I expect he will try to avenge himself on me for daring to try to stop his thieving,” she reflected ruefully.

When the *Elf* tied up once more at the home dock, the girls found David busy with a new project.

“Hi!” he greeted the chums. “Come and see what I’ve started!”

Kay and the twins hurried up the path, guided to him by the merry sound of his whistling and the rat-a-tat-tat of his hammer. In a clearing among thick and pretty laurel bushes, the young man was ingeniously building an attractive rustic booth. Logs with their bark still on rose in a woodsy fashion to form the walls of the trim little shack.

“How do you like it?” he queried, smiling down from the top of a ladder where he was struggling with beams for a roof.

“What’s it to be, Dave?” Kay asked.

“It’s going to be a refreshment stand for ice cream, cooling drinks and all that sort of thing,” he explained. “There’s no such place near here and I believe in giving our tenants all the comforts of home.”

“It certainly was clever of you to think up this idea and build this stand all by yourself,” said Betty admiringly.

“Oh, he had help!” informed a new voice, and the girls turned to see Ethel Eaton rolling her eyes up coyly at David. “Now, don’t say I didn’t help you, Mr. Halpen! I did my best even if I was afraid you’d fall from ’way ’way up there on the tippy top of that ladder!”

“Oh yes, Miss Eaton was a big help, handing me nails and hammers and things,” he assented gruffly.

“I think you were perfectly w-o-n-d-e-r-f-u-l, building all that with your own hands!” Ethel simpered.

“I didn’t build it all alone,” said David honestly. “Eddie Doyle has been working all day on it.”

“If Eddie helps you again tomorrow I believe you can finish the roof,” said Kay critically. “I’m so glad you made the booth.”

The next day the twins, Kay, Mrs. Tracey, even Ethel and her aunt as well as other tenants gathered to cheer and admire the final efforts in shingling the peak of the roof. David, astride the ridge-pole on top, was just calling down some jesting remark to the group below, when there came a thumping sound and angry shouts.

“What’s the matter?” cried the twins.

David, from the look-out point atop the roof called down, “A one-legged man seems to be hot on the trail, hopping this way and yelling with might and main. I can’t make out what he’s saying.”

“He’s calling for you, Kay,” said Wilma, listening carefully.

“It’s our lame bridge man!” exclaimed Betty, as the newcomer plunged through the bushes.

“There she is!” he yelled, the veins standing out like cords on his red face. He brandished his crutch threateningly in Kay’s astonished face. “It’s you I want, young lady!” he bellowed, doubling up his fists in fury. “Where’s my money?”

“Your money?” repeated Kay, mystified.

“Yes, I said my money!” he roared furiously, fairly shaking with rage. “You stole my money!”

## CHAPTER X

### UNBURIED TREASURE

Kay stood stunned. A crowd gathered and gaped in an unfriendly manner as her friends edged nearer to her side. The cripple jerked something from his pocket and waved it in her face.

“Don’t tell me this girl didn’t steal my money,” he yelled, “because I can prove it.” He flipped out a colored silk scarf and waved it like a flag. “Did you ever see that before?” he demanded.

“Yes,” answered Kay without flinching.

It was her scarf which had been left, dusty and forgotten, on the bridge after the scuffle with Spider. At this, Ethel Eaton began whispering busily in the crowd and her aunt kept nodding her head at everything her niece was saying.

David called for silence. “Let’s hear what this man has to say.”

“This scarf was a-layin’ right where my money box was kept,” Farkin said accusingly. “My cash was gone. You heard her admit that the scarf is hers so I guess that proves she stole the money all right!” he triumphed.



Kay thought sadly of the number of times she had begged others not to jump to the conclusion that Farkin was guilty, merely from the circumstantial evidence of the Lone Footprint. Now he was condemning her on the circumstantial evidence of the scarf.

“Wait a minute!” she said defiantly. “Tell me this: Have you been coming up here to Owl’s Hole at night and annoying people and destroying property?”

“Of course I haven’t!” denied Farkin indignantly.

“Well, the tracks of a single footprint, and that print of a right foot, are always found here after these midnight visits,” argued Kay. “We all can see that you have only one foot and that foot is the right one. Does that prove anything?”

Farkin howled with rage as the clever girl thus turned the tables on him. The fickle crowd now began murmuring on the other side of the argument.

“And tell me this,” she went on, pressing her advantage, “have you written any threatening notes? Because we have a sample of your handwriting, and we aren’t so sure!”

A rising murmur of “A-a-a-a-h!” now came from the crowd.

“She’s almost as good a lawyer as Cousin Bill!” Betty whispered excitedly.

“I believe by the evidence of the scarf that it was Spider who took the man’s money,” Wilma nudged her twin and called out, “We think we know who took your money,

and if you will wait a little we'll go and get the thief!"

This caused a sensation. Eddie Doyle was dispatched to catch Spider.

"There is no use laying the blame on someone else," objected Farkin stubbornly. "You are the only one who knew my money was buried in the ground. You're related to Byram Brown, who stole everybody's money in his bank failure and I say that stealing money runs in your family!"

At this point there was a commotion in the crowd. Kay's Cousin Bill, who had arrived unexpectedly, demanded to know what the trouble was. He soon had Farkin calmed down by offering to go at once to inspect the place where the money had been hidden. Kay and the twins joined the men as the cripple led them far off into the thick woods.

"Here's where my treasure was buried," he said at last, "and here's where I found the scarf."

A deep hole had been made in the ground. Freshly dug earth was piled up along its sides. Evidently the man had kept his money, all in coins, in a chest which the robbers must have had difficulty in hoisting out of the excavation.

As Bill Tracey and Farkin discussed the affair, the girls wandered off, calling back that they would go home by another path through the woods. Their reason was that Kay had discovered tracks on the soft ground some distance from the hole. Nobody had noticed these before as the earth near the hiding place had been too tramped upon to reveal any.

“The lone footprint!” exclaimed the twins.

“But,” said Betty, “they don’t mean anything because we know the one-legged man was here anyway.”

“They prove that Farkin left those at Owl’s Hole,” said Wilma.

“I’m not so sure of that,” said Kay. “Examine them closely. Compare them with those we just saw Farkin leave behind him. Do you see any difference between the two sets of footprints?”

The twins knelt down and peered at the ground critically.

“I don’t see a speck of difference,” declared Betty.

“I don’t either,” agreed her sister. “They both seem to be the same.”

“I suspect that they may have been made by an entirely different person,” said Kay. “Another cripple, or a two-legged man may be imitating Farkin to get him into trouble or throw blame on him for another’s crime,” she conjectured.

“Why?” asked Betty, startled.

“If you will examine these marks which we know Farkin left behind him, you will see that they do not sink very far into the ground. That’s because he is a thin man and does not weigh enough to press his foot in very deeply.

“But if you will examine these other marks you will see that

they are pushed far down into the soil. The other man is a much heavier person. That is why his marks at Owl's Hole are always very noticeable and easy to follow.”

“Let's trail these lone footprints as far as we can and see if they lead to anything interesting or important,” suggested Betty.

The marks were, as Kay had pointed out, fairly easy to follow as they were clearly cut in the soft earth of the woodsy path. The girls paced along, taking pains not to step on the footprints. They led directly to a natural rock cave at some distance from the spot where the treasure had been buried.

“The ground here is too hard for the prints to show any farther,” reported Wilma.

“They lead into this cave, anyway,” said Betty. “How queer. Perhaps another treasure chest is hidden inside!”

She hesitated at the opening and peered within. As the cavern was empty, the girls ventured to enter and look around. There was no sign of any money box, but there were traces of food. Tin cans, fruit skins and an old ham bone indicated that the place had been camped in.

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“Someone, either Farkin himself or Cripple Number Two, must use this place frequently,” remarked Kay.

“Ugh, the spot gives me the creeps,” shivered Betty. She skipped out of its dim depths into the late sunshine. Immediately she uttered a shriek. “Snakes!” she screamed.

There was a stealthy rustling and Kay came out of the cave in time to see two large brownish snakes slither off the rocky ledge into the bushes.

“Rattlers!” cried Wilma in alarm.

“Yes,” answered Kay. “I’ve heard that families of them live in the cracks in the rocks around here and that men come from zoos to collect them. This place is known as Rattlers’ Rocks.”

“Oh, horrors,” groaned Betty, “let’s get out of here before we step on one!”

“Yes, we must go back, for the sun is getting low,” agreed Kay.

“We certainly don’t want to be wandering around in these unfamiliar woods after dark,” warned Wilma.

“It’s a very pretty sunset,” approved Betty, “but I hope the snakes know it’s their bedtime and get out from underfoot!”

The rocky ground rose high and gave a beautiful view of the river. Suddenly Wilma cried out, “Do be careful, Kay. You are so near the edge you make me dizzy.”

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“Yes, that’s a horribly deep ravine,” warned her twin.

The girls withdrew from the ledge. As twilight came on, they had to feel their way carefully. Presently Betty called sharply, “My foot’s caught in a crack in this rock and I can’t pull it out!”

Kay and Wilma hurried to the girl's aid, trying to dislodge her shoe.

“Ow!” she objected, wincing as they pulled. “Wait! That hurts my ankle!”

In vain she wriggled, twisted and tugged. Her foot was caught as if in a trap.

“Oh, dear, and it's getting dark!” mourned Wilma. “We shan't be able to find our way home!”

“Let me try it from this side,” said Kay, reaching over from a new angle to pull on Betty's leg.

She took a firm grip, trying not to be too rough. The rock on which the Tracey girl was balancing sloped away toward the ledge. As she gave an extra hard pull, she slipped, lost her balance, and fell over the edge!

Down, down she crashed through bushes, dislodging a shower of loose stones. Finally she bumped and thumped out of sight. There was a final rattle of loose pebbles falling, then utter stillness.

“Kay! Kay!” screamed the twins in panic.

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No answer came.

“She's dead!” wailed Betty.

Choking back a sob, Wilma lay down flat on the ledge and ventured to peer over the edge. The rocks dropped off steeply.

The bottom was a mass of thick undergrowth, indistinct in the darkness.

“Can you see her?” asked Betty, jerking her foot more desperately than ever.

Wilma crawled back to her twin. “I can’t see or hear anything of Kay,” she said with a sob.

## **CHAPTER XI**

### **A WEIRD DISAPPEARANCE**

“If only I could get my foot loose!” wailed Betty, gritting her teeth and grunting with the effort of pulling. She only succeeded in scraping the skin painfully from the trapped ankle.

Again Wilma crawled to the edge of the cliff and peered down into the darkness.

“Kay! Are you there?” she cried desperately.

“K-a-a-y!” mocked the echo, in ghostlike tones, but no other sound came.

“Oh, Betty,” Wilma said with a sob, “I’m so frightened!”

“So am I,” confessed Betty.

“I ought to go for help,” said Wilma, “but I don’t know my way out of these woods in the darkness.”

“There’s nothing much to do but wait here until morning,” said Betty dismally.

She gripped her tongue between her teeth, seized her ankle



tightly in both hands and yanked madly. Out came her foot so suddenly that she almost fell over backwards down the cliff.

“Oh!” gasped Wilma, clutching her sister frantically.

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Betty now was able to join her twin as both lay on their stomachs and called over the cliff:

“Kay! Kay Tracey!”

“K-a-a-a-y T-r-a-c-e-y!” mimicked the echo faintly.

“It’s no use, we’ll just have to settle ourselves till dawn and hope for luck in the morning,” Betty decided dismally.

The twins entered the cave and tried to make themselves at least a little less uncomfortable for their long weary vigil. They talked for a while, but as all their conversation circled around the terrible question, “Is Kay killed?” they fell gloomily silent. Now and then they jumped nervously at the snap of a twig or the uncanny hooting of a screech owl. They drowsed off from time to time only to awaken with a start. With the first streak of dawn Wilma said:

“What is that noise?”

There was a loud droning sound overhead. The girls staggered up on their cramped legs to see what it was, as a shadow slid across the mouth of the cave.

“An airplane!” they cried together.

No shipwrecked mariners at sea on a raft ever signaled more

frantically to a distant ship than the twins now waved to the craft over their heads.

“They’ll never see us!” moaned Wilma, who felt quite lost in the thick green growth of the woods.

Betty scrambled on top of a high rock. As the plane suddenly swooped low, she wildly flapped her scarf.

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“They see you!” screamed Wilma, hopping up and down.

The plane, like a great hawk, circled and dropped lower. Suddenly with a burst of speed it rose and flew off, vanishing into the blue.

“They’ll be back,” said Betty confidently.

Before long there was a loud halloo-ing and a crashing through the bushes. The airplane pilot and Bill Tracey, followed by a searching party, burst into sight. Never were men more welcome!

“Kay fell over the cliff last night and we can’t find her!” was the first cry of the disheveled girls.

Bill’s face whitened. “Come on, men,” he said hoarsely.

They began scrambling down the dangerous cliff at the point where Wilma showed them Kay had fallen. For a long time the searchers thrashed about in the underbrush hunting for some clue. They found none.

The twins, though weak from the need of food and water,

nevertheless refused to go home. Instead they clambered down the rocks to help in the search. As no sign of Kay could be found, they could only conclude that she had been able to get up and go away.

“Unless she was kidnaped by the man with one leg,” said Betty, but no lone footprint appeared on the rocky ground to confirm this notion.

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Leaving others to continue the search, Bill escorted the worn-out twins back to Owl’s Hole.

“Maybe Kay will be there before us,” said Wilma wishfully.

This hope was dashed, however, for Mrs. Tracey ran to meet them, asking anxiously, “Where’s Kay?”

The twins choked up and could not answer, so Bill broke the news. Although the mother of the missing girl tried to take this bravely, her heart seemed to turn upside down and she slumped limply into a porch chair. This was the very worst possible moment for Ethel Eaton to appear, but that is exactly what she did, hoping to pick up gossip.

“Don’t tell her anything until we know more about Kay,” pleaded Mrs. Tracey, bolting indoors to escape the unwanted caller.

Ethel, by this time, had reached the porch. She raised her eyes disapprovingly at sight of the twins’ untidy appearance.

“Returning from a hike so early in the morning?” she asked slyly.

“Yes, and now we must wash up,” answered Wilma briefly. She went indoors at once.

Ethel blocked Betty’s way. “Where in the world have you been to get dirty and tired so early?” she persisted with her usual prying manner.

“Oh, around,” evaded Betty good-naturedly. “Nothing like a brisk walk in the good old morning air, you know, Ethel.”

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The Eaton girl looked at her suspiciously. “You seem completely fagged out and I do believe you’ve been crying, Betty Worth!”

“Crying, my eye!” sniffed the other contemptuously.

“Yes, crying, and Wilma looked as if she had wept her eyes out, too!” insisted Ethel. “Where is Kay?” she demanded inquisitively.

“Oh, she’s around somewhere, I guess,” answered Betty casually. “And now, Ethel, you must excuse me while I wash up, curl my hair, and get into clean clothes.”

“You needn’t try to hide things by acting so nonchalant!” scolded Ethel. “I believe something terrible has happened to Kay and you are just trying to cover it up!”

“We’re all entitled to our own opinions,” said Betty agreeably, “but I’d advise you not to jump to any wrong conclusions.”

With that she pushed past the caller and went into the house.

“Humpf!” grunted Ethel, “I am as sure as anything that Kay actually did steal that poor old cripple’s money and has run away to keep out of trouble. I suppose I’d get into trouble myself if I should dare to mention it!”

