

RUTH FIELDING AND BABY JUNE



ALICE B. EMERSON

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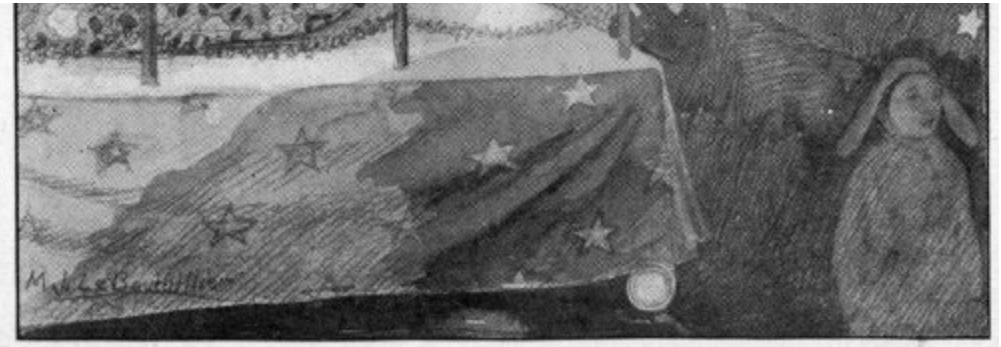
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“OH, ISN’T SHE JUST PERFECT!” EXCLAIMED HELEN. (See [Page 102](#))

Ruth Fielding and Baby June

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING AT
GOLDEN PASS," "RUTH FIELDING AT CAMERON HALL," "RUTH FIELDING
CLEARING HER NAME," ETC.

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RUTH FIELDING AND BABY JUNE

CHAPTER I ORTIZ CORONDA

“Isn’t this the loveliest cottage, Tom?” Ruth Fielding, who stood at the window gazing out past the summer house to the crystal clear waters of Lake Osago, gave her husband’s arm an affectionate squeeze. “Baby June and I are going to be so happy here! June is going to grow up so beautiful and I——”

Tom smiled and slipped his arm about her waist.

“You couldn’t grow more beautiful!”

“Silly!” Ruth laughed. “I fear you are a base flatterer. But don’t you think Lake Osago is the most wonderful place? Far, far nicer than Hollywood.”

“Yes, it’s fine,” Tom agreed. “A great place for you to rest up. That’s what you need after such a long career as

a moving picture star and director, to say nothing of your various other occupations.”

“They all seem insignificant beside the one that holds me now—being a good mother to Baby June.”

“You’re a wonder, Ruth. I—” Tom broke off and gave his wife a startled glance. “What was that noise? Did you hear it?”

“Yes, but I am sure it was nothing. Just someone out on the lake. I can see the boat now just coming around the point. You’re not nervous, are you?”

Tom laughed.

“No, but since Baby June came, I’m sort of—so—well, I wouldn’t want anything to happen, you know.”

“Nor would I, but I don’t believe I am as jumpy about the baby as you are. Did you think Nurse had dropped her?”

“No, it wasn’t that. Oh, never mind! I guess I am a little nervous. Don’t know what makes me that way. It must be the sudden change from our strenuous life in Hollywood.”

“This quiet life is just what we both need.”

“Yes it is. Don’t worry about me, Ruth, I’ll settle down in a day or so.”

Only the previous week Ruth and her husband had taken a cottage at Lake Osago, a picturesque summer resort,

located only a short distance from their childhood homes, the Red Mill and Cameron Hall at Cheslow. Temporarily deserting Hollywood and the movies, they planned to remain at the lake the entire summer.

Ruth had loved the cottage from the moment she had set eyes upon it. Particularly, she was pleased at the stretch of glistening beach which came within a stone's throw of her back door, for it offered an inviting place for Baby June's daily sun bath. Ruth frankly admitted that her young daughter ruled not only her heart but her household as well. She had been born a month before on the first day of June, and impetuously Ruth had declared that her baby should bear the name of the month.

Unwilling to trust Baby June to any available nursemaid, Ruth and Tom had brought Anita Grenade, a trained nurse, with them from Hollywood. Her references were of the best and Ruth had been delighted to observe her devotion to Baby June.

"We must plan to have a big reunion when Helen and Chess get back from Europe," Tom observed, forcing himself to turn away from the window. "I suppose they will be coming home most any day now."

"Yes, Helen writes they are getting lonesome for the United States again. And just think! Jennie Stone Marchand and that French husband of hers are coming with them too! It will be good to see them all again, though I don't believe I ever can accustom myself to calling Helen Mrs. Chess Copley."

“It does seem strange to think of sis as married, but then Chess waited long enough for her. For that matter, I waited years for you.”

“I hope I was worth waiting for.”

“I’d have waited a lifetime for you, Ruth.” Tom’s eyes were eloquent.

“Thank goodness it wasn’t necessary. Won’t Helen and Chess be surprised to see Baby June?”

Tom nodded absently. He had turned back to the window again and was gazing thoughtfully out toward the lake. The troubled expression of his face was not lost upon Ruth.

“I believe I’ll take a little stroll down the beach,” he announced. “Want to come along?”

“No, if you don’t mind, I’ll stay here. I’m a little tired.”

After Tom had left the cottage, Ruth watched him stride down the sloping lawn toward the lake.

“He’s gone to find out what that noise was,” she told herself. “I don’t believe it could have been anything, and yet—. Oh, dear, why will I let myself get worked up so? Since June came we’ve both been so nervous.”

Her thoughts were interrupted as Anita came into the living room bearing a fluffy bundle of white.

“Oh, let me take her,” Ruth cried, rushing over to the nurse. “My own little Baby June! Isn’t she the sweetest thing you ever saw?”

“Indeed she is,” the nurse returned soberly. “She never cries or fusses.”

“I’m afraid I’m a prejudiced mother,” Ruth laughed, clasping Baby June in her arms. “I’ll take her out in the summer-house with me.”

After the nurse had left the room, Ruth carried Baby June out into the warm sunlight. As she sat down in the summer-house, she gently pulled aside the blankets and peeped down at her wee daughter.

“She must look like Tom,” she decided, “for she is far too good-looking to resemble me.”

In all truth, Ruth did not do herself justice. If anything, she was lovelier than she had ever been even in the days when acclaimed one of the most beautiful stars of the screen, and Baby June gave promise of rivaling her mother. Her eyes were of the deepest blue and her hair curled in tiny ringlets about her doll-like face.

“If anything should ever happen to you, Baby June, I don’t know what I would do,” Ruth whispered softly. “But of course, nothing ever shall happen.”

Though she was unwilling to admit it even to herself, Ruth felt uneasy about her small daughter. In a measure, Tom’s strange nervousness had been communicated to her.

Glancing down the shore, she wondered what had become of him.

Suddenly, Ruth was startled to hear the low murmur of voices. It was not the voice of her husband that came to her ears, but that of a strange man. It struck her as odd, for the cottage was located at the far end of the beach, and few persons ever ventured to trespass.

With the baby in her arms, Ruth arose that she might have a better view. To her surprise, she saw two persons, a strange man and the nurse, seemingly in earnest conversation.

“I wonder who it is Anita is talking with?” Ruth thought. “I did not know she had any friends here at Lake Osago. I wonder——”

Looking carefully about the summer-house, Ruth Fielding walked to a bench that would be in the shade and, making sure it sloped in such a way that the baby could not roll off, the mother laid her baby down, carefully arranging the soft blankets about the sleeping form.

“I can’t be too particular about Baby June,” Ruth murmured. “Not only now but for the future. I must see who that strange man is, talking to my baby’s nurse.”

Making sure the child would be safe there for a moment, and taking as much care as though she intended to go a long distance off instead of but a few feet away, Ruth stole out of the little rustic house and, treading softly, advanced to

a point where she could cautiously part the bushes and get a better view.

“That man—that man!” Ruth murmured. “There is a familiar something about him—the way he stands, how he uses his hands, the poise of his head. If I could only see him more plainly. I feel certain——”

At that moment, the stranger turned so that Ruth caught her first glimpse of his face. She could not believe her own eyes. And yet, there was no mistaking what she saw.

“Ortiz Coronda!” she gasped. “One of the men who made so much trouble for me in my talking pictures. What can he have to say to Anita? Why has he come here? Oh, I am so afraid—so strangely afraid! I—I——”

Ruth Fielding turned quickly, fairly dashed back into the summer-house, caught Baby June up in her arms and ran as fast as she could toward the cottage, her heart beating madly.

CHAPTER II

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

For one brief instant Ruth gave way to panic, but as she reached the house, she felt more secure and partially overcame her fears. After all, she did not know that Ortiz Coronda intended harm by coming to the cottage. Perhaps his excuse for seeing Anita was a legitimate one.

Though she tried to reason away her misgivings, Ruth could not forget the unpleasant circumstance under which she had met Coronda. He was a Mexican actor, and formerly had been employed at her studio in Hollywood. He had made a great deal of trouble, and after Ruth had refused to cast him in one of her pictures, had retaliated. While Ruth and her friends were at work on a talking picture, he with several unscrupulous companions had overpowered her and her chum, Helen Cameron. The two girls had been taken into Mexico and there imprisoned in a tower. Ruth's many adventures in this connection are related in the last volume of the series, entitled, "Ruth Fielding in Talking Pictures."

Though more than once called upon to face danger, Ruth had always managed to take care of herself. As the reader learns in the first volume of the series, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill," the plucky girl came to her great-uncle's mill as an orphan. If miserly old Jabez Potter sometimes proved trying, Aunt Alvirah Boggs, the faithful housekeeper,

made it up to “her pretty” by showering every kindness upon her. Then too, Ruth soon became acquainted with Helen Cameron who lived nearby at Cameron Hall, and with her brother Tom. In time she came to know Chessleigh Copley, whose devotion to Helen was apparent from the first.

The young people had many jolly times together, but all too soon school days came to an end. Ruth left college to enter moving pictures. Beginning as a scenario writer, she soon found herself a star, and before long, with the help of Mr. Hammond, a moving picture magnate, organized her own film company. It was natural that Tom should become the company treasurer for he had a special talent for business and was eager to be of service to Ruth.

Gradually, Ruth came to depend more upon Tom. She learned that he loved her, and after a great deal of persuasion, agreed to become his wife. Shortly after the marriage Helen, not to be outdone by her chum, became the bride of Chess Copley, and the two had departed for a honeymoon in Europe.

Ruth’s life had been an exciting one, but her greatest joy and happiness came with the arrival of Baby June. It was no wonder that as she caught a glimpse of an old enemy, she asked herself what he could be doing at Lake Osago.

“Where can the housekeeper have gone?” she thought frantically. “I will leave Baby June with her and see if I can find Tom!”

Hurrying through the cottage she found the woman in the kitchen and quickly turned Baby June over to her.

“Don’t leave her alone an instant,” Ruth cautioned.

Rushing out of doors again she glanced toward the beach, but Anita and the Mexican had disappeared. This only added to her alarm. Why had they gone off together?

“I can’t understand why that man came here,” she told herself anxiously. “It frightens me.”

Tom was not in sight and after a slight hesitation, Ruth called his name. There was no answer. The beach appeared deserted.

“Oh, where did he go?” Ruth murmured.

Again she called and as there was no response started down the path toward the beach. She had gone but a short way when she caught sight of him down by the boathouse. He was coming leisurely toward the house, but as he caught sight of his wife, quickened his step.

“He didn’t hear me,” Ruth thought. “Thank goodness, nothing has happened to him. It gave me such a fright to see that Mexican on the grounds. I could have believed anything.”

She smiled at her own fears. With Tom nearby she was less nervous and she decided that perhaps she had been hasty in calling him to the house.

“I’ll tell him about Coronda anyway,” she thought.

She hurried down the path to meet her husband but before she had an opportunity to speak, Tom began to chuckle softly.

“You were right, Ruth. I’m getting to be as nervous as an old cat.”

“Oh, Tom, you aren’t! I’m commencing——”

“That noise was just a false alarm,” Tom interrupted. “I went down to find out and I didn’t see anyone around the grounds. There’s a boy on the lake, and probably it was his voice that we heard.”

“But Tom——”

“Forget all about it, Ruth. I’m afraid I’ve made you nervous with all my talk. I didn’t mean to and I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed you. There is no need to worry.”

“Oh, if only I could believe it, but just a few minutes ago——”

“I know, Honey,” Tom interrupted again. “Baby June means the world to us and we’re so afraid something may happen to her that we unconsciously go looking for trouble. Now, don’t worry. Everything will be all right.” He glanced at his watch and gave an exclamation of surprise. “Jove! It’s three-thirty and I have an appointment at the bank in ten minutes. I must hurry or I’ll be late.”

Before Ruth could protest or find an opportunity to tell him what she had seen, he kissed her goodbye and rushed away to the garage. She saw him back out of the drive and vanish down the road.

“Oh, dear, why didn’t I tell him?” Ruth asked herself. “Now I’ll be here alone and if anything should happen——”

She walked back to the house, more troubled than before. In spite of Tom’s insistence that nothing was amiss, she could not entirely banish her misgivings. It was not for herself that she was afraid, but for Baby June. And yet, what could happen to her?

“I am acting perfectly absurd,” she chided herself. “No harm can ever come to my baby.”

Returning to the cottage, she found that the housekeeper had taken June to the nursery, and went there herself.

“Oh, Mrs. Perkins,” Ruth asked, “is the baby all right?”

“Why, of course, Mrs. Cameron,” the woman answered. “Did you think——”

She noticed Ruth’s agitation and inquired:

“Is anything wrong?”

“Well,” the young mother replied, “I have had a fright, and it has made me worry about Baby June. Did anyone come to the door while I was down at the beach?”

“No, Mrs. Cameron, no one that I saw. I brought the baby up here right after you gave her to me. I heard no one. Someone might have come to the door, but not have knocked.”

“Have you noticed anyone around here who aroused your suspicions in any way since we came to live at this cottage?” Ruth questioned the woman.

“No, I haven’t, Mrs. Cameron. But if you would tell me a little more, maybe I could remember something.”

Despite her perturbed state, Ruth was forced to smile at this remark. She hid her amusement, however, and merely said:

“Keep your eye on things, will you, please? I mean, glance out of the windows once in a while, and if you see anyone walking around who doesn’t live here, let me know at once. And also, don’t mention this to Mr. Cameron—I wouldn’t want him to think I was worried.”

It was now Mrs. Perkins’ turn to be amused. She smiled and said:

“It was only yesterday that Mr. Cameron gave me the same instructions!”

“What?” Ruth cried, “Tom—Mr. Cameron told you to watch for strangers? I wonder if he knows anything?”

“Well,” the housekeeper went on, “I guess I shouldn’t have told you. I don’t think he meant anything special. He’s so crazy about the baby—and you, too, Mrs. Cameron—that he doesn’t want harm to come to you.”

“I suppose that’s it,” Ruth said, her surprise over. “Mr. Cameron is very thoughtful.”

After the woman had left the nursery, Ruth bent over the crib and smiled down at her tiny daughter.

“So beautiful and yet so helpless,” she murmured.

Baby June was asleep. Nestled among silken blankets, she lay there, a precious and lovely bit of humanity. Tears of pride filled Ruth Fielding’s eyes—a new kind of pride.

“I have done many things,” she thought, “ever since I was a little girl. I have made an enviable name for myself in the business world, and I suppose I am admired by many people who see me in the movies. I have helped those less fortunate, and I’m glad of that. But this—this baby of mine—of her I am more proud than anything else in the whole world.”

She stood gazing at the sleeping form, comparing her first to a lovely rose, then to a delicate piece of china, then to a dainty little doll.

“No harm must ever come to you,” Ruth Fielding announced half aloud.

The tiny form moved, unclosed her wee fists, and opened her eyes. Baby June was awake.

“My little darling,” Ruth murmured.

Unable to resist the temptation, she lifted Baby June from the crib and cuddled her. Then, for no reason at all, she walked over to the window and gazed down toward the beach.

“I wonder what could have become of Anita?” she asked herself. “I did not give her permission to leave.”

As she was standing at the window looking thoughtfully out, the doorbell rang sharply. Ruth started and then laughed softly.

“I guess I am looking for trouble. Probably it is only a peddler.”

Nevertheless, she stood quietly listening. She heard the heavy footsteps of the housekeeper and then the opening of the front door. A low murmur of voices reached her ears and then a man’s voice rose angrily.

“Not seeing anyone this afternoon,” she distinguished. “Well, you give your mistress my name. She will see me.”

A few minutes later the housekeeper came into the nursery with a calling card. She handed it to Ruth apologetically.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, but the man insists upon seeing you.”

Ruth accepted the card and read the name it bore. The color faded from her face, and her arms tightened about Baby June. The caller was Ortiz Coronda.

“That man!” she exclaimed. “Oh, what can that Mexican cowboy want with me? I won’t see him! Send him away! Lock the doors!”

CHAPTER III COMPLICATIONS

After the housekeeper had left to deliver the message to Ortiz Coronda, Ruth placed Baby June in her crib and softly opened the door of the nursery that she might hear the conversation on the front porch.

From where she stood she was able to see the Mexican actor without being observed. To her surprise he was much better dressed than in the days when she had known him in Hollywood. His clothing was neat and of good quality and taste. The expression of his face had altered too, though Ruth scarcely was able to decide what the change was.

She heard the housekeeper give the man her message.

“Your mistress will not see me?” he asked, plainly showing disappointment. The bravado left him and Ruth thought he appeared somewhat crestfallen and crushed. “Did you tell her that it was most important?”

“I gave her your card,” the housekeeper returned curtly.

She tried to close the door, but the Mexican was not to be discouraged so easily. He smiled affably.

“Will you not kindly return to your mistress and beg of her that she see me? I have important news for her.”

“If you have a message I will take it to her,” the housekeeper promised, softened by the man’s change of manner.

Coronda shook his head.

“No, my words are only for the ears of Senorita Fielding. Go to her, I beg of you, and intercede in my behalf.” A broad smile flashed over the Mexican’s dark face and his white teeth gleamed. “Ah, tell her that I have reformed!”

“I will give her your message,” the housekeeper agreed reluctantly, “but I am sure it will be useless.”

She closed the door upon the man with a suspicious glance over her shoulder, and returned to the nursery where Ruth was waiting.

“I heard what he said,” Ruth declared before the housekeeper could speak.

“Shall I tell him to leave?”

“Oh, I don’t know what to say. I do not wish to see him, and yet he may have something really important to tell me. If Tom were only here!”

“Shall I tell him to come back when Mr. Cameron is at home?”

“Perhaps that would be the best way to stall him off. Evidently he intends to be persistent. Yes, tell him——”

“Oh, no,” she added quickly as a thought came to her, “he mustn’t know Tom—Mr. Cameron is not here.”

“Then what shall I say to him?” the woman asked.

“I must tell you that he is the person who has upset me. When I was out in the garden, I saw him on the beach. He was with——”

Here Ruth hesitated, not wishing to mention Anita’s name. Then she went on:

“Some time ago I had a very unpleasant experience in which he was involved. I never expected to hear of him again. And here he is at my door, demanding to see me. I’ll not look at him!”

“Then I’ll tell him you do not care to speak with him.” Mrs. Perkins started to open the door of the baby’s room.

In the moment of silence which followed, the two women heard the strains of a Spanish song. Surprised they realized it came from the Mexican who awaited outside the entrance to the Cameron cottage.

Still more surprised was Ruth when she recognized the melody.

“Nita, Juanita,” were the words which floated up to them from the lips of the handsome singer.

Despite her fears, the young mother found her reserve weakening.

“Oh,” Ruth murmured, “I don’t know what to do. Just what did he say?”

“The man seemed quite put out that you wouldn’t see him,” the housekeeper declared. “He said to tell you he had reformed.”

“Yes, but it is difficult for me to believe that he has!”

While Ruth was debating what she should do, the door of the nursery opened again and Anita, the nurse, came in. Somewhat sheepishly, she apologized for her absence, yet offered no explanation as to where she had been. Ruth would have questioned her, but she felt that she had no right to pry. Anita had always been loyal and she could not be called to account for every act.

“Oh, I am so glad you are here!” Ruth exclaimed in relief. “Stay here in the nursery with Baby June while I see Ortiz Coronda. Perhaps then I can get rid of him.”

As the Mexican’s name was mentioned, she saw the nurse start. Again Ruth was tempted to question the woman, but refrained. She turned to the housekeeper with a decisive gesture.

“I will see Senor Coronda but only for a very few minutes. And you must stay with me every minute that he is in the house.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cameron.”

Together they went to the living room, Ruth carefully closing the door of the nursery. The housekeeper hurried to admit the visitor.

If Ruth was frightened she did not disclose it when she greeted Senor Coronda. However, her face was stern and she returned the Mexican’s affable greeting without cordiality. Although the man appeared to be a perfect gentleman, Ruth had steeled herself against him. It was impossible for her to think of him save in terms of his disreputable past.

“I am sorry to trouble you, Senorita Fielding,” he began politely.

Ruth stopped him with a gesture.

“Before you say anything, I have a few questions to ask you.”

The Mexican bowed low.

“I will answer with pleasure.”

“Why were you talking with my nurse a few minutes ago?”

“Pardon, Senorita, merely to ask if I were at the right cottage.”

The smooth answer somewhat mollified Ruth, yet she looked at the man sharply. If only she knew whether or not he was speaking the truth!

“Why have you come here?” she demanded.

Again Ortiz Coronda smiled suavely.

“I have news for you.”

“What news?”

“Senorita, I see that you are prejudiced against me and I cannot blame you. But I would have you know that I am not the same man you knew in Hollywood. I have turned over a new leaf.”

As Ruth made no response, Coronda went on with earnest eloquence.

“I sincerely regret all that has gone before, but can we not let that rest? I am very wealthy now, having been left a substantial fortune when my parents died.”

“Oh!” Ruth murmured, not knowing what else to say.

“I am thinking of starting a moving picture company,” Coronda continued. “Will you act in it for me?”

Ruth was taken aback at the offer. She had no intention of aiding the Mexican even if her time had been her own. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him this, but instead she said:

“I must consider.”

“If only you will, Senorita. It will mean so much to my company.”

“Is this what you came to see me about?”

“No, there is another matter I wish to speak of. During our affair—” he broke off and smiled—“I beg your pardon—our adventure in Mexico, I lost a valuable ring. An heirloom which I prized highly. You may have seen it? No?”

Ruth began to lose patience.

“No, I don’t know anything about your ring, and I may as well tell you now that I am too busy to consider going into the movies again soon.” She hesitated and her voice softened. “You see, I have—a little baby.”

Coronda beamed.

“So I have heard. Congratulations! I kiss your hand and that of your so charming baby!”

The corners of Ruth’s mouth relaxed into a smile. In spite of her dislike for the Mexican, she found him amusing and his apparent interest in Baby June caused her to relent a trifle. Though at first she had been unwilling to admit the change, she saw that Coronda really was a different man than the one who had helped to abduct her. Whether or not his transformation would be lasting, remained to be discovered.

“I am sorry to have troubled you,” the actor apologized as he picked up his hat from the table. “If you hear of my lost ring _____”

“It is not likely that I shall,” Ruth told him more graciously, “but if I learn anything I will try to notify you. I am afraid I

must ask to be excused now.”

She turned to leave the room, but just at that moment the nurse opened the door of the nursery and came down the stairs. Ruth saw her glance self-consciously toward the actor.

“Baby June is asleep,” Anita announced. “If I have your permission, Mrs. Cameron, I shall go shopping.”

Ruth frowned slightly. However, Anita seldom asked for privileges and it seemed selfish to refuse.

“Yes, you may go,” she said reluctantly. “You will be back before dinner?”

“Oh, certainly.”

“Allow me to drive you downtown,” Coronda interposed with a polite bow. “My car is outside.”

“Oh, thank you,” Anita responded at once. “It is so kind of you.”

Before Ruth could protest, they departed together, Anita obviously flattered at the attention.

“Why did she do that?” Ruth demanded, addressing the housekeeper. “I should have warned her.”

She moved to the window and was just in time to see what Tom would call a “snappy” roadster move slowly away from

the curbing. In the car Ortiz Coronda and Anita were engaged in animated conversation.

“She tried to pretend that she came down stairs quite by accident,” Ruth told herself, “but she knew Coronda was here, and I believe she hoped he would offer to take her downtown!”

