

By the author of the **NANCY DREW BOOKS**

THE MYSTERY OF THE LOCKED ROOM



THE DANA GIRLS MYSTERY STORIES
By CAROLYN KEENE

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The DANA GIRLS Mystery Stories



THE MYSTERY OF THE LOCKED ROOM

By
CAROLYN KEENE

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“Let’s find out what is below,” Jean proposed bravely

CHAPTER I

THE MISSING NOTES

“I wonder where my notes could have gone,” Louise Dana said anxiously as she examined the contents of her study desk in the sunny dormitory suite she shared with her fair-haired sister Jean. “Have you seen them anywhere?”

“What did you say?” Jean inquired absently, for she had been too absorbed in a book she was reading to listen attentively.

“My history notes,” Louise repeated patiently. “You know, the ones I’ve been taking for Professor Crandall to help him in his research work about American Indians.”

“Oh, they’re around here somewhere,” Jean answered carelessly. “I saw a great pile of papers on your desk when we went down to luncheon.”

“That’s just where I left them—on the desk,” Louise declared soberly. “Now they’re gone. You’re certain you didn’t touch them?”

“Of course I am, Louise. I know better than to tamper with your papers. You’ve been guarding them like a lioness since you started working for Professor Crandall!”

“What could have become of them?”

“Look in the wastepaper basket. You probably tossed them away by mistake.”

“I’ve already done that. Oh, Jean, it makes me fairly ill! I’ve worked ten days on those notes!”

“Now don’t get excited about it, honey,” her sister comforted, tossing aside her book. “I’ll find them for you.”

Both girls searched the room thoroughly, but the missing sheaf of papers could not be found. The notes were particularly valuable, for Louise had spent many hours at the Penfield Library gleaning every available fact connected with the subject of American Indians.

The assignment had been given to the girl by Professor Crandall who, with his capable wife, conducted the Starhurst School for Girls, located near the town of Penfield. Louise excelled in history, and the professor, who was engaged in writing a scholarly book about Indian lore, had promised to give her some extra credits for the work.

“Well, the notes aren’t here, that’s certain,” Jean admitted ruefully after the room had been searched from one end to the other. “Perhaps you took them downstairs with you.”

“No, I distinctly remember leaving them here in plain view on the desk,” Louise insisted. “They’ve been stolen! I’m sure of it.”

“But who would want your notes, Louise? They would be of no use to anyone except Professor Crandall.”

“Someone might have taken them out of spite. A few of the girls resented it when he gave me the assignment.”

“Lettie Briggs was furious,” Jean agreed thoughtfully, “and her stooge, that insipid Ina Mason, made a few unpleasant remarks, too. But it would be such a hateful trick for either of them to play.”

“They both enjoy making trouble.”

“Yes, they do. Did you leave the door open when you went downstairs?”

“I can’t be certain,” Louise rejoined, “but I’m afraid I did. Anyone could have spied them from the hall.”

“I don’t see what we can do except report the matter to Professor Crandall.”

“I don’t wish to do that just yet,” Louise replied with a frown. “It will worry him because he has been counting upon my work. I wish we could find the notes ourselves.”

“Perhaps we can,” Jean agreed. “Let’s begin our detective work by asking if anyone has seen Lettie or Ina prying around our room.”

The Dana girls visited several of their friends along the corridor, making inquiries, but nearly everyone had been absent from the floor during the luncheon hour, and nobody could give any information.

“Even in the absence of direct evidence, I can’t help feeling that either Lettie or Ina took the papers,” Louise declared when she and her sister had returned to their rooms. “I wish we dared search their suite.”

“Let’s do it,” Jean proposed.

“Oh, we couldn’t go there without a reason,” Louise replied hastily. “I was merely talking.”

“I can provide the excuse,” Jean declared instantly.

“Yesterday Lettie borrowed my tennis racket and as usual failed to return it. I need it, for we’re playing a match early this afternoon.”

“Oh, dear, I had forgotten,” Louise said with a frown.

“Feeling as I do, I don’t see how I can meet Lettie and Ina and be civil to them!”

Miss Kessler, the physical instructor, had arranged a monthly tennis tournament for the girls of her class. To their discomfiture Louise and Jean had drawn the names of Lettie and Ina in the first doubles match.

“Whether you come along or not, I’m going after my racket,” Jean Dana announced determinedly. She was always more impetuous than her sister. However, Louise, although cautious, did not lack courage.

“I’ll go with you, Jean,” she said quickly. “I don’t like to appear as if I were prying, but after all I can’t afford to lose those notes!”

Upon reaching the door of the suite shared by Ina and Lettie, the Dana girls were relieved to see that it stood slightly ajar. However, the two connecting rooms were deserted.

“Every time I come here I feel like cleaning up the place,” Jean remarked as she and Louise entered. “Clothes, books, papers strewn around everywhere. There’s my good tennis racket, tossed carelessly in a corner.”

Indignantly she rescued it, testing the strings to see if any had been damaged. Louise swiftly examined the papers on Lettie’s desk but the missing notes were not there.

Several papers lay on the bed and Jean glanced at them. Evidently Lettie had been reading her mail, for a number of letters were scattered about. Most of them were advertisements, but one bearing the heading “Superior Sales Company,” drew the girl’s attention. It was plainly not a circular.

The missive lay open, and Jean was tempted to read it for she could not imagine why Lettie should have business dealings while still a student. However, she sternly put aside the thought and continued her search for the missing notes.

“I don’t believe they’re here,” Louise said at length. “For once we may have misjudged Ina and Lettie.”

“It does look a little that way,” Jean agreed reluctantly. “But Lettie is very shrewd. She may have destroyed the papers.”

The Dana girls did not wish to linger in the suite, so taking Jean's racket they returned to their own rooms. When they had changed into tennis shoes, shorts, and T-shirts, it was time for them to meet Ina and Lettie at the courts.

"I'm so disturbed about everything I doubt if I shall play a decent game," Louise complained. "I wish I hadn't signed up for the tournament."

"I'd not have entered either if I'd known we were to draw Ina and Lettie as opponents. They're both such poor sports. They've been boasting that they expect to defeat us."

"I'd like to see them do it!" Louise retorted grimly.

"Ah, that's the spirit," Jean chuckled. "Just slam those balls over the net and trust me to look after the base line."

The Dana girls reached the tennis courts promptly at the appointed hour of two, but Lettie and Ina were nowhere in sight. Some fifteen minutes later they arrived, but they were not wearing their tennis shoes.

"Do hurry, girls," Jean requested, trying to hide her impatience. "Louise and I have an appointment at three-thirty and we're late in getting started."