She bustled off importantly to tell her aunt what little she knew and a great deal that she did not know!

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“Maybe Kay Tracey has developed some terrible contagious disease,” remarked her aunt.

“It would be exactly like the Traceys to conceal any fact that might upset the new tenants,” mused Ethel.

“For all we know, she’s come down with infantile paralysis and they are keeping it dark to avoid a panic,” added the older woman. “If anyone should suspect it, this place would be emptied in twenty-four hours.”

In twenty-four hours the cottagers were asking one another, “Did you hear about there being a case of paralysis here and the people smuggling the patient away so we wouldn’t know it?”

Many parents decided to take no chances with their children and hastily moved out.

“This place has a jinx on it!” lamented Mrs. Tracey, who was showing the strain of Kay’s disappearance.

Police, state troopers, friends, relatives and neighbors

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continued the search, but not one single sign was found to tell what had become of Kay. Betty had mentioned Spider's threat against Kay at the bridge a few days before, but the lad could not be located. As the third day wore away, her mother began to lose hope. It was at this crucial point that the very lad in question sneaked up to her kitchen door one night.

“Ssstt!” Spider hissed through the screen, attracting Mrs. Tracey's attention. “Is there a reward offered for finding your daughter?” he asked gruffly.

“Do you know where she is?” The distressed mother gave a glad cry of hope.

“Never mind what I know or don't know,” the boy answered insolently. “I just asked you if there's a reward?”

Hope died out of Mrs. Tracey's eyes but she assured the lad emphatically that a liberal reward would be paid for finding Kay.

“Dead or alive?” demanded Spider brutally.

Mrs. Tracey shuddered and closed her eyes for a second, then regained her composure. “Yes, dead or alive, but double the money if alive,” she added firmly.

A greedy glint lit up the ruffian's face. “Don't you dare tell anyone I asked that!” he threatened and darted off into the woods.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE LOST IS FOUND

As Spider departed, Mrs. Tracey's mind was in a turmoil.

Did the boy know where Kay was? Or was he just speculating on the possibility of winning a reward by chance? Had he taken revenge on Kay as he had threatened to do? Should the police be notified at once to follow him, or was it safer to take him at his word and await developments?

"If I should make one false move, I might put Kay into graver peril," Mrs. Tracey thought in an agony of uncertainty.

The distressed woman kept a sleepless vigil as the night wore on. The twins, unaware of this latest turn of affairs, succumbed to weariness and went to bed. One by one the lights twinkling in the cottages winked out and left Owl's Hole in the blackout of a moonless night. It was nearly three o'clock when Kay's mother, worn out with the strain of worry and waiting, told herself that there was no need to stay up any longer.

"I mustn't let myself get so tired that I fall sick in this crisis," she thought, forcing herself to seek rest.

She was just rising from her arm chair to go reluctantly to bed

when there came a stealthy tap-tap on the window. A face appeared outside, peering in at her. Startled, Mrs. Tracey went to the door.

Spider stood there! He motioned roughly for silence and whispered hoarsely:

“Give me some money and I’ll tell ya where t’ find your daughter.”

Quickly Mrs. Tracey took several bills from her purse and passed them to the lad.

“If you want your girl, you can go get her now, down at the boat dock, and don’t forget I told you where to find her.”

With that he scampered rapidly away into the darkness. Mrs. Tracey, trembling with nervous excitement, hastily awakened the twins. She begged them to go with her to see whether Kay was really at the dock or whether it was only some cruel hoax.

“I knew it, I knew it!” declared Betty, rolling out of bed confused by sleep and fumbling wildly with her clothes. “Spider was keeping his threat to make Kay sorry! Oh, just let me lay my hands on him once, and maybe he won’t be sorry.”

Grinding her teeth in rage, and jamming her right foot frantically into her left shoe, Betty raced after the others. Breathlessly they ran down the uneven path to the boat dock. It was very quiet and dark. There was not a thing to be seen.

“Oh, dear!” cried Mrs. Tracey in bitter disappointment, “she



isn't here!"

"What's that noise?" gasped Wilma, listening.

A dreary whining cry grated on their ears. It sounded sharp and insistent, like someone in pain, then faded away only to begin again.

"Somebody's hurt!" cried Mrs. Tracey.

"That sounds like the *Elf* rubbing against the dock as the wind ruffles the water," said Betty.

Relieved at this, but not much encouraged by anything else, the three felt their way along the narrow dock over the water. Everything was black and still. There was no sign of Kay.

The disappointed searchers felt that Spider had played a ghastly trick upon them but they were unwilling to give up the hunt. Their eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness so that now they could see more clearly.

"Look!" whispered Wilma, pointing.

They now were standing on a narrow board walk that reached out into the river. Suddenly they beheld a small round object slowly rising over the edge of it from the water below.

It was a human head!

The head moved, jerked downward, then stopped motionless. Through the gloom its eyes stared straight at the girls. Neither they nor Mrs. Tracey dared to move or

breathe.

As the head came up higher, arms stretched over the rough boards. Painfully a figure was pulling itself up onto the dock from a rowboat—a disheveled figure with a bloody gash across its forehead.

The person sank down feebly on the planks and lay there in a heap, too weak to move. A sudden cry cut the stillness.

“Kay!” shrieked the lost girl’s mother, and Mrs. Tracey ran recklessly down the narrow planks to her daughter.

“It can’t be Kay!” muttered Betty.

“But it is!” announced Wilma with a joyous shout.

Mrs. Tracey gathered the girl into her arms, too overcome to speak.

“How did you get here? Where have you been?” demanded the twins finally.

Kay gazed at them hazily and ran her hand vaguely over her face. “I don’t know what happened,” she said huskily. “I remember that Betty’s foot was caught and I pulled it, and I fell. Then I don’t remember anything else. Where am I?”

“You are back at Owl’s Hole dock,” explained her mother tenderly. “How did you get here?”

“I don’t know,” replied Kay weakly.

“Never mind about it,” comforted Mrs. Tracey. “That will be cleared up later. Now we must get you to a doctor to see if you have other injuries besides that cut on your head which probably stunned you.”

Moving slowly and quietly, the twins helped Kay stagger back up the path. Mrs. Tracey hurried ahead to get out the car which soon whirled them into town to a doctor.

“No fracture of the skull, only a concussion and some bad bruises,” the physician reassured them after an examination. “But tell me how this happened.”

The twins poured out a tale of their adventure while the man dressed Kay’s wound.

“I felt all along that Spider was at the bottom of the disappearance,” concluded Betty.

“That boy is a real problem, and no wonder,” commented the doctor. “His mother is dead and his father is a queer person if ever there was one. I know, for I treated him once. He lives like a hermit way off in the hills up the river and he is very poor.”

As he talked, the physician’s quick fingers made Kay comfortable. Soon Mrs. Tracey was able to take her home and settle her in bed.

“Oh, how good this feels!” sighed Kay gratefully as she snuggled down, smiled wanly at them all, and fell asleep.

One day of rest was all that was needed to restore the

vigorous Kay to her old energy. When it was announced that David's rustic ice cream stand was ready to open for business, the girl hopped gaily out of bed. She insisted that they all must dress in their best and make a party of the opening.

The twins rallied around and soon had plans for a gala affair to start David's project off with a flourish. Kay's appearance at the party took Ethel by surprise.

"Why, where have you been keeping yourself?" she asked sheepishly.

Those who had listened to Ethel's malicious gossip now eyed Kay's lively arms and legs, amazed to see no sign of paralysis.

"Oh, I was just off on a little jaunt," answered the Tracey girl jovially. "So glad to hear you missed me, Ethel!"

"Miss Eaton," said David firmly, "this is a very good time for you to explain to everybody that you were very much mistaken in supposing that Kay was stricken with a contagious disease. Now you can apologize publicly for spreading such a rumor."

Ethel, cornered, was forced to admit that she had started a false report. Being angry and embarrassed she added:

"I suppose I was mistaken also in thinking that Kay took that poor cripple's money box and then ran away to avoid being questioned!"

This needless remark so infuriated David that he vaulted over the ice-cream counter and advanced upon Ethel to make her retract the statement. At the same moment, the one-legged Jed Farkin appeared, uninvited, upon the scene.

“Heard you was having a little party and I thought I would come to it,” was the way he introduced himself. “I guess I’m entitled to a little of this ice cream,” he said disagreeably, “especially as it has been bought with my stolen money!” He glowered at the Tracey girl.

This insinuation, coming on top of Ethel’s, was the last straw for David’s temper. He turned furiously upon the cripple, championing Kay, and their hot words almost led to blows.

“I will not allow you, nor Miss Eaton, nor anyone else to accuse Kay Tracey falsely!” challenged the young man at white heat.

“O-o-o-h! So you won’t permit this and you won’t permit that, eh?” snarled the cripple. “And what business is it of yours, I should like to know? I’ll show you what I think of you, you—you impudent young—young——”

In a rage Farkin flew at David, balancing on his one leg and raising his crutch like a club to strike the college boy across the head with it. Quickly Kay stepped between the two men to stop the blow.

## CHAPTER XIII

### EXPLOSIONS

Farkin dodged around Kay with surprising speed. He braced himself as best he could on his one leg and then swung violently at David's head with his crutch.

The force of his blow threw him off balance. He toppled wildly and fell flat on his face, the crutch flying out of his hands and landing out of reach. At this instant Spider stepped from the bushes.

“Hit a cripple, would ya?” bawled the boy loudly. “Knocking a crutch from under a cripple is the meanest trick there is! Somebody oughta knock *you* down for that!”

Some of the men on the edge of the crowd who had not seen exactly what had happened, heard Spider and began to boo Halpen. Others took it up and there was rough hooting from some lads near by.

“Knock him down!” prompted Spider. “And wreck that ice cream stand! It belongs to people who steal from cripples and attack 'em!”

Some of the less well-behaved youngsters of Owl's Hole now flung themselves joyously upon the orderly

booth. In a minute a fierce battle was raging with ice cream bombs bursting over David's face and hair.

To quell the riot, Kay leaped up on the counter and clapped her hands for attention. The crowd paused to gaze inquiringly at her. She held in her hands a camera which she had been using a few minutes before.

“I have here some good pictures of our party. But I also caught some other snaps. These will not look very well if I have to exhibit them in court as evidence when I sue for damages. They will tell the truth about who destroyed things here!”

This clever twist subdued the trouble-makers, who began to murmur uneasily and act innocent. Seeing her advantage, Kay went on:

“All this rough stuff is nonsense! You know well enough that I would not steal money. Also many of you were looking at Mr. Farkin when he tried to hit Mr. Halpen.”

There were nods of assent at this, as reason began to take the place of excitement.

“Look at that cut on Kay's head!” cried Wilma loyally. “She got it while helping to hunt for the lost treasure chest. She had a bad fall and was hurt trying to help Mr. Farkin.”

At this speech the crowd began cheering. Then Kay opened her camera dramatically. Everyone watched her.

“Shall we consider this little quarrel a family matter,

and say nothing about it outside our own community?” she asked, smiling.

Heartfelt calls of assent rang out at this sign of good sportsmanship.

“Then suppose I destroy these pictures?” Kay unwound the spool of film and held it against the sun so it became light-struck. “What do you say, let’s give three good cheers for Owl’s Hole!”

They were given with such vigor that they fairly echoed across the river.

“And,” concluded Kay, “I want you all to join in singing a camp song arranged for this party by Wilma Worth. She wrote some words to a familiar tune.”

Eddie Doyle appeared with his accordion and accompanied the song, which was to become a favorite at Owl’s Hole. Led by Wilma they joined in with a rush of good feeling that had not bound the community together before.

“Father Time is a crafty man  
And he’s set in his ways.  
We know that we never can  
Make him give back past days.  
So, Pals here at Owl’s Hole,  
Let’s be friends firm and true,  
Having a gay time in our play time,  
For vacation days are too few.”

“There,” cried David, as the last note floated away, and



he gave Farkin a brotherly slap on the back. “How about telling the folks here that anybody can make a mistake and you admit you were mistaken about who took your money?”

The bridge tender cleared his throat and croaked, “Well, maybe somebody else could of put the girl’s scarf there. And I will say the young lady did her best to help me, so I just as soon admit I ain’t got no real proof against her. But I still say her Uncle Brown is an ole crook!”

With this handsome apology the man took himself off towards the river. At the same time Spider slunk off sulkily into the woods. Once more peace prevailed at Owl’s Hole.

“Whew, what a bad temper!” cried David, mopping strawberry ice cream out of his hair.

“And what powerful oratory!” praised Betty, hugging Kay in delight.

“You’ll have to go into partnership with your cousin in the law business,” applauded Wilma.

“That was a grand showing of community singing!” returned the embarrassed Tracey girl, complimenting the twin’s verse.

Life in the colony remained normal for only two days when all of a sudden a tremendous explosion rocked the place. A deafening roar thundered over woods and river and rolled heavily away through the hills. It echoed and re-echoed for several seconds. Everyone ran outdoors from the cottages with cries of alarm.

“What was it?”

“Who did it?”

“Anybody hurt?”

Before anyone could answer there were loud complaints.

“Our plaster’s knocked down!”

“All our windows are smashed!”

“All the dishes in our pantry are broken!”

“That was dynamite!” said one man in businesslike tones.

“Spider’s to blame for this,” declared Betty in a cautious undertone to Kay.

Upon investigation it was found no one had been injured but the damage was considerable. Later Dave, Eddie and other men who had gone out with the constable to hunt for the cause of the explosion, returned with news.

“Somebody stole a large quantity of dynamite and blew up a cave about half a mile from here,” David reported.

“But nobody knows why,” added Eddie.

After the men had gone off, Kay took her chums aside. “Let’s slip off by ourselves and see what we can find,” she urged the twins adventurously. “You recall one set of the lone footprints led to a cave.”

“I should think you’d have had mystery enough,”  
moaned Betty.

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The twins were far from enthusiastic about marching straight toward possible trouble. When they saw that Kay’s bold heart was set on it, however, they fell in with her plans and trailed loyally after their leader.

The girls followed the path to the cave. When they were close to the spot, Kay cautioned her chums.

“Go quietly, and let’s see if anyone is there. You know it’s said, ‘A criminal always returns to the scene of his crime,’ so maybe that rule will hold good now.”

Accordingly, the three crept stealthily in Indian file. They ambushed on a high rock that gave a good view of the cave, or rather the place where the cave had been! It had been blown completely to bits. A huge black crater gaped in the ground while all about it was strewn a debris of broken rocks.

“What a wreck!” marvelled Betty, gazing at the scene.

“Sh!” said Kay. “Someone is down there!”

“Could it actually be the criminal returning?” asked Betty excitedly.

All three flattened out on the ground, hidden in bushes, and watched the figure below. A queer, stooped old man was peering intently into the ruins and poking industriously in the rubble of blasted rocks.

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“What can he be looking for?” whispered Wilma.

“I’ve seen that man before,” said Kay unexpectedly.

## CHAPTER XIV

### ROCKS AND CAVES

“I’ve seen that man before,” repeated Kay.

“Where?” demanded Betty.

“I can’t recall,” her chum answered, rubbing her forehead in a puzzled way. “But I’m positive I’ve seen him somewhere! Oh, isn’t that maddening! Did I dream it, or——

“I seem to remember his being in a dark place,” recollected Kay, putting her hands over her eyes and puckering her forehead in an effort to think hard. “Maybe I saw him that night I fell off that cliff and got hurt,” she speculated.