The more she thought of the incident, the more puzzled she became. Though she had been forced to alter her opinion of the Mexican, she could not entirely trust him, and it troubled her that Anita should show an interest in the man.

“Oh, dear,” she thought uncomfortably as, puzzled and suspicious, she ascended the stairs to the nursery. “Anita has always been so faithful, but this is apt to complicate everything!”

CHAPTER IV

A MYSTERIOUS THEFT

In the days which followed Ruth could not forget Ortiz Coronda. She was greatly relieved that he did not again attempt to force an entrance to her home, but occasional glimpses of him about Lake Osago caused her considerable uneasiness. One day she saw him talking with Anita again and spoke of it to Tom.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” he promised, “but it may be that he has just taken a fancy to Anita.”

“I’d feel a great deal easier in my mind if he would leave her entirely alone.”

“Have you spoken to her about him?”

“No, not yet. It is a rather personal matter, and if Coronda is really trying to reform, I dislike to mention his past.”

“That’s so,” Tom admitted. “One ought not to kick a fellow who is down.”

“He doesn’t appear to be so very far down right now,” Ruth smiled. “You should see that fine automobile he drives around. He told me he had inherited a fortune.”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about it,” Tom advised. “If he doesn’t leave town in a few days I may take it upon myself to advise him to do so. I can’t have him troubling you. We came to Lake Osago to rest up.”

“Oh, I don’t worry about Coronda very much,” Ruth protested. “Really, I am having a wonderful summer, and Baby June actually seems to grow more lovely every day, if that is possible.”

“More like her mother,” Tom supplied.

They fell silent as the housekeeper entered with several letters which the postman had just left. Ruth quickly glanced over them, sorting out the ones which were personal. Catching a glimpse of familiar handwriting, she snatched up the envelope and quickly ripped it open.

“It’s from Helen!” she declared. “Why, the letter was written in New York!”

“New York!” Tom exclaimed. “When did they sail? I supposed they were still in Europe.”

“So did I, but it seems they thought to surprise us. Jennie and her husband are with them too.” She read another paragraph and then gave a squeal of delight. “Tom, what day is this?”

“Thursday.”

“Oh, they’ll be here today then!”

“What?”

“They’re coming on the four-twenty train.”

“That’s less than two hours from now. Shucks! I thought we would have a regular homecoming party for them when they arrived, but this sort of spoils it. There isn’t time to plan anything.”

“Yes, there is,” Ruth declared eagerly, ringing for the housekeeper. “It will mean quick work, but I can manage.”

She turned to the housekeeper as she came in and gave rapid orders.

“We are expecting guests today. Prepare the rooms at once. I will do the ordering for dinner. It must be very special—flowers and favors and oh, everything!”

“Yes, Mrs. Cameron.”

“Make a good part of the ‘everything’ food,” laughed Tom.

“Yes, indeed,” Ruth replied, “we mustn’t forget how one of the guests loves to eat.”

“Oh, Heavy, you mean. Probably by now,” Tom stood up and put his hands on his hips, “that young lady is as slim as I. And would be shocked to be called by the name of Heavy—Jennie it will no doubt have to be from now on.”

“Perhaps you’re right, Tom,” Ruth smiled. “However, we must plan a good dinner. Even if Heavy isn’t as interested in food as she used to be, I think the men will put a big dent into a well planned meal.”

Tom dared not continue the conversation along these lines, so he wisely changed the subject.

“I’ll drive down to meet the folks from France. What time does the train get in?”

Ruth looked at the message again.

“Four-twenty,” she read. “And there is so much to do. Do you know, I can hardly wait to see Helen—and all of them. Oh, Tom, won’t it be wonderful having them here?”

Suddenly she realized that Mrs. Perkins was still standing there.

“You better go and start preparations,” she advised the woman. “Telephone to that gift shop in town where they sell place cards and favors and have them select something suitable for a dinner party. Tell the shopkeeper the guests have just returned from abroad. Mr. Cameron will collect the package about four o’clock. I’ll be out in a few minutes to plan the dinner.”

“You’re a brick,” Tom told his wife after the housekeeper had gone. “It sure will be good to see the old gang again. And what a surprise they will have when they see Baby June. You haven’t told Helen have you?”

“Not a word.”

Seeing that Ruth was eager to start preparing for the expected guests, Tom wisely took himself to the garden. When he returned an hour later he was astonished to

note the festive appearance of the little cottage. Flowers had appeared as though by magic, the dining room table was gleaming with silver and crystal glass and Ruth's gay laughter floated out from the kitchen where she was supervising the work.

Soon it was time to leave for the station and Tom set forth to bring the guests home. At a quarter to five Ruth heard the car stop at the curbing, and rushed out. In an instant she had enfolded Helen in her arms.

"Don't forget me," a hearty voice broke in.

"Heavy!" Ruth laughed.

"That's it, all right," Jennie agreed in a mournful tone.

"Heavy and getting heavier every minute! I actually weigh—but then, you wouldn't believe it. I do hope you're not having anything good to eat for dinner."

"Oh, just a crown roast of lamb with mint sauce, hashed brown potatoes and——"

"Stop right there, Ruth Fielding Cameron, or I'll go back to France."

More kisses, introductions, and handshakings all around, and the group started for the door of the cottage.

"Tom and I have a big surprise for you," Ruth announced.

Helen and Jennie went into the cottage arm in arm with Ruth, leaving Mr. Marchand, Chess and Tom to follow.

In the doorway the two girls paused and stared in amazement, for there stood Anita with Baby June in her arms.

“Where did you get *it*?” Jennie cried. “Oh, what a cute little thing.”

“She isn’t an *it*,” Ruth corrected. “We call her Baby June.”

“*Your* baby?” Helen gasped.

Ruth nodded proudly.

“What do you mean by holding out on us this way?” Jennie demanded. “You never wrote a word.”

“Tom and I saved the news as a surprise.”

“It’s more than a surprise,” Jennie laughed. “It’s a shock. May I hold her?”

“Of course.”

Jennie went over to Baby June and lifted her from the arms of the nurse, but at once she was greeted with such a howl that the others burst into laughter.

“She doesn’t like you, Jennie,” Ruth declared. “You’re too fat.”

“Oh, dear,” Heavy mourned. “To think that even the babies turn against me because I am a stylish stout.”

By this time Tom and the others had entered the cottage, and an enraptured throng gathered about Baby June.

“I don’t know what makes her cry this way,” Tom apologized with a harassed look. “She doesn’t do it once a week—well, not more than once a day anyway.”

“I guess Baby June wants her Ruth,” Jennie declared, handing the bundle over. “There, she’s stopped. I’m afraid it was I she didn’t like, all right.”

Perfectly contented in her new position, Baby June dimpled and cooed and all but flirted with her new friends. When at last Nurse Anita came to take her to the nursery, Jennie and Helen were reluctant to see her go.

“Ruth, you always were the luckiest thing!” Jennie said. “Now you have the prettiest baby in the world.”

“And the sweetest,” Helen added.

“Tom and I think so, of course. But tell us about Europe. Do you wish you were living in the United States again, Jennie?”

“Yes and no,” the fat girl drawled. “I couldn’t stand it if I didn’t come back for a visit now and then. I like France but the food is too heavy.”

“You know that is what you like,” Ruth teased.

“Oh, well,” laughed Jennie good-naturedly, “they say some people eat to live and others live to eat. I’m afraid I come in

the latter category, but I feel good, so why should I deny myself one of the joys of life?”

“By the way, Helen,” Tom interjected, “tell us about the places you visited. Where did you spend most of your time?”

“Oh, every place seemed so delightful we couldn’t stand to leave a single one—we always said we would surely return—on our second honeymoon, if not before,” she roguishly concluded, laughing with Chess.

“We were in most of the European countries,—spent nine weeks in London, six weeks in Rome, and all the time we possibly could in Paris. But the most unique and cosy little place of all was a little seaport town in France. I can’t pronounce the name, but it starts with a C. It was just like a place in a book—winding streets, old jagged cobblestones, funny little houses all dingy looking, they were so old.” Here Helen paused, as though she were visualizing this quaint, old world place.

“Go on and tell us more,” admonished Ruth. “I love atmospheric things—this town must be a jewel.”

“Well,” continued Helen, “we used to go down to the shore and watch all the old Breton fishermen in their oilskin coats and hats, getting ready to go out for fish. Sometimes it was terribly foggy and windy, and the rain would beat against their faces, but they are a hardy lot and didn’t mind anything. It was real spooky to hear the fog horns, with their dismal

warnings—oh, I can't tell you how really romantic and different this old town really was."

"I can't say I care a lot about a place like that—no fun at all to me. So cold I almost froze to death," and Heavy emitted a loud B-rrring sound to show just how she disliked cold.

"Oh, Heavy hasn't the artistic temperament, that's all," teased Chess. "You know, I could hardly get her to show us a place in Paris except the big shops. Do you suppose she cared to take us to the Louvre? No, not Heavy." Here Chess heaved a dismal sigh.

"Listen, Helen, you stand up for me. Didn't I buy a painting of some artist or other? Can't remember what his name was. Paid two hundred good American dollars for it, too, so who dares to say I haven't the artistic temperament? I challenge you."

"Oh, I'm sure Heavy appreciates art," solaced Ruth. "Only perhaps she's not one to show her feelings when she is overcome with fervor and admiration."

At this they all laughed, Heavy the heartiest of all, and soon the room was buzzing with conversation about this and that, different places of interest, their preferences, and finally winding up with Heavy telling about the delightful foods served in various countries.

The conversation was interrupted at this point as the housekeeper came in.

“Oh, the most dreadful thing has happened!” she cried.
“Someone has stolen part of the dinner!”

“What!” Ruth exclaimed, starting to her feet. “Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. I left two cakes and the dessert on the back porch to cool. I went upstairs for perhaps ten minutes and when I came back, everything had vanished!”

Ruth and the others followed the housekeeper to the back porch.

“I left the food on this ledge,” the housekeeper wailed, nearly in tears. “There’s not a sign of it now.”

“Perhaps a dog took it,” Chess suggested.

Ruth shook her head.

“In that case, we would find the dishes somewhere nearby. Anyway, the porch is screened and a dog couldn’t get in.” She turned to the housekeeper. “Did you latch the porch doors?”

The woman confessed that she had not locked them.

“I never thought anyone would steal food. Especially here at Lake Osago where nearly everyone owns their own summer cottage.”

“It certainly is a mystery,” Tom observed with a troubled frown. “What do you make of it, Ruth?”

“I can’t understand it at all.”

“Perhaps the thief is still around here,” Jennie suggested. “He may be eyeing us even at this minute.”

“Oh, Jennie, you give me the creeps!” Helen protested, slipping her hand into that of her husband.

“I’ll just take a look around,” Tom said quietly.

He walked rapidly around the house and then went down the path to the beach. There was no sign of any prowler about the grounds.

“No one around now,” he announced when he returned.

“Let’s say no more about it,” Ruth suggested. She had no wish to further alarm her friends. “After all, it may have been a dog.”

CHAPTER V

A WARNING

Though Ruth passed over the incident of the missing food as an affair of little consequence, she was convinced that no dog had been responsible for the loss. She changed the subject and it was not brought up again until dinner was announced.

“Poor Heavy will be the one that will suffer,” Helen laughed. “Her greatest joy in life is gobbling desserts.”

“That dog really did me a favor,” Jennie protested good-naturedly. “He must have known I am on a diet.”

All through the dinner, the young people continued to joke about the accident, but once Ruth caught Tom’s eye and noticed the odd expression on his face.

“There’s something queer about the way that food vanished,” Ruth told herself, “and Tom knows it too. Coming so closely after Ortiz Coronda’s visit—but then, of course he didn’t do a thing like that. With all his money there would be no need to commit such an act.”

The dinner was perfect from the fruit cocktail to the last course. And after all, the guests were not deprived of their dessert, for the maid came in with ice cream sundaes which had been ordered hastily from a downtown store. The

housekeeper had added a few touches of her own in the form of whipped cream, plump red cherries and crushed nuts. Jennie groaned as she picked up her spoon.

“I thought you were on a diet,” Helen reminded her cruelly.

“So did I,” Jennie returned with a weary sigh, “but I’ve changed my mind.”

Dinner over, Ruth and her guests retired to the living room. Over the coffee they discussed moving pictures, Europe, Baby June and a hundred other subjects.

“I do hope you will all stay here at Lake Osago a long time,” Ruth said hospitably. “It will liven things up for Tom and me.”

“I wish we could,” Jennie sighed, “but Henri says we must be back in France by September and before that time we want to see the Grand Canyon and a lot of other places.”

“I’m afraid Chess and I won’t be able to stay here all the time either,” Helen declared regretfully. “But we’ll make trips back and forth between Cameron Hall and your place.”

“That will help a little.”

“You won’t miss us anyway,” Helen insisted. “Baby June will fill your time.”

“She is an absorbing interest,” Ruth admitted with a proud smile. “If anything should happen to her—” She broke off. “Why will I think of such silly things?”

“It’s the mother instinct working on you,” Jennie drawled.

The evening passed very pleasantly but after everyone had retired, Ruth stole quietly into the nursery for a last peep at Baby June. As she had expected, she found her sleeping peacefully in her crib. Satisfied, she descended the stairs again, to speak to the housekeeper.

“Has Anita come in?” she inquired.

The housekeeper shook her head.

“She asked me for the evening off,” Ruth said somewhat impatiently, “but when I told her that she could go I assumed she would return at a reasonable hour. I wonder where she went?”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Cameron, but I think she had an engagement with some young man. Why, there’s a car driving up to the door now!”

“Thank goodness she has come back.”

“It’s a new car,” the housekeeper announced as she peered out of the window. “Why, it looks like that one that stopped here this afternoon.”

“Never mind,” Ruth remarked dryly.

“I beg your pardon,” the housekeeper stammered, backing away from the window.

“You may go now,” Ruth told her. “I will lock the door after Anita comes in.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cameron.”

Ruth sat down on the davenport, impatiently waiting for the nurse. At length, after perhaps fifteen minutes, she came hurrying into the house. Seeing Ruth, she looked confused.

“I’m sorry if I kept you up,” she apologized. “I didn’t mean to be out so late.”

“Anita, if you don’t mind, I should like to have a little talk with you. Will you step into the den where we shall not be heard?”

Anita frowned, but reluctantly followed Ruth into the other room.

“Anita, I think a great deal of you,” Ruth began kindly, “and that is why I don’t want you to make a serious mistake. I rather suspect that you were out with Ortiz Coronda tonight. Am I right?”

“I was out with him, but what of it?” the nurse said petulantly.

“Do you know anything about the man?”

“No, but I like him and that is sufficient.”

“I warn you then that you had best be careful.”

“I am well able to take care of myself!” Anita retorted peevishly.

“Anita,” Ruth said patiently, “I don’t mean to interfere in your affairs, but I feel it my duty to tell you something of this man’s past.”

The nurse stood gazing down at the floor, and Ruth after a moment’s pause continued,

“Ortiz Coronda made a great deal of trouble for Mr. Cameron and me when we were making a talking moving picture in Hollywood. When I refused to hire him, he sought revenge with some others, by kidnapping Mrs. Copley and myself. He tried to hold us for ransom and would have succeeded, had not Mr. Cameron and Mr. Copley come to our rescue. While Coronda claims to have reformed, one cannot be sure.”

Anita’s chin went up.

“I am sure,” she said quietly. “I don’t care what his past has been. I feel certain that he has turned over a new leaf. My own life has not been an easy one and I can find it in my heart to sympathize with him.”

“You have never told me about yourself,” Ruth suggested gently.

“I never knew that you were interested.”

“I have always had your welfare at heart, Anita.”

“It’s a long story and not a very pleasant one,” the nurse said after a slight hesitation. “Shortly after my graduation from nursing school I married a doctor. I guess I was carried away—I don’t know what made me think that I loved him—anyway, I did. We were happy for a year but I noticed that my husband kept acting strangely. Then one day he fell down the cellar stairs and injured his head.”

Anita paused and went on with difficulty.

“After that he seemed to go from bad to worse. One day he became violently angry and slapped a baby patient. I don’t know whether that was the cause of it or not—the baby died.”

“Oh, how dreadful!”

“The parents of the child had my husband arrested, but the matter was hushed up as much as possible. He was given a sanity test and found—insane. Through the kindness of the parents to me, the charges against him were removed and he was turned over to me. I placed him in a private sanitarium where he receives the best of care. When I learned that there was no hope for his recovery, I secured my divorce.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Ruth sympathized. “I didn’t know.”

“So you see,” the nurse said with a constricted smile, “my memories are not always pleasant. I love babies—especially your little June, and by my devotion I hope in a measure to atone for my husband’s terrible wrong.”

“June could not have a more loyal nurse, of that I am certain.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Cameron. I will bear in mind what you have said to me about Ortiz Coronda, but I know I cannot change toward him. After all, I have never had the good times which fall to the lot of most girls, and I crave a little fun—a show now and then or a ride.”

“I understand your viewpoint now,” Ruth told her, “and of course it is up to you. If you feel you can trust Ortiz Coronda—and mind, I do not say that he is entirely untrustworthy—then I shall say no more.”

“I shall be careful.”

“Then that is all.”

The nurse turned and without a word left the den. Ruth heard her slowly ascending the stairs to her room.

“Oh, dear,” she thought as she turned out the lights, “what I said just went in one ear and out the other. It’s easy to see that she is infatuated with that man. I wonder where it all will end?”

CHAPTER VI

A SOCIETY AFFAIR

Ruth did not speak again to Anita Grenade concerning her friendship with Ortiz Coronda though frequently she was tempted to do so. A week slipped by and during that time the Mexican's automobile was seen at the door far too often to please her.

"They do make an attractive pair," she thought grudgingly one day as she saw them walking together on the beach. "Anita is good-looking and as for Ortiz, he is dangerously handsome. No wonder she is infatuated with him."

Yet as long as Anita did not neglect Baby June, Ruth had no real cause for complaint. She was frank to admit that her dislike for the Mexican was based entirely upon what he had been in the past.

On the whole, Ruth was much too busy to think of the matter. Enjoying the company of her guests, she entertained with a lavish hand, and was sorry when Jennie and her husband announced that they must take up their travels again. Shortly after their departure, Chess and Helen left for Cameron Hall, promising to return to Lake Osago at least once every week.

“Chess has just bought a new coupe,” Helen announced, “and I intend to wear out the tires the first month.”

With all her old friends gone, Ruth devoted herself to Baby June. She declined all invitations, refused to serve on committees and held open house for no one save Helen and Chess.

“I intend to be a regular hermit this summer,” she told Tom. “I shall have to go back to Hollywood and the movies soon enough. Now I intend to enjoy Baby June.”

“Bravo!” Tom applauded.

Just at that moment the front doorbell rang. Ruth threw up her hands in despair.

“I know it’s another club woman who wants me to serve on some committee. I’ve told them that with the scenario I am writing and my baby, my time is full, but they won’t believe me.”

She glanced carelessly at the card which the maid brought in to her.

“Mrs. Sallenfield—she’s one of the most prominent women in the colony—not that I care! I suppose I must see her, but I’ll not promise anything.”

When Mrs. Sallenfield was shown in, she greeted her graciously.

“I know how busy you are,” the visitor began, “and I would not think of troubling you, were I not certain that you will be interested in what we are planning. We are trying to get up a parade.”

“Really, I——”

“A baby parade,” Mrs. Sallenfield interrupted. “Not just an ordinary affair but something gorgeous.”

“Oh, a baby parade,” Ruth said slowly, her face lighting up. “That would be splendid.”

“You have such wonderful ideas,” Mrs. Sallenfield went on, quick to press her advantage. “Will you not help us?”

“I am dreadfully busy, but I admit you tempt me.”

“Then you will do it? We should like so much to have Baby June in the parade.”

Ruth hesitated. She had devoted herself to so much welfare and artistic work that it seemed second nature to her. This had left her very little time to herself, however, and she felt also that Baby June must not be deprived of a mother’s care.

“Really, Mrs. Sallenfield, I should love to help you and serve on the committee, but you cannot imagine how hard pressed I am for time,” Ruth answered in an apologetic tone.

“But Mrs. Cameron, I want you so much to supervise the arrangements. You are experienced in directing plays and pageants, and no one could do it better than

yourself. And by the way, since this is to be a baby parade, why not enter your little girl? You could decorate a float in your finest manner and have the little baby as the central note. Please say you will help me, Mrs. Cameron.” Mrs. Sallenfield’s voice was so full of entreaty that Ruth could not entirely ignore her request.

A vision of Baby June on a float, her golden hair shining in the sunlight, laughing and cooing at the admiring crowds, came before Ruth Fielding. Wasn’t Baby June sweet enough to carry off the prize for the loveliest baby in the parade? Why not help her win? It really would be fun, after all, to decorate a float and make lovely, fluffy things for June to wear.

So she turned her lovely eyes on Mrs. Sallenfield, and the matronly woman knew she had won.

“Yes, I will help you,” Ruth declared with sudden decision. “It will mean putting away my scenario for a time, but it can wait.”

“Is it too much to ask that you direct the work?” the visitor next asked. “You have had so much experience.”

“Not in baby parades,” Ruth laughed.

“I mean, you have so many novel ideas and of course as a moving picture director you have learned how to gain certain gorgeous effects.”

“If you wish, I will take charge,” Ruth promised.

After a short discussion, the two made out a list of committees and set the date for their first general meeting. Mrs. Sallenfield then took her departure, obviously pleased at having secured Ruth's promise to direct the parade.

"I thought you weren't going to help with anything," Tom teased when they were alone. "Here you go, running the whole show."

"But this is different. A baby parade will be such fun and we'll make it a splendid affair. Something that will be the talk of Lake Osago for the rest of the summer!"

"I know it will be, if you are in charge."

"Tom, you're making fun of me now."

"I am not! Haven't I the most capable little wife in the world?"

"Sometimes I'm afraid I'm most too capable. People are always asking me to do things and I get so tired of it. Why, I believe I'm almost tired of writing scenarios."

"You mean you'd like to give it up?"

"We-ll," Ruth wavered. "No, I know I could never get along without writing, but right now I feel as though I have gone stale. I haven't an idea in my head, unless it has some connection with Baby June."

"Neither have I," Tom confessed. "But I hope Baby June isn't going to stop your work—that is, if you

really want to go on with your writing.”

“Oh, Baby June hasn’t stopped me. If anything she has enriched my mind and given me a deeper understanding. I guess I am just tired of writing. I have been at it several years now.”

“All writ out, eh? An interlude is just the ticket for you.”

“Yes, this baby parade will give me a mental rest at least. By the way, what has become of Anita? She took June out in her carriage and I haven’t seen her for some time.”

“Oh, she has the baby out on the grounds.”

“I’m glad of that. I was afraid she might have gone off with Coronda again. Somehow, I don’t like to have him near Baby June.”

“I can’t blame you after what happened last summer.”

“Do you really think that man has reformed, Tom?”

“It’s hard to say. He seems decent enough now.”

“But what is he doing here at Osago Lake? I don’t see why he stays.”

“Perhaps he hopes you will reconsider and agree to act in his moving picture company.”

“I told him very pointedly that it was out of the question. No, I think he must be hanging around for

some other reason.”

“Anita?”

“I wish I knew. He seems to pay her a great deal of attention.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed it myself. Of course, she is old enough to look out for herself.”

“Nevertheless, I feel responsible for her.”

“Don’t you think she appears happier than she has for many a week?” Tom asked.

“Yes, I do, Tom, and that is what makes me uneasy. I am dreadfully afraid she is falling in love.”

“It might not be such a bad match for her. Coronda has plenty of money.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Of course not. I didn’t mean to imply that it was. Still, if Coronda *has* reformed and he really cares for Anita, she might be happy with him.”

“If only I could forget his past,” Ruth sighed.

“Well, Anita takes wonderful care of Baby June, and we shouldn’t ask for more. We can’t select companions for her.”

“She does love Baby June,” Ruth returned as she moved over to the window and looked out. “See them there together. They——”

She broke off and gave a little scream as she beheld a sight which struck terror to her heart.

“Tom! Oh Tom, the baby!”

A large black dog had leaped the hedge which separated the Cameron grounds from the roadway, and with bared fangs was rushing straight at Baby June in her carriage!

CHAPTER VII

ANITA'S COURAGE

It all happened so quickly that Ruth was left momentarily stunned.