"I can't bear to rush around," Lettie rejoined haughtily as she indolently laced up her shoes. "Besides, I forgot to bring your racket, Jean. You'll have to go back to my room for it."

"I already have it," Jean returned, and walked away.

Lettie and Ina delayed as long as possible while their opponents stood in the hot sun. At last they announced that they were ready for the match to begin. Louise had the first serve and sent such sizzling balls over the net that neither Lettie nor Ina could touch them. The first game ended with a quick victory for Louise and Jean.

Lettie then took her place at the service line. The Dana girls returned her shots with ease, placing them accurately just short of the base lines. As one particularly fast ball sped by, Ina swung at it belatedly.

“That one was out!” she called.

“Why, I thought it struck several inches inside the line,” Louise returned in amazement.

“No, it was way outside. Ask Lettie.”

Lettie hesitated, and then confirmed her partner’s statement. Both Jean and Louise were furious, for they knew that their opponents deliberately had cheated.

“Let it pass,” Louise warned her sister in an undertone.
“We’ll defeat them anyway.”

The game went on. Soon Lettie and Ina were puffing as they raced from one spot in the court to another. Several times they got in each other’s way and berated each other for clumsiness. As game after game was lost, their irritation grew.

Louise and Jean won the first set. In the midst of the second Lettie suddenly threw down her racket and walked off the court.

“I’m not feeling well enough to finish,” she moaned. “My head aches and I hurt all over. I shouldn’t have tried to play today.”

“You didn’t say anything about not feeling well when we started the match,” Jean replied coldly, for she knew very well that Lettie was only pretending. The girl could not bear to accept an overwhelming defeat.

Lettie, with Ina clinging close beside her, walked away. The Dana girls had no choice but to accept the default.

“That’s just what one would expect Lettie to do,” Jean said indignantly as she and Louise gathered up their belongings and walked slowly back toward the dormitory. “When she isn’t winning she doesn’t want to play.”

“I never saw you serve such a tricky ball before,” Louise praised her sister. “It had such a nice break just as it struck the ground.”

“I played it with a cut,” Jean explained. “I’ll show you how to do it. See!”

Without glancing backward, she swung her racket vigorously. To her horror it crashed into something. She heard a thud and a moan.

Jean and Louise whirled about to see a man stretched out at their feet. He had been walking close behind the girls and apparently intended to go around them just before he was struck. The blow from the racket had knocked him unconscious.

For a moment the Dana girls were too horrified to speak. They stood staring down at the handsome dark-haired stranger.

Lettie and Ina, only a short distance ahead, had heard the crash of Jean's racket. They now came running back to learn what had occurred. Lettie took one glance at the prone figure on the ground and wailed:

“Oh, he's my friend! You've killed him!”

“Hush!” Louise said sharply, for Lettie was shrieking the accusation at the top of her lungs. “It was an accident and the man hasn't been killed. He's only stunned.”

The Dana girls knelt beside the well-groomed fellow and were greatly relieved to see his eyelids flutter open. He did not appear to be aware of what had happened to him but stared as if he were in a daze.

“Run for the doctor, Jean,” Louise urged. “We must have this man carried to the infirmary.”

Jean darted away, eager to do everything in her power to atone for her dreadful mistake. Instead of offering assistance, Lettie and Ina hovered by Louise, making dire predictions.

“He will die, and it will be entirely Jean’s fault!” Lettie insisted excitedly.

“Who is the man?” Louise inquired anxiously.

“Anthony is a special friend of mine,” Lettie replied. “That’s all I shall tell you.”

“Oh, Lettie, why must you be so cantankerous at a time like this?” Louise cried in desperation. “The man is badly injured and we ought to know more about him.”

“If he should die I’ll tell the authorities,” Lettie threatened unpleasantly. “I’ll inform them that Jean struck him with her racket, too! But until the proper time comes you’ll not learn one thing from me about my handsome Tony!”

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERIOUS STUDENT

Louise did not doubt but that Lettie would carry out her threat. At the same time her anxiety over the condition of the stranger increased. The man seemed in a state of semi-consciousness. While Louise hoped that he was merely stunned, she realized there was always a chance that his skull might have been fractured by the impact with the racket.

In a few minutes Jean came hurrying back, followed by a nurse and two stretcher bearers who carried Anthony to the infirmary. An attendant was dispatched for Dr. Wilson.

Jean and Louise took up their post in the hallway, for the nurse would not permit them to enter until after the physician should have arrived. Nervously the girls paced up and down.

“Now don’t worry, Jean,” Louise said over and over. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Lettie will say otherwise.”

“She may try to make trouble, but I doubt that the man is injured seriously. He seemed to be reviving.”

“If the poor man should die I’ll never get over blaming myself,” Jean moaned. “And why did Lettie have to

witness the accident?”

The girl had long been an enemy of the Danas, disliking them because they were popular and stood high in their classes. She had never forgiven them for exposing an acquaintance of hers to the police, a story which has been recounted in “A Three-Cornered Mystery.”

Louise and Jean were orphans. When they were not attending school at Starhurst they lived with their Uncle Ned Dana and his maiden sister, Aunt Harriet, at a rambling house on the outskirts of Oak Falls. Other members of the household were Cora Appel, the kind-hearted but stupid maid, and Ben Harrow, the stuttering hired man.

The Dana girls were proud of their uncle, who was a distinguished sea captain, and never grew tired of displaying photographs of his trans-atlantic liner, the *Balaska*. Captain Dana was equally devoted to his attractive nieces, and upon his return from a foreign cruise usually would bring them rare gifts.

One of these presents, a study lamp, plunged Louise and Jean into their first mystery. The lamp was stolen and finally recovered only after a succession of startling adventures.

Other exciting experiences followed. Only recently had Louise and Jean encountered a mystery which centered about a strange circle of footprints. In befriending a messenger boy, the girls had become the possessors of an unusual treasure dug up from the cellar of the lad's home. Their task of locating the true heirs was not an easy one, and

before the problem had been solved satisfactorily Louise and Jean found themselves involved with many curious characters.

The Dana girls were standing at the entrance to the infirmary when Dr. Wilson came hurrying down the hall. He entered the room and closed the door behind him.

“Oh, dear, this suspense is dreadful,” Jean declared nervously. “I wish someone would tell us what is happening in there.”

Nearly half an hour later Dr. Wilson emerged from the room. He nodded to the girls and would have passed on, had they not halted him with a question regarding the injured man.

“He is conscious,” the doctor replied. “Save for a bump on his forehead he seems little the worse for the accident.”

“Is he able to leave the Infirmary?” Louise inquired anxiously.

“He could be moved now if necessary, but I have advised him to remain quiet for a day or two.”

“There’s no danger that he will die?” Jean asked.