“Then you were conscious,” reflected Betty.

“My head ached so that everything was in a fog but there seemed to be indistinct figures moving about,” replied Kay. “He might have been one of them.”

“Can you recall whether he limped?” asked Wilma. “Because *this* man walks with a very decided limp,” she added, “and carries a cane.”

“I’m going down and ask him some questions,” said Kay,

sliding off the rock.

Rather dubiously the twins followed her. The rattle of loose stones that fell as they scrambled downhill, and the grating sound of their feet on the fragments of blasted rock, did not attract the attention of the busy old man. He seemed to hear nothing and continued to examine the ground. 114

Kay spoke to him but he did not turn his head. He went on peering and poking, wholly unconscious of the girl's presence at his elbow. Finally she went around in front of him and he looked up, startled.

“Can you tell me how the explosion happened?” she asked.

He merely looked at her, annoyed, and turned away to continue his search.

“How did it happen?” repeated Kay, raising her voice loudly.

This time he did not even look up.

“He's deaf,” Kay decided. “Maybe deaf and dumb!”

Gently she tapped him on the arm and pointed inquiringly at the wreckage as she spoke very slowly, making her lips form the words plainly. The man shrugged away from her irritably. Then with impatient, limping steps, he went away quickly. In a few seconds he was hidden by the thick foliage.

Kay looked sharply over the ground to see what had held the man's attention. The twins kicked at the loose rocks, now and then picking up one to examine it, then 115

tossing it away again. Suddenly their chum spied an unusual strata of rock that was noticeably different from the common varieties around it. She pointed this out with some excitement.

“Let’s take home samples of this,” she said.

In spite of the blasting which had loosened so much rock, it was difficult to get pieces of the special color. After a good deal of struggling and scratching of fingers, however, a number of bits were secured that seemed to show the peculiar layer formation very well.

“We can’t tell whether or not we have really discovered something important,” said Kay, “but somehow I feel that this rock is valuable and may be the secret behind all the strange happenings at Owl’s Hole.”

“We’ve endured plenty!” said Betty with a gusty sigh, as the three hurried toward home.

Just before reaching the cottage, Wilma, impressed with the uncanny side of their life at the resort, burst into verse.

“Rocks, caves, fens,  
Lakes, bogs, dens,  
Vipers’ poison breath,  
Shades of early death!”

“Shades of death is right!” gasped Betty. “Look on the porch! There’s Mr. Brown himself, in person, and I expected him to die!”

Sure enough, as the girls came in sight of the Tracey

cottage, there sat the owner of Owl's Hole talking to Cousin Bill.

"Welcome home, Uncle!" Kay heartily greeted the elderly man. "This is a pleasant surprise. I'm so glad you are back."

"I'm glad to be back, too," responded the patient, who looked whiter and thinner than ever.

"We girls have been to look at a place where there was an explosion on your property," explained Kay.

"We saw a man there who might have been the dynamiter!" added the twins.

"What did he look like?" asked Cousin Bill.

"Oh, he was queer looking," said Betty.

"Very shabby and secretive," put in Wilma.

"He acted as if he were deaf and dumb," added Kay. "He seemed unable to hear a thing and he wouldn't talk. He acted most annoyed at being approached."

"He sounds eccentric," remarked Bill Tracey.

"He's worse than eccentric, if he thinks he can go around blowing my property to pieces!" growled Mr. Brown, and a purplish hue spread over his waxen face as anger stirred him.

"Now, Uncle," soothed Mrs. Tracey, coming outside, "you mustn't get excited, you know. Here's your



medicine and your nourishment. Let me make you comfortable here in the sunshine. The rest of you must not disturb him.”

“We have some specimens of odd-looking rock to show him,” said Kay.

“You can take up that matter later, this evening perhaps, but he must rest now,” insisted Mrs. Tracey.

It was not until after supper that Kay and the twins displayed their specimens in the living room.

“We found these up the river where the cave had been blasted,” the Tracey girl explained as they dumped their heavy collection on the floor.

The rocks were carefully spread out and each piece examined. At once both men became enthusiastic about the find.

“We’ll have this stuff tested at once,” said Mr. Brown, looking better already, as excitement stained his pallid cheeks pink.

“It looks very promising,” agreed Bill. “Perhaps you have valuable ore on your land that will make it more profitable than you guessed. We had better keep this discovery secret until we find out whether it is really valuable or not. Otherwise someone may try to make a claim on this quarry.”

“Maybe these rocks will make your fortune and you can live happily ever after!” said Betty gaily.

Hardly had she said this, than as if to contradict her there resounded a heavy thud upon the porch, directly under the window. Stealthy footsteps were heard creaking across the porch floor.

“Somebody’s spying on us, trying to see these rocks and hear what we have to say about them!” cried Kay alertly.

She ran to the door and flung it open with a challenging “Who’s there?” Whoever it was took a flying leap through the shrubbery and went thudding down the trail. Kay caught a glimpse of a dark figure before it was swallowed up in dense shadows.

“Spider, I bet!” cried Betty.

“Or one of those awful boat thieves,” said Mrs. Tracey.

“Probably it was that deaf and dumb man,” was Kay’s guess.

The next morning early she went out on the porch to look for evidence. She quickly called the others.

“Look!” she cried. “Last night’s prowler left his usual calling card. The Lone Footprint!”

## CHAPTER XV

### BIRDS OF PREY

“Telegram for Mr. Byram Brown!” called the cheery voice of a messenger boy.

Kay, retracing her steps from a search for the lone footprints, went to receive the envelope. She took it indoors where Mrs. Tracey and Bill were reporting to the patient some of the things that had happened at Owl’s Hole while he was in the hospital.

“As I have said before,” sighed the girl’s mother, “this place seems to have a positive jinx on it.”

“Don’t I know it!” groaned Mr. Brown. “The problems here will be the death of me yet, I fear!”

At this point Kay handed him the telegram. He looked at it listlessly, but when he had read it through he became very excited.

“What do you think of this! It’s an answer to our problems. I have here, believe it or not, an excellent offer to buy Owl’s Hole. I’ve a notion to close the deal right away and be free from further worry!”

“Who is making this handsome offer?” queried Bill Tracey cautiously.

“The Eagle Realty Company,” replied the old gentleman, reading from the telegram.

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“The Eagle Realty Company!” gasped Kay. “I’m sorry to dash your hopes, but we found out that the men who stole your boat, the *Purple Pansy*, belong to the Eagle Realty Company. They are rascals with whom you would not want to do business.”

“I shouldn’t mind taking their money if they pay spot cash as they offer to do,” contended the old banker.

“Their boat was the *Fish Hawk* and their company is the *Eagle Realty*. If you ask me I think they are, like those names, a couple of Birds of Prey,” said Betty.

“Why, Betty!” laughed her twin, “you are getting to be poetic yourself.”

“You better wait, Uncle,” advised Bill shrewdly, “until we have those rock specimens tested. This offer coming directly after that blasting and the finding of them seems strange. It almost looks as if the ore had been proven valuable. Somebody is in a hurry to buy your property before you find out how much it is worth.”

“I suppose you are right,” agreed Mr. Brown. “We should waste no time getting the rocks tested, so that we’ll know whether or not I ought to snap up this offer to sell the place.”

“I’ll send word to the Eagle Company that you are very much interested in their proposition and will think it over,” offered the lawyer. “That will give us time to see where we stand, yet keep the offer open to sell if nothing better turns up.”

“Very good,” assented Mr. Brown, closing his eyes wearily.

Kay accompanied her cousin. After sending the message they went on to the town of Hartford, where the nearest assayer’s office was located. It was while the lawyer was doing an errand and she was awaiting her turn at the office, that the Tracey girl noticed two men who suddenly came from the assayer’s laboratory. Unaware of her, they paused to talk.

“The Birds of Prey!” she thought. “Those are the boat thieves, Fat Webb and Thin Silman! I’ve a good notion to ask them point blank where the *Pansy* is or call the police.”

She hesitated a moment as she caught their whispered words, “Owl’s Hole.” Kay pricked up her ears and heard them mention the plan of the Eagle Realty Company to buy the land at the resort.

“We want to make sure we get the property all the way up the river and get it as soon as possible,” Webb was saying.

“Don’t worry, the old miser will jump at the chance to sell out that bunch of trouble for the good price we offer,” replied Silman. “I wish I could see the old man’s face when he finds out later what that property is really worth!”

With this remark the man laughed softly, showing his yellow

teeth. Webb joined him with a wheezy grin, as the two rascals went off together.

Kay, flushing angrily, quietly followed, but at that moment Cousin Bill beckoned to her from another direction to come into the assayer's office. As the men departed she caught the surprising words:

"I'll meet you later at Barberry Dock. I have that brown boat tied up there for sale."

"The *Purple Pansy*, painted brown!" thought Kay, startled.

Resolving to get Cousin Bill to go with her to Barberry Dock before the men could reach it, she hurried into the geologist's office.

The lawyer spoke up. "My cousin Kay is responsible for finding these specimens," he said, smiling.

"We have reason to keep the report about this ore a secret," said the girl to the scientist. "Will you please not mention to anyone that we have been here? And now we must go."

"We never publish any confidential dealings," the geologist assured her. "Don't worry for a minute."

Cousin Bill wondered why the girl seemed to be in such a rush to get away. He was startled when she related to him a few minutes later the conversation she had overheard. The lawyer gave a long whistle.

"We must hurry to Barberry Dock, wherever that is, and

get back the *Pansy*,” Kay urged.

“As a detective, you have had a profitable morning,” laughed Bill, hurriedly starting his car and hastening toward the river.

Barberry Dock proved to be very hard to find. No one seemed to be quite sure how to direct them to it, and the two Traceys were obliged to hunt for it themselves without much success.

“It is plain that the place is used as a hideout,” said Kay impatiently.

“Well,” said her cousin determinedly, “a dock must certainly be on the water, so we shall just go along exploring every little cove and jetty until we find it.”

He turned his car into a dirt road that wound off half noticed into some woods. They followed this for some distance but saw nothing that looked like a dock. They were about to turn back as the lane ended when Kay spied a low building. On it was a weatherbeaten sign:

### BARBERRY DOCK

Cousin Bill jumped from the auto and strode up to the place.

“Anybody here?” he called.

In the meantime, Kay hurried out on the wooden structure to see whether there was any sign of the stolen boat. Several old craft were tied up at the wharf. At first the girl felt a prick of disappointment not to recognize the trim *Purple Pansy* among them. She realized, however, that it had

been painted another color. She stepped along eyeing each boat sharply and trying to pierce the disguise of Mr. Brown's property. All of a sudden, something familiar in the outline of one of them caught her sight.

"That's it!" thought Kay in delight.

But what a sight! When Kay had last ridden in it, the *Purple Pansy* was new, shiny, and all its brass work gleaming. Now it wore a coat of streaked brown paint. Already it was scratched and dingy. The decks were dirty, and smelled unpleasantly of fish. The brass was dull and grimy.

Kay flew back to call her cousin who was approaching with an over-alled individual. He was trying to explain that he knew nothing about any brown boat except one that was for sale. He pointed it out just as Kay remarked:

"This is our boat, Cousin Bill."

"I warn you that this is stolen property," said the lawyer to the fisherman. "If you try to sell it, you will get into trouble."

Bill Tracey's outspoken remark seemed to embarrass the Barberry man. He became very nervous.

"If you say that's your boat and can prove it, take it along before there's any fuss about it. I don't want folks to think I handle stolen goods!"

Kay was at a loss to know how to prove that the boat was theirs, but she gave the license number and told the story of the *Pansy*. She even showed the purple paint visible



through a scratch on the brown coat.

“That’s right,” agreed the man. “Take it, and I’ll give your name and address to them two fellers that brought it here, if they show up.”

“I’ll run my car to a garage in town, Kay,” said Bill. “You drive the boat and I’ll meet you at Smith’s Dock in Hartford. Then we’ll go home together in the *Pansy*.”

Before she got away Kay became nervous. At the sound of each footstep she was sure the thieves were coming and she would lose the boat again. A strange man did appear and inquire about the brown boat that was for sale. The dock owner, coming from the building, said that it was not for sale any longer.

“The young lady took it,” he explained, and the customer went away disappointed.

“That was a narrow escape for me,” thought Kay, starting the motor.

In a few minutes she was speeding down the river and met her cousin at the appointed place.

“Now, let’s get home as fast as we can,” she begged.

With the lawyer’s skilled hand on the wheel, Kay could relax and enjoy the spin toward the familiar Owl’s Hole wharf.

“Maybe the paint is not good on this boat now, but the motor certainly hums along as breezily as ever,” said

Bill.

When lo, the motor coughed, wheezed, and went dead!

“Out of gas!” both Traceys cried together in dismay.

“We must be within a mile of home!” added Kay.

In vain they searched for an emergency supply of gas on board. Not a drop was on hand. In the meanwhile, the helpless boat became caught in the current and began to be swept downstream. There was nothing the passengers could do.

“There’s a raft full of boys ahead,” Kay called out in warning.  
“Hurry, Bill, look for an anchor. We’re going to crash into them!”

## CHAPTER XVI

### RETURN OF THE PANSY

Bill Tracey found an anchor, but before he could lower it, the boat had drifted perilously near the clumsy homemade raft on which a group of boys were balancing and yelling. Kay recognized the red hair and rough voice of Spider.

“Look where you’re going!” he howled.

The raft, a heavy thing of logs, slopped along, propelled by poles in the hands of the lively lads. It tipped dangerously as the fellows yelled and scrambled. Water rolled over their feet.

“I can’t get this thing loose!” cried Bill Tracey, tugging at the anchor chain.

On came the *Pansy*, drifting sideways. In vain Kay whirled the wheel, but without the motor the boat would not answer the helm. In another minute it bumped into the logs. The jar flung all the boys sprawling, and Spider shot off the slippery surface into the river. He rose, snorting and spouting water, and swung himself back onto the raft.

“Run us down, will ya?” he bawled at Kay. “We’ll fix ya!” he added, ramming the log craft savagely against

the *Pansy*, denting its side.

Bill by this time had dropped anchor. The boys started pulling at the rope to let the boat loose. When Kay leaned overboard to ask them not to do this, she was drenched with water they splashed at her.

“Here, you fellows, lay off the rough stuff!” demanded the lawyer.

At first they paid no attention but when he mentioned the kind of trouble into which boys can get from being over mischievous, they quieted down.

“I’ll go ashore and get gas,” offered Kay, spying an oncoming motorboat. “You stay here and keep those young hoodlums under control.”

This plan was agreed upon, so Kay hailed the other craft. Upon reaching shore the kindly people had to leave her as they were in a hurry.

Seeing no place where gasoline was sold, she ran ahead hopefully in search of some. Still she saw no kind of a store where she might buy any.

Heaving a sigh of disappointment, she struck off through the woods toward Owl’s Hole. To cover the mile or so that lay before her, she had to pass near the scene of the explosion. As she drew close, she saw a figure stooped over. It was that of the same queer old man she had seen before. He was still poking industriously in the ruins. Kay paused.

“Have you lost something?” she asked.

The man turned and gave her a surly glare. He made no answer.

“Are you looking for something?” Kay tried again with a pleasant smile.

The man scowled and walked away.

“He certainly acts queer,” she thought, and hurried on so that Cousin Bill would not be kept waiting.

Back at Owl’s Hole at last, Kay was relieved to see Halpen and the twins.

“Guess what?” she shouted, breaking into an excited run. “We found the *Pansy*!”