As the big shaggy dog sprang over the hedge, the nurse turned and saw him. She gave a scream of horror and started to back away. Then, as the dog leaped toward the baby carriage, she snatched up a stone from the ground and hurled it with all her might, at the same time trying to shield Baby June with her body.

The stone struck the animal squarely on the mouth. With a loud howl he fell over on his side, writhing in pain.

Deserting the carriage, Anita snatched Baby June from her blankets and started to run toward the house, but her flight was arrested by the sound of a harsh voice.

“Hey, you! What you mean striking my dog? You try to keel him, eh?”

Still trembling with fright and clutching Baby June tightly in her arms, Anita wheeled about to see a strange foreign man, evidently an Italian, peering angrily over the hedge.

“Keep your ugly dog away from here!” she cried. “Call him off!”

By this time the dog had somewhat recovered from the stunning blow and was getting unsteadily to his feet.

“Call him off!” the nurse screamed.

The Italian gave a short, scornful laugh and leaped the hedge, but he showed no disposition to obey the order. Instead, he turned angrily upon Anita.

“You knock out his tooth with the stone,” he accused. “You try to keel my pet.”

“I was only trying to protect myself and this little baby. You have no right to let him run without a leash.”

“I teach you dat you not touch my dog! You pay for hitting him!”

“I’ll not pay a cent!” Anita cried, backing away. “I wish I had knocked out all of his teeth!”

By this time, Tom and Ruth had rushed out of the house. Seeing them, the Italian lost some of his bravado.

“Get out of here and be quick about it!” Tom ordered curtly. “If I see that dog of yours around again, I’ll call the police.”

“You call-a de police, eh?” the man snarled. “You try—I feex you!”

“None of your threats!”

Tom started toward him, but the Italian, after another sullen glance, climbed over the hedge. He called the dog and disappeared down the road.

“Oh, my baby!” Ruth cried, taking her from Anita. “If anything had happened to her! Anita, you were wonderful! I saw it all from the window.”

“I acted instinctively,” the nurse returned quietly. “I love Baby June, too, and—well, it seemed the natural thing to do. Perhaps I shouldn’t have struck the dog.”

“Indeed you should have,” Ruth told her. “Such an ugly, vicious looking beast.”

“We owe you a lot, Anita,” Tom told her gratefully. “Ruth and I were too far away to have saved June. If it hadn’t been for you—well, we’ll not think of what might have happened.”

“Do let’s go into the house,” Ruth proposed. “That man may still be around here.”

“No, I saw him go out of sight,” Tom assured her. “We’ll probably not see him again.”

“Oh, I hope not, but he threatened you. Do you think he will dare try to make trouble?”

“I know how to handle his kind,” Tom said quietly. “They are all bluster.”

“But he had such an evil look on his face. I feel that he would do most anything.”

“I’ll see to it that he doesn’t come around here with that dog of his again,” Tom declared. “There’s an ordinance here at the lake that dogs must be muzzled at this time of year. I mean to report him to the police.”

“But we don’t even know his name.”

“No, but I can give them a description.”

“Oh, Tom,” Ruth said anxiously, “I really wish you wouldn’t do it.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Oh, I suppose you think I am silly, but I am afraid if you report him, he may try to get even with us.”

“I think Mrs. Cameron is right,” Anita seconded. “That man might do anything.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid of him,” Tom insisted, “but if you think best, Ruth, I’ll let the matter drop.”

“I wish you would. After all, Baby June wasn’t harmed, thanks to Anita’s quick work.”

“All right, I’ll do as you say, but if I see him around here again——”

“That will be soon enough to report him to the police.”

The three went into the house, but Tom continued to frown as though he regretted his promise.

“You know,” he began again as he sat down in an easy chair and stared thoughtfully out toward the lake. “I wish I knew that fellow’s name. I have a sneaking notion he may know something about what became of that food that disappeared the other afternoon.”

“It might have been that horrid dog of his,” Anita suggested.

“Yes, or it may have been the Italian himself. He didn’t seem like a very reputable character.”

“He looked positively criminal to me,” Ruth declared with a shudder. “I hate to think he has perhaps been skulking around here.”

“Oh, perhaps he hasn’t been,” Tom said lightly. “It was only an idea of mine, and probably not a very good one.”

“On the contrary, I suspect you are right. The same thing occurred to me.”

“If I were you, Anita, I should be careful where I walked,” Tom advised. “Especially when you have Baby June with you.”

“I will,” Anita promised soberly.

A few minutes later she took Baby June and carried her to the nursery, leaving Ruth and Tom together.

“That was a wonderful thing for her to do,” Ruth said softly after the door of the nursery had closed. “We must try to show our appreciation.”

“Yes, perhaps we can give her a substantial gift.”

Ruth shook her head.

“No, we can’t do that. She would feel insulted. Anita loves Baby June.”

“We’ll try to make it up to her in other ways.”

“Yes. You know, Tom, I feel a little ashamed of myself.”

“Ashamed?”

“I was beginning to feel a trifle provoked at Anita—I mean at the way she has been acting. Sometimes I have even wondered if she were entirely loyal to us.”

“You mean by her association with Ortiz Coronda?”

Ruth nodded.

“She knows I distrust him and do not welcome him here. This incident today has convinced me that I was wrong to question Anita’s loyalty even for a minute.”

“She’s devoted to you and to the baby,” Tom said slowly. “If she is making a mistake about Coronda it is an error of the mind rather than the heart.”

“But while her own motives may be above board, how can we be certain about Coronda? He may be using her as a cat’s paw.”

“That’s so.”

“I had intended to tell Anita today that she positively must not see that man again,” Ruth ended, “but now that is impossible. After the way she saved Baby June, I couldn’t deny her anything. Fate, you see, has tied my hands.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Tom returned gravely. “We are in an awkward position. I’m afraid we’ll have to let matters take their own course.”

“Yes,” Ruth sighed, “and matters have a way of getting into a hopeless tangle!”

CHAPTER VIII

GREAT-UNCLE JABEZ: VILLAIN

During the next few days, a close watch was kept of the Cameron grounds, but no more was seen of the strange Italian who had caused so much annoyance. Though Tom did not report the matter to the police, he did take it upon himself to trace the man. For his trouble he received little information of interest.

The Italian's name was Mike Altoni. He had drifted into town the week before and had made it known that he was in search of employment. However, he had not appeared ambitious in searching for work, preferring to loiter about the streets or beach.

Ruth's fears concerning the man gradually melted away and she came to feel less troubled about Anita Grenade. The nurse attended strictly to her duties, devoting herself wholeheartedly to little June. As far as was known she did not see Ortiz Coronda.

Ruth, feeling that her baby could not be left in more competent hands, rushed into a whirl of preparation for the coming baby parade. Already the affair had received a great deal of publicity. The newspapers used Ruth's picture several times in announcing that the parade was to be one of the most interesting events of the summer.

As a special honor, the committee had requested Ruth to serve as “queen” of the pageant, but she had refused, giving as her excuse that she wished to devote all her spare time to her baby.

“But it is an honor you have earned,” one of the ladies protested. “It will not take a great deal more of your time to be queen.”

Ruth shook her head.

“I prefer to watch the parade from the sidelines.”

In the end she had her way. While Ruth was reluctant to take any more upon her shoulders, she did not shirk the work which she had already promised to do. So skillfully did she plan and name her helpers that the preparations, elaborate as they were, went forward with scarcely a hitch. Her ideas were quickly adopted and praised. It seemed that everyone at Lake Osago wished to co-operate.

Even Tom, who at first had declared that baby parades were not for him, found himself taking an interest in the work. Helen and Chess, who frequently motored over from Cameron Hall, enthusiastically entered into the plans.

One day Ruth entered the den to find Tom and Chess uncrating a large box.

“What in the world are you up to?” she demanded curiously.

“Come and take a look for yourself,” Tom invited.

“Why, it’s a moving picture camera!”

“Chess and I thought we might as well have some fun out of this parade. We thought we’d take some pictures of it.”

“Oh, fine! But are you sure you can get good ones?”

“Well, we’re not experts, but Chess and I both sort of nosed around the cameramen out on the lot in Hollywood. We learned a few tricks.”

“We thought we’d get the machine a few days early and practice,” Chess added.

“We’ll take some shots of you and Helen,” Tom offered.
“And of course, Baby June.”

“Why not make a party of it?” Ruth demanded, her face lighting up as an idea came to her suddenly. “Let’s have Great-Uncle Jabez and Aunt Alvira over from Red Mill!”

“Say, that’s great!” Tom approved. “Do you think they would consent to having their pictures taken?”

“We’ll have to coax them. When will you be ready to take the pictures?”

“We have some reels coming tonight. If they get here, we can shoot tomorrow.”

“Then I’m going right now and telephone to Red Mill. I’ll tell them we’ll send the car for them tomorrow afternoon.”

That evening the young people could talk of little else than the new moving picture camera. With a great deal of laughter they wrote out a scenario which was to be used the next day.

“It’s just nonsense, but if Great-Uncle Jabez and Aunt Alvira will take the parts we have assigned them, it will make a good comic movie at that!” Tom declared enthusiastically. “Ruth can’t turn out a poor scenario even when she tries.”

Wisely, Ruth had not told her great-uncle of the plans, for she knew that if warned before, he was apt to balk. In recent years the old miser had softened in many ways, but upon occasion he still proved discouragingly stubborn. Great-Uncle Jabez had always regarded moving pictures with disfavor, never entirely approving of Ruth’s connection with the industry.

Yet on the following afternoon the old man was more tractable than usual.

“Movin’ pitchers?” he demanded scornfully, when told of the plans for the day. “Is that what you brought me clear over here for? Wastin’ my day with such nonsense!”

“I’ve always thought it would be wonderful to act before a camera,” Aunt Alvira whispered to Ruth, her eyes shining with anticipation. “But don’t you think I’m too old and wrinkled for such things, my pretty?”

“Of course not!”

“Aunt Alvirah, you’re to be the grandmother in our scenario,” Tom told her.

“What’s a scenario?” Great-Uncle Jabez broke in. “Can’t you call a thing by a civilized name?”

“He means the story,” Ruth said with a tolerant smile.

At last the group assembled on the lawn at the back of the cottage where Tom and Chess had decided that the shots were to be taken. Anita came down with Baby June in her arms and Aunt Alvirah quickly relieved her of her burden. As she sat in a rocking chair softly crooning, Tom slyly set up the camera and caught the pose without her knowing it.

“Uncle Jabez, you’re to play the part of the villain,” he announced a few minutes later when they were nearly ready to start the filming of the scenario. “When I give the signal, you walk out in front of the camera and try to intimidate the heroine—that’s Ruth.”

“Humph!” Great-Uncle Jabez grunted. “It will be the first time I’ve ever been able to do it!”

For all his goodnatured complaining, the old miser was more interested in the taking of the pictures than he pretended. To the surprise and delight of the others, he fell into the spirit of it, and when the signal was given, ranted and snarled and leered like any dyed-in-the-wool villain of the thrillers.

“That was splendid!” Ruth cried when the scene was finished.

“I always said there was nothin’ to this movin’ pitcher business,” Great-Uncle Jabez retorted bluntly, yet secretly pleased that he had scored such a triumph. “Nothin’ but an expensive pastime. If I’d known you were going to rope me into this, I’d have stayed at home and got in the hay.”

When Aunt Alvirah’s turn came, she was overcome with self-consciousness and no amount of coaching would make her relax before the camera.

“I wasn’t made for a moving picture star,” she sighed as she sank wearily into a chair. “Oh, my back! And, oh, my bones!”

“I’m afraid we’ve tired you out,” Ruth said solicitously. “Come into the house and have a cup of tea.”

“When will we get to see these pitchers?” Great-Uncle Jabez asked as he followed the others inside.

“I thought you weren’t interested,” Ruth teased.

“Well, since you dragged me into it, I aim to see how bad a fool I made of myself.”

“Don’t worry,” Tom said with a chuckling laugh. “You did all right. I mean,” he went on, hastily, “you did fine! I can tell that you registered. I’ve been around where they make movies enough to know that.”

“Hum!” muttered Great-Uncle Jabez with a wry smile.

“That’s a little better than what I thought you were goin’ t’ say. But when can we see these ‘shots’ as you call ’em?”

“I’m rushing them over to Bordentown by auto to have them developed and printed,” Tom answered. “It takes more of an outfit than I could manage here to do that. We’ll have them back tomorrow night. Can’t you stay over and see how you and Aunt Alvira look? You may want a job in the movies some day.”

“Not as long as I can farm it!” chuckled Great-Uncle Jabez. “But I’m just curious enough to stay an’ see how I look on the screen.”

The return of the prints was anxiously awaited, and during the day that followed Ruth entertained her visitors. Aunt Alvira could hardly be parted from Baby June, insisting on taking care of the little one during nearly all her waking moments, somewhat to the jealousy of Anita Grenade.

“Well, here we are!” cried Tom that evening as the auto containing the moving picture prints swung into the grounds. “Now for the big show. This way, everybody!”

After dinner the group eagerly gathered in the living room where a screen had been set up. They took seats and after a little wait the lights were turned off and the first picture was flashed upon the silver sheet. It was Aunt Alvira cuddling Baby June. So natural was the pose, that there was a chorus of delighted “Oh’s!”

Other scenes showed Ruth with the baby and one with June all by herself staring questioningly out toward her audience.

“You’ll have to make a star of her yet,” Helen whispered to her chum. “What a lovely screen baby she would make.”

“I don’t intend the movies shall have my June,” Ruth returned promptly. “At least, not for a good many years.”

A roar of laughter greeted the appearance of Great-Uncle Jabez on the screen. Though his actions were jerky, his antics would have done credit to a comedian. By far the best performers were Ruth and Helen, especially the former, for many years before the camera had taught her a technique which had become second nature.

Not content with one view of the pictures, Ruth’s relatives insisted that Tom run the film through several times.

“I am sure we can get some good shots of the baby parade,” Tom told Ruth. “Wouldn’t it be great if Baby June should win the cup?”

“Oh, I’m not really expecting that much.”

“You never can tell. I’ve been sort of casting my eye over the babies at Lake Osago and June is the cutest one here.”

“You’re prejudiced,” Ruth laughed. “Anyway, it isn’t entirely the baby that wins, but the most attractive float and baby together.”

“That clinches it then. You know there isn’t a person in Lake Osago that can compete with you when it comes to ideas.”

“I haven’t been able to think of a thing so far, Tom.”

“Oh, well, there’s plenty of time. You will.”

“I’m not so sure,” Ruth returned with a perplexed frown.

“I’ve been racking my brains for days. Unless I have an inspiration soon, I am afraid you’ll not get that picture of June clasping the winning cup.”

CHAPTER IX

MISGIVINGS

“Ruth, you’ve been so busy helping plan for the baby parade that you haven’t had time to think up a float for your own daughter. Aren’t you ashamed?”

It was Helen who spoke. She and Chess were spending a week at the cottage, planning to remain until after the parade.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Ruth declared, “but I haven’t been able to strike upon an idea that will do Baby June justice.”

“But do you realize that the parade is only a few days off? If we are going to make the float we must be getting busy.”

“I know it only too well, but when one’s mind is a blank, what can one do?”

“I wish I could think of something good,” Helen said regretfully.

“We might try to work it out by association,” Ruth suggested after a moment’s thought. “Take June’s name, for instance. What does that make you think of?”

“Why, the month of June and roses.”

“And what do the roses make you think of?”

“Oh, a big basket.”

“There!” Ruth cried triumphantly. “We have it!”

“Have what?”

“Why, the idea for the float! We’ll call it, ‘A Basket of June Roses.’ Can’t you see the picture? A gigantic basket of flowers with June nestled down in the center like a tiny rosebud.”

“Wonderful,” exclaimed Helen, “I can picture her already. The basket surrounded with roses—enough to cover the whole float.”

“The whole float! What do you mean?” Ruth Fielding asked, but before a reply was forthcoming, she answered her own inquiry.

“I can see it, too. An automobile with the back entirely covered with flowers. In the center the big basket, like the lovely ones at the florists’, with a curved handle, and Baby June inside of it.”

“The only change I’d like to suggest is in the name. I think ‘A Basket of June Roses’ is too long. Make it a little more peppy.”

“How does this sound,” Ruth suggested. “‘June Roses’?”

“Fine. Much better,” decided Helen.

So the matter of how Baby June was to appear in the Baby Parade was settled.

“Ruth, I knew you’d think of something good.”

“But I didn’t. This was your idea.”

“I merely mentioned a few isolated words and you wove them into the idea. A splendid one, too! If June doesn’t win the silver cup, I’ll miss my guess.”

“Oh, I’ll be so proud if she does, but the competition will be keen. They say Mrs. Hollis is spending a great deal of money on her float.”

“That seems foolish to me.”

“Yes, it does. She is determined that her daughter shall win, and is sparing no expense toward that end. Oh well, if June doesn’t win, I’ll not be much disappointed. After all, the success of the parade is what I am working for.”

“When shall we start on June’s float?”

“We’ll have to have a great abundance of artificial roses,” Ruth declared, “and it will take days to make enough.”

“Then let’s start right away. Perhaps we can get Anita to help us.”

“I’m sure she would be glad to, but she took June and went to the park about an hour ago.”

“Well, we can get our materials together and start in. She may be back in time to help.”

A search of the sewing basket revealed that there was enough goods on hand to supply the girls with work for several hours. Dispatching Tom and Chess downtown for fancy crepe papers and various other necessities, they gathered together their sewing things and went out to the summer-house.

“I don’t see why Anita doesn’t come back,” Ruth said after they had worked for some time. “It’s nearly five o’clock and I don’t like to have her keep June out so long. Do you suppose anything could have happened?”

“Oh, I’m sure everything is all right,” Helen returned. She glanced up from her sewing. “Isn’t that Anita coming now?”

“Yes, it is,” Ruth observed in relief. A moment later she frowned. “There’s someone with her. I do hope it isn’t Ortiz Coronda.”

“That’s just who it is, Ruth.”

“Oh, dear, I thought she was getting over her infatuation.”

“She has probably been with him all afternoon.”

“I’m afraid of it.”

“Are you going to speak to her about him?”

“I did once, but apparently it didn’t make the slightest impression. After the way she saved my baby, I don’t wish to appear ungrateful.”

“But aren’t you afraid she will neglect June?”

“She has always taken wonderful care of her, but it worries me.”

“They make a handsome couple,” Helen observed. “There’s something about Coronda that’s rather dashing, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I do,” Ruth returned frankly. “If I were only certain of his character, I would not oppose Anita’s going with him.”

“He seems to have reformed.”

“Yes, he does appear changed. I would be the last person to hold his past against him, if I only knew that he had actually turned over a new leaf. I think so much of Anita I can’t bear to see her make a mistake.”

“She’s coming on alone now,” Helen observed. “Coronda has turned back.”

“He knows he isn’t welcome here. I hate to have Anita sneaking away with him, but until I am sure of Coronda, I’ll not allow him on the grounds.”

“I don’t blame you,” Helen declared.

They fell silent as the nurse approached. She wheeled the perambulator up to the summer-house, and with a rather sheepish expression on her face, brought Baby June to Ruth.

“You were gone a long time,” Ruth said quietly.

The nurse looked away.

“It was so nice out in the warm sun,” she faltered, “I thought the fresh air would do Baby June good.”

Ruth did not reply. She lifted up her tiny daughter and gently cuddled her.

“I’ll take the carriage back to the nursery,” Anita said awkwardly.

She turned away and hastily walked into the house.

“I don’t like the way she acted,” Ruth said to her chum after the nurse had gone. “She didn’t want me to know she had been with that Mexican.”

“She felt guilty about it too. You could tell by the way she acted.”

“Yes, I was so provoked that I didn’t ask her to help with the flowers.”

“Oh, well, we’re getting along with it. We should finish everything in plenty of time for the parade.”

For some time they cut out petals and stitched and pasted, but the work did not progress as rapidly as before, for Baby June was a delightful distraction.

“We’re nearly out of thread,” Helen said presently.

“I have another spool in the house. I’ll get it. Perhaps I had better turn June over to Anita too. If I don’t, I am afraid we never will finish.”

Gently she picked up her daughter, straightened her pretty dress, and carried her to the house.

“Anita!” she called.

There was no answer.

Frowning slightly she went to her work basket and searched for the spool of thread. She could not find one of the right shade.

“I must have left it in my room,” she decided. “I believe I had it the other night when I was mending a scarf.”

Still holding Baby June she slowly mounted the stairs. She glanced in at the open door of the nursery but Anita was not there.

“I wonder what became of her?” Ruth thought.

She came to her own bedroom and flung open the door. Involuntarily, she stepped back a pace and gave a gasp of astonishment.

“Anita Grenade!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing in my room?”

CHAPTER X OVERBOARD

“What are you doing here?” Ruth repeated sternly.

She saw for herself that Anita Grenade had been searching for something on her dressing table. The cover had been removed from a jewel box.

“I—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cameron,” the nurse stammered. Hastily, she edged toward the door.

Ruth did not move aside to permit her to pass.

“I am afraid I must ask for an explanation,” she said pointedly.

The nurse dropped her head and looked away.

“I know what you must think of me, Mrs. Cameron,” she said very low. “It was a dreadful thing for me to do. I had no right to come into your room without permission.”

Observing that Anita was genuinely contrite, Ruth felt only a deep regret that she had caught the girl in a questionable act. She was convinced that the nurse had been looking in her jewel box and yet she was puzzled at the motive, for all the servants knew that valuable jewels were

never kept in the house. Then, too, she had always trusted Anita.

“You think I came here to steal,” the girl blurted out, “but I didn’t. I swear it! Won’t you believe that I speak the truth?”

“Yes,” Ruth returned simply, “but don’t you feel that you owe me an explanation?”

Anita nodded miserably.

“I don’t know why I did it. I told Ortiz I couldn’t, but when I saw your door open——”

“Ortiz Coronda?” Ruth lifted her eyebrows. “What has he to do with it?”

“He asked me to look through your jewel box.”

“Indeed! And for what reason, may I ask?”

“He wanted to find out if you had a ruby ring in your collection.”

“Oh!” An angry flush mounted Ruth’s cheeks, but she kept her temper in check. “Then you thought I was a thief, Anita?”

“Oh, no, I was sure you weren’t!” the nurse half sobbed. “Ortiz didn’t tell me much about the ring. He just asked me to look for it.”

“And you promised?”

“No, I told him I wouldn’t think of going to your room.”

“But I find you here.”

“I am so ashamed of myself, Mrs. Cameron. I can’t understand why I did it. I had no intention of coming in here, but as I passed your door I saw that it was open. I said to myself: ‘I *know* that ring isn’t there, but Ortiz will never be convinced unless I look. It won’t do any harm to go in.’ I swear I had no intention of prying. And I didn’t intend to steal!”

“I believe you,” Ruth told her, “but I can’t tell you how much I regret that it had to happen.”

“You’ve always been so good to me, Mrs. Cameron. It was a contemptible thing to do and I humbly apologize. I’ll pack my things now.”

“Pack?”

“Yes, you’ll not be wanting me here after this.”

Ruth was silent a moment. Then she said:

“I want you to stay, Anita. I am sure such a thing will never happen again.”

“Oh, no. I don’t know what possessed me.”

“I am afraid,” Ruth said dryly, “that Ortiz Coronda has quite a power over you. I notice that you even call him by his first name.”

“I—I didn’t think.”

“Anita, are you in love with this man?”

“Well, I—that is——”

“Never mind, you don’t need to answer,” Ruth told her. She walked over to the dressing table and picked up the jewel box. “I want you to see, Anita, that Senor Coronda’s ruby ring is not here.”

“Oh, I know you didn’t take it,” the nurse said brokenly. “I just wanted to convince Ortiz—Mr. Coronda—that you knew nothing of the ring.”

“We’ll say nothing more about it for the present,” Ruth told her, not unkindly. “You may go now.”

“Thank you,” Anita murmured.

After she had gone, Ruth stood for some time gazing thoughtfully at the jewel case in her hand. She gave a short little laugh.

“It’s plain to see that Anita has fallen in love with Coronda. That was why she was so easily influenced. Perhaps I should have discharged her.”

She found the spool of pink thread and slipped it in her pocket. Then she took Baby June into the nursery and placed her in her crib. Anita, she observed, had slumped down in a chair, and was softly weeping.