“Practically none. The man’s injuries are of such a minor character that I shall not even order X-rays.”

Louise and Jean were so relieved that they did not detain the doctor longer to ask him any more questions.

“Lettie called him Tony and claimed that he was a special friend of hers,” Louise remarked thoughtfully when the girls were alone in their suite. “It’s possible she doesn’t even know him very well.”

“Just pretending, perhaps, because he is so handsome,” added Jean.

That night when the Dana girls went down to dinner they noticed many of their classmates staring at them. Later, when they attended a concert given by the music students, they were aware of furtive glances being cast in their direction.

“I’m certain Lettie has been telling untruths about the accident,” Jean declared in an undertone. “The girls are whispering about me.”

“Oh, you just imagine it,” Louise replied carelessly. “Let’s listen to the music.”

The program was an excellent one; but the final number, a vocal solo by a slim, dark girl with sad eyes, captivated the audience.

“Who is she, Louise?” Jean whispered, consulting the program. “I have never heard a lovelier voice.”

“She is a new girl here at Starhurst, I believe. Her name is Mona Martin.”

The song was applauded enthusiastically, and even after the girl had bowed several times, the audience would not permit her to return to her chair without singing an

encore. Mona Martin reluctantly returned to the stage without her accompanist. Slowly she began to hum a lovely, yet weird song which the girls had never heard before. Her voice was low and sweet. An awed silence came over the audience as she sang. When the last notes had died away everyone burst into thunderous applause.

“Why, that girl is marvelous!” Jean exclaimed.

“And so beautiful,” Louise added dreamily.

The sisters wished to congratulate the girl upon the success of her vocal numbers, but so many other persons crowded about that it was some time before the Danas were able to reach her. Mona responded graciously to their praise.

“You are Louise and Jean Dana?” she inquired with a warm smile. “I have heard of both of you.”

“Something to our credit, I hope,” Jean responded.

She was rather stunned by Mona’s unexpected reply.

“Well no, I’m afraid it wasn’t,” the dark-haired girl answered frankly. “But then, I never believe gossip, and certainly none furnished by Miss Briggs.”

“Oh, Lettie!” Jean exclaimed as the light dawned upon her. “Has she been telling you about the accident?”

“Telling everyone,” Mona corrected in her soft voice.

“According to her story, you deliberately attacked her friend Tony by striking him over the head with your tennis racket.”

“Why, that is utterly untrue! The man was walking close behind me, and as I swung back my racket to demonstrate a serve, I struck him accidentally.”

“I believe your story,” Mona said gravely.

The conversation switched back to the concert, and Louise hinted that she would like to know the name of the encore which Mona had hummed. To her surprise the girl appeared reluctant to reveal the information.

“The chant really has no name,” she murmured. “And the words have never been printed.”

As Louise seemed upon the verge of asking another question, Mona forestalled it by taking leave of the Dana girls.

“Aren’t you staying for refreshments?” Jean inquired. “They will be served in a very few minutes.”

The dark girl shook her head. “I never remain for the social hour,” she said politely. Then, smiling again at the two girls, she walked away swiftly.

“No wonder we have never met her before,” Louise remarked when Mona was out of hearing. “It’s strange she seldom mingles with the girls.”

“Yes. But even though she is aloof one can’t accuse her of being unfriendly.”

At that moment Evelyn Starr hurried up to greet the Dana girls. Jean and Louise regarded her as a loyal friend, though

never more so than now, when she came to tell them that Lettie Briggs had been up to her old tricks.

“I don’t see how that girl can be so mean,” Jean said impatiently. “Let’s not stay for refreshments, Louise. I can’t bear to have everyone staring at me.”

“Only a few of the girls believe Lettie’s outlandish story,” Evelyn told her kindly. “If the man recovers I feel certain the gossip will be forgotten in a day or two.”

“That’s just the point,” Jean rejoined. “The man might have a relapse and then I’ll be the target for another attack. It isn’t fair, for I am entirely blameless.”

“Why don’t you make Lettie retract the story?”

“How can I?” Jean asked bitterly. “I might compel her to admit the truth, but the moment my back would be turned she’d repeat the tale again with additional embellishments. I know Lettie!”

The Dana girls were greatly upset by the malicious gossip. Instead of remaining for the social hour as they had intended doing, they went directly to their rooms. They tried to study but found it impossible to do so. Louise fretted over the loss of her precious notes while Jean could not stop worrying about the handsome stranger.

Ten minutes before the “lights out” gong, Jean flung aside her French book and said determinedly, “Louise, I can’t bear this suspense another instant. I’m going to run down to the infirmary and ask if I may see that man Tony.”

She had gone before her sister could offer to accompany her. At the door of the infirmary Jean was turned back by the nurse, who had helped care for the injured man.

“The gentleman is no longer here,” she explained. “He insisted upon leaving about three hours ago.”

“Oh, I’m relieved that he felt well enough to go home,” Jean replied, “but I had hoped to talk with him.”

Jean walked back slowly to her own floor. Suddenly she noticed a slip of white paper on the carpet at her feet and stooped to pick it up.

“Why, this is a check for a hundred dollars!” she exclaimed. “And it is signed by Letitia Briggs!”

She hastened to show it to Louise, and both girls decided that it must belong to Lettie Briggs, although she seldom used the name Letitia.

“It’s her check, all right,” Louise declared. “See, it’s made out to Superior Sales Company. You recall that is the name on the letter head we saw in her room.”

“So it is,” Jean agreed. “What do you suppose she can be buying that costs so much?”

“There’s no predicting what Lettie will do.”

“After the stories she’s been telling about me, it would serve her right if I were to let her worry a while over losing this check.”

“It might serve her right, Jean, but we’ll not do a thing like that. We must take it to her room immediately.”

“I suppose so,” her sister agreed reluctantly.

The door of Lettie’s suite was closed, and the girls rapped several times before Ina Mason came to admit them.

“Oh, it’s you!” she muttered in relief. “I thought maybe it was one of those sneaking proctors.”

“Isn’t Lettie here?” Jean asked quickly, for she suspected that Ina’s fear resulted from the absence of her roommate. Several times in the past Lettie had been caught leaving the dormitory after closing hours.

“I told her not to go, but she wouldn’t listen to me,” Ina replied in a whining voice. “Lettie said she had to mail an important letter. She climbed down the fire escape ladder.”

“She is very foolish to take such risks,” Louise said disapprovingly. “If Mrs. Crandall should learn that Lettie left the dormitory she would lose her social privileges for at least the remainder of the term.”

“I know,” Ina sighed, “but my roommate said the letter simply couldn’t wait. You’ll not tattle to Mrs. Crandall?”