“W-h-a-t? How? Where?”

Kay quickly told how she had overheard the men mention the boat’s whereabouts, and how she and Cousin Bill had located it. When she mentioned that the gas had run out, Dave immediately volunteered to take a supply on the *Elf*. As he set off on his rescue expedition, the twins pelted Kay with questions.

“So you saw the old man still looking for rocks?”

“Do you really think those Eagle Realty men found out they are valuable?”

“How soon can we know?”

“What did the geologist say?”

Kay reported she was sure the scientist would tell them, as she believed he already had told the men, that the rocks were very valuable and that Owl’s Hole would prove richer as a mine than as a cottage colony. While the twins, Mrs. Tracey and Mr. Brown were exclaiming over these new developments, a great tooting of boat horns announced that the lost *Pansy* had come home safely at last!

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“Uncle, you must come to see your wanderer returned!” urged Kay.

The old man, trembling with excitement, leaned on her arm and ventured to the dock. “This was very, very good and clever of you two,” he quavered appreciatively. “I certainly want to give you the reward I offered for her return.”

This, however, Kay and Bill flatly refused.

“I wouldn’t think of it!” said the girl positively. “After all, I lost your boat when you so kindly lent it to me, so why should I be paid for getting it back?”

The elderly relative, nevertheless, was so delighted about the return of his boat, and so pleased with Kay’s enterprise, that he made up his mind, privately, to reward her. He suggested a celebration but Bill said hurriedly:

“I must be on my way back to town, for I have an important business engagement in Brantwood. I’ll take the train, pick up

my car at that Barberry garage, and drive straight to town.”

The next evening a jeweler from Hartford delivered to Kay a lovely and valuable bracelet, and to Bill a handsome, gold-handled penknife with engraved initials.

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“Oh, Uncle, you shouldn’t have done this!” Kay protested, reluctant to accept the gift.

“I want to give you some little token of my appreciation of the way you have stood by me in all the difficulties at Owl’s Hole, so say no more about it,” insisted the old gentleman, slipping the shining bracelet on Kay’s wrist. “I hope that troubles at the resort are over and that the place will be peaceful from now on.”

This hope was shattered suddenly by a terrific scream. There was a pause, then scream upon scream followed, each higher and more piercing than the preceding one.

“What in the world has happened?” wailed Mrs. Tracey, rushing to the window.

Mr. Brown tried to rise but staggered back and sank into his chair again, completely unnerved. His face had turned as white as paper.

There was the sound of running footsteps outside in the dark. Then hastily someone thumped up the porch. A tearful voice called:

“Miss Tracey!”

“What’s the matter?” demanded Kay, opening the door.

One of the women tenants from a nearby cottage fairly fell into the room. She was too out of breath to speak, and her eyes were dark with terror. She sat down, panting and puffing from her run. 132

“Oh, the most awful sight!” she moaned when she could get her breath.

“Do tell us what it was!” begged Mrs. Tracey, impatient with the suspense.

“It was a tall, horrible, black figure! A huge man, with feathers in his hair!”

Other feet now stamped up on the porch and cottagers stormed in to lodge new complaints.

“What’s this tale about a tall man with feathers in his hair?” demanded Kay, to whom the idea certainly sounded fantastic.

“We’ve seen him, too,” assented others who appeared to be perfectly sensible, sober people.

“He looked like an Indian chief in a big feather war bonnet, and he carried a tomahawk.”

“It might be some boy dressed up,” said Kay, trying to calm the fears of the tenants.

“Oh, no!” came a protesting chorus.



“He’s sort of a ghost!” somebody explained. “This isn’t the first time he’s been around. He comes softly in his moccasins so you never know he is near until he appears right at your shoulder and scares you clean out of your wits.”

“Then he vanishes; goes out like a bubble!” explained somebody else nervously.

“I never heard such rubbish,” said Mr. Brown brusquely.

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“It isn’t rubbish!” retorted one of the cottagers sharply, feeling much irritated by the manner of the owner of Owl’s Hole.

“There’s been a lot of queer goings on in this place,” continued the sharp voice, “and you are plainly to blame for all of it!”

“I’m to blame!” squeaked Mr. Brown, enraged, his face turning purple. “I’m not to blame, my dear lady. I’m the worst victim of it!”

“Yes, I say you are to blame,” his accuser continued.

“What makes you say that?” demanded Kay.

“Because I have just learned that he built this colony on the site of an ancient Indian burying ground. Anybody knows that no luck comes to anything that is built on an old graveyard. That man had no right to build cottages here and rent them to us. No wonder we are disturbed all the time.”

“Yes,” spoke up someone else timidly, “I’ve never known it to fail that when houses or roads are put across a grave, trouble is sure to come to the place.”

“Where did you hear this is the site of an old Indian burying ground?” questioned Kay.

“Miss Eaton told us it was,” a voice explained.

A sudden light dawned in Kay’s eye. “O-ho, so it was Miss Eaton who started this story, was it?”

“Yes, she said it was told her by an old man who had lived here all his life. He knows all the historical spots around these parts.”

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“I see,” said Kay dryly. “Well, if you will go now and try to get some rest tonight, tomorrow we’ll try to do something to take the curse off this ground.”

Grumbling, the tenants took themselves off, muttering to one another. More than one timid soul vowed to move out as soon as daylight should come.

“That Ethel!” stormed the twins.

“She’s a positive menace!” raged Betty.

“Oh well, girls, don’t bother too much about her,” counselled Mrs. Tracey. “We can’t let Uncle get sick again worrying over it.”

“Anyway,” Kay said cheerfully, “I am sure those rocks will

prove to be so valuable, Uncle By, that you can sell out for a huge sum of money. Then all your worries will be over!”

“I wish I thought so,” said the old man, shaking his head gloomily.

At that moment there came a thunderous knocking at the door. Everyone thought some tenants were returning with new complaints. The group was startled, therefore, when in stormed Jed Farkin. His face was dark with anger as he pointed a finger at Kay and spoke harshly.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t stolen my money this time,” he bellowed.

“What do you mean?” cried the Tracey girl, dumbfounded.

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“I told you I had my money buried in two different places and you know one place was cleaned out,” explained the enraged man. “And now,” he paused dramatically, “all the other money is gone too!”

“Oh!” cried the twins.

“Yes,” roared the man. “This time it was in a bag plainly stamped with my name.”

“Mr. Farkin,” said Kay earnestly, “we shall probe this thing to the bottom and get back your money. We’ll stand by you until we see that the robbers are caught and justice is done.”

“Fair words don’t butter my bread!” the cripple sneered. “And

never will I expect justice from any of the family of that wicked old crook sittin' right there!" Farkin strode up to shake a finger ferociously under the nose of Byram Brown, ex-president of the bank that had failed.

As the patient's white face turned slowly blue with emotion, Mrs. Tracey quickly cut in, "That will do, Mr. Farkin! Mr. Brown's heart is not strong and you cannot come into his home and accuse him without evidence. Please leave at once."

With a grunt and gesture of rage, the one-legged man marched out of the house. Kay went to close the door and was just in time to see the man trip in the darkness on the porch. She snapped on the light.

"What's this?" yelled Farkin, looking down to see what had made him stumble. "A-ha!" he cried bitterly. "Talk about evidence! Now you can't deny that you had something to do with taking my money. This—" he held aloft the object he had snatched up from the porch floor—"this is the bag that held my money!"

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All crowded around to see what he held. It was a stout leather pouch, reinforced with heavy straps. Printed plainly in gold letters on the side were the words:

JEDIKIAH FARKIN

"How did this get here?" he demanded.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### DISAPPOINTMENT

“I don’t know,” gasped Kay. “But if I did, I shouldn’t be likely to place the evidence on my own porch and then turn on the light so you would be sure to see it!”

“I still say you robbed me, and I’m going to have you arrested!” the man shouted.

As a new thought struck Kay she turned to the twins. “Do you suppose Ethel Eaton got hold of the bag somehow and put it here for spite?” she asked.

“Did you say Ethel Eaton?” roared Farkin. “Don’t drag that little lady’s name into this!”

Kay and the twins were surprised at this unexpected outburst. What did it mean?

“Miss Eaton is a fine girl and the only one who takes my troubles to heart or tries to help me! I won’t hear a word against her!” proclaimed Farkin.

“There’s something queer about this!” whispered Betty to Wilma.

“Yes, what can Ethel be up to now?” answered Wilma distrustfully.

“Never mind whispering about me!” barked the cripple suspiciously. “And never mind saying things about my friend Miss Eaton! She’s set to work like a detective to catch the person who’s robbing me. When she succeeds, you’ll be surprised and sorry!” With this threat he snatched up his bag and walked off. 138

Mr. Brown, seriously upset by the commotion, caused a sensation by collapsing on the floor. He was bundled off to bed and though he slept, still felt too weak and dizzy the next morning to get up.

“Do you think it wise to bother him with business today?” asked Cousin Bill, conferring quietly with Mrs. Tracey. “I have here the report of the assayer on those rock samples we took to be tested. As the verdict effects a decision about selling Owl’s Hole, I think he will have to know about it.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Tracey doubtfully, “try to be as brief and gentle as possible.”

As he entered his uncle’s room, Kay propped the invalid up in bed.

“This ought to be the best of news, to cheer you up and make you well at once!” she said, smiling.

“Well, what does it say?” asked the feeble old man impatiently.

“The letter is addressed to you, so I have not opened it,” answered Bill Tracey, handing over an important looking document.

Mr. Brown fumbled with the big envelope and then tossed it irritably to the lawyer. “My fingers are all thumbs. You open it and read the contents aloud.”

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Bill Tracey did so, and the listeners leaned forward with high hopes. Hastily the lawyer ran his eyes over the page. His face clouded as he broke the news that he saw there.

“The geologist, I am sorry to say, reports that the rock samples we submitted to him are of practically no value at all.”

There was complete silence save for a hiss of sharply in-drawn breath and a gusty sigh of disappointment.

“I might have known it,” whimpered the old gentleman, slumping hopelessly into his pillows. “I’ve had nothing but hard luck for years now and I was foolish to have hoped that it had changed.”

“There must be some mistake!” protested Kay, stunned by the report.

“The letter says the samples show some slight value but not enough to warrant mining. I’ll sell the whole place at once!” declared the old man, bouncing up from his pillows. “I’ll snap up that Eagle Realty offer and I’ll snap it up now! Where is that telegram? Somebody get me some paper! Where’s a pen and where’s the ink? Come, Bill, draw up an acceptance of

that offer and get it off in the next mail!”

“Oh, Uncle, do wait!” pleaded Kay. “I am sure those rocks are valuable! There is some mistake!”

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She told how she had overheard the two schemers laughing together to think how they would buy up Owl’s Hole cheaply because it was not known how valuable the land really was.

“I can’t go through all the worry of checking up and carrying on a new development,” said the sick man. “I’ll just sell it and be done with the whole thing.”

Kay’s conviction that the ore was really valuable in spite of the report, was not shared by Bill. He felt that the assayer had given its true value, while his cousin was sure there had been some mistake.

Mr. Brown and Bill Tracey began at once to draw up the necessary papers to sell the land to the Eagle Realty Company. A telephone call suggested an immediate meeting at Hartford, when the entire amount would be paid in cash. This promising offer stirred the old banker to the effort of getting up to dress.

“I’m going at once and get that money myself,” the invalid vowed.

“But you aren’t strong enough to go!” protested Mrs. Tracey.

“Fiddlesticks!” said the old man, stubbornly determined to carry the deal through at once.



The prospect of action and ready cash seemed to act like a tonic upon the aged man and he actually seemed strong enough to make the effort.

“I am sorry that I can’t go,” apologized Bill, “but I have a business engagement to keep today. Couldn’t you wait and go another time when I could be with you?”

“No,” said his uncle decidedly, “I am going right now while I feel equal to it.”

“I’ll take you, Uncle,” offered Kay, who was still dazed and dismayed at the news.

“We’ll all go with you,” said Wilma.

“And take the best of care of you, Mr. Brown,” encouraged Betty, smiling.

“Let’s get off, then, before anything happens,” urged the old man eagerly.

Mr. Brown was bundled into the car with a twin on each side of him, while Kay drove to Hartford.

“I remember the address,” she said, “because I got Farkin to write it down. I compared his handwriting with that on the threatening note you received, Uncle, but I must confess I saw very little resemblance between them. Now who could have written that note?” she mused aloud.

“The whole thing is very complicated,” sighed Wilma.

“I’m selling out, thank goodness, and then I hope we’ll all get a little peace,” replied Mr. Brown.

The prospect of this solution of his troubles and the diversion of the ride seemed to make the old gentleman feel better. Betty remarked on this as they got out of the car in the city of Hartford to go to the Eagle office. 142

“You’re getting almost spry!” she complimented him as he stepped out of the car without accepting her helping hand.

“Oh, I’m all right,” he said briskly. “Now, you girls amuse yourselves about town. I’ll meet you here later and we’ll enjoy a little celebration before we drive home again.”

The aged banker then stepped into the office building and the girls went off to do some shopping. So interested did they become in some new bathing togs that the appointed hour arrived before they were aware of it.

“Goodness, look at the time!” prompted Betty. “Come on, we mustn’t keep Mr. Brown standing there on the corner waiting for us!”

“No. Suppose he should have a fainting spell!” worried Wilma.

“Uncle will be all right if the deal goes through smoothly,” said Kay wisely. “Business seems to be a tonic for him.”

“But what if the deal does not go smoothly?” asked Wilma.

“To tell the truth I shall be surprised if it does,” Kay

answered. “I don’t trust those Eagle Realty men.”

“I should say not!” agreed the sisters.

“They are up to something, mark my words,” said Kay soberly.

The three girls quickened their steps. Arriving at the corner where they had agreed to meet, they were relieved to find that Mr. Brown had not appeared yet.

“Oh me, oh my, I’m so hot I’m nearly dead,” panted Betty. “I feel the need of a little ice cream to revive me.”

“We could go over to that store across the way,” suggested Wilma. “From there we easily could watch for Mr. Brown from that big front window.”

“So we could,” assented Kay.

“Let’s go, then,” insisted Betty.

The chums strolled across the street and settled themselves comfortably at a table in the window. When they had placed their order, Betty leaned forward.

“Don’t look now,” she warned, playing with soda straws in an unconcerned manner, “but Ethel Eaton and her aunt are at a table over there.”

Ethel, realizing that she had been recognized, strolled over to the girls’ table.

“Well, what brings you all the way to the city on this broiling hot day?” she inquired.

“We’ve been shopping,” said Betty, truthfully enough.

“I’ve been following up some very interesting clues,” volunteered Ethel with an unpleasant smirk.

No one asked her to sit down, but she did so, and Betty sighed impolitely.

“I am very much interested in Mr. Farkin’s lost money,” went on Ethel.

“Oh?” said Kay non-committally, directing her attention to an elaborate structure of ice cream, fruit, nuts and whipped cream with a cherry triumphantly atop.

Annoyed that the girls were not paying her any attention, Ethel remarked significantly, “Perhaps if you knew all I know, you’d show some interest.”

“Perhaps,” replied Kay tersely, her eyes searching the street for some sign of her uncle.

“There are some very strange clues that I have been fortunate enough to unearth about the Farkin robbery, which perhaps you know more about than I do,” went on Ethel.

“You certainly started something when you scared the cottagers with that fantastic tale about the old Indian graveyard,” said Kay.