“Don’t cry,” Ruth said gently. “After all, no harm has been done. If you will watch June until she goes to sleep, I’ll go back to the summer-house.”

She descended the stairs and went to join Helen.

“It took you a dreadfully long time,” her chum observed as Ruth again took up her sewing things. “I made ten roses while you were gone.”

“I was delayed,” Ruth returned indefinitely. “I had to say something to Anita.”

She refrained from recounting what had happened, for she felt it would only add to Anita’s anguish to have others know of the incident.

“You’re very quiet,” Helen said after a time. “Is anything the matter?”

“Oh, no,” Ruth returned hastily. She neatly folded up her sewing. “It’s beginning to get dark. Don’t you think we had better stop for today?”

“Yes, it’s time to go in.”

The girls arose and stretched their cramped limbs. Ruth turned to look at the lake.

“Isn’t the sunset beautiful?” she asked. “It seems so peaceful and nice here at Lake Osago.”

As she spoke, a shout came from the direction of the point, and the girls shifted their glance to a small boat which was coming toward the beach.

“What are those boys doing?” Helen questioned wonderingly. “They seem to have a line trailing out behind the boat.”

“Oh, I imagine they’re trolling for bass. They say the fishing is good there by the point, though I’ve never had the ambition to try it myself.”

“Look!” Helen cried. “I believe they’ve hooked something!”

It did appear that the boys had had a strike, for one of them gave a pleased cry and commenced to reel in his line, the others shouting encouragement.

“I guess they’re amateur fishermen,” Ruth declared, “but the fish can’t tell the difference. It looks as though they’d hooked a big one.”

The girls stood watching the boys try to land the fish. As their catch successfully resisted their efforts, they became more and more excited. One of the boys left his place in the bow, and scrambling over the lad in the center of the boat tried to aid the one who held the troll line.

“Aren’t they comical?” Helen laughed.

Ruth did not smile.

“Those foolish boys!” she exclaimed. “They should know better than to try to stand up in the boat unless they’re all good swimmers.”

The words scarcely were out of her mouth when a frightened cry arose from the lake. The girls saw the boat wobble unsteadily while the boy who was standing upright waved his arms wildly in the air, frantically trying to maintain his balance. To their horror, they saw him pitch headlong into the water, overturning the boat!

CHAPTER XI

A TIMELY RESCUE

“Those boys can’t swim a stroke!” Helen exclaimed in fear, as she caught sight of the struggling figures in the water not far from the overturned boat.

“Quick!” Ruth cried. “We must try to save them!”

“They’ll drown before we can reach them!”

For answer, Ruth caught her chum by the hand. Together they raced down to the beach where they knew an old skiff had been moored. With desperate haste, Ruth untied the rope. Stepping into the boat she grasped the oars while Helen pushed off.

“Oh, I hope we are in time!” Helen gasped as she splashed through the water and scrambled into the skiff.

“Can you still see them?” Ruth asked anxiously.

“Yes, two of the boys have caught hold of the overturned boat.”

“And the other one?”

“I can’t see him. I’m afraid he’s gone down.” A moment later she cried in relief. “No, there he is! The

other boys are trying to pull him onto the boat.”

“Thank goodness! If only they can manage to hang on until we get there!”

Grimly, Ruth pulled at the oars, exerting every ounce of her strength. Helen found an old paddle in the bottom of the skiff, and snatching it up, tried to help. Their united efforts sent the little craft shooting swiftly through the water.

“Help! Help!” came the feeble cries of the boys clinging to the overturned boat.

“Hang on!” Ruth shouted. “We’re coming!”

Frantically, she bent to the oars and Helen worked with all her might at the paddle, but it was a long row to the point and the wind was against them. Waves lapped against the side of the skiff. It seemed to the girls that they were scarcely moving.

They had rowed but a short distance out into the lake when Helen gave a little scream of alarm.

“Oh! That boy has lost his hold on the boat! He has gone under!”

Ruth glanced over her shoulder as she rowed and caught a glimpse of a dark figure in the water. She saw the struggling boy gripped by one of the boys clinging to the overturned boat, and dragged back to safety.

“That was a narrow escape!” she breathed. “We couldn’t have reached him in time.”

The skiff drew nearer the point, and the boys, seeing an approaching rescuer, called feebly for help. Ruth shouted encouragement.

“We’ll have you off in a minute!”

It was not as simple as that. She brought the heavy skiff about and skillfully maneuvered it to the side of the overturned boat, but the wind was against her and she found it difficult to keep it there. Twice the waves washed the skiff away. Again Ruth brought it around and this time Helen managed to catch hold of the overturned boat. So eager were the boys to climb aboard, that had Ruth not called out a sharp order, they would have swamped the skiff.

“One at a time,” she directed.

While she did her best to balance the skiff, Helen stretched out her arms to aid the first boy in crawling over the side.

“Careful!” Ruth warned.

The skiff wobbled dangerously and for an instant it appeared that disaster could not be averted, but at the critical moment Ruth threw her weight to the opposite side and the boy was dragged safely aboard.

The second victim was rescued with less difficulty. Together, Helen and the boy who had been taken into the skiff, got him over the side. The third lad, however, was

so weak that he could do little to aid himself and with four persons already in the skiff, Ruth expected it to overturn at any instant. At last, when they did succeed in pulling him over the side, he dropped weakly into the bottom of the boat and lay there gasping for breath.

“He’ll be all right in a little while,” Ruth predicted. “I don’t believe he could have swallowed much water. Probably more frightened than anything.”

The boy was slowly beginning to regain his breath, and in a few minutes began to cry. The girls were at a loss as to what to do, and tried to assure the little fellow that he would be all right.

“Oh, I know that,” he sobbed, “but I’m afraid I can’t go fishing again, if my mother finds out about this.”

“I see,” Ruth nodded. “She has probably told you never to stand up in a boat. Well, I guess you have learned a good lesson, and will not have to be told about it again.”

“We won’t say anything,” chorused his two youthful companions.

“And we won’t tell,” sang Helen.

This seemed to relieve the forlorn figure in the boat, who stopped crying, and sat up now. As he was shivering, Ruth Fielding remarked:

“We must hurry. The poor child’s cold.”

The other lads did not appear much the worse for their mishap and insisted upon helping the girls row back to shore, but as the skiff was overloaded and there were only two oars and an almost useless paddle, it was slow work. Ruth's and Helen's clothing had been drenched and even their feet were thoroughly soaked, for more than an inch of water had seeped in through the seams of the old boat.

“There isn't a thing to bail with,” Helen observed with misgiving.

“Never mind,” Ruth assured her. “It isn't leaking very fast and we'll reach shore before this tub sinks beneath us.”

Finally the skiff grated upon the beach sand. Before they could step out, Tom and Chess came hurrying down from the cottage.

“What happened?” Tom asked anxiously.

“These boys upset in the lake. Fortunately, Helen and I saw them go over and fished them out. Take them into the house and see if you can get them some dry clothing.”

The youngsters began to protest that they were all right and could go home the way they were, but Chess bundled them into the cottage. Tom made the skiff fast to the dock.

“You girls were lucky to get back yourselves in this old boat,” he observed. “I'll see that it is repaired tomorrow.”

“Well, it served a good purpose,” Ruth declared as the three turned toward the house. “My! I feel like a wreck!”

“So do I,” Helen chattered, nervously.

“A cup of hot coffee and a change of clothing will brace us up.”

“Yes, everything considered we came out of it pretty lucky. I thought surely those boys were going to drown us all. What an afternoon!”

“It *has* been an eventful one,” Ruth observed with a rueful smile, but she was not thinking entirely of the accident. “I hope I don’t have many like it.”

CHAPTER XII

A LEERING FACE

“Thank goodness, we’ve finished the last rose,” Ruth sighed in relief as she arose from the window seat and put away her sewing things.

“What a lovely basket we’re going to have for Baby June,” Helen declared enthusiastically.

“Yes, and we finished it just in time, too. The week has passed so swiftly—it doesn’t seem possible the parade could really be tomorrow afternoon.”

“No, it doesn’t. I’m so excited about it all! I do so want little June to win. Wouldn’t it be a tragedy if she should get croup or something terrible at the last minute so she couldn’t take part?”

“It would be tragic under any circumstance,” Ruth said with a smile, “but particularly, if she missed the parade after all the work we’ve done on the basket.”

“The trouble has been worth it, though. And think what an honor it will be if she should win the cup!”

“I believe I’d be even more proud than I was that time when I won the international scenario contest,” Ruth

laughed. “But of course, I can’t expect too much. If June wins second or even third prize, I shall be satisfied.”

All week the two girls had worked faithfully on Baby June’s entry in the parade and now that they had finished, were well pleased with their handiwork. Ruth had secured a gigantic basket with a beautiful curved handle from a New York florist and this they had dressed up with chiffon and artificial roses. This, surrounded by other flowers, would rest on the chassis of a small car. The girls were delighted at the result but the idea was so simple Ruth doubted it would win a prize.

Anita Grenade had helped the girls with the flowers and had taken a great deal of pride in the entry. Since her talk with Ruth concerning Ortiz Coronda she had been more devoted to June than ever and in every possible way endeavored to atone for her one act of disloyalty.

“Anita feels genuinely sorry for what she did,” Ruth told Tom late in the afternoon when he came to admire the finished basket. “After all the work she has done on our entry, don’t you think I should give her the evening off?”

“By all means,” Tom agreed heartily. “There will be a lot doing in town tonight. A band concert on the square and I don’t know what all. Anita will have plenty of extra work tomorrow, so it’s only fair to let her go tonight.”

Ruth hurried away to inform Anita of the plan. The nurse thanked her profusely and appeared almost overwhelmed by the favor.

“It’s so good of you after the way I——”

“Never mind that,” Ruth told her kindly. “What is past should be forgotten.”

Even as she spoke she felt that her own attitude toward Ortiz Coronda belied her words. Though she would have liked to believe in the actor, she could not force old memories from her. However, if Anita noticed the slip of tongue she gave no indication but hurried away. A few minutes later Ruth heard her at the hall telephone.

“I do hope she isn’t calling that Mexican,” she thought.

She had no desire to pry into Anita’s affairs and so did not remain within earshot, but the fear that the girl might be acting unwisely, made her somewhat more watchful than usual. At seven o’clock, after Baby June had gone peacefully to sleep, Anita came downstairs gowned in her best frock. Nervously, she read the newspaper, or pretended to do so, but every few minutes she glanced out the front window, evidently waiting for someone.

Presently, a car drew up at the curbing and upon the instant Anita sprang to her feet and began to pull on her gloves. Hastily saying goodbye to Ruth and Tom, she slipped out the front door and was gone.

“Oh, dear, it’s just as I thought,” Ruth sighed. “She’s going out with Ortiz Coronda again and she doesn’t want us to know.”

“It looks that way,” Tom admitted gruffly, going to the window. “Yes, you’re right. I recognize his car.”

“If she must go with him, I’d far rather she be open and frank about it.”

“Well, I guess there’s not much we can do, Ruth. We’re not her guardians even if we are her employers. You’ve been worrying about Anita all week. Better go to bed early and forget everything. Try to get a good sleep so you will be fresh for tomorrow.”

“I don’t intend to go to bed until Anita comes in.”

“But, Ruth, you owe it to yourself——”

“I owe Anita something too, Tom. In a way I feel responsible for her.”

“I know, dear. She’s been wonderful to Baby June. If you’re determined to wait up, we’ll do it together.”

Tom selected a book on amateur photography from the shelf and was soon absorbed in its contents, but Ruth found it more difficult to settle down to a comfortable evening. For some reason she felt out of sorts and uneasy. She tried to read but could not interest herself in the story. Going to the desk she took out the scenario upon which she was working and attempted to rewrite a scene. After an hour she gave it up and went back to the davenport. Presently she became drowsy and before she was aware of it, dropped off to sleep.

When she opened her eyes Tom was bending over her.

“It’s nearly twelve o’clock,” he told her. “Don’t you think you had better go to bed?”

“Twelve o’clock!” Ruth gasped. “I’ve been asleep nearly three hours. Has Anita come in?”

“No, not yet.”

“I’m worried, Tom. If she hadn’t gone out with that man _____”

“Oh, she’ll be all right. No use—” he broke off as he caught the sound of an automobile stopping in front of the house. “I say! That must be Anita now.”

A few minutes later they heard footsteps on the walk and Anita and her escort came up on the porch. There they stood for some time engaged in earnest conversation. The low murmur of their voices reached Ruth and Tom quite distinctly, yet the words were not distinguishable.

Then the door was flung open and Anita stepped into the living room. Ruth was quick to note her flushed face and reddened eyes. The nurse did not pause to say a word but rushed up the stairs to her own room.

“Well!” Tom exclaimed in a low tone. “What do you make of that?”

“She’s been crying, Tom.”

“I thought so myself.”

“Oh, I wish she had never gone out with Coronda. He must have done something to hurt her feelings.”

“I guess I’ll have to speak to that fellow,” Tom declared with a troubled frown. “When he sends Anita home in tears, it’s time to do something about it.”

“Yes, but it would be a lot easier if Anita would only confide in us.”

“She’ll not do that, knowing we’re not in sympathy with her friendship for Coronda.”

“I suppose not. Oh, dear, it’s all such a tangle!”

“I intend to have a word with Coronda at the first opportunity, Ruth. Until then there’s not much we can do.”

“Probably not,” Ruth admitted with a sigh, “but it does seem that things are breaking unpleasantly all at once. Tomorrow is the day of the parade and of course Anita must take charge of Baby June when she is brought before the judges’ stand. If she is nervous and over-wrought, I’m afraid the impression created will not be the best.”

“It’s unfortunate, all right, but the matter seems to be beyond our control.”

“Yes, we may as well forget it until after tomorrow.” Ruth gave a tired yawn and arose from the davenport. “Lock the doors, will you, Tom? I’m going to bed.”

As she spoke she walked slowly toward the stairs. Half-way across the room she suddenly halted and a little cry of fright escaped her. Like one transfixed, she stared toward the window.

For one fleeting instant, she had seen the leering face of a man pressed against the pane!

CHAPTER XIII

JUNE ROSES

“Oh!” Ruth murmured, involuntarily recoiling a step as she saw the face at the window.

At her sharp exclamation of surprise and fright, Tom, who was replacing a book on the wall rack, wheeled about.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“There’s someone at the window!” Ruth returned tremulously. “Someone is spying upon us. I saw a face pressed against the pane!”

Tom snapped off the lights and moved across the darkened room to the window.

“I don’t see anyone, Ruth.”

“But I saw someone, Tom. I know I did.”

“You saw the face distinctly?”

“Oh, yes, but I couldn’t describe it.” Ruth shuddered. “It was such a horrible face—almost like a ghost.”

“It couldn’t very well have been a ghost.”

“No, of course I don’t believe in such things. But there was something about that face that wasn’t human.”

Tom quietly moved to the door and suddenly opening it stepped out upon the porch. Ruth followed and slipped her hand in his.

“Not a sign of anyone here,” he declared.

“The man could have gotten away by this time, though.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Tom admitted, “but you would think we would see him running away from the house. You’re certain you saw the face? It couldn’t have been the shadow of a tree?”

“Absolutely not. You know I’m not inclined to be overly nervous, Tom.”

“No, you’re not, Ruth, but I can’t imagine who would come sneaking around here at night unless perhaps Coronda——”

“Oh, I don’t believe it could have been he. I didn’t get a very good look at the man, but still I am certain I would have recognized Coronda in an instant. I wonder——”

“What?”

“Oh, I was going to say I wondered if it was that foreign man with the dog who came here that time.”

“That’s a possibility,” Tom agreed thoughtfully. “He threatened us, didn’t he?”

“I’ve been so afraid he would try to harm us,” Ruth declared anxiously.

Tom slipped his arm about her waist and drew her to him.

“Don’t worry, dear, I’ll look after you.”

“Oh, I know you will, but still I can’t help being afraid—even now I feel as though someone were watching us. Let’s go in.”

After another careful glance about they went back into the house. Tom locked all of the doors and windows and then they climbed the stairs together to take a last peep at Baby June in the nursery.

“You must get a good night’s sleep tonight,” Tom advised. “Tomorrow is the big day, you know.”

“I’ll do my best not to worry,” Ruth promised with a smile.

As she was a girl not given to borrowing trouble, she was able to drive the matter entirely from her mind. Determined that nothing should mar the success of the baby parade, she arose the following morning fresh and eager for the day’s activities.

Everyone was in high spirits, not excluding Anita Grenade. If she were grieving secretly, she courageously stifled her feelings and entered into the gaiety. The morning passed in a bustle of excitement and last-minute preparation for the parade. Ruth was so busy that she did not have an

opportunity to question Anita as to her strange actions the previous night.

Luncheon was hurriedly dispatched and then, while Tom and Chess adjusted their moving picture camera, Ruth and Helen went to the nursery where Anita was arraying Baby June for the parade.

“How sweet she looks in that fluffy little dress!” Helen murmured admiringly. “Only a cold-hearted judge could deprive her of the prize.”

Ruth smiled proudly and took up her daughter.

“If she only keeps that angelic look when she faces the judges’ stand, but more than likely she’ll choose that moment to embarrass me.”

Baby June was carried downstairs and tenderly placed in her gorgeous flower basket. It seemed to Ruth and her friends that she looked like a dainty rosebud as she snuggled down among the blossoms.

“We must be starting for the public square,” Ruth warned, after Tom and Chess had used up nearly a reel of film on the willing subject. “The parade forms at three-thirty, you know.”

“I’ll get the car right away,” Tom promised.

“Don’t be late!” Ruth begged.

“I won’t. But I have decided to change the plan a little.”

“What do you mean?” Ruth looked somewhat alarmed.

“Well, you know I was going to let Baby June ride in her basket, on the big float you designed, all roses around and so on. And Nurse Anita was to be right there with June, out of sight among the flowers, so it would look as if June were all alone.”

“Yes, I know. We planned that.”

“But I’ve changed it,” Tom went on. “I’ll have the nurse there, of course. She’ll know what to do if June gets a spasm, which I hope she doesn’t.”

“And maybe I don’t!” murmured Ruth.

“But I’m also going to ride on the float,” Tom said.

“You?”

“Yes—me—Daddy if you think that’s more grammatical. I just can’t have June, even with her nurse and her roses, all alone in the middle of the parade on a float. So I’m going to sit in front with the man I’ve hired to drive the car. You know the float is to rest on an old auto chassis.”

“But, Tom, that is a baby parade! You can’t be in it!”

“All right, I won’t! Don’t worry! I won’t be seen, but I’m going to be on June’s float.”

“But what about helping Chess take more movies?”

“Chess can easily get somebody else to help him. I’m going to be on June’s float where I’ll be ready in case anything happens.”

“Why, Tom Cameron! You don’t expect anything to happen—” Ruth’s eyes widened apprehensively.

“Silly! Of course I don’t! But I’ll be there. And now I’ve got to skip. I’ll get the car out for you to ride to the grandstand and I’ll hop along and get my driver ready with the float, and a lot of extra flowers to hide the nurse and yours truly. I suppose Anita has June all ready.”

“Yes, long ago.”

Ruth and Helen went to the car, and drove to town.

As they neared the main street, they noticed all types of floats and baby carriages lined up, some elaborately decorated and others arrayed in rather unimaginative style. There were all sorts of babies, too—smiling and crying—ranging in ages from one to seven years. In the baby class, little June was the youngest contestant.

“Look at that entry over there—number 42,” Ruth pointed out. “Isn’t it a beauty?”

The float which she indicated was one of the most attractive in the parade. It consisted of a large boat constructed of vines and flowers and was complete even to snow white sails set at a rakish angle.

“It must have cost plenty,” Helen commented. “Whose entry is it?”

“Mrs. Hollis’s, I believe. She’s very wealthy, you know, and has spared no expense. She has two nurses to look after her child. It seems rather silly, doesn’t it?”

“It seems particularly foolish to spend so much money for a float,” Helen declared.

“She’s set her heart on winning the cup, I guess. It won’t surprise me if she does, either.”

“Her daughter competes in Baby June’s class?”

Ruth nodded.

“Well, even if her float did cost a lot, I don’t think it’s any prettier than yours,” Helen insisted loyally.

They parked the car, and had scarcely found a good vantage point before Ruth heard her name called out and, looking toward the judges’ box, she saw one of the officials motioning to her.

“What are you doing down there?” he asked, smiling at Ruth. “The committee is to have seats of honor. Bring your friend, too.”

Gratefully, Ruth and Helen slipped through the crowd and took their places in the box.

“We’ll have a wonderful view from here,” Ruth said. “I’m so excited I can scarcely wait for the parade to start.”

At last, however, the strains of a band reached their ears, and policemen hastily forced pedestrians back from the street, which was in the line of march.

First came the junior band, composed of boys not over twelve years of age. Then a double row of bicycles, the wheels brilliant with ribbons and streamers. After that there were miniature floats of all descriptions. Tiny wagons, little automobiles, baby carriages and even “scooters” had been transformed into objects of beauty. One float in this group, which obviously was marked for a prize, was a gorgeous affair of tulle and flowers with as its centerpiece a dazzling crescent.

There were comic floats, too. One group of pickaninnies provoked a great deal of merriment among the spectators.

As the parade progressed, Ruth Fielding found it difficult to contain her enthusiasm. Her excitement grew more intense as she awaited the moment when Baby June should near the judges’ stand.

One by one the floats passed in review until at length Mrs. Hollis’s entry came along. A hush fell over the spectators, and a few were heard to murmur: “Isn’t it pretty!”

Ruth and Helen exchanged a quick, significant glance which was almost one of despair.

“The winner of the cup!” Ruth whispered. “I know it!”

“Don’t be too sure!” warned Helen. “You haven’t seen our darling’s float yet. Oh, here it comes, Ruth! Look! Baby June!”

For a moment Ruth Fielding could see nothing more than the placard, “June Roses,” which had been made with such care to name the entry of her adorable baby. There seemed to be a mist before the eyes of the celebrated motion picture actress who had gone through critical and exacting episodes before the camera as clear-visioned as a woodland pool. But now she felt the tears come unbidden. She could make out a splash of gorgeous pink—then the outlines of the float—a veritable basket, set upon an automobile chassis, which was so hidden by flowers that not even the wheels could be seen. Among other masses of blooms sat Tom, and beside him was a man who had been hired to drive the car, the steering wheel and mechanism being camouflaged by blooms. Neither the nurse, Tom, nor the driver could be noted, so well were they hidden.

“Oh, isn’t she just perfect!” exclaimed Helen.

“Too lovely for words!” Ruth murmured. “Lovelier than I ever imagined she could be. My June rose! My baby! Oh, see the darling, Helen! She is actually looking for me, I do believe. And smiling! Oh, see her, the precious!” Ruth buried her face on Helen’s shoulder in an excess of happiness. But she raised it quickly again to see the float—her baby’s float—move slowly on, guided by Hawkin and guarded by the faithful father masked in the mound of flowers.

A hush fell over the crowd as the June Rose float moved along and then applause broke forth.

“Isn’t that lovely!”

“Marvelous!”

“So sweet!”

“Such a picture! June roses and a baby among them like a drop of pink dew in the heart of the flowers,” one woman, who must have been a poet, murmured. “Oh, how sweet! I wonder whose baby it is?”

Ruth felt like calling out so all could hear:

“She is my baby!”

But she held back, and clasped her hands before she wiped away the proud and happy tears from her eyes.

“I don’t care, now, whether Baby June wins the cup or not!” Ruth whispered to Helen. “I’m proud of her just as she is.”

The float with Ruth’s baby passed on, and there was a sudden exclamation. The driver was bringing to a stop the car beneath the flowers.

“Oh, what’s the matter?” gasped Ruth in a panic, springing to her feet.

“Nothing at all!” Helen answered. “Some of the clusters of flowers at the back are slipping. And—look, Ruth, some little

boys jumped out of the crowd and are putting the bunches back in place. How clever of them! Do you see them?"

"Yes," Ruth replied. She saw three lads who, with nimble feet and fingers, were repairing the damage caused by the jolting of the float. "Why," she went on, "those are the boys who fell out of the boat. Oh, the clever little fellows! I must find them again."