“We’re not in the habit of carrying tales to the office,” Jean replied coldly. “The reason we’ve come here tonight is that Lettie lost a check in the hall and I picked it up.”

“Why, that must have been the one she meant to mail in her letter!”

“A letter to the Superior Sales Company?” Louise inquired carelessly.

“Yes,” Ina acknowledged, then glanced at the Dana girls with sudden suspicion. “How did you know?”

“Never mind,” Jean answered vaguely. She started to lay the check on the table, then thought better of it. “Tell Lettie we have it,” she directed Ina. “She may get it by coming to our room.”

The Dana girls returned to their suite, and began undressing. Jean went to bed, but Louise sat up waiting for Lettie. An hour elapsed and still the girl had not come. The darkened room was conducive to slumber, and soon Louise caught herself nodding in her chair. She dozed off, only to be aroused by a slight noise in the hallway.

The door opened slowly.

“Come right in, Lettie,” Louise called. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

She was startled to hear the door slam shut, but not before she had caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure. Louise sprang up and ran out into the hallway.

She was just in time to see a figure vanish around the corner. However, when she reached the far end of the corridor she

found it deserted. Puzzled, Louise went directly to Lettie's room. Ina was there alone.

"No, Lettie hasn't come back yet," she answered in response to Louise's inquiry for her roommate. "I don't know what is keeping her—I'm beginning to worry."

"When she does come in, don't bother to send her up to our room, Ina. We'll give her the check in the morning."

Louise walked back slowly to her own suite. She could not imagine who had opened the door in such a stealthy manner. It occurred to her that someone had assumed she and Jean were asleep and meant to pry.

"I don't like it a bit," Louise told herself as she prepared for bed. "First my notes on Indian lore disappear, and now an unknown person tries to break into the room! I wonder—can there be any connection between those two acts?"

CHAPTER III

THE LOST CHECK

Before breakfast the next morning a crestfallen Lettie knocked at the door of the Dana girls' suite. Her eyes were puffy, and Jean and Louise suspected that she had not slept many hours the previous night. The visitor carefully closed the door behind her.

"Ina told me you picked up the check I lost in the hall. May I have it, please?"

"Certainly," Jean rejoined pleasantly, "but in return I'd like to ask a favor."

"What?" Lettie inquired suspiciously.

"I want you to retract the story you've been telling about me—that I deliberately struck Mr. Anthony with my tennis racket."

Lettie squirmed uneasily, for she did not wish to deny the tale.

"Oh, no one believed that you were responsible," she returned evasively.

“Either you deny the story or I’ll not give up the check,” Jean said firmly. “Another thing: if Mrs. Crandall should learn you went down the fire escape last night——”

“You’d not be mean enough to tell her?”

“Not if you admit to the girls that you misrepresented the accident.”

“Oh, all right,” Lettie answered crossly. “I’ll retract the story.”

“You might tell us about the man Tony also,” Jean added, enjoying her advantage. “He’s really no friend of yours, is he?”

“Tony is a friend of my family,” Lettie insisted. “Mother and Father know him well, but he’s especially interested in me.”

Before Jean could ask the man’s last name, the girl went on to relate that her parents were enjoying a cruise around the world.

“They’ll be away for at least six months,” Lettie declared in satisfaction. “Father left enough money to last me a year and I have the entire sum in a checking account.”

“That’s fine,” Louise responded dryly. “You want to be careful how you spend your money, Lettie. If your funds should run out before your parents return you might find yourself in an awkward position.”

“I guess I know how to handle money,” Lettie retorted haughtily. “I may invest some of it and make a great deal more.”

“Whatever you do, beware of wildcat ventures,” Jean said warningly. “Don’t tell everyone you have the bank account.”

“I don’t require your advice, Jean Dana. You know absolutely nothing of big business. If you’ll give me my check, I’ll go.”

The Dana girls were very glad to see Lettie depart. In relinquishing the check, however, they reminded her of her promise to retract the tale regarding Jean. They knew that she would not dare to do otherwise.

Morning classes occupied the girls. At lunch time Louise returned to her room for a text book and noticed a pile of papers lying on her study table. She went over and picked them up.

“Why, these are my missing notes!” she exclaimed in amazement. “How did they get back on my desk again?”

In fingering the papers to see if any might be lost, she noticed that in several places entire lines had been crossed out.

“Professor Crandall must have done that, for he is the only person interested in my work,” Louise reflected. “I suppose he came to my room yesterday and took the notes. But it’s queer he didn’t speak of it to me.”

Professor Crandall had never been known to come upstairs upon any mission. A visit by him to the Dana girls' room was decidedly improbable and out of character. For a moment Louise was puzzled, but she dismissed the matter as being of no great consequence. Her notes had been returned to her. While the corrections meant that she would have to recopy several pages, she felt greatly relieved to have the notes back again.

While she was studying the papers, Jean burst into the room, waving a letter which had arrived from Aunt Harriet.

“Here is some real news, Louise! Uncle Ned has been transferred from the *Balaska* to another vessel. Aunt Harriet received word from him only yesterday.”

“Why, that’s unexpected, isn’t it? Let me see the letter, Jean.”

“It seems that the captain of the *Corinth*, a ship that is to make a world cruise, was taken ill suddenly. Uncle Ned is to replace him.”

“I wish we were going along,” Louise remarked wistfully. “However, there’s no chance of it this year.”

After reading Aunt Harriet’s letter, she showed her sister the notes which had been recovered. Jean chuckled.

“That’s a good joke on you, Louise,” she said. “Professor Crandall had them all the time.”

“I imagine so, but I keep thinking about that person who tried to come into our suite last night. Who could it have been?”

“Oh, probably someone who mistook this room for another,” Jean answered carelessly. “Come on, let’s go down to luncheon or we’ll surely be late.”

Lettie was seated at a table to which the Danas turned. Presently Louise remarked to the group that Captain Ned had been transferred to the *Corinth*. The Briggs girl glanced up with startled eyes.

“Did you say the *Corinth*?”

“Yes. Uncle Ned will make a world cruise as he is replacing another captain who is ill.”

“Why, my parents are sailing on the *Corinth*,” Lettie declared. “If that isn’t just their luck——”

“I have no doubt Uncle Ned will sink the boat,” Jean said teasingly. “He loves to do things like that just to improve his standing as a sea captain.”

“You think it’s funny, don’t you?” Lettie retorted irritably. “I know very well my parents never would have made the cruise if they had known the captain was ill!”

Louise and Jean refused to take offense. The other girls, who thought that Lettie had spoken in very poor taste, coldly ignored her throughout the remainder of the meal. When luncheon was over Louise sought Professor Crandall in his office.