“Well,” bristled the mischief-maker, “I certainly didn’t have to make up anything about it. It’s perfectly true. Mr. Farkin told me so himself. He knows all the old native lore about these parts. In fact,” she said impressively, “he is part Indian himself.”

“Oh, is that so?” said Betty, imitating Ethel’s airy manner. “Well, I suppose he’s descended from a one-legged Indian chief and inherited the one leg.”

“Oh, the time will come when you won’t think things so funny,” retorted Ethel. “My clues point to the fact the person who robbed Mr. Farkin is a relative of Mr. Brown!”

With this remark the Eaton girl flounced back to her own table. The three chums ate their ice cream in silence, and left the store, not deigning to give Ethel even a nod. They crossed to the appointed corner, and waited and waited.

“I wonder why Uncle doesn’t come?” asked Kay uneasily.

“Perhaps we’ve missed him in some way,” said Betty.

“Could he be sick, do you suppose?” Wilma suggested anxiously.

“It’s getting late,” worried Kay. “I think I’ll go into the office and see if I can get him.”

“It’s a dingy, dreary old building,” said Betty critically.

“Do hurry up,” begged Wilma.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Kay promised.

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But she did not come back in a minute nor in many minutes.

“Now what’s happened?” the twins asked each other, as they waited impatiently outside.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### STRANGE BUSINESS

Kay, upon entering the dingy office building, looked in vain on the wall directory for the name of the Eagle Realty Company. No such firm was listed, either under E for Eagle or R for Realty. Neither were the men whom Betty had nicknamed “Birds of Prey” listed under W for Webb, or S for Silman.

“That’s strange,” she thought uneasily. “Uncle certainly came in here and this is surely the address of the company.”

It was now past closing time and the passenger elevator had stopped running. There was no operator from whom to inquire directions. At last Kay found a janitor who scratched his head and said vaguely that he thought the men she was looking for shared an office with another concern.

“It’s funny they’re not listed, just the same,” she said.

The janitor offered to give the girl a ride up to the fourth floor in the freight elevator to reach the office. Kay, much relieved at finding herself on her uncle’s trail at last, gladly rode up.

“Just go down that corridor until you get to Room 415,” directed the man, letting her off.

The door clanged shut and he sank out of sight. Kay advanced down the empty, silent corridor, looking for room numbers. The hall was so dimly lighted that the lettering on the ground-glass windows was very indistinct.

“Oh, here it is!” she thought with relief, as she came to the end of the corridor. “But it doesn’t look right!” she reflected in alarm.

There was no lettering on the door to indicate that either the Eagle Company or any other company was using the room. The place was locked, and no one answered Kay’s knock.

“The janitor must have been mistaken,” she thought, a little worried. “Perhaps he meant Room 315. I’ll walk down and see.”

There was no sign of her uncle, Webb, Silman, or anybody else to be seen on the third floor or on the second. Again she sought the janitor.

“Well, that’s funny,” said he, rubbing his chin meditatively. “That’s the room number all right, where they used to be. Must have moved out without notice.”

“It’s very strange,” worried Kay.

“Some of these business men are fakes, here today and gone tomorrow. Did they cheat you in business or something?” asked the kindly man.

Kay told her story and the janitor offered to start with her on the top floor and look in every room in the



building to see if her uncle's voice might be heard within.

Up, up creaked the freight elevator again. Patiently Kay and the janitor went down corridor after corridor. There was no trace of Mr. Brown or of the realty operators.

“It's the most mysterious thing!” cried Kay. “Uncle walks into a building before my eyes and disappears completely. More than that, there is no sign of the company he's looking for ever having been here.”

“Sounds like there might be something criminal about the whole thing,” said the janitor. “Or,” he added hopefully, “maybe he came out while you were shopping and didn't wait for you.”

“That's the only explanation I can make of it,” assented Kay.

Thanking the janitor for his help she returned to her chums outside, much disheartened. Betty, who was tired of waiting, pooh-poohed the idea of Mr. Brown's being in any trouble.

“He probably met the men in there somewhere, got through his business in jig time and then went on home by train.”

“He was far from well, and maybe he had a heart attack or something,” said Wilma dismally.

“Let's go home,” urged Betty. “If he isn't there we can get your Cousin Bill to start a search.”

“I promised Mother I would take good care of uncle, too,” said Kay remorsefully, as they drove along.

Her mother, however, was the one who cheered them up when they reached home. She produced a telegram which had come to her, reading:

“Finished deal satisfactorily. Am at fraternity club in my old college town, winding up other business. Byram Brown.”

“Well!” exclaimed Betty, rather ruffled by all this. “It seems as if he might have waited and let us know instead of bouncing off like that and leaving us to worry.”

“Perhaps this teaches us not to worry!” said Mrs. Tracey.

The next morning she changed her mind. While the girls were in swimming, a man came to the cottage and introduced himself as an agent of the Eagle Realty Company. His name, he said, was Canfax. The message he delivered was so upsetting that when Kay and the twins got back they found her packing.

“Mother, what has happened?” asked her daughter, startled.

Mrs. Tracey told of the call of Mr. Canfax, ending with the announcement:

“He told me we had to move out at once!”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. We have to leave this cottage in twenty-four hours. He was so insistent and disagreeable and bossy that I thought we might as well avoid more trouble, so I’ve begun to pack.”

“But Mother, he can’t do that!” protested Kay. “I am going to get in touch with Uncle and ask his advice. I’ll find out what kind of a deal he made. Indeed, until I’m satisfied that everything is honest about this thing, I refuse to budge!”

“Hooray for you!” cheered Betty.

Kay immediately went to the telephone and put in a call for him at his fraternity house in the college town. The girl asked to speak to Mr. Byram Brown.

“Mr. Brown is not here,” came a voice over the line.

“When do you expect him back?” asked Kay.

“He hasn’t been here and we have had no word that he is coming,” responded the voice on long distance.

“When was he there last?” demanded Kay, a wrinkle of worry beginning to crease her brow.

“Just a minute, please.” There was an empty crackle and humming of the wire for a while until the voice returned and said, “Our records show that Mr. Byram Brown has not been here for over a year.”

“Thank you,” said Kay, hanging up. “That’s very queer,” she thought.

She immediately tried to get her lawyer cousin on the phone. He, however, was out of town.

“What shall we do now?” Kay asked her mother.

“Oh, I’m sure I don’t know!” said Mrs. Tracey, torn with anxiety. “Uncle may have been the victim of foul play, especially if he carried a lot of money with him. Those men were to pay him cash, you know.”

“I think the foul play, if any, took place before any cash was paid over to him,” said Kay.

“We ought to notify the police,” advised Wilma.

“Yes, of course,” said Mrs. Tracey, and promptly went to the telephone and did so.

“That’s a good move,” approved Kay, “but after all, the police have been notified of our troubles all along and I cannot see that they have made much headway.”

As soon as Bill Tracey returned home, he hired a detective from a first-rate agency.

“Now I hope we get some action,” he said.

“We must have action soon, because if Uncle is in danger, his poor health will make the situation a matter of life or death for him,” said Mrs. Tracey.

Realizing that the frail old man had not been fit to get out of bed the day he had insisted on driving to Hartford, they all were in constant anxiety that he had collapsed somewhere. A check-up of hospitals, however, revealed no trace of him.

After the detective had been busy searching for the invalid for days, he reported nothing encouraging. Kay,

impatient, suggested that she and the twins hustle out and conduct an extensive investigation of their own.

“But where could we look that hasn’t been thought of already?” asked Wilma helplessly. “And where could we hope to find those men, since the address they gave was false?”

“There is one place we know where they go!” announced Kay with a gleam in her eye.

“Where is that?” asked the twins.

“Barberry Dock!” replied Kay triumphantly.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A MYSTERIOUS BUNDLE

“I’ll drive the car to Barberry Dock,” said Kay. “The *Pansy* might run into bad luck again!”

“My goodness, I should think any one would have bad luck on this road!” objected Betty some time later, as she suffered a severe shake-up on the rough, winding trail along the shore.

Kay mercifully came to a standstill soon, near the wharf where the *Pansy* had been found. The place was so hidden in high grasses in the elbow-shaped inlet, that Wilma was led to say:

“This is a perfect hide-out for pirates, smugglers, robbers or kidnappers! Ugh! It gives me the creeps.”

Kay went to the little building and called. The same individual who had restored the *Pansy* to her came out again. Kay explained that they were in pursuit of the men who had stolen that boat.

“Only this time they seem to have stolen my uncle,” she said.

The man became very irritable at this, complaining bitterly, “I wish them fellers would keep away from

here. They give my place a bad name!”

“What did they say about the *Pansy*?” asked Kay eagerly.

“They was mad and said they didn’t steal it. Said the owner gave ’em the job of paintin’ it. They was goin’ to return it but you didn’t give ’em the chance!”

“That’s not true, but never mind,” sighed Kay. “The present matter is more important. Do those men come here regularly?”

“No. Just off and on. But I don’t want no trouble, so don’t you let on I told you, but they was here three days ago.”

“Do you know where they went?” probed Kay anxiously.

“Well, no, I don’t know *where* they went,” he answered, “but I know *how* they went, if that will do you any good.”

“What do you mean—how they went?” cross-questioned Kay.

“They went off in a boat of mine and they never brought it back again,” he said angrily.

“Seems to be a habit of theirs!” remarked Betty bitterly.

“Can you give us the details?” begged Kay, delighted with the clue.

“Yes, they came here and hired one of my boats, to go on a fishing trip, they said. They never came back. Haven’t heard a word from them since.”

“Why, that was the very day Mr. Brown disappeared!” whispered Wilma alertly.

“Did you notice what they took with them?” asked Kay shrewdly.

“Yes, I should say I did, for I never saw so much stuff put aboard for a fishing trip in all my born days. They must have had supplies enough to last them on a cruise to the South Pole and sometimes I think they must have started for there,” he said with a wry smile.

“What did they take with them?” Kay asked suspiciously.

“Well, food of course, and fishing tackle, but mostly a lot of clothes and blankets.”

“Clothes and blankets!” said Betty, surprised.

“Yes, and they didn’t like it either, when I noticed all those blankets. They said it got cold out fishing! I told them it was summer time and plenty hot.”

“How many blankets did they take?” persisted Kay curiously.

“Well, I couldn’t count ’em, because they was all wrapped up in a bundle.”

“How big was it?” inquired Betty.

“It was a roll of bedding as big as a man,” said the Barberry owner. The three girls exchanged quick, frightened looks. “Yes, ma’am, big as a man. I joked with



them and asked who they had rolled up in all that bedding and they got mad as hops, jumped on board and scooted out of here as fast as the boat would go.”

“What kind of boat is it?” demanded Kay, her face very serious.

“A nice cabin cruiser, painted a bright green. She’s a good one and her name’s the *Sea Serpent*. I’ll be glad to have her back.”

“Look here,” said Kay confidentially, “I think that bundle of blankets was a man, all wrapped up to hide him! And I think he was probably unconscious or too sick to struggle. In fact, I believe those men spirited my uncle away on your *Sea Serpent*!”

“I do, too!” chimed in Betty.

“The boat was rented on the very day Mr. Brown disappeared,” Wilma observed.

“Jumping Junebugs!” exclaimed the man excitedly. “I’ll notify the river police right away.”

He rushed off to telephone the details and to ask that a green cruiser named *Sea Serpent* be hunted for and held for investigation.

“That ought to fetch them!” he declared. “I want my boat and you want your uncle and the police want those pirates, so before long among all of us we ought to get results.”

Thanking the man for his help, and promising to keep in touch with him, the girls drove off.

“I feel repaid for this morning’s work,” exulted Betty with a breezy sigh of satisfaction.

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“I feel more worried than ever that Mr. Brown will succumb to excitement and exposure,” grieved Wilma.

“At least we have what looks like a real clue at last,” triumphed Kay, but she too was very serious.

The news was received with alarm by Mrs. Tracey and Cousin Bill. The young lawyer in the meantime had been carrying on his own investigations.

“I’ve been delving into the affairs of this so-called Eagle Realty Company,” he reported, “and I regret to say that I find they have no backing whatsoever. The outfit is a fraud and I doubt whether Uncle received a single penny for his property that day he disappeared!”

“I thought you said they mailed you, the next day, all papers covering the sale of the Owl’s Hole property to them and that these papers appeared to be legal and in good order in every way,” said Mrs. Tracey.

“Yes, they seemed to be,” acknowledged Lawyer Bill, “but I am positive now that they are falsified and a fraud also.”

“What is that terrible noise?” complained Betty. “I can hardly hear a word you are saying.”

“Oh, that’s a big steam shovel that appeared on the scene while you were away,” explained Mrs. Tracey, holding her ears. “That man Canfax, the new agent here—the one who ordered us out of this house—says they are excavating for a new radio station.”

“A radio station!” ridiculed Kay. “Digging for more of that curious dark colored ore, more than likely,” she declared.

“I thought it was proved to be of no value,” said Wilma.

“I believe that was a mistake,” said Kay. “Everything seems to point to the fact that these Eagle Realty people believe it is valuable. They are gambling on it, and that steam shovel is proof that they want to get at the ore.”

“Maybe the Eagle people were fooled,” said Wilma.

“Yes, maybe they think it is valuable and it isn’t! That would be a good joke on them!” chuckled Betty.

“I am sure they took samples to the same man that we did for analysis. I can’t understand why he would tell them that the rock is of value and tell us it is not. That is the real puzzle!” said Kay.

“We might go back and get some other samples,” Betty suggested helpfully. “We might have picked up the wrong kind before.”

“That’s so,” said Kay. “If we can find the old man there poking in the ruins as usual, we can watch him and see what kind he takes, then get some like it. Let’s go back there

now,” she urged energetically.

The three set off once more for the dynamited spot.

“Cousin Bill thinks that place we fell into the day Spider chased us, is an old test hole, sunk by prospectors in search of ore,” said Kay, as they walked along.

“That sounds as if some one had expected to find ore of value here before,” exclaimed Wilma.

“But if the venture was given up, maybe that shows the rock was judged to be no good even then,” said Betty, discouraged.

“There’s the same queer old man!” cried Kay, pointing. “He’s still looking for something in the piles of broken stones. Let’s see what it is.”

The girls approached him this time without fear of his hearing them. They walked close to him and felt convinced that he was deaf.

“He’s collecting our chocolate cake specimens!” said Betty.

It was plain to be seen that the rocks with the layer formation were the samples this man was interested in. This puzzled Kay more than ever.

“Those are exactly what we collected,” she thought, “and if he finds them valuable, why are we told that they aren’t any good?”

She broke off her thoughts to approach the old man and

ask him questions. Sure that he was deaf, she produced pencil and paper and wrote clearly on a slip of paper which she handed to him.

“What are you looking for?” she had written.

The queer character read it and promptly tore the paper into little pieces and scattered them on the ground. Kay tried again, this time writing:

“We do not wish to bother you, but we are in trouble. My uncle has been kidnaped, perhaps to be held for ransom. We think he was taken down the river on a green boat. Have you seen or heard anything about this?”

The old man read this, slowly moving his lips as he read. Then impatiently he spoke.

“No. Don’t bother me,” and walked away.

“Lovable old chap,” said Betty sarcastically.

“I’m going to follow him,” said Kay in grim determination. “I believe he knows more than he pretends.”

The three girls marched bravely and doggedly along the trail, following the old man. Suddenly there was a rattle of pebbles and the thump of new footsteps. Who should join the old fellow but Spider!