"They are repaying you for what you did for them," Helen said. "They saved our day. It would have been awkward if those roses at the back had dropped off just when Baby June's float passed the judges. I wonder when they will announce the prize we are interested in?"

Mrs. Hollis stood not far from the box and as Ruth turned her head to catch a last glimpse of Baby June, she saw her. Her face was wreathed in smiles and several ladies had gathered to offer congratulations.

"She is certain of the prize," Ruth thought with a sinking heart.

The last of the parade had passed before the stand. As one of the judges arose to make the awards, Ruth gripped Helen's hand. She scarcely heard as the first prizes were given out.

"And now for the winner in the baby class," she heard the judge say. "It is the unanimous decision of the judges that the prize winner in this class is also the winner over all."

He paused and smiled. Ruth felt her heart skip a beat. If only Baby June might be the winner of the silver cup! She glanced

toward Mrs. Hollis. That fine lady's head was held high and her eyes were bright with anticipation.

“Baby June hasn't a chance,” Ruth thought miserably.

She squared her shoulders, determined not to show her disappointment, and waited for the decision.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WINNER

Ruth held her breath as the judge began to speak once more.

“I take great pleasure in awarding the silver cup to entry number 36,” he announced. “June Roses.”

“Oh!” Ruth gasped, scarcely able to comprehend the good fortune. “Baby June has won!”

“Step out and take the cup,” Helen urged, giving her chum a nudge. “Don’t act so dumbfounded.”

As Ruth smilingly arose, she was enthusiastically greeted by shouts from the spectators. By many she was recognized as a famous scenario writer and actress; others who did not know her by reputation, nevertheless were instantly charmed by her friendly and unassuming manner. Without affectation, she moved forward to accept the cup.

Graciously, she said a few words in appreciation of the honor, and then feeling conscious that Chess was now busy photographing her every movement, tucked the trophy under her arm and rushed from the box. Unmindful of the curious persons who watched, she hurried over to where Anita Grenade had Baby June in charge, and dropped the cup into the basket.

“It’s yours, Baby June,” she declared proudly.

Before Ruth was aware of the attention, a crowd had closed in around her. Friends came to offer congratulations and to admire June. Through it all Ruth smiled graciously. June seemed to enjoy the limelight. She dimpled and cooed and clutched at the glittering trophy with her chubby little fists.

Gradually, the crowd about Ruth melted away and only Helen and a few friends were left.

“What a marvelous day it has been,” Ruth declared. “The parade was a tremendous success and I never saw a more enthusiastic crowd. Best of all, my own baby won the grand prize!”

“She deserved to win,” Helen told her firmly. “There wasn’t a baby in the parade that compared with her.”

“Mrs. Cameron was responsible for the success of the affair too,” another added.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Ruth protested modestly. “I was only one of the committee.”

“But it was due to your ideas that everything worked out so smoothly.”

Ruth attempted to change the subject to a less personal one.

“I wonder what has become of Tom and Chess?” she murmured, glancing about. “They were over there by the

judges' box a few minutes ago.”

“Oh, they'll be along in a few minutes,” Helen began, but broke off as a piercing scream arose from a group of women gathered not far away.

Instantly, Ruth and her friends whirled about to see what had caused the alarm. Women and children as well as a few men were scattering in all directions. As the crowd broke away, Ruth beheld the cause of the panic. An ugly dog was straining and snapping at his leash, doing his utmost to break away from his master.

“It's that Italian who came into our garden!” Ruth cried in recognition.

Scarcely were the words spoken when she saw the vicious dog break the restraining leash and dart away. Women shrieked in terror and tried to reach safety. Several men snatched up stones and sticks and prepared to beat off the animal if he came their way.

Frantically, Ruth snatched Baby June from her basket and with Helen close behind, ran toward an automobile which was parked nearby. Before they reached it they saw that the dog had started in another direction, and paused in their flight.

“That man should be arrested for bringing his dog here at such a time!” Ruth declared angrily. “What a terrible end for the day if a child should be bitten!”

Both girls watched anxiously as a group of men armed with canes attempted to corner the dog.

“Tom and Chess are out there,” Helen observed nervously. “I’m afraid they’ll be injured.”

A moment later they were relieved to see that the dog had been captured without serious mishap to anyone. However, the Italian had elbowed his way through the crowd, and as he demanded his dog again, it appeared that an unpleasant scene might ensue.

“The animal ought to be shot!” one man shouted.

“You keel my dog, I call da police,” the Italian cried furiously.

By this time a uniformed officer of the law had reached the scene and many of the men began to slip away, unwilling to be involved in the affair. Tom and Chess remained to give an unbiased report of what had happened. In the end, the policeman took the Italian and his dog in charge and led them away.

As the crowd dispersed, Tom and Chess hurried over to where Helen and Ruth were anxiously waiting.

“Did you have him arrested?” Ruth asked hopefully.

Tom shook his head.

“He claimed it wasn’t his fault that the dog broke away from him.”

“But it’s dangerous to have such a vicious dog at large! And that man is an undesirable character!”

“I told the policeman that and he agreed. It seems they’ve been watching him for some time, but they can’t get anything on him.”

“I should think this would be enough.”

“Well, I guess you can’t convict a man on suspicion or because of what his dog does. Anyway, the policeman said he’d see to it that he got out of town before night.”

“If he only does!” Ruth observed.

“Yes,” Tom returned soberly. “I’m not convinced myself that we’ve seen the last of him.”

“He didn’t threaten you again?”

“He didn’t dare say anything with the cop there,” Chess broke in, “but he surely gave Tom a dark brown look.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” Tom said lightly, observing Ruth’s troubled expression. “Come on, folks, let’s be jogging back to the cottage. I’ll get the car.”

He left the group, returning a few minutes later with the automobile. At home once more, after Anita had taken sleepy Baby June to her crib, the young people discussed the parade.

“Wasn’t I proud, though, when the judge said Baby June had won!” Tom bragged shamelessly.

“I was so excited myself I almost stopped grinding at the camera,” Chess said. “If any of the pictures are ruined, you’ll have to forgive me.”

“They won’t be ruined,” Tom declared. “Just wait until I can rush them over to have them developed and you’ll see!”

“I wish I could see them tonight,” murmured Ruth.

“That isn’t possible,” her husband said. “But I’ll have the views that Chess took back tomorrow night. Say, there were several news-reel cameramen there, taking all kinds of shots. I saw one grinding out a lot of film in front of Baby June’s float.”

“Oh, I’d love to see them!” murmured Ruth.

“Well, that’s possible,” Tom went on. “I heard one of the operators say they were going to show views of the baby parade in the theatre at Bordentown. It isn’t such a run from here. Let’s go over.”

“Oh, let’s!” cried Ruth.

“But can they have those views ready so soon, when they only filmed them this afternoon?” asked Helen.

“Oh, yes,” Ruth answered. “They often used to show ‘rushes’ of me a little while after I had finished a scene. It takes quite

an outfit to develop and print the pictures so quickly. Do you think they can do it, Tom?"

"Yes. I heard one of the operators—the one who ground out so much film on June—I heard him say they had set up a special plant in Bordentown on purpose to give the baby parade pictures a view tonight. A lot of proud fathers and mothers, in which we count ourselves," and he put his arm around Ruth, "a lot of them will crowd in to see the pictures."

"Then they can count on us," said Ruth, smiling happily. "But, Tom, what about the Humphrey dinner? You promised to go."

"And we will. But we need not stay. They're older and like to go to bed early. We can go to the theatre afterward. The baby parade views may be a bit late. Sure, we'll go to the dinner, and tomorrow night Chess and I will show you the views he took."

The dinner passed off very pleasantly and as was to be expected, the baby parade furnished the main topic of conversation. After the guests had retired to the drawing room it seemed to Ruth that the party began to drag a bit.

Though she tried her best to keep her mind on the conversation, Ruth found herself thinking of Baby June. What a little angel she had been all day! And how sleepy and tired she had been when it was all over.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have left her alone with Anita,” she told herself. “If she should get sick——”

She smiled at her own fears. Anita Grenade was a dependable nurse and even if anything went wrong, there was the telephone. The nurse had instructions to call her if there was the slightest need.

“What is the matter with me tonight, anyway?” Ruth asked, somewhat impatiently. “It isn’t a bit like me to worry about June when I’m at a party.”

However, as soon as she decently could do so, she excused herself and with Tom and the others, said good night to the Humphreys.

“It was a nice party,” Ruth said as they got into the car, “but I begrudged every moment of it. I was so anxious to get over to Bordentown and see the pictures.”

“We’ll soon be there,” Tom answered. “I’m going to step on the gas.”

“Yes, do hurry,” his wife urged.

“Why, you act more like an amateur than a professional in your anxiety to see these shots of Baby June,” he teased.

“It isn’t altogether the pictures I want to see,” Ruth answered in a low voice. “I am anxious to get back to my baby. I hope she is all right.”

“Why shouldn’t she be?” asked Tom as he speeded the car. Ruth did not answer.

However, her mood, which was strangely apprehensive, seemed to pass once they were in the movie theatre. They were glad the main picture was over and, after a short comedy, in which the principal character didn’t do as well as Great-Uncle Jabez, so Ruth said, the baby parade views were thrown on the screen.

“Oh, isn’t she a wonder!” Ruth murmured to her husband as they saw Baby June smiling at them from amid her basket of roses.

“There’s only one like her—and she’s right here beside me!” he whispered.

The parade views were good, and some of the crying, yawning babies drew much laughter and applause. And there was applause when the scene was shown where Baby June’s prize was awarded by the judges. But it was an old story for Ruth Fielding to see herself in the movies. It was new, though, to see Baby June.

“The pictures of her were perfect,” she told Tom as they emerged. “I want to get some of those prints.”

“I’ll arrange it,” he promised, little knowing how soon they were to have a use for those same shots.

Ruth said little as they started home, but wearily leaned her head back against the cushions. She gave a sigh of relief as they drove up to the cottage.

“There’s no light burning in Anita’s room,” she observed. “I suppose she must have gone to bed.”

Tom went ahead to turn on the porch lights, for the housekeeper had been given the evening off. As Ruth stepped into the cottage with Chess and Helen it seemed to her that the place was unusually still. She tried to shake off the feeling that something was wrong.

“Wonder how Baby June made out while we were gone?” Tom remarked. “I’ll bet the little tyke spent a more quiet evening than we did.”

Hastily, Ruth removed her hat and dropped her cape on a chair.

“I believe I’ll just tiptoe up to the nursery and have a peep at her,” she smiled apologetically.

Quietly, she moved up the stairway and vanished down the hall.

“I’m afraid Ruth has been worrying all evening,” Tom said after she had left. “To tell the truth, I didn’t feel exactly easy myself.” He grinned widely. “I guess it’s the penalty you pay for parenthood. Of course, there’s nothing to worry about. June is as safe in her crib as——”

The sentence was never finished, for at that moment those in the living room heard Ruth’s agonized scream. A door slammed. There was the sound of rushing feet. Then came the mother’s agonized cry:

“Tom! Tom! Come here—quick!”

Tom never knew how he mounted the stairs but he did, in what seemed to him, to be one great leap upward. He saw his wife at the entrance to the nursery, holding one hand to the door jamb. The other was over her eyes. Ruth Fielding was swaying like some flower shaken by a mighty blast.

“Oh, Tom—Tom!” she sobbed.

“Yes, my dear, what is it? Has anything—is Baby June—is she—has she fallen——?”

Ruth clasped her arms around his neck and her tear-wet face was close to her husband’s as she sobbed out in a heart-rending cry:

“Baby June is gone!”

CHAPTER XV

KIDNAPPED

Baby June gone!

For a moment after Ruth's wild cry rang out from the nursery, Tom remained motionless. He could not believe that anything had happened to little June. Surely, it must be a mistake!

Recovering from the first shock, he sprang to the stairway, followed by Helen and Chess. The three rushed into the nursery to find Ruth bending over an empty crib. Her face had lost its color and she looked as though she were about to faint. Tom caught her in his arms.

"Oh, my baby!" she sobbed. "Tell me it isn't true!"

Tom held her close and tried to think of some word of comfort. His eyes traveled beyond her strained, tense face to the crib. There could be no mistake. Baby June had been taken from the bed.

"Brace up, Ruth," he begged. "Nothing has happened to June. She must be here in the house."

"But where?" Ruth wailed frantically. "We left her here asleep in her bed and now she's gone."

“Perhaps she’s in Anita’s room,” Helen suggested hopefully.

The four rushed from the nursery and across the hall to the room occupied by Anita Grenade. Ruth flung the door open and switched on the light. There was no sign of Anita and the room, usually so neat and tidy, was in disarray.

“The bed hasn’t been slept in!” Tom observed.

“Oh, I know something dreadful has happened,” Ruth cried. “Someone has taken my baby!”

“Perhaps Anita just went out for the evening and took June with her,” Chess suggested hopefully. “That Mexican may have come for her.”

“She has no right to leave the house without permission,” Ruth declared. “I’m sure she wouldn’t take June from her bed, especially after such a hard day.”

Upon impulse, she moved over to the closet and flung open the door.

“Some of Anita’s things are gone!” she cried. “Oh, what can it all mean?”

“Only one thing,” Tom said, a sob in his voice. “She’s kidnapped June!”

“Kidnapped!” Ruth echoed in a strained voice. “Oh, Tom, it can’t be! Why would Anita do such a thing?”

“Ransom, most likely,” Chess spoke up. “She probably thinks you’ll pay handsomely for the return of Baby June.”

“Oh, I’ll give anything in the world to get her back! Anything!”

“Of course,” Tom said simply, trying to hide his own agitation. “Don’t you worry, dear. We will get her back. I’ll not leave a stone unturned. We’ll find Anita and if she kidnapped our baby, turn her over to the authorities.”

“Oh, I don’t care about Anita,” Ruth cried, almost hysterically. “I just want my baby! My June!”

She sank into a chair and burying her head in her arms, began to cry. Tom rushed to her side and tried to comfort her but he was so stricken himself that he could think of little to say. Chess and Helen stood looking on helplessly. So keenly was the loss felt, so suddenly had the blow descended, that all were dazed and momentarily unable to cope with the situation.

“Anita always seemed to love June,” Ruth murmured brokenly, “and I trusted her. I can’t understand why she would do such a thing unless—” Her voice hardened. “It’s that Mexican, Tom! He must have put her up to it!”

“Ortiz Coronda!” Tom exclaimed. “I hadn’t thought of him!”

“He was angry at Ruth for not letting him come to the house,” Helen put in quickly.

“A contemptible way of getting revenge,” Chess declared angrily.

“If I find he’s up to his old tricks, I’ll break every bone in his body!” Tom muttered fiercely. “We let him off easy that time he abducted Ruth and Helen, but this time it will be different.”

“We’re not certain he took June,” Ruth said slowly. “It just looks suspicious to me.”

“It looks suspicious to me too,” Tom returned. “He has been hanging around the house a lot lately. And last night when Anita came in after she had been out with that fellow, you could tell she had been crying.”

“He may have been trying to force her to help him with his sinister scheme,” Helen contributed.

“That’s what I think,” Ruth announced, “but then, there was that face at the window. You remember, Tom? The face of a man!”

“You said it wasn’t Coronda, Ruth.”

“It didn’t look like him,” Ruth admitted, “but I only caught a glimpse of the face. I received such a horrible impression—as though I were gazing upon some ghost! If I thought Baby June——”

“Don’t think about it,” Tom commanded.

“Anita and Coronda probably hatched the scheme between them. Baby June is safe. They’ll take good care of her, but they’ll force us to pay heavily.”

“If only I could believe June is safe—Oh, quick,” she almost screamed. “Maybe Anita lost her nerve and left her somewhere. Let’s look everywhere.”

After that one, natural outburst Ruth again got herself in hand, and while Chess was busy sending the alarm to the local police, the whole household was aroused. Lights gleamed in every room and with electric flashlights several neighbors, to whom Chess appealed, hurried over and began a frantic search of the grounds and the lake shore. The police arrived in a fast automobile, and joined the seekers.

But it was only too soon evident that no Baby June was in the house nor abandoned about the grounds. As the search broadened, and as the heads of different small parties came in to report to the benumbed and stricken parents, Tom saw that unless he did something Ruth would not be able to keep up. Helen was doing all she could for her friend. Some aromatic spirits of ammonia quieted Ruth’s wildly-beating heart and then Tom, sitting beside her and holding her hands, said:

“Now, my dear, this is awful—terrible, but I cannot make myself believe that—that anything serious can happen to Baby June.”

“But, Tom, they have *taken* her—that awful woman and Coronda!”

“Yes, it seems as if they had kidnapped her. But June is worth more to them alive than——”

“Oh, Tom! Don’t say it!” Ruth put her hand on his lips, stifling the terrible word.

“I mean,” he went on, “they probably did this to make us pay a ransom.”

“Well, Tom, we’ll pay it, won’t we—to the last cent!”

“Yes, of course! But if we could catch them and get June back——”

“Never mind catching them if we can only get my baby.”

“Yes, of course. But we must make plans. Now, let’s talk this over. Tell me all you know—all you suspect. And you, listen here, please,” Tom ordered one of the police officers.

“That’s the way to go at it, sir,” said the officer with rough but ready sympathy. “We must have some clues to work on. Now, Mrs. Cameron, tell me all you can.”

Then, while the searchers came and went, hopelessly and without good news, hurrying in to ask this question or that, departing as some new idea came to them—amid this confusion Tom and Ruth told every phase of the matter—giving the past history of Coronda, telling how he had unexpectedly appeared at the lake, his mention of the ring, his protestation of reform and his liking for Anita. Before this recital was over, Tom and Ruth had given up hope of finding Baby June about the cottage or grounds.

“Yes, it looks like a straight case of kidnapping, all right,” the officer decided when Ruth, stifling her sobs, had told of the frequent presence of Coronda about the place and the fact that Anita had met him several times. “These two worked up the plot, took advantage of your absence and skipped out with the baby. But don’t worry, Mrs. Cameron.”

“Oh, but how can I help worrying—my darling baby—how do I know how they will treat her—she may be cold—hungry—in pain—crying for me—and you tell me not to worry!”

“I—I didn’t mean it exactly that way. Of course, naturally, you’ve got to worry some—wouldn’t be a woman if you didn’t. That’s all right,” he added as Tom held Ruth to him. “But I mean don’t worry about what—what will happen. Those crooks will keep the baby safe and will look after her well. It’s to their interests to do so—if they want to cash in on the reward, as of course they do.”

“That’s what I say,” murmured Tom.

“And we’ll catch ’em!” predicted the officer. “I’ve sent out a general alarm—all over the state. I’ll have this on the radio as soon as I can telephone the broadcasting stations. And you, Mrs. Cameron, you had better lie down and get some rest.”

“Rest? I shall never rest until I have my baby in my arms!”

“But you must!” insisted Tom. “For the sake of Baby June you must lie down, Ruth. You will need your strength when we start after those kidnapers!”

For a moment she faced the two, her eyes filling again. Then, with a strong effort she retained command of herself and said, more quietly than she had yet spoken:

“You are right. I will lie down. I must keep my strength to trace and find Baby June. And I will find her! I will!”

“Of course,” murmured Tom as he led her away.

“That’s the way to take it,” said the officer. “She has only been kidnapped for a reward. Likely, by morning, you’ll get a letter telling you where to leave the money so the crooks can get it. And then we’ll have some clues to work on.”

“Do you think so?” murmured Ruth.

“I’m sure of it!”

“Oh, I hope so. Now, Tom, you go lie down, too. And send Helen to me,” Ruth begged.

“I will, my dear. Keep up your courage. You’ll need all of it.”

“And more, too,” said Ruth with a sad smile. “You’ll do your best, won’t you, officer?”

“You may depend on me. Why, I’ve got a little baby of my own at home and if anything were to happen to her——”

Tom made her a sign to go away quickly, for he saw that Ruth was going to burst into tears again. As soon as Tom had

turned her over to the tender ministrations of Helen he went back to the officer.

“If you had some pictures now, Mr. Cameron,” said the policeman, “it would help a lot. But maybe she’s too young to have been photographed yet.”

“Pictures? We have something better than ordinary photographs,” Tom said. “The news-reel men took some movies of the baby parade today,” he went on. “My baby won a prize—she was in—in a basket of roses.” His voice broke.

“Was that her? Say, she was sweet! I saw her. I was on duty near the judges’ stand. So that’s the little one who was kidnapped? Well, that’s tough, but I must say those devils picked a good one. Now, about the pictures.”

“I was saying,” Tom went on, regaining control of himself as he thought how happy the day had been and how sad the night, “that the movie news-reel was shown in the Bordentown theatre tonight—I mean last night,” he corrected himself, as he saw morning dawn. “I can arrange to have those shots shown all over the country.”

“You couldn’t do a better thing to trace your baby, Mr. Cameron. Hop to it! Now, I’ll get back to the police station and see if there is any news.”

“Let me know right away,” murmured Tom. “Oh, our baby! Our dear little June!” He had to bite his lips and clench his hands to keep from sobbing aloud.

CHAPTER XVI

ANXIOUS WAITING

Ruth never knew how she endured the waiting. Sleep was out of the question. Restlessly, she rolled and tossed on her bed, her tortured mind reviewing the events which had preceded the tragedy.

“If only Tom and I hadn’t gone to that party,” Ruth thought over and over. “Oh, why did I trust Anita?”

When the increasing dawn-light appeared in the sky, Ruth arose with a sigh of relief and went to the window. As she awaited the sunrise, she whispered a little prayer—a prayer that, ere the day had passed, Baby June might be returned to her unharmed. She bathed her tired eyes, stinging from tears and lack of sleep.

At last she left the window to brush her hair and change her crumpled gown for a fresh frock. As she glanced into the mirror she scarcely recognized herself. Over night she seemed to have aged years. Her face was pale and pinched; her eyes had a worried, almost desperate look.

It was six o’clock by her watch when she descended the stairs to the living room. Tom, who was slumped down in a chair near the telephone, quickly arose and came to meet her.

“Ruth, you should have stayed in bed,” he chided gently.

“I couldn’t sleep, Tom. I didn’t close my eyes all night.”

“Neither did I.”

“Is there any news?”

Tom shook his head miserably.

“I called the police station about fifteen minutes ago. They’ve been working all night but they haven’t been able to trace Coronda. It’s believed he headed north toward Randall but after his automobile left town it wasn’t sighted again.”

“Oh, if they don’t catch him, how can I bear it? It’s too dreadful—horrible!”

Ruth buried her face in her hands but she did not cry. Her anguish was too deep for that. Tom took her in his arms and held her close. After a time he said as cheerfully as he could:

“Things will look brighter after we’ve had breakfast, Ruth. I feel sure the mailman will bring us some communication, probably a demand for a ransom. What motive could Coronda have for stealing June unless for money?”

“He may be trying to avenge himself upon me. That ring, you know. He seemed to think I should know what became of it.”

“Brace up, Ruth. We’ll know the worst when the mailman comes. He should get here about eight o’clock.”

“Two long hours! How can we wait?”

As she spoke, the telephone rang. Eagerly she started toward it, but Tom, who was closer, took the receiver from the hook. Ruth’s face fell as he hung up a few minutes later.

“A reporter from the *Times*,” Tom explained briefly. “He’s coming out in an hour.”

“I suppose we’ll have the house swarming with them before the morning is over,” Ruth returned. “Not that I don’t want it. I’ll endure anything if only it will help to get Baby June back again.”

“We’ll get her back some way, Ruth. If we don’t hear from Coronda or Anita this morning I’ll set out myself and find a way of tracking him down. He’ll not get away!”

At this moment the housekeeper came into the living room to inquire whether or not Ruth and Tom wished breakfast served immediately.

“Oh, I can’t eat,” Ruth protested.

“You must try,” Tom told her. “You’ll need all your courage and vitality to see you through this terrible ordeal. If you don’t eat——”

“All right, I’ll try,” Ruth submitted. She turned to the housekeeper. “You may serve as soon as Mr. and Mrs. Copley are down.”

A half hour later the four friends sat at breakfast. It was a dismal affair and little attempt was made at conversation. Helen and Chess tried to cheer Ruth and Tom, but without success. Everyone was relieved when the meal was over.

“I wish there was something I could do, old man,” Chess said to Tom as they returned to the living room.

“There’s not much any of us can do yet. Just wait for the mailman.”