“How are you progressing with your notes on Indian lore?” he questioned cordially. “Will you have them ready for me soon?”

“Why, Professor Crandall,” Louise stammered, “didn’t you come to my room and take the notes?”

“Certainly not, Louise. I don’t understand.”

The girl explained how the papers had vanished from her desk only to reappear as mysteriously with several lines crossed out. Professor Crandall repeated that he knew nothing of the affair.

“I shall investigate this, you may be sure,” he declared. “Such doings are not to be tolerated.”

The man jotted down a memorandum to the effect that he would bring up the matter at the next assembly period. Louise felt certain he would never find the culprit, for the chances were the absent-minded professor would not remember to speak of the matter at all.

More than ever did Louise feel convinced that the mysterious borrower of her notes had been the shadowy figure which had visited her room the previous night. But why should anyone wish to mar the pages? The papers obviously had not been stolen just for spite, for in that case they would have been destroyed.

After leaving the professor’s office Louise passed one of the parlors. She noticed a dark-haired young man with a bandaged head seated near the door, and recognized him as

the person she had hit. She decided to talk to him. It was easy to open the conversation by inquiring how he felt after the accident.

“I’m all right,” the caller answered. “I have a bump on my head about the size of a hen’s egg, but except for that I’m none the worse.”

“My sister has worried a great deal over you,” Louise went on. “Neither of us dreamed you were walking right behind us when she swung the racket.”

The man did not reply because of the appearance of a maid, who said:

“Mrs. Crandall is waiting for you now, sir. I will show you the way to her office.”

Louise was vaguely disturbed as she walked on toward her own room. She wondered if he had come to talk with the headmistress about the accident, perhaps intending to make trouble for Jean.

“I still can’t figure out how he happened to be directly behind us as we walked along the path,” she mused. “One might think he had been trying to listen to our conversation.”

When told of the man’s visit to the school, Jean refused to become alarmed. “He received only minor injuries so I don’t see how he can claim any damages, Louise. One of the girls told me that Lettie has been seeing this gentleman rather frequently of late so I suspect Mrs. Crandall may have sent

for him. There is a strict rule about the girls seeing people away from the school, and Lettie has broken it.”

The Danas forgot the matter entirely that evening when all the girls at Starhurst School were destined to have a pleasant surprise. After the dinner hour Mrs. Crandall gathered the students together to say that she had an important announcement to make.

“For some months Professor Crandall and I have contemplated the purchase of a girls’ camp to be operated in connection with our school. A piece of property at Moon Lake has been selected tentatively for the future site. Before making a final decision I plan to spend a week-end in the locality. The trip will be an enjoyable one, I hope, and I should like to take a group of students with me.”

A babble of excited comment greeted the announcement, and everyone waited eagerly for Mrs. Crandall’s next words.

“Unfortunately I cannot take you all. The five girls who stand highest in their studies will be chosen. There will be no partiality shown, I assure you. Grades alone will determine those who are to make the trip.”

The girls gathered about the headmistress, pleading for additional details concerning the proposed camp site.

“From photographs I have seen the spot must be very beautiful,” Mrs. Crandall told them. “A wooded peninsula leads to an ancient stone house which is located at its very tip.”

“I have heard of Moon Lake,” Louise remarked thoughtfully. “The locality is uninhabited, is it not, Mrs. Crandall?”

“Yes, that is one of the objectionable features. The nearest stores are miles away. However, I can afford to overlook that feature for in other respects the location is ideal.”

Everyone expressed a desire to be one of the chosen five, and Mrs. Crandall warned the girls again that only those who stood high in their studies would be taken.

“I intend to get busy and really study my French from now on,” Jean told her sister when the two girls were alone in their suite. “I certainly want to go to Moon Lake!”

“The competition will be keen,” Louise replied, “but fortunately we already stand high in our classes. We should have a fairly good chance.”

“Moon Lake has such a romantic sound,” Jean declared dreamily. “And from Mrs. Crandall’s description, one easily could imagine it as a setting for a mystery.”

The Dana girls settled themselves to study. Scarcely had they opened their books when someone tapped on the door.

“Come in,” Jean called a trifle impatiently.

“Am I intruding?” asked the musical voice of Mona Martin.

“Oh, no!” Louise stammered, jumping up from her chair. She was surprised to receive a visit from the girl, for everyone agreed that Mona was very aloof.

“I have come to ask a great favor,” the caller began apologetically. “I have so much trouble with my English lessons. I wonder if perhaps you girls would help me. It is too much to ask, I know——”

“We’ll be glad to,” Jean said quickly. “Of course, Louise and I won’t have as much free time as usual for we’re working hard ourselves. We’re determined to be included in Mrs. Crandall’s party.”

“That is why I must improve my grades in English,” Mona declared with an intensity which startled the two sisters.

“I was just saying to Jean that the competition will be very keen.”

“Oh, yes, but the other girls will not work as hard as I shall. To them Moon Lake signifies only a pleasant trip.”

“And what does it mean to you?” Jean asked with a smile.

“Everything,” Mona answered gravely. “I cannot make you understand—but I *must* go!”

CHAPTER IV

MOON LAKE

“We do understand, Mona,” Louise said gently. “My sister and I will help you all we can with your English.”

“I need to brush up on the subject myself,” Jean added quickly. “If you wish, we’ll start reviewing the text tonight.”

Mona thanked the girls for their kindness and hastened back to her room for her books and papers.

“I wonder why she is so eager to make the trip to Moon Lake?” Louise mused. “I told her I understood her desire, but I’m afraid I don’t. She seemed so intense.”

“You could tell it wasn’t just an ordinary pleasure trip,” Jean agreed thoughtfully. “She seems to have a special reason for wishing to go.”

“Maybe she’ll tell us.”

Mona soon returned with her books and the three girls began their work. At nine-thirty the texts were laid aside. Louise and Jean then encouraged the girl to talk about herself. At first she seemed reluctant to do so, but as her listeners were sympathetic she gradually relaxed and spoke freely of her life.

“I have never told anyone this before,” she confided to the girls, “and I must ask you never to speak of it—not even to Mrs. Crandall.”

“Why, of course we’ll keep anything you tell us in strictest confidence,” Louise returned in surprise.

“Mona Martin is not my real name,” the girl revealed. “You see, when I was very small I was adopted by a wealthy couple who had no children of their own. They have been kind to me. That is why I must show them my deep appreciation by making good grades and studying my music.”

“Yes, I suppose you do owe them a certain debt,” Louise acknowledged. It did not seem to her that Mona’s secret was of such a nature that it should be kept from Mrs. Crandall, and she waited expectantly for the girl to reveal more.