The boy was loaded down with shovels, picks, and various other supplies. He fell in step with the man and both stamped along together in the friendliest of manners.

“Well, will you look at that!” gasped Betty in open-mouthed astonishment.

“They are well equipped for digging,” observed Wilma.

“The doctor who fixed my head when I fell off the cliff, said that Spider’s father was a queer old hermit who lived in the hills! Do you suppose that is his father?” Kay cried softly.

“It looks that way,” agreed Betty.

“Let’s follow them,” urged the Tracey girl.

The man and the boy tramped on ahead, while the three girls trailed them cautiously from a safe distance. Presently the two ahead took a sharp turn in the winding path. They disappeared from view beyond a jutting ledge of rock.

“Now we’ve lost them!” said Wilma.

“We’ll catch up,” said her twin, forging along determinedly.

Suddenly a huge stone came crashing down. It hurtled perilously near Kay’s head, missing her by inches as it went tumbling down the hill.

“Well!” said the girl, who had dodged just in time, “where did that come from?”

“It fell from that ledge,” said Wilma, pointing to the rocky rise in ground around which Spider and the man had gone.

“Or was thrown,” decided Kay.



## CHAPTER XX

### IN PURSUIT OF THE SERPENT

“Spider threw that rock at your head, Kay,” declared Betty, her eyes blazing.

“Look out or he may throw another,” her chum advised, prudently dodging behind a tree.

The girls hurriedly scattered and took refuge in the shelter of trees. No other missile came hurtling through the air, however, and in a few minutes the chums ventured from their hiding places.

“I don’t see how Spider and that man disappeared so suddenly,” marvelled Betty.

“I’m going to investigate and find out,” Kay said boldly. “Perhaps they located another old test hole to hide in. Maybe it has better rock specimens than those here.”

“Oh, Kay, it’s growing late!” objected Wilma. “The most awful things always happen around here in the dark!”

“Let’s go home,” proposed Betty flatly.

“You stay here, if you like, and just let me look around for a



while,” coaxed Kay.

The twins, for once in their lives, balked. “No sirree, not me!” said Betty. “I know when I’ve had enough of rocks and caves.”

The Tracey girl might have persisted in her search, but just then there rose a low moan.

“What’s that?” squealed Betty. “It made me nearly jump out of my shoes!”

Again the low, mournful sound came to their ears.

“There it goes again!” said Wilma, backing away in a hasty retreat. “Now I hope you will leave this place in a hurry, Kay Tracey!”

“Oh, it’s nothing but a dog growling!” Kay tried to reassure them.

“It’s a groan! A terrible groan!” insisted Wilma, terrified.

“It’s just a growl!” said Kay.

“It’s the growl of a bear then,” cried Betty, and without more arguing she turned and ran as fast as she could, with Wilma frantically racing after her.

Unconvinced of danger, Kay rather reluctantly trotted after the fleeing twins.

“Maybe Spider or the old man fell into a hole and were

terribly hurt,” said Wilma remorsefully.

“Maybe they were just trying to scare us,” suggested Kay with a grin.

“If so, they succeeded,” said Betty breathlessly, “and nothing would persuade me to go back.”

“Come on home, then,” Kay surrendered. “We can investigate some other time by daylight.”

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The twins were overjoyed at their chum’s willingness to return and they lost no time doing so.

“How comforting that light in our house looks,” said Wilma gratefully, as they came in sight of Wren’s Nest.

“Who is that standing in the lighted front room?” asked Betty, squinting to recognize the outlines of a strange man.

“That must be the agent Canfax. Let’s find out what he’s saying,” suggested Kay, leading the way into the house.

“Oh, girls, I’m so glad you’ve come!” her mother greeted them with a sigh of relief.

“This is Mr. Canfax, the new agent for Owl’s Hole. I have just agreed to move out of here tomorrow, as he insists!”

“On what grounds?” asked Kay sternly.

“The place has been taken over by new management and we want to make a great many changes,” answered Canfax

haughtily.

“I have told Mr. Canfax that we are not satisfied with the terms of the sale and that we shall hold them responsible for any loss to Mr. Brown,” stated Mrs. Tracey.

“I understand your relative has disappeared but that has

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nothing to do with me,” said the agent in a surly tone.  
“And the Eagle Company has nothing to do with it, either, so you cannot hold us responsible. We are concerned only in taking control of this property from him. We have no further interest in your uncle.”

Mention of Mr. Brown, however, seemed to make the man uneasy and he wasted no more time, going away immediately. The Traceys felt indignant, but helpless.

“After all, he does own this property now, I suppose,” sighed Mrs. Tracey, “so he can order us off if he likes.”

“If we move out and go back to Brantwood, we shall lose all touch with this place,” objected Kay. “And I feel that we ought to solve several of its mysteries before we feel satisfied that Uncle has not been cheated.”

“Let’s not go back to town!” exclaimed Betty, who had a new idea. “Let’s stay at a place near by where we can keep watch on all that’s going on here, but pretend we’ve left Owl’s Hole.”

“That’s a wonderful scheme,” praised Kay.

“There’s a very nice boarding house right near here, down on

the river shore,” Wilma informed them.

“We better move out after dark tonight when there isn’t anyone around to watch us or pry into our affairs,” suggested Kay. “We can slip off unnoticed and transfer to the boarding house without any publicity.”

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This plan was decided upon. With drawn shades the packing was done. Mrs. Tracey had telephoned for rooms and then called up Bill Tracey, who was spending the night in Brantwood.

“Now we’ll put out all the lights and wait until the rest of the colony is dark, too,” plotted Betty, “then creep out unseen.”

“We’ll fold our tents like the Arabs  
And as silently steal away!”

quoted Wilma.

It was well after midnight when the group at last began silently stealing away. There was a good deal of hushed giggling, and the moving, which had seemed like a calamity, suddenly became a lark.

“This is fun!” chortled Betty, stumbling about in the dark and stowing baggage into the car.

“Where’s my bathing suit?” demanded Wilma, sorting things frantically. “I put—what was that?”

A distinct thudding sound could be heard near by.

“Footsteps of someone passing, do you think?” queried Wilma timorously.

Kay walked in the direction of the thud and swept her flashlight on the ground. The earth was muddy, following a slight shower. Kay’s eyes focussed on the wet path.

“The lone footprint again!” she whispered.

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“Then the sooner we get away, the better,” sighed Mrs. Tracey.

Someone else had heard the thud of runaway footsteps, too. The very first thing the next morning, Ethel Eaton and her aunt, greatly disturbed, rushed to tell the Traceys that they had caught a glimpse in the dark of a weird figure; a ghost, perhaps, from the Indian burial ground.

“No good will come of this business of digging into burying grounds with steam shovels!” lamented Mrs. Pinty.

Imagine their astonishment to find the Tracey cottage locked up and no one there!

“They saw that terrible apparition, too,” concluded Ethel, “and out they fled as fast as they could go, right in the dead of night! What do you make of that?” she asked.

“They know when to leave,” said her aunt. “We’ll not argue any longer with that man Canfax about staying. If Owl’s Hole isn’t fit for the Traceys to stay in, it isn’t fit for us either!”

While Ethel and her aunt were packing up to depart, there

came a thunderous knock on their door.

“You go, Auntie, I’m scared stiff!” begged the girl.

Muttering something about people who didn’t have any more spirit than a white rabbit, Mrs. Pinty swept majestically to the door. Jed Farkin stood there, propped up on his well-worn crutch.

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“I want to speak to Miss Eaton,” he said.

Ethel, feeling a little sheepish over her timidity, walked forward.

“I came about that robbery case of mine, and I want to know if you got the evidence against the Tracey girl that we was talkin’ about,” the man blustered.

Much annoyed at his insistence, Ethel tried to put him off with hesitant remarks about, “Well, nothing definite yet, but perhaps something soon.”

“Nothin’ definite yet!” exploded the man. “Well, how long is it goin’ to take you to get somethin’ on her? I thought you said you could do that easily. Look how long it’s been since I was robbed by that girl and she still runs scot free!”

“We have to be sure of our ground and we don’t want to get into trouble,” mumbled Ethel feebly.

At this the cripple flew into one of his rages and sputtered, “You’re a fine detective, you are! You told me you was smart runnin’ down clues and it wouldn’t take you no time before

you had evidence enough to jail the robbers. Now you don't know as much about it as I do!"

Ethel tried to put in a word of protest but he interrupted rudely with a flow of accusations. Then with a final roar at the girl, he twirled around on his crutch and stamped off. 170

"Let's get out of this awful place as fast as we can," begged Ethel tearfully.

Both she and her aunt packed up hurriedly and took their leave. It was now noon. Their morning had been so disrupted that they had had only a sketchy breakfast and were hungry.

"This looks like a clean place," said Mrs. Pinty, as they drove along the shore road. "Let's get a bite to eat here."

"Oh, don't let's stop," whined Ethel. "We can eat later, and I want to put as much distance as possible between us and that horrid one-legged man."

"I haven't had my coffee yet today," complained her aunt, "and I am not a bit of good until I do, so we might just as well run in here and have lunch before we go any farther and I get one of my fearful headaches."

Very sulky at her aunt's decision, Ethel entered the dining room. Then her spirits brightened. The first person she saw there was Kay Tracey!

"Let's sit at their table," whispered Ethel. "I'm dying to give that Tracey girl a good piece of my mind!" she mumbled spitefully.

She and her aunt seated themselves, unasked, at the table with the Traceys and the twins. They did not get a very warm welcome, and this added to Ethel's annoyance.

"Have you heard from your uncle?" she inquired sourly, as she unfolded her napkin.

"Not yet," Kay answered, struggling to keep her voice agreeable.

"Perhaps he has been overtaken by justice at last," remarked Mrs. Pinty.

"High time, I should think!" said Ethel with a smug tone of righteousness.

"Yes, it was always a mystery to me how he escaped prosecution at the time of the bank failure," went on Mrs. Pinty.

These insinuations, made in a public dining room where there was no opportunity of reply, offended the Tracey group, who kept a discreet silence. Cutting short their luncheon, they retired from the table as soon as possible and sought the privacy of their own rooms.

"It is embarrassing enough to have strangers hear all this," stormed Kay, "but think of our friends at home. Ethel will spread the story all over Brantwood and all through Carmont High School!"

"If only Uncle Byram could be vindicated of this charge that



he robbed people of their money through that unfortunate bank failure!” cried Mrs. Tracey. “I never can believe he did anything dishonest!”

“I never will believe it either!” announced Kay belligerently. “And if it’s the last thing I ever do I’ll stick at this till I prove him innocent!”

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Disturbed by all the confusion and late hours, the Traceys were glad to go to bed early that night.

“It is a relief to be here, and out of the way of hoots and haunts that make night hideous up at Owl’s Hole,” remarked Betty.

“Yes, and there is a very pretty view of the river from our windows,” said Kay, peering into the starlit night.

Outside the river reflected the lights along the shore.

“It is pretty,” said Wilma, and was about to burst into poetry about the loveliness of night, when something on the river caught her eye.

“What’s that?” she asked.

A boat glided by—a long, slim, swift boat. As it passed a light the girls saw that it was green.

“Quick! It’s the *Sea Serpent!*” Kay cried, reading the name on the side.

Before Mrs. Tracey could imagine what had happened, the

girls had fled. Tearing outdoors they were just in time to see the boat slowly put off into midstream. Breathlessly Kay dashed along shore to the dock where the *Pansy* was tied up. All three leaped into the swift craft. Kay quickly found the hidden key, started the motor and swung out over the inky river to chase the *Serpent*.

The other boat already had gained headway. The *Pansy* cut the water in a frenzy of speed, endeavoring to overtake her.

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“Can’t you go faster?” pleaded Wilma in an agony of excitement as the craft ahead threatened to disappear altogether.

“I can’t see where I’m going!” said Kay, who could not turn on the lights from the dashboard.

Betty fussed with the bulbs but got no results. “They won’t work,” called the twin.

“I’m afraid I’ll hit rocks!” worried Kay, going slowly. “I know there are some around here.”

“Lie down out there on the tip of the bow, Betty,” called Wilma. “If you see any rocks sticking out of the water, yell ‘Danger!’”

Scarcely had Betty taken her look-out post when she shrieked:

“DANGER! You’re going to hit!”

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## CHAPTER XXI

### THE SECRET SOLVED

Kay instantly threw over the helm, hoping to avoid striking the rocks. Too late! There was a disheartening grinding sound, the boat shuddered as it stopped, and the motor gave a final whine as the girl cut it off.

“We’re stuck!” yelled Betty from the bow.

“I hope I didn’t put a hole in the *Pansy!*” moaned Kay.

“No water seems to be coming in,” Wilma observed comfortingly.

“There goes the tail light of the *Serpent,*” wailed Betty, straining her eyes to watch.

“Now what are we going to do?” groaned Wilma.

“Here comes a man in a motor boat. Maybe he can give us a tow,” Kay said hopefully.

The person in question to their joy proved to be their old friend, Eddie Doyle.

“Eddie! Ahoy! S-O-S!” they hailed him wildly.

“Well, by the great horn spoon!” the man laughed heartily. “What are you sitting up there so high and dry for?”

The girls called out their predicaments to him. It did not take Eddie very long to throw them a tow line and jerk them off their perch. Then he chugged off, escorting them back to Owl’s Hole cove. They lingered on the dock a while to talk over matters.

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“Everything’s changed up there,” he reported glumly. “I’m losing my job and Dave Halpen already has lost his. He got fired the first thing by that Canfax fellow and had to go back to town to take another job. I’ll be glad to get out. Anything would be better than working for that crowd of crooks!”

“If we could only prove that!” sighed Kay.

They stood looking very gloomy, then Eddie broke the silence.

“Oh, by the way, Miss Tracey, whatever became of that bag of rocks you had at your cottage? It’s a funny thing, but I thought somebody stole them!”

“Stole them?” queried Kay, instantly alert.

Eddie laughed. “Yes, I said stole them, but it makes me feel foolish even to have such a simple thought. After all, why would anybody want to *steal* yours when this place is nothing but rocks? If a person wanted some, why didn’t he bend over and pick them up off the ground? Why would he take yours?”

“What makes you think anybody did? I hadn’t missed any,”

Kay replied.

“Oh, you didn’t know you lost them,” Eddie chuckled. “The fellow who took them left some others in their place!”

“What in the world are you talking about?” asked the twins, completely confused.

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“Listen,” the man said confidentially. “You know I was put on as night watchman after things got so spooky. I used to try my best to find out who was doing all that prowling around in the dark. Well, one night when you folks went out to the movies and your place was deserted, I thought I heard somebody tramping around your cottage, so I went over to look. Sure enough, he took that bag of stones you had on the porch.

“I couldn’t see very well in the dark, but I chased him. He spilled the rocks. When I found they were just stones, I laughed to think how he got fooled thinking he had something valuable. He got away, but I didn’t figure it mattered, deciding you just wanted some decoration for a border to your flower bed, maybe. So one stone was as good as another.

“Later I saw that he had put a bagful of rocks back on your porch. I would have forgotten all about it but I happened to pick up one of the little stones he dropped. It had kind of a pretty pattern on it, so I put it in my pocket for a lucky piece. Here it is.”

Eddie produced a small pebble plainly marked with what Betty had called the chocolate layer cake design. Kay and the twins looked at one another astounded. Thanking Eddie for

his help, and wishing him luck with a new job, they hurried back to their rooms to tell Mrs. Tracey of the strange affair.