An hour dragged by and then another. A close watch was kept and when at length the mailman was sighted far down the road, Tom hurried to meet him. He came running up the walk a few minutes later with a bundle of letters.

“Did it come?” Ruth cried.

“I haven’t had a chance to look yet. There’s a big pile of stuff.”

Hopefully, Ruth snatched up several of the letters, hastily examining them. Bills and advertisements she sorted at a glance and cast away. A number of personal letters which bore no return address, offered a possibility, and she began to rip open the envelopes with desperate eagerness. Tom and Helen were going through another bundle in a similar manner.

“Find it, Ruth?” Tom asked in a tense voice.

“Not yet.”

“Helen and I are through with this bunch.”

“I have three more to look through.” For an instant Ruth raised valorous eyes to her friends. “Oh, it must be here. I’m sure it’s this one. It bears a strange postmark.”

Nervously, she ripped open the envelope and scanned the contents. Her lips moved slightly but no sound escaped her.

“Is it?” Tom demanded.

Ruth shook her head.

“No, it’s from an old friend. Perhaps—the other two——”

“I’m afraid not,” Helen said quietly, slipping her arm around Ruth. She had just opened the two remaining envelopes.

“I can’t understand it,” Tom murmured brokenly. “I felt sure they’d ask for ransom.”

“You may get the letter in the afternoon mail,” Chess suggested hopefully.

“I doubt it,” Ruth said quietly. “Oh, I tried to tell myself they’d ask for ransom, I tried to hope we’d hear this morning, but all the time I knew we wouldn’t! This isn’t an ordinary kidnapping. There’s something strange, sinister about it. Oh, my darling Baby June!”

“Don’t cry, dear,” Helen pleaded.

“I’m not crying. I don’t feel as though I could ever cry again. I feel—” Ruth’s tightly clenched hand went up to her heart. “Oh, I can’t express it! I just know that I must do something to get Baby June back or I can’t stand it.”

“We will do something right away,” Tom announced with determination. “I know the police are doing everything they can, but it’s not enough. I’ll take the car and go out after Coronda myself.”

“And I’ll go with you,” Chess added firmly.

“I want to go too,” Ruth broke in.

“No, you and Helen stay here,” Tom said. “There will be reporters and police officers coming all day and someone must be here. Then, too, it’s possible Coronda will try to communicate with us later on.”

“Yes,” Ruth agreed, “it’s wisest that someone stay. You’ll let us know the first instant you learn anything.”

“Of course. And we’ll surely have something to report before night.”

“Which way will you go?”

“North toward Randall. Chess and I will inquire at houses along the road. If we don’t have any luck by noon, we’ll try another direction.”

Hastily taking leave of the girls, Tom and Chess rushed to the garage and backed out the automobile.

“Don’t be worried if we shouldn’t get back tonight,” Tom shouted to Ruth just before he drove away. “If we really get trace of Coronda, there’s no telling what we’ll have to do.”

“Telephone if you can,” Ruth called back.

With Helen at her side, she watched the automobile disappear down the street. For an instant a feeling of hopeless desolation took possession of her. Baby June was gone. And now Tom.

With an effort she shook off the mood and turned bravely to her chum.

“Come, Helen. There’s a great deal to be done. We’ll not remain idle while Tom and Chess are gone!”

CHAPTER XVII

HOPE AND FEAR

All morning Ruth was kept busy but she found a measure of comfort in the intense activity. There were photographers to see and an endless number of reporters, as well as kindly neighbors and friends who sought to console her and offer their services. The telephone rang almost continuously.

At length Helen took a firm stand and refused admittance to everyone save close friends and those who were aiding in the search, for she saw that Ruth's nerves were near the breaking point. The girls kept in close touch with the police and the newspapers and did a great deal of telephoning.

The day dragged on and nothing was heard of either the Mexican or Anita Grenade. Nor did word come from Tom and Chess.

"Oh, dear," Ruth fretted as she nervously paced the floor, "I wish Tom would telephone."

"Perhaps no news means good news," Helen suggested hopefully.

"Not this time, Helen. If Tom learned anything he wouldn't keep me in suspense. He would telephone immediately."

“I suppose so,” Helen admitted gloomily. “But let’s not give up hope.”

“I’ll *never* give up hope,” Ruth returned almost fiercely. “I’ll spend all of my fortune, I’ll devote my entire life to finding Baby June, if need be!”

“She’ll be returned to you within a few days, Ruth.”

“If only I could believe that, Helen! Somehow I have a strange feeling—I can’t exactly explain it—but it seems to me we’re not on the right track.”

Helen glanced at her chum in surprise.

“What do you mean, Ruth? Surely, you believe Coronda kidnapped her, don’t you?”

“Oh, I don’t know what I think.” Ruth gave a despairing gesture. “At first I thought sure it was that Mexican, but the more I consider it, the more doubtful I am.”

“Then you believe Anita kidnapped June by herself? What motive would she have? You always treated her like one of the family.”

“I can’t bring myself to believe Anita was entirely responsible, either,” Ruth declared.

“Well, my opinion remains unchanged. I feel sure Anita and Coronda put their heads together and decided to force you and Tom to turn over ransom money to them.”

“But no message has come, either in the morning or afternoon mail.”

“That part does look queer,” Helen admitted reluctantly, “but it’s possible they’re only waiting until the police aren’t quite so active.”

“The thing that makes me wonder if we’re on the right track —” Ruth hesitated.

“That face at the window?” Helen broke in.

“Yes, that’s one of the things. And then you remember that man with the dog? He threatened Tom.”

“That’s so,” Helen agreed, “and he was at the baby parade yesterday. Tom and Chess both got mixed up in the argument.”

“He was told to get out of town, but I wonder if he actually did?”

“You think he might have had something to do with Baby June’s mysterious disappearance?”

“Oh, Helen, my head is awlirl now from trying to think of clues, but it seems to me this one might lead to something. While Tom and Chess are away, let’s try to trace this fellow.”

“It won’t do any harm.”

“And it will be a lot better than sitting here with our hands folded.”

The girls rushed to the telephone and Ruth called the police station. They could tell her nothing of Mike Altoni save what she already knew. She next called the offices of the Trinidad Construction Company, for she had heard that the Italian had been employed there. In response to her inquiry she was informed that the man had given up his job a week before.

“We’ll broadcast his description over the radio,” Ruth decided. “He may not have had anything to do with the kidnapping, but at least he will bear questioning.”

“We should get in touch with him in a day or so,” Helen returned. “If he has left town he must have walked or hitchhiked, and can’t be many miles away.”

Late that evening Tom and Chess returned home, tired and discouraged. The girls did not need to inquire the news, for their faces told the story.

“Not a trace of Coronda,” Tom informed them tersely. “We’ll try a different road tomorrow.”

“Somehow,” added Chess, “I begin to think we’re on the wrong track. We keep figuring on the Mexican and the nurse in connection with ransom money.”

“How else would you have us think of them?” Helen inquired. “Surely, if they wanted to go away for any other reason, they wouldn’t want Baby June with them.”

“Why should Coronda want money?” Chess asked. “He has plenty now. He’s rich.”

“So he says,” answered Ruth with fire in her beautiful eyes.
“That probably was not true.”

“At any rate,” Tom announced, “I’m going to find out where he is—and if it’s within my power, it’s going to be tomorrow!”

For Ruth, the following day was even harder to live through than the one she had just endured. There were fewer telephone calls, less to do, but she had more time in which to worry.

“It’s all so baffling,” she said to Helen. “Anita and Coronda seem to have gone into hiding, and now we can’t get trace of that Italian.”

“We’ll have better results in a day or so, Ruth.”

“Those films of Baby June in the parade should help some. They’re to be shown in theatres all over the state. Surely, someone has seen my baby!”

“It was such a contemptible trick to steal her!”

“If only I knew she was having good care. Suppose she should get sick. I wouldn’t be there to take care of her.”

“Don’t think about it,” Helen said quickly. “Anita is with her and whatever else she may be, she is a good nurse.”

Toward nightfall the girls began to watch for their husbands, but the hours passed and still Tom and Chess did not return.

“I wonder what’s keeping them?” Ruth asked. “Do you suppose they’ve struck a clue at last, Helen?”

“Let’s hope so, dear.”

The girls ate dinner alone and maintained their vigil. At midnight they were forced to the conclusion that Tom and Chess were too far away to reach home that night.

“We may as well go to bed,” Ruth said at last.

“I wonder if anything could have happened?” Helen murmured anxiously as she followed her chum upstairs.

“Oh, I’m sure they’re all right, Helen. Probably they couldn’t reach a telephone. We’ll hear from them in the morning.”

But in the morning no word came from the two young men, and in spite of their determination not to become uneasy, Ruth and Helen began to grow anxious. Every time the telephone rang they rushed to answer it, but always they were doomed to disappointment. There was no news of Baby June or of their husbands.

“We may have to go out and search for them yet,” Helen said with an attempt at humor.

Ruth did not respond, for she had caught sight of a uniformed messenger boy coming up the walk.

“A telegram!” she cried eagerly. “It may be from Tom!”

She rushed to the door and flung it open. Quickly she signed a slip of paper and the messenger boy handed her two yellow envelopes.

“Open them quick!” Helen pleaded.

With nervous fingers Ruth ripped open one of the envelopes.

“It is from Tom!” she cried joyfully.

As she scanned the message, the light faded from her face. Tom had wired:

“No success yet but we are keeping on.”

Dispiritedly, Ruth sank into a chair and passed the sheet of paper over to Helen. In her despair she forgot the other telegram in her hand. It slipped through her fingers and lay unnoticed on the floor.

Helen read the message Tom had sent, but before she could comment, a colored woman whom Ruth employed as a laundress, thrust her head in at the door.

“Mis’ Cameron, de housekeeper says I’s e to ask you what you want done wid dese heah baby clothes.”

The laundress held up a bundle of soiled garments as she spoke. Ruth gave a stifled little cry and gazed fixedly at the tiny garments. Then abruptly, she turned and hurried up the stairway toward her room. The laundress stared after her in astonishment.

“Now what is I to do?” she muttered. “She didn’t say was I to wash ’em or not.”

“You shouldn’t have brought those things in here,” Helen told her sternly. “By all means wash them, but don’t say another word to Mrs. Cameron unless you want her to have a nervous breakdown.”

With that, Helen turned her back upon the laundress, and went upstairs to console her chum. She too had forgotten about the second unopened telegram.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CLUE

After Helen had hurried from the living room, the laundress stood gazing after her in a puzzled sort of way.

“It do beat all the way Mis’ Cameron and Mis’ Copley carry on,” she muttered. “Jes’ ’cause a baby been stole, dat no reason for bawlin’ me out ’cause I asks ’bout dese old clothes. Why they git so excited anyway?”

Left to herself, the negress surveyed the room rather curiously and her eyes opened wide at the sight of a huge pile of letters and telegrams on the table.

“Mis’ Cameron powe’ful important person,” she murmured. Her attention was attracted to the unopened telegram on the floor. She went over and picked it up.

“I wonder why she throw dis one away without opening it?” she asked herself, slowly turning the yellow envelope over in her hand. “Maybe it drop off de table.”

As the old laundress studied the missive it gradually dawned upon her that the telegram might be important. She placed it on the table and started away but half way across the room she stopped and came back. After a long

hesitation she picked up the message and went to the foot of the stairway.

“Mis’ Cameron,” she called.

There was no response from above. With a shake of her head she laboriously climbed the stairs and paused before a door which she thought opened into Ruth’s room. She knocked softly.

“Who is it?” a muffled voice asked from within.

“It’s me, yo’ laundress. I’s e got a telegram heah dat I found downstairs.”

The door opened suddenly and Ruth came out.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, taking the envelope from the colored woman. “I forgot all about it.”

“I thought it might be important, Mis’ Cameron.”

“Probably it’s just a message of sympathy from some friend.”

Unable to think of any excuse for remaining, the laundress shuffled downstairs again, turning once to cast a curious glance at her mistress. Ruth opened the telegram and casually looked at it. Almost in an instant her listlessness fell from her.

“Helen! Helen!” she cried in excitement. “Come here!”

“What is it?” her chum demanded, coming out of the bedroom.

Ruth’s face had gone white and it was evident to Helen that something had startled her.

“This telegram!” Ruth exclaimed. “It’s from Ortiz Coronda!”

“Coronda?” Helen echoed. “He demands the ransom money?”

“No! Read it! He says, ‘Have just heard of your misfortune. Can I be of any help?’”

Helen snatched the telegram from Ruth’s hand and read it for herself.

“The villain! What can it mean, Ruth?”

“It looks as though he’s trying to make us think he didn’t have anything to do with the kidnapping.”

“If only Tom and Chess were here!”

“But they aren’t. We’ll have to face this thing ourselves, Helen.”

“What can we do?”

“Let me see that telegram again. Isn’t there an address on it?”

“Yes, the message was sent from a town by the name of Brecksville.”

“How far away is that?”

“I don’t know exactly. It’s clear across the state.”

“We must go there at once and confront him, Helen. There isn’t a minute to lose.”

The girls rushed downstairs and Ruth found a time table. A moment later she tossed it aside in disgust.

“We’ve just missed the last train today.”

“Fate seems against us. We’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Oh, we can’t wait, Helen. By that time Coronda may have taken Baby June and gone to another place. We must get there today.”

“But how can we?”

“We’ll go by airplane,” Ruth announced with sudden inspiration. “There’s a landing field not far from here.”

“And what about Tom and Chess?”

“We’ll telegraph them to meet us at Brecksville. You’re not afraid to try it, Helen? If you are, I’ll go alone.”

“No, I’m going with you,” Helen insisted firmly. “I wouldn’t think of letting you face that Mexican alone.”

“Now that the time for action has come, Helen, I feel a hundred per cent better. I’m not fearful of Coronda—or of

anyone else,” Ruth announced, standing very straight and holding her head up.

“I’m glad there’s something to do. You mentioned telegraphing Tom. We don’t know where the boys are. How can you send them a message?”

“I forgot to tell you,” Ruth answered. “Tom said he would stop at the telegraph office in Bowerville about noontime today, so he might receive a message, and leave a forwarding address.”

“That’s great,” commented Helen. “Let’s hurry. I’ll change my dress right away.”

“How soon can you get ready?”

“In ten minutes.”

“All right, while you get into something warm, I’ll telephone the airport and engage an airplane!”

The two girls, keyed up to the adventure which lay before them, flew about like mad. The housekeeper helped them to get ready, and in exactly fifteen minutes they were motoring toward the airport.

“Faster! Faster!” Ruth urged the driver of their taxicab.

“I hope Tom and Chess get our telegram,” Helen commented somewhat uneasily.

“Oh, I’m sure they will, but even if I knew they wouldn’t, I’d not wait.”

“Coronda may prove dangerous.”

“I’m not afraid of him. I’ll accuse him to his face and if he doesn’t give me my baby, I’ll turn him over to the police.”

Another ten minutes and the cab turned in at the airport. The girls alighted and walked hurriedly across the field. They noticed an airplane which had been wheeled from one of the hangars. Several mechanics were working around it and the engine was being warmed up.

“That must be our plane,” Ruth decided.

As the girls walked toward it, the pilot came forward to meet them.

“Mrs. Ruth Fielding Cameron?” he asked politely.

“Yes,” Ruth returned. “Is this our plane?”

“Yes, everything is ready for a quick getaway.”

“Good.”

“But I must warn you that we’re taking a slight risk,” the pilot continued with a frown. “There’s a high wind and——”

“You’re willing to take the plane up?” Ruth cut in.

“Yes, I think we can make it all right.”

“Well, we two are not afraid. This trip is of the utmost importance. We are eager to reach Brecksville as quickly as we can.”

“Then hop in and we’ll be off.”

Ruth and Helen were helped into the cockpit. The pilot scrambled into his seat and tried the controls. He signaled for the chocks to be removed from the wheels and smiled at the girls. Bravely they returned the smile, though they were far from confident that all was well.

The plane nosed into the wind, and the pilot gave her “the gun.” While Ruth and Helen held their breath, the machine ran swiftly down the runway, rapidly gathering speed. Then, so easily that the girls scarcely were aware of it, they lifted into the air, steadily climbed for a time and then leveled off.

Once in the air, all uneasiness left Ruth. She knew that flying conditions were not ideal, that she and Helen were taking a risk, but she faced what lay before her without fear. The knowledge that she was going to Baby June gave her courage.

“I *will* find her, I *will*,” she told herself fiercely, over and over. “By tomorrow I’ll have her in my arms again. My baby! My own darling Baby June!”

CHAPTER XIX

CORONDA AT LAST

It was exactly four thirty-five by Ruth's wrist watch when the airplane swooped down upon the Brecksville landing field. In relief, the girls scrambled from the cockpit and stretched their cramped limbs.

"Safe and sound," the pilot said with a smile. "If you're in a hurry to get to the city, you'll find a taxi over at the north end of the field."

"Thank you," Ruth returned hastily.

Without loss of time, the two girls ran across the field to a row of cabs which they saw near one of the hangars. They sprang into the first one and settled back against the cushions.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

Ruth and Helen looked at each other in consternation. In their excitement they had failed to note that a street address had not been given on Coronda's telegram.

"Surely, he must be staying at a hotel," Ruth guessed, "and since he is wealthy he naturally would select the best. Driver, take us to the most exclusive hotel in the city."

“That would be the Rawley, ma’am.”

“Then drive there as quickly as you can.”

The girls were silent as the taxi carried them swiftly toward their destination. Ruth was intent upon the approaching interview. What should she say when she confronted Ortiz Coronda?

“I’ll decide when the time comes,” she thought. “The first thing is to find him and that may not be easy.”

Brecksville was soon reached and presently the taxicab drew up in front of an imposing hotel.

“The Rawley, ma’am.”

Before the driver could open the door for them, Ruth and Helen had stepped out. They paid him quickly and rushed through the revolving door of the hotel.

Once inside, the girls walked directly to the desk where they asked to see the register. Trembling with excitement, Ruth ran her eye down the list of names. Oh, if only Coronda’s was there!

Suddenly she saw the bold scrawl.

“He’s here!” Ruth whispered excitedly to her chum. “He has suite 25. Shall we telephone to his room—”

“Better have the clerk do it,” Helen advised. “He might recognize our voices and try to get away.”

“A good idea. And we’ll mention no names. Just have the clerk say that two ladies wish to see him in the parlor.”

Ruth explained to the clerk what she wished done and he obligingly called suite 25 and repeated her message.

“There is a more private parlor on the second floor,” the clerk told the girls after he had hung up the receiver. “Senor Coronda will meet you there.”

Ruth suddenly decided upon a bold move. She did not wish to arouse any suspicion in the clerk, but she was eager for information. She smiled at him and asked in a casual manner:

“Are Senor Coronda’s wife and baby with him? We should like to see them, too.”

The clerk looked puzzled. Ruth watched his face intently. Was his answer going to be an honest one or would he deceive her?

“No,” he answered slowly, “no one is here with him. I understood he was not married. But I see I was wrong. Having a little holiday by himself, I suppose.”

“Thank you,” Ruth murmured, as she and Helen walked away from the desk.

They were whisked up to the second floor in the elevator and entered the parlor before Coronda had arrived. Nervously, they sat down to wait.

“That was a risky question you put to the clerk,” remarked Helen. “How did you ever dare do it?”

“I decided to do it before the man had time to be warned. I thought if Baby June and Anita were here, we might find it out and burst in upon them before they had a chance to hide.”

“Coronda evidently told them he wasn’t married,” Helen decided.

“Oh, I wish he’d get here. It seems to me now that the clock stands still.”

At last they heard a light step and glanced up to see Senor Coronda standing in the doorway. A puzzled expression flashed over his face, but almost instantly he recovered from his surprise, and bowed low.

“Ah, Senorita Fielding, this is indeed a pleasant surprise,” he murmured, addressing himself to Ruth.

Ruth had risen from the sofa and stood gazing at the Mexican with blazing eyes.

“What have you done with my baby?” she demanded.

“Your baby?” Coronda inquired, looking puzzled. “I have not seen your child.”

Ruth stared at the man in disbelief.

“You kidnapped Baby June,” she accused bluntly. “I suspect it was a scheme of yours to——”

“Senorita, you are most unfair to hold my past against me in this manner,” Coronda interrupted with a commanding gesture. “It grieves me that you would believe me guilty of kidnapping a helpless baby.”

In spite of herself, Ruth was impressed by the Mexican’s earnest manner.

“If you didn’t take my baby, what has become of her?” she faltered.

“I do not know, Senorita. I only know I have not seen her. I swear it! I had nothing to do with the affair. Will you not believe me?”

Ruth gazed searchingly into Coronda’s face and was convinced of the man’s honesty.

“Yes, I believe you,” she said at last.

Helen, however, was not so easily convinced. She still eyed Coronda with distrust.

“If you didn’t take Ruth’s baby, then perhaps you can tell us what has become of Anita.”

“Anita has vanished too?” the Mexican asked in a low tone.

“You know very well that she has,” Helen told him suspiciously.

“I swear I did not. I read about the kidnapping in the papers, but I saw no mention of Anita’s name. I have no idea what

can have happened to her, but I assure you it is a matter of deep concern to me.”

“It looks as though we have been following a false clue from the very first,” Ruth murmured, sinking down into a chair. “We are no nearer to finding Baby June than we were at first.”

“I am so sorry, Senorita. Gladly will I help if I can.”

“If only Tom and Chess were here,” Ruth said slowly. “They can’t possibly arrive before late tonight or tomorrow morning.”

“Senorita, if I may be so bold, I would suggest that you and your friend engage rooms here for the night. You are both tired and over-wrought. In the morning your husbands will arrive and we can all discuss the matter together.”

Since there appeared no other way, Ruth and Helen welcomed the suggestion. They spent a miserable night, but were abroad early the next morning to see if their husbands had arrived.

“If they aren’t here by ten o’clock we must start back to Lake Osago,” Ruth declared as they sat down to breakfast which was served in their room. “Tom has no way of knowing where to look for us.”

Scarcely were the words spoken when there came a loud knock on the door. Ruth hastily opened it and was astounded to behold Tom and Chess.

“We came just as soon as we got your telegram,” Tom said, “but we had a fierce time finding you. Any news?”

“Only bad news, Tom. We found Coronda all right, but as it turned out he doesn’t know a thing about what became of Baby June or Nurse.”

“He doesn’t, eh? I’d like to have a talk with him myself. Hasn’t skipped out, has he?”

“No, he’s still here and more than eager to help us. I’m sure there can be no mistake about it, Tom. He isn’t the man we’re after.”

“Then we’ve just wasted our time.” Tom’s face showed his keen disappointment. “When we got your telegram, Chess and I were all pepped up. We thought you girls had found a real clue.”

“We thought so too, at first.”

“Well, don’t get discouraged, Ruth. We’ll find Baby June yet. Perhaps Coronda can help us.”

“I’ll ask him to come up here if you wish, but you look all tired out. You must have had a terrible trip here.”

“We drove all night,” Chess admitted.

“Then you boys must get some sleep,” Ruth protested.

Tom shook his head.

“No, let’s talk to Coronda and find out just what he knows. We’ve wasted enough time already. If we’re ever to find _____”

He broke off sharply and did not finish the sentence, but Ruth gave him a startled glance. Was it possible, she asked herself, that Tom’s expressions of confidence had been only for the purpose of keeping up her courage? In his heart did he really believe that Baby June would be recovered? She shuddered. It was too dreadful to even think about.

“I’ll telephone Coronda right away,” Helen said. “We can meet him in the parlor.”

Inside of ten minutes Senor Coronda had joined the four and they all sat down in the parlor to discuss the situation.

“If I only knew my baby was safe,” Ruth murmured brokenly. “Days have passed and we’ve had no word. Maybe they are both dead—my June and the nurse.”

“Whatever may have become of your baby, I feel sure that Anita had nothing to do with the disappearance,” Coronda said quietly.

“She was always so good and kind,” Ruth returned. “It’s difficult for me to believe her guilty of such a sinister scheme.”

“Rest assured she is not to blame.”

“Senor Coronda, why do you defend Anita so loyally?” Tom demanded.

The Mexican looked somewhat embarrassed.

“I love Anita,” he said softly. “I hope she loves me.”

“I beg your pardon,” Tom apologized. “I did not know.”