Mona hesitated, apparently upon the verge of giving additional information. Instead of doing so, she suddenly gathered up her books and with a pleasant smile bade her friends goodnight.

“She’s a delightful girl,” remarked Louise as she and Jean prepared for bed, “but rather strange, I’d say.”

“Very mysterious, *I’d* say,” added her sister.

The following day the entire school was plunged into the depths of despondency by an announcement that tests in all subjects would start the middle of the week. However, while the other girls spent hours at study, Lettie

Briggs went serenely along, scarcely opening a book, yet boasting that she would be one of the persons selected to make the trip to Moon Lake.

“Lettie seems very confident of herself,” Jean remarked irritably one afternoon as she and Louise were on their way to the Penfield bank to cash a small check. “I don’t see how in the world she can expect to go on the outing when her marks are so low.”

The girls entered the bank, and Jean immediately lowered her voice, for she saw Lettie standing at the cashier’s window. The Dana sisters took up their position directly behind, awaiting their turn to be served. Their schoolmate was so engrossed in her errand that she failed to observe them.

“I want the hundred dollars in ten-dollar bills,” Lettie told the cashier with an important air. “Fifty of that amount I wish placed in a sealed envelope.”

Jean and Louise were tempted to warn the girl that she would find her funds soon exhausted if she should continue to draw out money with such reckless abandon, but recalling the recent rebuff to them, they remained discreetly silent. Lettie turned around, and noticing them standing in line she nodded curtly. Then, picking up the envelope and the money, she hastily left the bank.

Jean and Louise cashed their own check, which was for required school supplies. When they reached the street the Briggs girl had vanished.

“Uncle Ned always says, ‘A fool and his money are soon parted,’” Louise remarked as they walked along slowly. “Mark my words, Lettie will be without funds long before her parents return from their cruise.”

While they were in Penfield, the Dana girls planned to call upon a Miss Hooker, a retired teacher who formerly had taught at Starhurst. The woman rented a suite of rooms at the local inn, which was only a short distance from the bank.

Entering the hotel lobby, Louise and Jean were surprised to find Lettie there ahead of them. The girl was handing a sealed envelope to the desk clerk.

“Why, she’s giving away her money to someone!” Jean exclaimed in an undertone.

“We don’t know the envelope contains any cash, Jean.”

“It looks like the one she secured at the bank. See, the clerk is putting it into Box 25.”

After the girl had left the hotel, Louise and Jean sauntered over to the desk and requested that they might look at the register. They were unable to find the name of the person to whom Box 25 had been assigned. Jean wished to ask the clerk, but Louise would not permit her sister to do that.

“It’s really none of our business how Lettie disposes of her money,” she pointed out.

After spending a pleasant half hour with Miss Hooker, the girls left the inn, wandering about aimlessly for a time. Coming unexpectedly upon a street circus which had taken over a vacant lot in the business section of Penfield, they amused themselves by going inside.

Louise was greatly intrigued by an old Indian who professed to sell a cure for snake bite. Much to her sister's irritation, she purchased a bottle of the medicine, which was of a peculiar dark green color and did not look as if it had any curative value whatsoever.

"What will you ever do with that awful stuff?" she asked scoffingly. "There surely aren't any snakes at Starhurst. Why, I've never seen one there at any time."

Louise smiled wisely, but said nothing to her sister. She chatted pleasantly with the old Indian as he wrapped the bottle in a piece of brown paper. Jean grew tired of listening, and moved on.

Presently her sister caught up with her again.

"That medicine was a good investment even if I should decide to throw it away!" she insisted triumphantly, a gleam of mischief in her eyes. "The old Indian told me the formula which has been handed down by his tribe for many generations. I'll add the information to my notes for Professor Crandall. I'm sure that he will be interested to hear about this remedy, for anything like that is just what he is looking for in his work."

Upon reaching the dormitory, Louise gathered up all the material she had accumulated, including the corrected notes which had been taken from her room, and brought them to Professor Crandall's office.

"You have done splendidly, Louise," the man praised as he glanced over the papers. "Let me see, why are so many lines crossed out?"

"Someone took the notes, and after making the changes, returned them," Louise explained patiently.

"Oh, yes, to be sure. We spoke of the matter before. I see that nearly all these corrections pertain to one particular Indian tribe—the Agawas."

"I noticed the same thing," Louise agreed, "and it seemed rather curious to me. By the way, Professor Crandall, isn't it true that the ancient village of the Agawas stood on the shores of Moon Lake?"

"Yes, Louise, the site is not far from the place which we propose to purchase for our summer camp."

"I hope I'll be one of the five girls selected to make the trip there," Louise remarked wistfully. "I may be able to gather additional data about the Agawas."

For days the students of Starhurst were occupied with tests, and a spirit of deep gloom prevailed over the dormitory. Mona Martin seemed especially depressed, confiding to the Dana girls that she did not think she had made high marks.

“Oh, if I should not be chosen for the Moon Lake trip, I’d be unable to bear it,” she told her friends.

At last came the awaited day when Mrs. Crandall was to announce the names of the fortunate five who had been selected. First of all the headmistress made a little speech in which she explained that the competition had been very keen and that many girls had narrowly missed the honor.

“I have chosen Helen Brewster, Evelyn Starr, Louise and Jean Dana,” she read from her list. “Their average grades were the highest. Lettie Briggs also will make the trip.”

There was a gasp of astonishment as well as a murmur of disapproval, for no one had expected that Lettie would win the honor. Jean and Louise felt certain the girl had barely escaped a failure in her French examination.

As many pairs of eyes were turned upon her, Lettie grinned impishly and in a loud whisper was heard to boast, “I told you I’d go! And I didn’t waste a week cramming for examinations, either!”

“Silence, please,” Mrs. Crandall ordered sternly, frowning at the Briggs girl.

The noise did not die away. Instead, the girls at the rear of the room began to talk excitedly, and several sprang up from their seats.

“Oh, Mrs. Crandall!” someone cried. “Mona Martin has fainted!”

CHAPTER V

AN OFFER

Immediately everyone swarmed about the girl who had slumped from her seat to the floor. It was with difficulty that the headmistress compelled the would-be helpers to return to their places.

“Jean! Louise! Evelyn!” Mrs. Crandall called the names of those upon whom she knew she could depend. “We will carry Mona to my room.”

They lifted the girl gently and bore her to the bedroom which was on the lower floor. Before Dr. Wilson could be summoned Mona opened her eyes, insisting that she was all right. Mrs. Crandall regarded her anxiously as she bathed the girl’s forehead.

“I am afraid you have been studying too hard, my dear,” she said kindly. “And you are so thin. I shall order a nourishing soup for you immediately. I fear you have failed to eat regular meals.”