“Probably the wrong collection of rocks was taken to the assayer’s office,” Kay finished excitedly.

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“And of course that collection of stones was of no value!” said her mother.

“Whoever did that trick deliberately substituted poor ones for good ones, so that we could not find out how valuable the real ore is!” chimed in the twins indignantly.

“We’ll clear that business up first thing tomorrow morning,” vowed Kay with determination.

She hopped into bed, impatiently wishing it were morning and time to run this new clue to earth. So excited had the turn of events made her, that Kay could hardly sleep a wink. She tossed and turned all night long, with hopes of vast wealth alternating with despair over the strange and unsolved disappearance of her unfortunate uncle.

The following day, even before breakfast was ready, Kay and the twins set out to get a new collection of rocks from the dynamited area. Mrs. Tracey, herself, intent upon new proof of the value of the ore, came along enthusiastically. All four trailed to the spot where so much of the stone had been turned up. All began carefully picking up pieces of the best specimens.

“Here’s something significant!” Kay pointed out.  
“Wherever the ground is soft, and not too hard and

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rocky, I can see plainly the marks of our old friend, the lone footprint!”

“Then it must be he who definitely is involved in all this rock business,” deduced Wilma thoughtfully.

“That ought to be the queer old man who is usually poking around here,” said Kay. “But it can’t be,” she added decisively, “for he has two legs.”

“It’s too much for me,” sighed Wilma, picking up a good specimen.

Finally the group left the area and started for the boarding house.

“Let’s put our rocks in the car,” suggested Kay. “Then right after breakfast we’ll go to the assayer’s office.”

Struggling along with their burdens, the four had nearly reached the edge of the Owl’s Hole property when they heard a shout behind them. As they turned around, they were horrified to see a man with a rifle coming after them.

“Oh, it’s that horrid Canfax man,” groaned Mrs. Tracey. “What can he want?”

They soon found out, for he said in a loud voice, “You were told to keep off this property!”

“Let’s run as fast as we can,” advised Betty, sprinting toward the automobile.

“Don’t leave our specimens behind!” warned Mrs. Tracey, clutching hers.

As she and the girls put on a burst of speed, their pursuer cried out again, “Drop that stuff, or I’ll shoot!”

The Worths and Traceys flung themselves and their specimens into the car. Betty, the fastest runner, already had the machine started. Down the road they bolted, leaving Canfax fuming.

“Drive straight to the assayer’s,” directed Kay. “We’ll get there this time with the real specimens before there is a chance for any kind of funny business.”

When Betty drew up in front of the office building, Kay marched directly to the geologist’s desk. She told her amazing story and asked for a new analysis.

In view of the importance of the situation, the geologist set to work on the analysis at once, while the others waited in acute suspense. After what seemed an endless wait, the geologist came from his laboratory with a report.

“This ore is entirely different from the worthless stuff that you submitted to me before. The samples you brought in this morning are very valuable indeed. They are specimens of a rare ore called Gomberic, which is in great demand in a new radio development. Your fortune is made, I believe,” he said, smiling and shaking Kay’s hand warmly in departure.

“So the secret of Owl’s Hole is solved!” cried Kay with emotion as she reached the car. “At last we have the



answer to the whole thing.”

“I don’t understand everything,” confessed Betty. “Please tell me.”

“Someone knew all the time that this ore made the property valuable,” Kay explained, “but he didn’t want Uncle to find that out! Everything was done to discourage him and all the tenants on the place. The weird sounds, ghosts and other things were done on purpose. When at last Uncle in despair said that he wished he could get rid of Owl’s Hole, he was offered what seemed like a good price for a summer colony. Then the development of the ore began.”

“But what became of your uncle?” asked Betty, who was not satisfied with the situation.

“We must find that out,” said Kay determinedly.

The girl’s next move was to get in touch with her Cousin Bill. His surprise at the news soon changed to high praise of his young relative. Putting his flattery aside, she asked what they had best do.

“Nothing, until I come up,” he replied. “Through my own investigations and those of the detective I engaged I feel convinced that no money was passed in this transaction. We have grounds for a criminal suit for this and for the kidnaping of Uncle By.”

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“Oh, dear me!” sighed Mrs. Tracey, when her daughter relayed this news. “It is all so complicated! I doubt we’ll ever get the whole puzzle unravelled, and I fear for poor Uncle’s

life!”

Kay had a new theory on which to work. Later she sought out Eddie Doyle to question him. She believed that he, as night watchman, might know more than he was telling.

“Eddie, did you ever notice footprints left by this night prowler?” she asked point-blank.

Eddie hemmed and hawed and hesitated to give a direct answer.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE CLUE

A cautious look came into the watchman's eyes as he tried to avoid answering Kay's question.

"Why don't you want to tell who you think it is?"

"Because I don't want to get into any trouble," said Eddie, still hesitant about telling what he knew. "The man who left those footprints is one of a gang that can act very ugly. I don't want him to beat me up for telling on him."

"I think I know who he is," offered Kay.

"Then there can't be any harm in my talking about it, I suppose," the man replied, looking nervously over his shoulder and lowering his voice. "It's this way: there's a whole family that's been making all this trouble at Owl's Hole from the beginning. They're folks that are always in trouble one way or another. The head man is a cripple by the name of Herman Brutch."

Kay felt it best to conceal the fact that she had no idea who this man Brutch was, so she did not show the surprise she felt.

"He is heavier than Jed Farkin, isn't he?" she asked,

recalling the footprints near the explosion.

“Yes, he is pretty heavy,” Eddie continued.

Kay felt she had to proceed cautiously so as not to give herself away, so she asked about any relatives the cripple might have.

“Herman Brutch belongs to a poor family that has always been mixed up in all the worst things that go around this neighborhood,” replied Eddie. “It’s amazing how he gets around. He might as well have one leg, ’cause that other one ain’t a bit of good, seein’ as how it won’t touch the ground.”

More surprises!

“So he swings along on his crutches and leaves only one footprint,” Eddie went on. “But it would be better if he couldn’t get around at all!”

“As bad as that?” remarked Kay, still cautious.

“This Herman Brutch is as cruel as he can be and that’s why I’m afraid of getting into any trouble with him. If he should find out I told on him I hate to think what he might do to me,” confessed Eddie. “He’s a man who stops at nothing, and his brother’s just as bad.”

“Oh, has the cripple a brother?” asked Kay.

“Yes, and he’s stone deaf.”

“I know who he is then,” said Kay shrewdly.

“Well, the deaf man, Andy Brutch, used to be a miner. His ear drums were broken in an explosion.”

A miner! All of a sudden the baffling details of the situation began to fit together like pieces of a picture puzzle. Kay was able to make sense of all the mysterious happenings.

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“Andy knows all about ores and explosives,” explained Eddie. “As soon as I heard the explosion that day I was pretty sure he was to blame because he’s the only one around here who takes an interest in rocks and blasting. I didn’t dare let on I knew, though, for fear he’d blow *me* up!”

“Where do these men live?” asked Kay, eager to have them rounded up before they could cause more trouble and damage.

“They live like a couple of hermits in a shanty up in the hills,” Eddie answered.

This description seemed to stir something vaguely familiar in Kay’s mind. She wrinkled her forehead, trying to think. Where had she heard of someone living like a hermit in the hills? Oh, yes, the doctor had told her Spider’s father did.

“Is that boy Spider related to these men?” she asked quickly.

“Yes, Herman Brutch is his father,” replied Eddie. “And he is teaching him to be a criminal!”

Kay did not show the excitement she felt. So many things became plain to her now! As casually as possible she left Eddie and hurried to her mother with the astounding news.

The very next afternoon Kay and her Cousin Bill saddled two horses and rode out through the mountains to investigate the hermit home. The lawyer wanted to question the men as to the fate of Mr. Brown and impress the ruffians with the seriousness of the law.

After a long ride through the woods, they came at last to a pleasant little stream. Following this through the hills, the riders came to a shanty half hidden amid thick trees and bushes.

Lolling on the doorstep in the sun, sprawled Spider himself. The sound of horses' feet put the boy instantly on the alert. He greeted the visitors in a sullen manner, as he shooed away several bothersome goats he had been tending.

"Whaddaya want here?" he asked insolently.

"Is your father at home, or your uncle?" Bill Tracey inquired pleasantly.

"No, they ain't and I don't know when they'll be home. Whaddaya want of them?"

"We want to see them on business," answered the lawyer, dismounting.

Kay also slid from her horse and her cousin tethered the animals to branches of trees.

"What business is it of yourn to come pokin' up here?" demanded Spider defensively.

“We want to know where my uncle, Mr. Brown, is,” explained Kay.

“Well, we don’t know nothin’ about him,” answered the surly boy. “So you’re wastin’ your time up here. You better git out before my folks git back and make you hustle.”

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In order to make a delay, Kay asked for a drink of water. Some minutes were consumed while Spider unwillingly drew a bucket from a well and offered her a rusty tin cup full of clear, cold mountain water.

“This is delicious,” said Kay, smiling in her friendliest way.

Spider merely scowled. More time was spent while Bill also drank and then watered the horses. This gave the Traceys a chance to look around the tumbledown shack in the woods.

While Spider was busy drawing water, the frisky goats took advantage of their freedom. One especially lively young billy goat pranced up onto the broken porch and butted open the sagging door. Before the boy could grab a switch, the animal had nosed inside and started to eat some papers that were lying on a rickety chair.

The other goats now began chasing each other up onto the porch. Spider had his hands full. Kay lent friendly assistance and helped to push the intruder out of the door.

A bit of paper was sticking from the goat’s mouth. It stopped munching to kick and prance. Laughing, Kay pulled the paper from its mouth. She saw it was a letter. One startled glance showed that it was from the Eagle Realty

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Company!

She caught the words “ore” and “blasting” and realized that by a lucky accident she had found some very important evidence! Before Spider could notice her act, she quickly whisked the letter into her pocket.

When the goats had been driven off to graze in a quiet spot near the brook, Bill undertook to quiz the boy in regard to the mischief done at Owl’s Hole, and especially about the strange disappearance of the unfortunate banker.

“I don’t know nothin’ about all that trouble and my Pop and my Unc don’t either, so you just git off our property before they come back and take a gun to you to make you git!” the lad stormed.

In vain the Traceys tried to reason, wheedle or even threaten. Suddenly Spider darted inside the forlorn shack. In a moment he came back, scowling ferociously as he held a hunting rifle. He straddled his legs far apart and braced himself in fighting form on the porch.

“Now you git outa here!” he yelled defiantly.

Raising the gun to his shoulder, he aimed it directly at Bill Tracey.



## CHAPTER XXIII

### BEHIND THE BARRICADE

When the Traceys had ridden a safe distance down the mountain glade, Kay drew her horse to a stand-still and called to Bill to do the same. She drew from her pocket the torn and crumpled paper which she had rescued from the goat.

“Our trip has not been altogether in vain!” said she, triumphantly waving the ruffled paper.

“Let me read this to you!” she called.

The letter, written on an Eagle Company letterhead, was very impressive, with an engraved spread-eagle stretching its wide wings across the top of the sheet. The signatures of Pete Webb and Jim Silman were clearly written across the bottom.

“Hurry, Kay, it’s thundering,” urged her cousin. “My horse is uneasy.”

The message said that the two men would buy the Owl’s Hole property from Byram Brown and develop the rich ore there. It agreed to give half the property to the Brutches in payment of their discovery of its value. The letter also referred to the miner, Andy, and his blasting for more rocks for further research. The deal was urged as a good

investment for them and a good revenge also upon Brown for the loss of their savings in his bank failure.

“Oh, dear!” sighed Kay. “More people trying to avenge themselves on poor old uncle for that awful bank!”

“It doesn’t say anything about kidnaping Uncle, does it?” questioned Bill, who was having a hard time restraining his impatient horse.

Another peal of thunder sounded through the hills, making the two animals rear.

“No, not a word about that,” answered Kay, clutching the reins and trying to stuff the letter back into her pocket.

A terrific crash of thunder now split the air. The horses stamped about wildly. Suddenly a torrent of rain began to fall. In one minute the Traceys and their mounts were soaked.

“Let’s crawl into that nook in the rocks,” shouted Bill.

Hastily the riders leaped down and tried to drag the animals near enough to a tree to tie them. As if sensing the danger of standing under trees in a thunderstorm, both horses, thoroughly terrified, flung up their heads and heels. They wrenched themselves loose from the grasp on their bridles and galloped madly away down the trail.

“What a storm!” gasped Kay, dashing into the cave.

She shrank back out of the wet as a solid curtain of rain swung down over the opening. Her cousin followed as a

blinding flash zigzagged across the sky.

Suddenly a blue-white ball of fire seemed to come straight down into the woods before the cave itself. There was a tremendous crash as the lightning struck a tree. Then came a splintering sound and the smell of burnt wood and sulphur. An enormous tree crashed straight across the face of the opening where Kay and Bill had taken refuge.

The Traceys were penned in!

“Can we ever get out?” shouted Kay over the uproar of the storm.

“We must,” Bill assured her in a voice that reflected far more confidence than he really felt.

The huge oak completely covered the entrance to the cave, clogging it with limbs, branches and heavy foliage. Its giant trunk lay immovable in front of the door, changing the welcome shelter of the cave to a hateful cage from which there seemed to be no possible escape.

After twenty minutes of fury the storm, satisfied with the havoc it had wrought, blew off across the hills. Thunder now rolled faintly in the distance and the rain slackened to a dreary drizzle.

“What a predicament to be in!” groaned Cousin Bill.

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Kay shuddered with the thought that in that lonely place they might die undiscovered.

“Let’s get to work,” she urged.

She joined her relative in tugging desperately at the cruel forest giant that had shut them in. Their most violent efforts were puny against the huge timbers, and it became plain that without help they never could escape.

Hoping for aid before nightfall, they took turns calling, but their voices were smothered inside the cave and blown back in their faces by the wind. Their shrillest cries were mocked by echoes across the ravine.

The situation certainly was desperate. Neither liked to admit how frightened they were.

“Hello! Hello!” cried out Bill lustily.

“Help! Help!” screamed Kay.

The effort seemed useless. Then, just as they were about to give up, there came an answering cry from the hillside. Instantly both howled lustily and again a faint answering call was heard.

“Thank goodness,” sighed Lawyer Bill.

By means of screaming and listening alternately, they were able to guide the searchers to them. Footsteps became louder and nearer, until they dislodged loose stones close at hand. Finally they thudded right up to the door of the cave. Two men appeared dimly through the foliage. Their shabby clothes and dingy hats were dripping wet. One, who hobbled on crutches, shouted so loudly to the other that it was

plain his companion was deaf.

“The Brutches, Spider’s father and uncle!” gasped Kay.

Bill Tracey was shouting to them, explaining how he and Kay had been trapped and asking help in being released. Neither Herman Brutch nor his brother Andy recognized the lawyer, nor could they see his cousin inside her rocky retreat. Both men went to work straining to remove branches of the tree.

Kay, peeking out, caught a glimpse of the cripple, a hard-faced man with a cruel mouth and sullen eyes. Spider evidently resembled his father. The deaf man, stooped and silent as usual, wore his customary sour expression.

“I wonder what they will say when they recognize me?” she thought uneasily.

Before there was any chance for the Traceys to get out, however, more footsteps and another voice were heard. There was a gruff shout from Herman Brutch. In a minute Spider came running along the trail.