“Miss Grenade is the first woman I ever loved,” Coronda went on after a slight hesitation. “She has had a very sad past. I will devote my life to making her forget, if I can find her.”

“You were with her the night before Baby June disappeared, were you not?” Tom questioned.

“Yes, I was.”

“And when Anita came back to the house after her drive with you she was crying. You do not deny that?”

“No, I do not deny it.”

“Do you know why she was crying?”

“I suppose it was because I had asked her to marry me and she thought she should not,” Coronda answered reluctantly. “I reproached her. I am sorry I did now. So she cried. Perhaps that means she really loves me and may yet marry me. But let my story go—I want to help find Baby June.”

“How much of her history did Miss Grenade tell you?” Tom questioned.

“She told me everything.”

“About her insane husband?”

“Yes, she told me that she lives in constant fear that he will attempt some act of violence. After he accidentally killed that other baby he swore he would replace it, that he would get a live baby of his own!”

“What are you saying?” Ruth cried sharply. “Where is this man now?”

“In a private sanitarium, I believe. I once heard Miss Grenade mention the Rosewood.”

“And where is that?”

“I am not certain. It is located in the country, somewhere in the Bryant hills in this state.”

“Tom,” Ruth cried, “I believe we’ve stumbled upon a real clue. It’s possible this insane man may have had something to do with June’s disappearance.”

“I’m afraid not,” Tom said thoughtfully. “This insane doctor is probably safe in the sanitarium just where he has been for some time.”

“But we must find out for sure. Oh, I’ll never rest until we know. I’m going to telephone there this minute.”

“Good idea,” chorused Chess and Helen.

Ruth Fielding gave the main operator in the hotel the name of the sanitarium and its probable location, and sat down to await a report. After what seemed like hours to the anxious group, the bell tinkled.

“Hello,” said Ruth. “What? You can’t——”

She hung up the receiver.

“The operator says there has been a bad storm and the lines are down. Oh, dear. It seems as if everything is going wrong.”

Tom jumped into action.

“We’ll drive,” he announced. “You girls get your coats and hats, and check out of the hotel. I’ll bring the car to the door.”

“Pardon, Senors,” interposed Coronda, “but if you have a place, I would be pleased to go with you. Maybe I could be of help.”

The four Americans exchanged glances. Each was wondering whether it would be wiser to let him go or to leave him.

“All right,” Tom finally announced. “Come along. Perhaps you will recall something else that Anita told you about Rosewood or her husband.”

CHAPTER XX

LIGHTNING AND WIND

By the time Tom had brought the automobile to the door of the hotel, Ruth and her friends were ready to depart. Ortiz Coronda, who was to show the way, took a seat in front and the others took places in the rear.

“You think you can get us to Rosewood all right?” Tom inquired anxiously as he shifted gears.

“I know you take the Cedar River road,” the Mexican returned. “I’m not just sure where the sanitarium is but I think we can find it.”

Following Coronda’s directions, the party soon reached the outskirts of Brecksville and after a drive of perhaps half an hour turned into the Cedar River road.

“We’ll be lucky if we reach there tonight,” Coronda observed. “As I recall, the place is a good two hundred and fifty miles from here.”

“Drive as fast as you dare,” Ruth begged her husband.

Tom did not need to be urged for he too was eager to reach the Rosewood Sanitarium where Anita’s former husband was held an inmate. The road was fairly smooth and

he sent the car skimming along. Presently they came to a fork in the road and as Coronda was uncertain which way to turn were forced to stop to make inquiry. Before they had traveled fifty miles they were forced to halt three times to ask the way and the delays were irritating.

At noon they did not stop for luncheon but satisfied themselves with sandwiches and coffee which were bought at a roadside stand. They made excellent progress for a time and then, without warning, the car began to wobble in the road and Tom brought it to a standstill.

“What now?” Ruth groaned.

“I’m afraid we have a flat tire.”

Tom was out of the car in an instant to make an inspection.

“Just as I thought. It’s the right rear. Guess you girls will have to pile out so I can get the tools from under the seat.”

Ruth and Helen climbed out of the car and Chess and Coronda began to help Tom fix the tire. The jack would not work and it was some time before they had the tire off. Ruth tried not to show her impatience but she glanced toward the sun with troubled eyes. It was sinking lower and lower in the heavens and before many hours would have elapsed, night would be upon them. Unless they reached the sanitarium before dark it would be necessary to stop at some hotel along the road.

“Hang it all, if that isn’t just our luck!” Tom exclaimed.

Ruth and Helen went back to the rear of the car to discover what new misfortune had befallen.

“This tire is completely ruined,” Tom announced, giving it a contemptuous kick with his foot. “We have only this one spare, so that means we’ll have to stop at the next town and buy a new one.”

“Oh, dear,” Ruth murmured, “that will take another half hour at least, and it’s getting dreadfully late.”

“It’s a shame, but it can’t be helped.”

“We can’t go on without a spare?”

“Not very well. Just as sure as we do, we’ll have another flat and then we’ll be out of luck.”

“We are now,” Helen mourned.

“We may get to the sanitarium yet tonight. Anyway, we’ll soon be on our way.”

In a few minutes the extra tire was in place and the party was ready to start again. At the first town they stopped to purchase a tire. When they finally took to the road again, it was nearly five o’clock.

They continued for an hour and then Ruth called Tom’s attention to several black clouds which had come up from the west.

“I saw them some time ago,” Tom admitted. “Looks as though we’re in for rain.”

“It looks like a bad storm to me,” Ruth declared.

“Do you think we should stop for the night?”

“Oh, let’s keep on as long as we can,” Ruth pleaded.

“All right, but it looks as though we’ll soon be in for it. We’re running straight into the storm.”

Anxiously, Ruth and her friends watched the sky. Soon the sun had been blotted from sight and a cool wind began to blow. A scattering of raindrops appeared on the windshield.

“Here she comes,” Tom declared.

Even as he spoke, a vivid streak of lightning coursed its way across the sky. The clouds seemed to open, pouring down a deluge of rain. Almost in an instant the gravel road became wet and heavy.

“This is terrible,” Tom murmured as he turned on the windshield wiper and endeavored to see the road before him.

“This settles it,” Coronda observed. “We’ll not be able to reach the sanitarium tonight.”

“I suppose not,” Tom admitted gloomily. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t land in a ditch.”

At a snail's pace the automobile crept along, now skidding and slipping but keeping well away from the ditches on either side of the road. The storm seemed to steadily increase in violence, and it became increasingly difficult for Tom to steer.

“I'm afraid we'll have to put up for the night,” he said at last as they drove into a town. “There's not much use going on like this. We're not getting anywhere.”

They halted at a comfortable inn near the outskirts of the town. Everyone was tired and discouraged. After dinner had been dispatched, they turned in, hoping for a good night's rest and an early start in the morning.

Breakfast was served at six o'clock and a half hour later the party was on its way again. The storm had passed over during the night. The sun came up and the roads quickly dried. Ruth had spent a miserable night but her spirits revived as she realized that the Rosewood Sanitarium could not be many miles away.

Twice during the morning they stopped to inquire the road and then when they had nearly given up hope of ever finding the place, Coronda caught sight of it on a distant hill.

Tom turned in at the driveway and drew up before a rambling and rather austere structure. Ruth shuddered at sight of the heavily barred windows. The courtyard, however, was pleasant and several patients were in evidence, attended by nurses.

Tom led the way to the office where the party was greeted by the head official.

“We wish to see a patient by the name of Grenade,” he explained. “Doctor Paul Grenade.”

“I’m afraid you’ve arrived too late,” the official declared regretfully. “Doctor Grenade has left the institution.”

“Left?”

“Yes, about a week ago. This is a private institution, you understand. He came here of his own free will. Last month he refused to pay his bill. We endeavored to get in touch with his relatives but were unable to do so. As his case did not seem to warrant turning him over to the state authorities, we permitted him to leave.”

“Then he was not violently insane?” Ruth demanded.

“At times he gave us considerable trouble,” the official admitted, “but of late he seemed to have improved.”

“Did you ever notice anything especially queer about him?” Ruth next questioned.

The official smiled broadly.

“Well, naturally all of our guests are more or less queer, else they would not be here. Several of the inmates labor under the impression that they are Napoleons or George Washingtons.”

“And Doctor Grenade?” Ruth asked eagerly.

“He appeared quite sane in most ways. However, he would not obey the rules and once he tried to take a baby away from a visitor.”

Ruth and Tom exchanged quick, significant glances.

“Have you any idea where this man went?” Coronda asked.

“Not the slightest.”

“Then I suppose we may as well be on our way,” Tom said despondently.

“You are welcome to remain here for as long as you wish,” the official invited cordially. “I’m afraid we’re going to have another storm—we have them quite frequently at this time of year—perhaps you had best wait here until the rain is over.”

In surprise, Ruth and her friends glanced out the window and saw that the sun, which had been shining brightly only a few minutes before, had gone under a cloud. The sky was indeed threatening.

“We’re in a hurry,” Tom returned, “so I believe we’ll go on.”

After thanking the official, they said goodbye and left the building.

“Perhaps we should have accepted his invitation,” Tom remarked doubtfully as he glanced up at the sky.

“We’re going to have another bad one unless I miss my guess. It may not be wise to start out.”

“Then why not sit here in the car,” Helen suggested. “We’ll be warm and dry.”

Scarcely had the young people settled themselves comfortably in the automobile, when the storm broke in full force. Rain came down in torrents and was accompanied by a high wind which howled and shrieked around the many corners of the old sanitarium. Shutters flapped and banged against the stone walls. Dazzling flashes of lightning were followed by sharp cracks of thunder which caused the girls to cringe.

“This reminds me of the days we spent at the war front,” Ruth declared. “With lightning popping everywhere, I feel just as though we were under fire.”

“Perhaps we’d better go inside,” Tom suggested.

“Oh, let’s stay here,” Ruth replied. “I don’t like the thought of being shut up in that dreadful place with—” she broke off sharply. “What was that? I heard someone screaming!”

“It must have been one of the inmates,” Tom told her.

In a few minutes the storm had somewhat abated, but to the discomfiture of Ruth and her friends, the howling and screaming from within the institution became louder. Several times they heard blood-curdling wails and shrieks from excited patients.

“Oh, let’s get away from here,” Helen begged. “The storm is letting up now.”

“We’ll go crazy ourselves if we listen to that screaming any longer,” Ruth added.

“All right,” Tom told them. “It’s getting my nerve, too.”

He started the motor and turned the car around, but before he could shift gears again, Ruth gave a startled exclamation.

“Wait, Tom!” she cried. “There’s someone calling to us!”

“Must be one of those crazy fellows.”

“No, it isn’t! I think it’s one of the doctors. He’s shouting for us to wait! Stop the car, Tom! It may be important!”

CHAPTER XXI

THE ADVERTISEMENT

As Tom switched off the motor, a man in a white uniform, evidently one of the staff physicians, came hurrying toward the automobile.

“I was on duty when you arrived,” he began hastily, “and just learned that you wanted to see Dr. Grenade.”

“Yes,” Tom returned eagerly. “Can you tell us where we can find him?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, but perhaps I can help you. Just before he left the sanitarium, I heard him remark that he intended to go after his wife and child.”

“His wife and child!” Ruth echoed in astonishment. “Why, Anita secured a divorce years ago, and I never heard of a child.”

“Perhaps he had another one,” Chess interrupted, “before he married Anita.”

“Did you ever hear him mention the name of his wife—or child?” Tom asked.

“No, I never did,” the physician answered. “But then I did not see a great deal of this patient. If you will leave your address, I shall be glad to get in touch with you if we hear anything of Dr. Grenade. It is possible he may return to this place.”

“That is very kind of you,” said Tom, writing down both the town and the telephone number of their cottage at Lake Osago.

“It’s important that we find this man,” Ruth put in. “You are quite sure there is nothing more you can recall about his whereabouts?”

“That’s all I know about it,” the doctor told her. “I thought perhaps you might want to know.”

“Thank you,” Tom said gratefully. “We may be able to find him yet.”

After the doctor had gone back inside, he turned questioningly to Ruth.

“Oh, I don’t know what to do now,” Ruth murmured. “I wonder——”

“What?” Tom demanded.

“Do you suppose Dr. Grenade could have gone to Lake Osago to find Anita? Perhaps he learned that she was employed as Baby June’s nurse.”

“Jove!” Tom exclaimed. “That may be an idea!”

“Let’s drive on until we come to the first town and telephone the housekeeper. She may have learned something by this time.”

Tom started the engine again and the big car moved slowly down the road. The storm had passed over by this time. The rain had dwindled to a mere sprinkle and the sun was endeavoring to break through the clouds.

It required but a few minutes to drive to the nearest town. There Tom sought a corner drugstore and placed his long distance call. When he returned to the car Ruth saw by his face that he had no good news to report.

“She hasn’t heard a thing,” he reported gloomily. “The police are hard at work, or so they claim, but they haven’t discovered anything.”

“What about that Italian?” Ruth asked.

“There isn’t a trace of him.”

“Did you ask her if a man answering Dr. Grenade’s description had been seen around Lake Osago?”

“Yes, she didn’t know anything about him. Said she hadn’t seen anyone prowling about the place.”

“Oh, dear,” Ruth said in a tired, discouraged voice, “It’s beginning to look hopeless.”

“Don’t say that,” Tom begged. “We mustn’t give up hope. We’ll get back to Lake Osago as quickly as we can. I’m sure

we'll find a clue there.”

Ruth did not reply.

As the automobile was headed toward home, Chess insisted upon taking the wheel, for Tom was weary almost to the point of exhaustion. Little attempt was made at conversation as they drove along, for everyone was tired and discouraged. Ruth, especially, appeared to be going on her nerve alone. The trip had been a gruelling one for all concerned. There had been scant time for sleep or rest and meals had been slighted in the interest of speed. Even Chess and Helen, who were under less of a mental strain, showed the effects of the unhappy experience.

Through it all Ortiz Coronda had proven to be a true friend. Ruth and Tom were not unmindful of this fact. Though there had been no opportunity for them to express their gratitude, they regretted that they had ever distrusted him. Coronda's reformation had been thorough, of that there could no longer be any doubt.

“We can reach Lake Osago late tonight if we speed most of the way,” Chess observed as the day drew to a close. “What do you folks say?”

“I think it very foolish to try to push on,” Coronda commented. “Miss Fielding is near collapse now. It has been a very tiring trip.”

“Coronda's right,” Tom decided. “We better find some nice place along the road and stop for the rest of the day.”

“How about that inn we’re coming to?” the Mexican inquired, indicating a tourist house near at hand.

As the others were satisfied with the appearance of the place, Chess drove the automobile into the yard.

Arrangements were made for dinner and they were assigned to their various rooms. Ruth was so exhausted that she sank down upon the bed without even removing her shoes, and in five minutes had fallen asleep.

It was perhaps an hour later that she opened her eyes and sat up. The house seemed strangely quiet.

“I wonder what has become of Tom?” she asked herself.

Arising, she straightened her hair and went downstairs. As she entered the lobby, the proprietor glanced up from the newspaper he was reading.

“Are you Mrs. Cameron?” he asked bluntly.

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, your husband said if you got up before he came back I was to tell you he had gone to town to buy some things he needed. The others went with him.”

“Oh, I see. Is it far to town?”

“About a mile.”

The man arose and offered Ruth his chair.

“Here’s the afternoon paper. Not much in it, though.”

Ruth accepted the paper and sat down to read it. She glanced over the headlines, but found nothing of interest. After a few minutes she got up and taking the newspaper with her, wandered outdoors. At first she was too restless to read but finally she sat down under an old apple tree. She forced herself to scan the important stories of the day and then idly turned over to the advertising section.

Suddenly a printed name in one of the “help wanted” ads, stood out before her startled eyes. For a moment Ruth thought that her mind had tricked her. It could not be, and yet, there it was in bold print.

“Nurse desired in country home for Baby June.
Stoneledge—Mooreville.”

CHAPTER XXII

A DARING PLAN

Ruth stared blankly at the strange advertisement, scarcely daring to trust her own eyes. As it gradually dawned upon her that possibly there might be a connection between the "Baby June" mentioned in the paper and her own darling baby, she began to tremble with excitement.

"It couldn't be," she told herself.

And yet, Why not? Certainly, stranger things had been known to occur.

"It's one chance in a thousand," Ruth thought, "but I'll take it! I'll go to Stoneledge, and apply for the position as nurse!"

To think was to act with Ruth Fielding. She rushed into the inn for her coat and hat. Then, without stopping to leave a message for Tom, she started off down the road.

"There's no use waiting for Tom and the others to get back," she told herself. "I must go alone anyway. If I wait, it will get dark and then I'll not be able to go there tonight."

She had not walked far before she saw an old automobile come down the road toward her. As it

approached, she waved her arm for the driver to stop. The car came to a groaning halt a few feet away from her.

“Please, can you tell me if there is a place called Stoneledge near here?” she asked.

“You mean the old mansion?” the driver asked gruffly.

“Yes, that is—I think so.”

“It’s not so fur from here. About two miles.”

“Can I hire you to take me there?”

“Well, I was goin’ to town but——”

“I’ll give you five dollars,” Ruth said hastily. “Here’s something in advance,” she added, taking a bill from her pocketbook and offering it to the man.

“Get in,” the driver directed with a pleased grin. “Taint worth that much, though.”

“It is to me.”

Ruth climbed into the car and took a seat beside the driver.

“Tell me about Stoneledge,” she commanded. “Who lives there?”

“Don’t think anybody does right now.”

“Oh, but someone must live there. Are you sure?”

“Nope, I’m not sure, but the last I heard the place was closed up. You still want to go there, do you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“It’s located in a wild place and it’ll soon be dark, lady. Some folks says there’s haunts at Stoneledge, but I don’t put no stock in that.”

“I’m not afraid of ghosts,” Ruth returned with a faint smile. “I must get there. The quicker the better.”

“All right. You’re the boss, lady.”

The car kept to the main road for perhaps a half mile and then turned into a side lane which led into wilder country. The going became increasingly difficult for the road had never been graded and was seldom used. There were deep ruts and once as the rear wheels caught, the car nearly upset.

“Oh do be careful,” cautioned Ruth. “We must not have anything happen to this car.”

The man wondered at his passenger’s solicitation.

“There’s a sort of spooky atmosphere about this old place,” the driver informed Ruth as they rode beneath a canopy of low hanging trees which swished against the top of the car. “I can’t say why, but I never likes to come up this road.”

Ruth wished that her driver would not offer any more information. Already she had begun to feel uneasy. She

almost wished that she had not decided to come alone, but not for an instant did she consider turning back.

At last the car halted at the foot of a steep hill.

“This is as far as I can take you, lady. Stoneledge is on top of that hill and no car can make it.”

As he spoke, the driver pointed to a large mansion amid a group of trees on top of the hill. In the gathering twilight the place looked cold and ugly. Ruth shuddered.

“Will you wait for me?” she asked.

“Sure thing. I’ll keep right here in plain sight.”

With growing uneasiness, Ruth walked up the steep weed-grown path toward the mansion. Only the knowledge that she might be near Baby June kept her from turning back.

“Courage!” she told herself.

As she came up to the porch she hesitated. The mansion did not appear inhabited and yet she had a feeling that her every movement was being watched.

“Silly!” she thought.

She tried to make her plans. Until this moment she had not considered what she would do when she reached Stoneledge. Certainly she would not disclose her real name. She would just say that she was a nurse and had come in response to the advertisement in the paper. Then when she

saw the baby she would have a decided advantage should it by any chance turn out to be hers. And if she had made a mistake she could slip away without embarrassing explanations.

Resolutely, she walked up to the door and knocked. Impatiently, she waited. There was no response.

Had she made a mistake? No, the advertisement had plainly said Stoneledge and there could be but the one mansion in the vicinity. If she had made an error it would be in anticipating that the “Baby June” mentioned was her child.

“Many parents name babies June, especially if they are born in that month,” she thought.

She rapped again, louder than before.

Then she heard a sound above her and glanced upward. She saw a window open. At first all she could see was a tousled head of hair but gradually she made out a man’s face. And such a face! The mouth was twisted into a queer sort of grimace and the eyes were wild and staring.

For the instant, Ruth’s courage failed her, but she was quick to recover her composure.

“What are you doing here?” the man called down.

“I came to nurse the baby,” Ruth replied, trying to speak calmly. “Baby June.”

There was a long pause and then the voice from above said coldly:

“Sit down on the porch and wait. I’ll see you in a little while. I have something to do.”

Before Ruth could reply, the window was slammed down. With a fast beating heart, she sat down on the porch, taking care to sit with her back to the wall. Who was this frightful man that she was to see? After all, perhaps she had made a mistake in not leaving a note for Tom.

CHAPTER XXIII

ALARM

Dusk came on, as Tom and his friends were returning to the inn after their trip to town. Helen and Chess had purchased a number of things which they needed and Tom had again telephoned to Lake Osago to inform the housekeeper that they could not reach home that night.

“I am terribly disappointed,” muttered Tom to Coronda as they were driving back. “I had hoped against hope there would have been some news of June. I thought that ugly Italian might have been tracked down—he might have told us something of importance.”

“Are you satisfied with the police investigation?” questioned Coronda.

“I suppose I have to be—but somehow things are moving so slowly—just think what might be happening to our Baby June right now.” Tom heaved a long, throaty sigh and blew his nose violently.

The Mexican was quick to realize Tom had not taken time enough to rest his exhausted nerves. His drawn face and deep-set eyes bespoke of constant worry and fear.

“You must stop thinking so fearfully. Try to get a good rest tonight before we start for your home,” counselled the handsome chap, sympathetically.

“I suppose that would be the wisest thing to do,” yawned the young father. “I’m so weary I feel numb.”

Helen and Chess, seated close in the rear of the big car, discussed plans for the future and ideas for hastening the return of Baby June.

“Chess, I don’t believe Ruth would ever appear in the movies again if the baby is really gone forever!” whispered his wife, weeping, but so quietly that her brother could not hear her.

“I feel the same way, dear. This would be an overwhelming blow to both of them. Sometimes it isn’t enjoyable after all to be so gifted—to be so famous—to be in the limelight and get so much publicity all the time. I just hate to think of the outcome of this.”

Chess coughed and kicked the unoffending foot-rail with the toe of his newly polished shoe.

How could anybody be so cold-hearted and vicious as to steal an innocent baby? His lip quivered for an instant. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

Helen dried her eyes. “We must not let Tom or Ruth think we are a bit despondent. Didn’t Mrs. Perkins say over the telephone to Tom that there was a heap of mail at the cottage she hadn’t looked through yet?”

“Yes, she did.”

“Well, maybe there is still something for us to look forward to—possibly one of those seemingly unimportant letters will turn out to be a real live clue. We ought to get to bed right after dinner, so that we can get up early and be on our way.”

As they drew up to the inn, they noticed that the curtain in Ruth’s room remained down, and the returning party little suspected that Ruth was at that very moment on a lonely mountain top.

“I hope Ruth got a good rest while we were gone,” Tom commented as he stepped from the car and helped his sister to alight. “I’ll just steal up to her room and see if she is awake.”

Leaving Chess to drive the automobile into the garage, he went inside. Helen and Coronda sat down on the veranda to enjoy the last of a brilliant sunset. Scarcely had they settled themselves comfortably in their chairs when they heard Tom clattering down the stairs, two at a time.

“Ruth’s gone!” he announced, coming out on to the porch. “She was sound asleep when I left.”

“Oh, don’t get excited about it,” Helen laughed. “She’s around here somewhere.”

“Perhaps she went into the garden,” Coronda suggested.

“I guess I’ll just have a look.”

While his sister and the Mexican regarded him with tolerant smiles, Tom hurried off to the garden. He did not find Ruth and returned to the veranda more disturbed than before.

“Maybe she went for a walk down the road,” Helen said.

“I took a look in both directions but I couldn’t see her. I’m a little worried——”

“Oh, Ruth hasn’t gone far, you may be sure,” Helen assured him. “Why don’t you ask the proprietor?”

As that worthy appeared in the doorway to announce dinner, Tom inquired if he had seen anything of Ruth.

“Yes, she left the inn about three quarters of an hour ago, I should judge,” the man replied.

“You don’t know where she went?”

The inn keeper shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

“She didn’t say and I did not ask. However, I noticed she appeared quite agitated about something.”

“Which way did she go?”