The Dana girls wished to linger with their friend, but Mrs. Crandall assured them they could do nothing more, and sent them away with Evelyn Starr.

“Mona doesn’t look a bit well,” the latter declared as the three girls walked through the corridor. “She is as pale as a ghost.”

Louise and Jean exchanged quick glances but offered no comment. They thought they understood the reason for Mona’s fainting spell. The girl had been bitterly disappointed over the fact that she had not been chosen for the trip to Moon Lake.

It was not until late that afternoon that the Dana sisters had an opportunity to speak with Mona alone. By that time she seemed her usual self, save that she was very subdued and wan looking. Louise tried to draw her out as to the cause of her sudden indisposition, but Mona was not inclined to talk.

“I was disappointed,” she admitted quietly. “The trip meant everything to me. I’d gladly pay my own expenses if I might make it.” Impulsively she gripped Louise’s hand. “As a special favor, do you think Mrs. Crandall would allow me to go?”

“Why, I can’t say, Mona. I’ll ask her if you wish.”

“Oh, please, Louise. I’ll be so grateful.”

While the girls were talking, a maid came to tell Louise that Professor Crandall wished to see her at once in his office.

“A strange thing has occurred,” he told the girl as she took a seat before him. “I am deeply disturbed. During the assembly period I was reading some of your notes regarding the Agawa tribe. I had them spread out here on my

desk. I was called away for a few minutes and when I returned, the papers were gone!”

“Why, that’s exactly what happened before!” Louise exclaimed. “Who could have taken them?”

“I am at a loss to explain the matter. Since the theft occurred during the assembly period it is not logical to suspect a student. I intend to sift this matter to the bottom, Louise, but I assure you that even though the notes should not be recovered, you shall have your extra credits regardless.”

“That is very kind of you,” Louise thanked him. “After this I plan to make most of the notes in duplicate.”

She left the office, vaguely puzzled by the happening. Although it was Professor Crandall’s opinion that no student could be guilty of the theft, Louise was unable to forget the shadowy figure which had glided away from her room.

Louise dismissed the problem from her mind as she set off for Penfield to call on Miss Hooker. Upon her previous visit she had promised to bring the teacher a book from the school library.

Approaching the inn from the rear, she observed a man sitting on a bench in the garden. He was absorbed in reading a sheaf of papers, but as he raised his head slightly Louise recognized him as the person called Anthony.

“Why, what can he be reading?” she thought. “From here those sheets resemble my missing notes!”

As Louise approached, the man recognized her and hastily thrust the papers into his pocket.

“I was just reading an interesting letter from a friend who is abroad,” he muttered, eyeing the girl warily.

“How are you feeling?” Louise inquired, without giving any sign that she distrusted him. “I see you have taken off the bandage.”

“My head doesn’t hurt any more,” the man mumbled.

“I’m glad to hear that,” the girl replied, and then asked casually, “Are you staying at the inn?”

“I am for a few days. I usually stop here when I have business in Penfield.” He glanced shrewdly at Louise. “Say, how would you like to invest a little money through me?”

“I don’t think I’d be interested.”

“I’d let you into a good thing. And you really owe me something, you know.”

“Why?”

“Well, on account of the accident. I could make a lot of trouble for your sister if I should want to do it.”

Louise regarded him sharply.

“By your own admission you were not seriously injured, and it was entirely your own fault! You

shouldn't have been walking so close behind us."

"I didn't say I'd make trouble," the man amended hastily.
"But I could."

Louise was so indignant that she turned and walked into the hotel. She felt worried, for she sensed that the fellow was toying with the idea of claiming damages. Later, upon her return to Starhurst, she told Jean of the conversation.

"It would be just my luck if he were to try to sue Uncle Ned," the younger girl declared gloomily. "Even if he should lose the suit it would be very disagreeable."

"I suspect that man Tony took my notes, Jean. When I came up he thrust the papers into his pocket and acted very guilty."

"Oh, you probably were mistaken. I don't believe he has been around here lately."

Despite her sister's words, Louise refused to discard the theory. The following day when she and Jean were in Penfield they saw the man again. He was walking down the street with Lettie Briggs and the two entered the Penfield bank. They emerged within a few minutes and drove away in a car.

"Lettie is certainly heading straight for trouble," Louise said with a worried frown. "She knows perfectly well that it's against the rules of the school to go riding with men unless Mrs. Crandall has granted permission."

“Since her parents went away, Lettie seems to think she can do as she likes,” Jean added. “It’s none of our affair, I suppose, but I hate to see her make such a fool of herself.”

“Her friend will make use of her money, too,” Louise declared, “with his investments. We ought to warn her to be on her guard.”

“Yes, we should.”

Later that afternoon, with the best of intentions, the Dana girls went to Lettie’s room.

“Oh, don’t try to lecture me again!” the girl said impatiently. “I’ve told you before I know how to look after my money. You’re merely jealous because Anthony is handsome and pays so much attention to me! He thinks I am a wonderful business woman.”

“I can imagine,” Jean commented dryly.

“When Father went away he left several important business matters in my hands,” Lettie went on glibly. “I’d tell you about them, only you’d not understand.”

The Dana girls smiled at this impertinence, and were almost convinced that Mr. and Mrs. Briggs actually had left instructions with their daughter regarding the disposal of her bank account. However, just then Ina Mason, who had been listening to the conversation, said in an aggrieved tone:

“I’ve been telling Lettie the same thing but she won’t listen to me. She goes ahead and does the wildest kind

of things.”

“Who asked for your opinion?” Lettie demanded furiously. “You just keep out of this, Ina Mason! I’ll run my own affairs and take no advice from anyone!”

“I can see we’ll all have a gay little vacation at Moon Lake,” Louise remarked lightly as she and Jean turned away. “A group of turtle-doves!”

“You started the fuss,” Lettie retorted. Then, with an abrupt change of mood she added, “I guess you were pretty upset when Mrs. Crandall selected me to make the trip to Moon Lake.”

“We were surprised,” Jean acknowledged.

“My marks were high,” Lettie bragged. “I didn’t bother to study, either!”

“You’re not telling the truth, Lettie,” Ina broke in. “You know very well you nearly failed in your French. Mrs. Crandall chose you because she had promised your mother she’d look after you personally while your parents were away!”

The Dana girls expected Lettie to fly into a rage at this exposure, but to their surprise she laughed heartily. Perhaps because she felt she had outwitted the Danas.

“One can never fathom Lettie,” Louise declared when she and Jean were alone.

“I’d give anything if she weren’t going with us to Moon Lake,” Jean returned. “How much nicer it would be if Mona could make the trip in her place.”