“Whatcha doin’?” he asked, arriving out of breath.

He peered through the foliage of the fallen tree into the cave. Instantly recognizing Cousin Bill and Kay, he called out forbiddingly:

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“Quit helpin’ them! They come after you this afternoon to arrest you for kidnagin’ that old bank robber Brown. They think you took him away and they want to put you in prison for it! That’s Brown’s niece and that’s her lawyer cousin

come to get you! They think they can put us in prison, so let's leave them in prison instead. Ha, ha!"

With a snarl of rage the men began piling back against the cave as much of the brush as they had succeeded in tearing loose. Then, with a mocking leer, the three cold-blooded fellows trailed away to their mountain hut. Kay and her Cousin Bill were left sealed securely in the hidden dungeon!

## CHAPTER XXIV

### TROUBLE

As the footsteps of the retreating rescuers faded away, the Traceys flung themselves with renewed fury upon the barricade that imprisoned them. Fighting for their lives gave the two great strength. They wrestled with might and main against the strong oak branches. At last the pair were able to crash through at a point weakened by the former efforts of the cripple and the deaf man.

It was only a small opening that they were able to make, but with a great deal of frantic squeezing and scrambling, pushing and pulling, Cousin Bill managed to smash his way out and to drag Kay, considerably scratched, after him. Both were torn and disheveled but nothing mattered since they were free and unhurt.

“We’d better get out of here before those men come back with that rifle Spider pointed at us!” Kay advised grimly.

“If only we can find the horses,” said her companion, advancing down the mountainside in quest of them.

The cousins hastened along the wet, slippery path and suddenly were overjoyed to behold, at the bottom of the hill, both animals grazing placidly in a flat, grassy field.

In hurrying toward them, Kay struck her foot against something. She picked it up for examination.

“Here’s a wallet one of those men dropped,” she cried, noticing tarnished gilt lettering stamped on the leather. “It belongs to Herman Brutch.”

The pocketbook contained nothing but some folded, greasy papers with notes about the ore and diagrams of its location on the Owl’s Hole property. In a flash Kay recognized the handwriting and crude spelling as exactly like that of the threatening note her uncle had received.

Excited over finding this piece of evidence, she gave little attention to a dirty business card which slipped out. On its back were pencil notes of dollars and cents. On its face was printed:

SPRUCE HILL SANATORIUM

NURSING HOME

Chronic Invalids—Convalescents—Emergencies  
Good Air    Good Food    Good Care  
Reasonable Rates by Day—Week—Month—Year.

Meanwhile Bill Tracey had approached the animals quietly and slowly, hoping to catch them without trouble. He did succeed in laying his hands on the bridle of



Kay's horse, but his own proved elusive.

His cousin, now mounted in her own saddle, tried to help catch the other beast. She rode slowly towards it, but the animal was suspicious and still unnerved from its fright at the thunderstorm. Suddenly it broke into a swift lope, its stirrups swinging.

Kay's horse, catching the spirit of unrest, bolted and went plunging wildly after the other steed into the woods. The girl lay flat in the saddle to dodge low-hanging branches, and hung on tightly. In the confusion her grip slipped from the wet wallet. It fell unnoticed into the tangled underbrush.

After a wild chase the runaway horse finally was cornered and caught. Bill Tracey swung into the saddle and the ride back to the boarding-house proceeded without further excitement.

Immediately upon arriving at the house, the lawyer strode, dripping, to the telephone and summoned his detective and a squad of troopers. He directed them to set out at once to arrest the Brutch brothers and Spider.

“So that's the end of those awful people!” exulted Betty.

“It seems a pity to arrest a mere boy like Spider. After all, he's only fifteen,” said Mrs. Tracey reluctantly.

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“What chance has he had to learn anything good, with such a criminal bringing up?”

Bill Tracey comforted her motherly heart with the assurance that so young a delinquent would not be thrown into prison with old and hardened lawbreakers.

“He’ll be put in a good farm school to learn the trade he is best fitted for, and to grow into a better way of living,” explained the lawyer.

Kay now hoped to produce useful evidence against the prisoners by exhibiting the Eagle letter which the goat had chewed, and the papers in the wallet showing the secret diagrams of ore location on Mr. Brown’s property. Alas, the pocketbook was nowhere to be found!

“Never mind,” said Cousin Bill as they were discussing the loss on the porch of the boarding house. “I believe we have ample evidence to convict the cripple and the deaf miner without the wallet.”

At that moment a forlorn figure could be seen coming along. At first they did not recognize him.

“Eddie Doyle! What on earth has happened?” gasped Kay a moment later.

The man was battered, torn and dusty, and he had a bad black eye!

“I got this from the big fat feller that stole your *Pansy* boat,” he explained. “I was taking down the American flag after he fired me from my job as caretaker there. Thinks I to myself, ‘Maybe he owns the land, but not this flag. I’ll just take this to poor Mr. Brown.’ Then up comes that big guy and gives me a fight!”

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There was a murmur of sympathy and Mrs. Tracey and Wilma offered remedies for the black eye. Eddie, much

embarrassed, declared he didn't need any.

“I knew I would catch it for telling on the Brutches,” he said. “They and the Eagle fellers are all in it together. I was due for a beating up when I told who left the lone footprint. But,” continued the valiant Eddie with a cocky twinkle in his good eye, “I'm glad I did it, if you've caught the Brutches. The next thing is to get those Eagle men. And I for one am going to try!”

It was dark that same day when Kay, tired with the week's strenuous activities, strolled toward the dock where the *Pansy* was tied up, that she might enjoy the evening breeze. If she had hoped for a little peace and quiet, this plan was rudely shattered. Hardly had she taken the woodsy path to the river than the ominous sounds of a scuffle reached her ears. Kay came through the trees just in time to see both Webb and Silman unmercifully beating Eddie whom they had thrown to the ground.

“Leave that man alone or I'll call for help!” she cried, rushing to Doyle's aid.

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“You keep outa this if you know what's healthy for you!” yelled one man, knocking Eddie flat as he tried to rise.

“I'll have you arrested for assault and battery as well as for cheating my uncle in that real estate deal with your crooked Eagle Company,” she cried. “Besides that, you shall answer for kidnaping Mr. Byram Brown!” she threatened fiercely.

The men were twisting Eddie's arms so that he squealed with pain and crouched low under their cruel grip.

“She knows too much,” growled Silman out of one corner of his ugly mouth.

“We’ll have to shut her up too,” said Webb viciously.

With a final twist that well-nigh cracked the bones in Doyle’s arms, they flung him savagely to the ground, kicked him violently, and then turned on Kay. Before she could scream, a large, dirty hand was clapped over her mouth. Though kicking and biting, she was picked up bodily and carried to the dock.

“Let’s get away!” Webb muttered hoarsely.

The men threw her onto the floor of a waiting speed boat. Her scarf was stuffed into her mouth and held tightly in place with a couple of turns of a dirty wet rope which they wound around her head. Two more knots of twine at wrists and ankles rendered Kay helpless and silent.

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## CHAPTER XXV

### A VALUABLE REWARD

The boat, with Kay a prisoner, sped on through the dark. Where they were going, she could not tell.

There now appeared a gleam of hope, for suddenly the blackness of the sky melted into silver and the moon came out.

“We better duck into our hut for the night and hide our boat until morning,” said Webb, who seemed to be the one in command.

Silman, steering, obediently cut down his speed and turned into a lonely inlet. Out splashed the anchor, then the men leaped to a small dock.

“We’ll leave the girl here,” Webb whispered.

They covered the boat, with Kay still in it, with a huge rough sheet of tarpaulin. She quailed at the prospect of lying there all night, trussed up and gagged into silence. Then in the morning— Her uncle had not been seen again. She trembled to think what might become of *her*.

The men, satisfied that their captive was safely

imprisoned, stamped away. By writhing and twisting, Kay managed to raise herself. Through a hole in the waterproof covering she clearly saw the ruffians enter a small shanty.

Uncomfortably cramped, Kay lay quiet for a long while, wondering if they might creep back to spy on her. After what seemed a safe length of time, she managed to squeeze her wrists loose from the ropes that bound them. In another instant she had jerked off the suffocating gag, then crawled from beneath the tarpaulin.

“Oh, dear,” she said to herself, finding that the ignition key was gone and she could not run the boat.

A minute later she lowered herself soundlessly into the river and swam under water for a long distance before coming to the surface. The friendly moon showed that she had been brought to a small island. Far over to Kay’s right appeared the comforting lights from houses along the shore.

The girl decided to kick off her shoes and socks and settle down in earnest to the serious business of swimming in the direction of the homes. Resolutely the girl beat through the rushing water. She had picked out one particular light on shore as a beacon. Toward this she went steadily.

But Kay had not calculated on the strength of the current. Soon she realized that she was making no progress. She found she would have to battle upstream as well as across to reach her goal.

The desperate girl was beginning to tire. Her wet

clothes twisted dangerously around her arms and legs, hampering her strokes. She was just beginning to doubt that she ever could reach shore when suddenly her hand felt the welcome touch of mud bottom. She stood up and waded ashore!

“There’s a light!” she thought in relief.

A short walk brought her to the front of a large rambling white building which bore a night light upon its door. A large sign read:

### SPRUCE HILL SANATORIUM

Instantly there flashed through Kay’s mind the memory of that card in the Brutch wallet she had found. An idea suddenly came to her. Could her uncle have been brought here by the scheming crooks?

“I wonder what kind of a place this is?” she thought. “I better not ask questions until I find out,” she decided.

Kay boldly rang the bell. The night superintendent who answered the door gave a start of astonishment at sight of her.

“I was nearly drowned,” explained Kay plaintively, “and I had to swim ashore!” She slumped down, pretending to collapse, in order to be taken into the hospital.

A call for first aid was immediately sounded. Muted bells rang and there was the crackle of well-starched uniforms and the hushed thump of rubber heels down the corridor. In no time Kay found herself whisked away. Her wet

things were stripped off. She was given a warm bath, hot drinks, and made to lie down.

“This is a splendid place,” she decided after a great deal of kindness had been shown her.

Presently she asked that she might telephone to her mother to tell of her safety. Mrs. Tracey, overjoyed, said she would send the police for Webb and Silman. She, Wilma and Betty would come for Kay at once.

A nurse now entered the room and the Tracey girl asked her casually, “I wonder if you have a patient here by the name of Mr. Byram Brown? A rather old man with a weak heart?”

The nurse looked puzzled for a second, then answered, “No, we have nobody by that name.”

Kay had been so sure that the sanatorium’s card in Brutch’s wallet was the solution of this mystery that she felt non-plussed. Never had she felt so disappointed.

Telling the nurse that her mother was calling for her shortly, the Tracey girl insisted upon getting up and dressing. She put on dry garments which the superintendent supplied. Then Kay took an exploratory stroll through the corridors, thinking that perhaps her uncle might have been brought in under a false name.

Passing down the hall, she paused a moment as a nurse came out of a private room marked “No Visitors.”

Kay’s eye had spotted a still white figure on the bed. It reminded her suspiciously of the sickly Byram Brown.



She waited until the nurse disappeared down the corridor. Then she stepped hastily into the room. One glance was enough. There lay her uncle, unconscious, sunk in a deep stupor!

“Here, here!” snapped a sharp voice. “Why are you in here?”

Kay turned to see the superintendent.

“I have every right to be here,” the girl replied tensely. “This is my Uncle Byram Brown who disappeared mysteriously some time ago and has been hunted everywhere by the police.”

“This patient’s name is not Byram Brown!” the woman contradicted Kay. “There must be some mistake.”

“Indeed there is a mistake,” the girl insisted.

The superintendent produced file records to show that the patient had been brought in unconscious and registered as Belden Black. The name of his nearest relative had been given as Peter Webb of the Eagle Realty Company of Hartford!

Quickly Kay told the astounded woman as much of the story as she deemed advisable. The superintendent said she would be glad to appear as a witness.

“This patient has been under the care of Mr. Webb’s personal physician,” the matron informed Kay. “I was uneasy about the case because the doctor kept the old gentleman under opiates all the time. Of course I dare not

criticize, but to tell the truth I have been in terror that the patient would die from an overdose of drugs!”

“The murderous plan is clear now!” said Kay. “The idea, of course, was to hide him here under an assumed name and keep him doped until his poor weak heart stopped beating!”

The sanatorium staff was in a commotion at the near-tragedy which had been prevented in the nick of time. Another doctor was called at once and new nurses put in attendance. By the end of the summer Mr. Brown had recovered sufficiently to sit up and enjoy the companionship of his relatives.

“Good news, Uncle!” greeted Bill gaily one evening, after all the criminals had been found guilty. “It is now proved conclusively that not one cent was ever paid to you for that Owl’s Hole property! The day you were drugged and kidnaped a false Bill of Sale was mailed to me as your attorney. There was no real sale at all and therefore the land is still yours. The rich ore on it means that your fortune is made!”

“I think I’m strong enough to celebrate with a little party,” the old man suggested.

He was very mysterious about who was to be invited. When the group finally assembled it included the Traceys, the Worths, Eddie Doyle, Jed Farlin and Dave Halpen. Wilma started the party by leading them all in the popular camp song she had written.

“Kay, tell your surprise,” ordered her uncle with a smile.

Jed Farkin was ceremoniously presented with his treasure box containing almost all the coin that had been stolen from it. His eyes nearly popped out at this unexpected turn and he could hardly stammer his apologies and thanks.

“The Brutches stole it and we got it back for you!” explained the Tracey girl, adding, “You know we promised we would!”

“Now,” quavered old Mr. Brown, “I have some announcements to make! I have organized a new company to mine the ore here. In appreciation of their loyalty and help I am giving a large amount of the stock in it to my relatives, the Traceys. I hope this will prove as profitable to them as they have proved helpful to me.”

There was an outburst of enthusiastic hand-clapping. The happy old gentleman stilled the applause and continued:

“In appreciation of the loyalty and help of Eddie Doyle, I am making him foreman of the new concern. I am sure there is no one I could rely on to protect my interests more faithfully.”

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Again there was loud applause and poor Eddie turned a deep red in his embarrassment. Once more Mr. Brown’s hand went up for silence.

“In addition I want to thank Mr. David Halpen for all he has done for me from the day he saved my life in the river. I have chosen him to be my office manager, with time off to finish his year at college!”

It was now David’s turn to flush with pleasure. Mr. Brown,

thoroughly enjoying himself, went on:

“In appreciation of the loyalty and help of the twins, Wilma and Betty Worth, I am presenting them with twin bracelets as nearly like one I once gave my niece Kay as I could get. I trust these little gifts will remind you that true friendship is more valuable than any ore!”

With this graceful little speech he sat down. At the close of an uproarious tribute, Bill Tracey jumped up and showed a copy of the day’s local newspaper. A big headline announced that the cloud which had long hung over the Lincoln Bank failure was now cleared up! For years it had been a secret that the cause of the failure was due to the crookedness of a former officer, now dead. Mr. Byram Brown was entirely exonerated of all blame.

“I’m sure I apologize for everything I ever said about that!” blurted out Jed Farkin sincerely.

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“I feel that we were just as suspicious of you as you were of my uncle,” spoke up Kay. “I owe you an apology for thinking you were the scoundrel who made the lone footprint!”

Farkin laughed and said he would forgive her. Then he proposed a cheer to Kay Tracey. “For she’s really the one who solved the mystery at Owl’s Hole!” he declared.

THE END



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[The end of *The Lone Footprint* by Francis K. Judd]