“I can’t tell you that. She came downstairs and I offered her the local paper. She took it outside to read. After a little she came rushing in. She went upstairs and got her hat and coat. That’s all I know about it.”

“I don’t understand what would make her go away so suddenly,” Tom declared uneasily, “especially without leaving word for us.”

“It will soon be dark, too,” Helen declared, a note of alarm creeping into her voice. “She couldn’t have started to town to meet us?”

“In that case we surely would have met her on the road,” Coronda put in.

“Ruth has always been capable of taking care of herself,” Tom said slowly, “and yet somehow I don’t like the thought of her being out alone with night coming on. She may get lost.”

“I can’t keep dinner waiting much longer,” the proprietor announced.

“Oh, hang dinner anyway!” Tom exploded. “Something must have happened to make Ruth leave the way she did!”

“Let’s get out the car again and go in search of her,” Coronda proposed.

“That’s just what I want to do, but it will be just our luck to start out in the wrong direction.”

“Just a minute!” Helen cried as Tom started toward the garage. “Let’s not be in too big a hurry. I have an idea we’ll make time by being more deliberate.”

“What are you driving at, sis?”

“Simply this. After we left, something must have happened which made it necessary for Ruth to leave the inn without waiting for us. The proprietor said she was reading the paper——”

“I get your idea!” Tom exclaimed. “You think we may find a clue to where she went by searching through that newspaper!”

“It’s only a hunch.”

“But it sounds like a good one. I wonder what became of the paper? Perhaps she took it with her.”

“I see something white out there on the grass,” Coronda observed. “It looks like a newspaper too.”

“It may be the one Ruth was reading,” Tom declared. “Let’s have a look.”

As the three hurried across the yard they were joined by Chess who was coming toward the house from the garage. Quickly Helen informed him of their fears concerning Ruth.

Tom snatched up the newspaper which had been dropped near the apple tree.

“It’s the local paper, all right,” he said. “Here, we’ll each take a section and see what we can find.”

The paper was split into four sections. Tom soon discarded his portion.

“Nothing in this.”

“Nor this,” Helen declared. “Nothing but sewing circles and aid society meetings.”

“I had the sports section,” Ortiz Coronda said. “I’m sure it contains no clue.”

“I’ve gone over every inch of this except the advertisements,” Chess announced. “It’s probably a waste of time to go through them. Hello! What’s this?”

In carelessly glancing over the “want ads” his eye had chanced upon the paragraph which had attracted Ruth’s attention but a short time before.

“Nurse desired in country home for Baby June,” he read in a tense voice.

“What?” Tom cried. “Baby June! Are you sure? Give me that paper!”

He snatched it from Chess and read the advertisement for himself.

“What can it mean?” Helen demanded.

“It means that Ruth must have read this same ad,” he told her. “She thought it might be a clue leading to Baby June and she decided to go to this place—Stoneledge.”

“Where in the world can that be?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out! We must go after her as quickly as we can! She may be in grave danger!”

CHAPTER XXIV

RUTH'S BRAVERY

As Ruth sat on the steps of the old mansion waiting to be admitted, her fear changed to impatience. Already the shadows were lurking among the trees; soon Stoneledge would be shrouded in darkness.

“Why doesn’t that man let me in?” she asked herself. “Perhaps Baby June is locked up inside and he means to keep me from getting to her.”

The thought brought her to her feet. Impulsively, she rushed to the door, and finding it locked, beat upon the massive structure with her fists.

Then, so unexpectedly that Ruth nearly fell headlong, the door opened and she gazed into the face of the man she had seen a few minutes before.

“You may come in now,” he said in a voice utterly devoid of expression.

In spite of her eagerness to gain admittance, Ruth hesitated. The man stood in the shadow so that she could make out only the outline of his face but the tone of his voice had frightened her. Instinct told her that she was walking into danger.

Yet she could not turn back. Not when she knew Baby June might be held within those ugly stone walls. Ruth tried to smile and with an assumed boldness, stepped inside. The heavy door swung shut after her.

“I have come in answer to your advertisement,” she began. “Where is the baby I am to nurse?”

The strange man stared at her as though he had not heard the question. Ruth was about to repeat it when he muttered:

“Follow me. I will take you to her.”

Ruth was led down a long, dimly lighted hall. The place was damp and cold and the boards underneath creaked with age. Thick cobwebs adorned the ceiling; dust was everywhere.

Ruth wondered with alarm where she was being taken. And who was her strange guide? If only she had let Tom know where she had gone! As it was, there would be no one to help her, should anything happen.

They reached the end of the hall and the man opened a door leading into a brightly lighted room. He stepped aside for Ruth to pass. With only the slightest hesitation, she entered.

She heard the click of a latch and wheeled about. The man had locked the door!

“Is—is that necessary?” she asked.

The stranger gave a loud, cackling laugh and came toward her.

“Oh, yes,” he told her, lowering his voice to a mere whisper. “Someone might hear us.”

As the man turned toward Ruth, the light fell full on his face. Ruth fought against an impulse to scream. The distorted features, those staring eyes could mean only one thing. The man was insane!

“He must be Doctor Grenade,” flashed through her mind.

What could she do? Escape was cut off. She must keep her wits about her and above all not show that she was frightened.

The doctor began to mumble again, running his words together in such a way that Ruth had difficulty in catching what he said:

“My wife left me—but I caught her all right—I needed her to nurse my baby. But now you are here, I do not need my wife.”

He leered foolishly at Ruth.

“I say I do not need her any more,” he repeated. “I am going to kill her!”

“You’re going to—oh!” Words failed Ruth.

“She is tied fast in bed upstairs,” the doctor went on, adopting a confidential tone. “I’ll let you look at her before I kill her.”

Never in her life had Ruth been so terrified.

Undoubtedly, it was Anita whom the insane doctor had taken prisoner. And he intended to murder her! She must think of some way to prevent the horrible deed.

“What is it one does to calm insane people?” Ruth asked herself frantically.

She tried to recall books she had read, she endeavored to remember scenes from moving pictures which dealt with irresponsible characters. Yes, now she knew! These unfortunate people had to be humored. Humored, and then gently led from the subject uppermost in their minds to one of a saner kind.

Moreover, Ruth Fielding reminded herself, she was an actress. Now she must play the part of a nurse, humoring a dangerous patient.

“That’s a good joke,” she said, laughing nervously.

“It is no joke,” the doctor corrected irritably. “I tell you I no longer need her. I am going to kill her.”

Desperate plans raced through Ruth’s brain. She said the first thing that came to mind.

“What if you bungle the job? Won’t you need a nurse for her then?”

As she had hoped, the doctor took up the idea.

“Say, that’s right. I’m glad you called.”

“You may count on me. But where is the baby?”

The doctor moved toward the door.

“Come, I’ll show her to you, and then I’ll strangle my wife!”

Having announced this as though calmly speaking of the weather, he unlocked the door and Ruth followed him down another long hallway until they came to a stairway. Only a feeling that Baby June must be somewhere on the floor above kept Ruth from bolting for the door. She dared not desert her baby and Anita Grenade, lest harm come to them. And even, in all probability, before she could reach the door, the insane doctor would be upon her.

“This way,” the doctor said, starting up the stairs.

Ruth followed some distance behind. As she came to the first landing, she glanced desperately out of the window. If only there was some way to get help!

Suddenly, she caught sight of a figure in the yard below. It was the driver who had brought her to Stoneledge. Undoubtedly, he had become alarmed for her safety, and had come to find out what had detained her.

“If only I can get word to him!” Ruth thought.

The doctor had gone on a considerable distance ahead and was now out of sight on the second landing. She had but an instant to work. Opening her purse she brought out a pencil and a writing pad. Hastily scribbling Tom’s name

and his address at the inn, she wrote: “Get help, quick!” and signed it, “Ruth.”

Then raising the window she tossed down the message which was still attached to the writing pad. It fell squarely at the feet of the driver. Startled, he glanced up and saw her.

“Quick!” Ruth called down in a low voice. “I need help!”

For an instant the driver seemed not to understand, then he picked up the writing pad, read the message at a glance and motioned that he comprehended. In relief, Ruth saw him hurry down the hill.

She wheeled about quickly, as she sensed that she was being watched. There, looking down over the railing at her, stood the doctor.

“What are you doing?” he demanded harshly.

“I—I was just opening the window,” Ruth murmured. “Don’t you think it’s stuffy in here?”

“I like it the way it is. Put that window down.”

Ruth complied as quickly as she could, for she was afraid the doctor would come down to do it himself. In that case he would be certain to see the driver who had not yet disappeared.

“Come on,” the doctor ordered. “There’s work to be done.”

Ruth, her heart beating like a trip-hammer, continued up the stairs. Now that the driver was on his way to bring help she thought the wisest thing she could do was to try to gain time.

She followed the doctor down another hall. Abruptly, he flung open a door. At the same instant, Ruth heard a familiar wail. She would have known that cry anywhere!

As calmly as though she were a nurse coming to take charge of a case of illness, Ruth Fielding stepped past the leering, evil doctor and entered the room. She had to clench her hands, to bite her lips until the blood almost spurted from them, before she could calm herself enough to say:

“Oh, yes, there is the baby!”

“Exactly!” chuckled the insane man and his chuckle became a maniacal laugh. “As you say, there is the baby!”

For one fearful instant Ruth thought she must rush forward and clasp the infant in her arms, for there, on the grimy bed, cooing and tossing her chubby arms and legs, lay Baby June. But though wild horses seemed to pull her toward the bed, Ruth Fielding remained some distance away, looking at her kidnapped child but making no effort to smother her with kisses, as she would otherwise have done.

“Ruth Fielding,” the young star, found herself saying, mentally, “this is nothing but a picture scene that you must go through with. One false move and this insane man back of you will either kill you or your baby or both. You are

not a mother! You are not Ruth Fielding! That is not Baby June! It is a borrowed baby to be used in this scene. You have never seen her before—you may never see her again.”

But Ruth had to stop there, and murmur,

“Oh, but I will see her! If need be I will die with her!”

Then the actress in her went on:

“There is the director sitting in his chair—his name is printed on the back—silly custom! The cameras are waiting—the mikes have all been tested—one hangs just over your head—the lights are on—the reflecting screens in place. In a moment you will hear the director say—in a low voice, ‘Camera, Miss Fielding!’ The sound apparatus will be switched on and you will—act!”

And act is just what Ruth Fielding did then and there. She acted as she had never acted before—as she could never hope to do again. With a careless gesture, she put back her tousled hair, walked toward the bed on which lay Baby June and leaned over her.

“Careful, now, careful!” she mentally cautioned her other self. “You are only a movie actress. The cameras are clicking—the mikes are registering—don’t make a false move—don’t look directly at the camera—bend over the child—that’s right—you are a trained nurse called in to take charge of another woman’s child—you must be professionally interested but that only—a professional nurse—Oh, my precious—my darling baby—my little June—

you're alive—safe—I want to kiss you—to hold you in my arms—but if I pick you up—if I hold you to me and rush out of this awful place—away from this awful man—if I do this—he will suspect—he will know—he will kill us both. I am only a nurse—an actress—I am acting a part. I must not let him see—know.”

With only the strongest effort of her will holding her emotions in check, Ruth Fielding leaned over the baby—so close she could feel the warm breath on her cheeks and then, indifferently, she straightened up and with quiet eyes, yet eyes that smouldered with a mother's love, she continued the part—a part that, later, was to have her acclaimed the greatest actress of her time. And Ruth Fielding calmly said, about her own baby:

“Do you want me to—shall I—shall I take her up?” Ruth could hardly form the words.

For a moment the crafty, insane doctor looked at Ruth and then at the baby. Did he suspect? Had he guessed her secret? He smiled in a cunning way and, for an instant, Ruth feared all was lost. Then he shrugged his shoulders and, indifferently, answered:

“Yes, pick her up. She seems a bit restless. May need feeding. There is some milk about the place, I believe.”

Ruth again approached the bed. She leaned over. It was all she could do to refrain from pressing her lips to the soft cheeks. But with an iron hand she held herself in.

“Remember,” she murmured, “the cameras—the lights—the director—the mikes—you are acting a part—acting a part—Oh, I have my baby back! If I can only get her safely away from here.”

A moment more and she had Baby June in her arms. But even yet she must act. She must not cuddle her child too closely, yet with all her being Ruth longed to press Baby June to her heart. She must not kiss her. She must still pretend indifference. And in a voice that had endeared her to the talking-picture directors Ruth said:

“A nice little baby.”

For a split second the doctor fairly glared at her. His eyes smouldered with hidden fires. Had she over-acted? Had she over-played her part? But her calm, careless air had its effect; disarming the fellow.

“Never mind whose child it is,” snarled the insane man. “She is mine, now! I had a baby once. I lost her. Now I have one again. My baby died—there are others who will die—but I shall keep this child alive. You may take her to get some food—one moment!” he commanded sharply, as Ruth would have glided from the room. “For a nurse, you seem very fond of that baby, madam.”

Again that chill at her heart. Had she over-acted? Then she forced herself to say, calmly, coolly:

“I am fond of *all* babies. I don’t like to hear them cry.”

“Um! Well, I don’t myself,” mumbled the man. “Don’t let her cry.” He stood for a moment, gazing critically, craftily at Ruth and then moved toward the door.

“Where are you going?” asked the young actress.

Again, as calmly as though speaking of the kind of day it was, the fiend remarked: “Now that you are here to take care of the child, I am going to kill my wife. I no longer need her.”

Still clinging tightly to Baby June, Ruth placed herself in front of the door. Desperately she tried to think of some way of keeping Doctor Grenade from committing the horrible deed.

“Don’t go yet,” she pleaded. “There is plenty of time.”

Doctor Grenade consulted his watch.

“No, it is growing late. I must get at it.”

Roughly, he grasped Ruth by the shoulder and pulled her from the door.

In vain, Ruth pleaded with him. Paying not the slightest heed to her entreaties, he started down the hall.

Frantically, Ruth ran after him. In some way she must stop him! But how could she? There had not been sufficient time for the driver to reach the inn and bring aid. She could expect no help from that quarter. If it came to a struggle, as it

undoubtedly would, she knew herself to be no match for the doctor.

Was there no way to save Anita?

CHAPTER XXV

JUST IN TIME

As Doctor Grenade opened the door leading into the room where Anita was held prisoner, it seemed to Ruth that she was at her wits' end. Her heart sank within her as she beheld the unfortunate nurse, cruelly bound and gagged, lying on the bed.

The sight unnerved Ruth, and completely forgetting her role, she rushed across the room and placed herself between the doctor and his wife.

“No! No!” she cried frantically. “Doctor Grenade, can’t you realize what you are doing?”

For answer the doctor laughed harshly and locked the door. Anita cast Ruth one despairing glance as though to say that she knew there was no hope for her.

“Stop! Stop!” Ruth shouted as the doctor advanced slowly toward the bed.

She tried to catch him by the arm but he eluded her grasp and whirled savagely upon her.

“I’ll fix you for trying to interfere!”

He raised his hand to strike her but the blow was destined never to fall. At that fateful moment there came the sound of voices in the hall below.

“Help! Help!” Ruth screamed with all her might.

She heard people running on the stairway and then suddenly the door was splintered as a heavy board was rammed through a panel.

Tom was the first to reach Ruth’s side, but Chess and Ortiz Coronda were close at his heels. The insane doctor, seeing that he was cornered, seized a chair and hurled it with all his might.

The chair crashed into the wall, barely missing Ortiz. With a leap, the Mexican was upon the man. He bore him down to the floor, but the doctor struggled desperately. Over and over the two rolled, the insane man kicking and biting and scratching with fiendish savagery.

Tom and Chess tried to help Coronda, but so fierce was the struggle, they could do little. They desisted as they saw that their friend was rapidly gaining the advantage.

Then unexpectedly, just as it appeared that the insane man was subdued, he squirmed away from Coronda and bolted through the door. With a shout, the three young men were after him.

Coronda, who was in the lead, leaped upon the doctor just as he reached the stairs. The insane man lost his balance and together the two rolled down the steps.

“Oh!” Ruth murmured apprehensively as she ran out of the bedroom, still holding Baby June tightly in her arms. “They will be killed!”

However, her fears were groundless, for the Mexican bounded up from the bottom of the stairs with the agility of a cat. The doctor lay quite still upon the floor.

Tom and Chess rushed down to help Coronda but there was no need of it.

“He’s been knocked unconscious,” Coronda observed. “I’m afraid he’s badly hurt, too.”

“We’ll get him to a hospital as quickly as we can,” Tom said, “but we’d better not take any chances with him getting away. I’ll set Anita free and we can tie him up with the rope he used for her.”

Leaving Coronda to watch over the unconscious doctor, Ruth, Tom and Chess hurried back to the bedroom. It required but an instant for them to free Anita. Her limbs were so cramped that she would have fallen, had Chess not supported her.

“Oh, Mrs. Cameron,” she murmured brokenly. “I owe my life to you.”

“Yes indeed,” spoke up Tom admiringly. “Mrs. Cameron surely got here in the nick of time. I’m thankful she saved Baby June, and that your life was spared.”

“I think you owe it to Senor Coronda,” Ruth Fielding told her significantly. “I hope you reward him properly too, for I know he loves you dearly.”

“I love Ortiz too,” the nurse returned softly, “but I can never marry him. Not as long as my former husband—” she broke off and her words ended in a sob.

“Don’t think about it now,” Tom said brusquely to hide his own emotion. “Let’s be thankful that no one was harmed. If he had touched Baby June——”

“She’s not a speck the worse for her adventure,” Ruth announced. “Look at her laugh—the little darling. She thinks it’s all a joke!”

“It won’t be much of one if we don’t get that man out of here before he regains consciousness,” Tom declared.

“Where is Helen?” Ruth questioned, as they all hurried down the stairs.

The question was answered by the appearance of Helen herself. She cautiously peeped through a crack in the door and then seeing her friends, boldly entered.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re all safe!” she cried. “I waited out there in the car so long and when Tom and Chess didn’t come back, I was certain something dreadful had happened to them.”

“We got here just in the nick of time,” Chess told her. “Another minute and—well, no telling what would have

happened.”

Helen glanced in amazement at the unconscious doctor and Ruth hastened to explain what had happened. In turn, she learned all that had transpired since she had left the inn.

“You owe your rescue to the timely work of that man who drove you to the mansion,” Helen declared. “We met him on the road, and not knowing that he had a message for us, asked him the way to Stoneledge. He was terribly excited, and told us he had a message to deliver to someone at the inn, but that a girl needed help at the mansion and would we go there as quickly as we could.”

“Then we knew he meant you, Ruth,” Tom took up the story. “We found out the message was for us and as soon as we had read it, we rushed here.”

“They made me stay out in the car,” Helen added. “I was terribly worried.”

The story was interrupted by a groan from the unconscious doctor.

“The man should be rushed to a hospital,” Ruth urged. “His injury may be serious.”

The insensible form was carried out of the mansion on an improvised stretcher and placed in the car of the driver who had brought Ruth to the mansion, and who had brought back with him a constable.

“We’ll keep him under close guard,” the officer of the law promised, as the car drove away.

In the excitement, Ruth and her friends had had scant time to notice Ortiz Coronda. Now, turning to thank him for all he had done, Ruth saw that his face was ghastly pale and his lips were pinched tightly together as though from pain.

“You’re hurt!” she cried.

“I’ll be all right,” Coronda said, forcing a smile. He tried to walk across the room and staggered. Anita ran to him. “It’s just this arm,” he insisted courageously. “I hurt it when I fell downstairs.”

“Let me see it,” Tom commanded. “Try to lift your arm up above your head.”

“I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Then it looks to me as though your arm might be broken.”

“Just my luck,” the Mexican grumbled.

“We must get him to a doctor at once,” Ruth urged anxiously.

Tom and Chess insisted upon helping Coronda to the automobile although he was convinced that he could walk alone. On the long ride to the doctor’s office, Anita sat beside him and held his hand.

“I’m almost glad I got the broken arm,” the Mexican joked with a significant glance at Anita.

As Ruth and her friends had been afraid, the doctor found that the Mexican's arm was broken. However, after it had been set, Coronda felt a great deal better and insisted that he was able to travel.

“Then let's push on to Lake Osago tonight,” Ruth suggested. “We'll all be so glad to get home again.”

During the long trip back to Lake Osago there was sufficient time for Ruth and Tom to express their appreciation for the help Ortiz had given them in recovering Baby June. They tactfully refrained from offering money, for they knew that the Mexican had ample funds of his own. With their daughter safe once more, Ruth was happy and gay. She scarcely would permit Baby June out of her arms for an instant, although Tom declared that he, too, had certain definite parental rights.

Naturally, there were many explanations to be made. Anita told the story of what had happened to her since she had been kidnapped, completely clearing all persons who at first had been suspected of having a part in the sinister plot.

“I put June to bed after the parade,” she related. “Then when she had gone to sleep I went to my room. Suddenly the door was flung open and my former husband burst into the room. How he entered the house I do not know.”

“Perhaps by the cellar window,” Tom suggested.

“Before I could scream,” Anita continued, “he clapped a chloroform-soaked handkerchief over my face. I tried to

struggle but I couldn't.

“That was the last I knew for some time. When I regained consciousness, I was at Stoneledge. I know now that Doctor Grenade took me there in an automobile, together with Baby June. I suppose he was obsessed with the thought that the baby was his.”

“Were you mistreated?” Ruth questioned.

“No, at first Doctor Grenade allowed me to take care of Baby June. Then, as you know, he inserted that advertisement in the paper, and he made up his mind to get rid of me. Fortunately, you saved me in time. Oh, I am so dreadfully sorry that all this happened.”

“It wasn't your fault,” Ruth assured her. “And now, try to forget all about it, if you can. It was a horrible experience but it's over now.”

Ruth saw Anita and Coronda exchange quick glances, and realized that for them the ending was not happy. Though Anita had long ago secured her divorce, she refused to marry until she was entirely free.

“What a pity,” Ruth thought. “They love each other, but Doctor Grenade stands between them.”

As she drove back toward Lake Osago, Ruth little dreamed that before many weeks elapsed, fate was to deal more kindly with Anita.

In less than a month after their return home, news was received that Doctor Grenade had quietly passed away at the hospital.

“Oh, I hope it wasn’t from the injury he received in that horrible battle with Ortiz,” Ruth murmured.

“No,” Tom assured her. “It was reported that he died from natural causes. I guess he had been ailing for some time.”

“It was probably for the best that he went that way,” Ruth observed. “Had he lived he would have been confined to an institution for the rest of his days.”

“And now Anita is entirely free to marry.”

“Yes, she told me only today that if this time ever came, she would consent to become Coronda’s wife. I shall hate to lose her, but she deserves her happiness.”

Since the return of Baby June, Ruth’s happiness had been complete. With Chess and Helen frequently driving over from Cameron Hall, the household was in an almost continual state of festivity.

Great-Uncle Jabez Potter came from Red Mill. He looked at the recovered Baby June and remarked:

“Well, Niece Ruth, there’s one thing the movies can’t do.”

“What’s that?” Ruth asked, smiling.

“I mean, no movie can make a prettier baby than you got right here!”

“How sweet of you!” murmured Ruth, kissing him.

“Oh, my back! Oh, my bones!” ejaculated Aunt Alvira Boggs. “Did a body ever hear of such goings on! And, Ruth, did you really pretend, when that crazy doctor showed you your own baby—did you pretend you weren’t her mother?”

“Why, yes, I had to. Of course, I was only acting, but it was necessary.”

“I suppose so! But such times! Oh, my back! Oh, my bones! Let me hold the little darling!”

Ruth was proud of Baby June’s silver loving cup which reposed on the living room mantel and gave a great many dinners, partially for the purpose of displaying it, but more particularly to show her joy at having her daughter once more.

For many weeks Ruth was too busy to interest herself in writing, but one afternoon she brought out the typewriter and inserted a sheet of paper behind the roller.

“I feel like writing a scenario again,” she informed Tom.

“A scenario?” Tom inquired. “What about?”

Ruth turned toward Baby June who was peacefully sleeping in her blankets, and smiled.

“About this kidnapping,” she said. “Don’t you think it would make a good movie?”

For answer, Tom smiled and kissed Ruth Fielding and Baby June.

THE END

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[The end of *Ruth Fielding and Baby June* by Alice B. Emerson]