“At that, I don’t know what Starhurst would do without Lettie,” Louise commented after a moment. “She provides excitement even if it isn’t of a desirable quality.”

“Handsome Anthony and Mona Martin add the dash of mystery,” Jean laughed. “After all, Starhurst is as thrilling as a good play.”

Louise was troubled about the missing notes which had disappeared from Professor Crandall’s desk. No clue had been found as to the identity of the thief. When the girl talked with the professor late that afternoon he admitted that he was completely baffled. In the absence of evidence, Louise became convinced that Lettie’s friend would bear questioning.

While the Dana girls were at dinner a maid came to say that Louise was wanted on the long distance telephone.

“I hope it isn’t bad news from home,” Jean commented anxiously as she followed her sister from the dining room.

Louise took down the receiver and heard Aunt Harriet’s voice at the other end of the line.

“How are you and Jean?” Miss Dana inquired. Upon being told that they were well, she hastened to reveal an important bit of news. “An amazing thing has happened to Cora Appel. She has inherited a little money!”

“Why, that’s splendid,” Louise replied heartily.

“Applecore’s hard luck must have changed.”

“I can’t understand it myself,” Aunt Harriet admitted with a merry laugh. “All her life Cora has had numerous reverses of fortune. She is fairly stunned by the news and goes about in a daze. She has broken no less than five dishes since the letter came.”

“You’ll have to lock up your china closet until she recovers from the shock,” Louise advised jokingly.

“I plan to bolt up the entire house instead. That’s why I called tonight, Louise. Before Cora may have her money she must go to Milton and sign certain papers. I have promised to accompany her.”

“She will need you, Aunt Harriet. If Applecore were to go alone she would be sure to bungle everything and probably lose the money.”

“We leave tomorrow,” Aunt Harriet continued. “It is our plan to spend a few days at the Three Elms tourist home in Milton.”

After chatting a few minutes longer Louise gave her sister an opportunity to speak into the phone, and then the connection was broken. Too late the girls realized they had forgotten to tell Aunt Harriet of their anticipated week-end trip to Moon Lake.

“Where is Milton anyway?” Jean suddenly asked. “I’ve heard of it.”

“Why, it’s the town nearest to Moon Lake!” Louise exclaimed. “When I was talking with Aunt Harriet that fact never dawned upon me. If that isn’t a strange coincidence!”

“We’ll surprise Aunt Harriet and Applecore by dropping in upon them,” Jean laughed.

“I have another idea, too.”

“What is it, Louise?”

“Mona Martin is eager to make the trip, but I doubt that Mrs. Crandall could grant her permission after the way the matter was arranged. But why couldn’t Mona go to Milton and stay with Aunt Harriet?”

“I’m sure Aunt Harriet would be glad to have her,” Jean agreed enthusiastically. “I wish we could arrange it.”

“Let’s try,” Louise urged impulsively. “I’m going straight to Mrs. Crandall now and ask if she will let Mona go!”

CHAPTER VI

A MIDNIGHT CALLER

Mrs. Crandall listened politely to the Dana girls' plea that Mona Martin be allowed to make the trip to Moon Lake. When they had finished she said:

"I should be very glad to grant your request, but unfortunately it will be impossible to do so. Mona left this morning to spend the week-end at her home."

"Oh," Louise commented in disappointment, "then of course she couldn't accompany us."

Early the next day the little party, composed of Mrs. Crandall, Lettie, Evelyn Starr, Helen Brewster and the Dana girls, set forth for Milton. The big convertible was built for comfort and speed, but the headmistress proved to be a nervous driver. She drove slowly, yet upon different occasions barely missed crashing into a truck, the rear end of another car which had halted suddenly, and a push cart filled with vegetables.

"I don't know what is wrong with me today," Mrs. Crandall remarked anxiously. "Once I ran into another automobile and narrowly escaped death. Since then I've had no confidence in my driving."

“I imagine you are tired from your strenuous work at the school,” Jean said sympathetically. “Perhaps we could take turns relieving you at the wheel.”

“I’d rather have Mrs. Crandall drive!” Lettie announced pettishly. “It’s safer.”

“Nonsense,” the headmistress replied, stopping the car so that Jean might take her place at the wheel. “I shall be very glad to have assistance, for you are all careful drivers and far more skillful than I.”

“Jean will run us into a telephone pole,” Lettie protested.

No one paid the slightest attention to the girl, whereupon she subsided into an angry silence. After an hour Jean gave up the wheel and Mrs. Crandall said that Helen Brewster might take her turn.

“When do I get my chance?” Lettie demanded irritably.

“Perhaps upon our trip back,” the headmistress replied evenly.

Helen Brewster was an excellent driver, but Lettie offered a number of criticisms. Finally Mrs. Crandall said sternly:

“Lettie, do try to enjoy the scenery. You are ruining the journey for everyone.”

After that the girl remained silent, but when they stopped for luncheon at a roadside inn she refused to eat, saying that the food was not good. A little farther on she

requested that they make a short detour in order to stop at a certain town.

“Lettie, we are in a hurry to reach Milton,” Mrs. Crandall said with growing irritation. “We can’t alter our route to humor your slightest whim.”

“It’s not a whim! I must make an important telephone call.”

“Why didn’t you think of it when we stopped for luncheon?” the headmistress inquired.

“I didn’t see any telephone.”

“We will stop at the next town on our route,” Mrs. Crandall conceded.

“We don’t come to a city for at least fifteen miles,” Lettie protested. “It will be too late then. The telephone call is very important, Mrs. Crandall. It is for my father—a matter of business.”

“Oh, very well,” the headmistress relented. “I suppose we must make the detour, but it will delay us.”

While she and the girls waited in the car, Lettie spent nearly half an hour in a drug store. At length, when Jean went inside to learn what was delaying her, she found her calmly eating an ice cream sundae.

“Lettie, do you know we are in a hurry to reach Milton!” she cried.

“Oh, stop scolding,” Lettie retorted crossly. “I guess it won’t hurt you to wait while I have a little ice cream. I couldn’t eat that horrible lunch and I’m hungry.”

It was dusk when the car finally arrived at the outskirts of Milton.

“How much farther is it to the peninsula?” Louise inquired anxiously.

“Oh, a number of miles,” Mrs. Crandall assured her. “We’ll not attempt to reach there tonight.”

“Are we going to stay in Milton?” Jean asked eagerly, for she hoped that such a plan might enable her and Louise to meet Aunt Harriet and Cora Appel.

“Yes, I have made arrangements for our party to spend the night at a small tourist home. It is operated by a woman named Mrs. Weston, and is reputed to be a clean, pleasant place.”

She gave the address to Helen, who chanced to be driving. After a little trouble the girl located a rambling white house with green shutters near the north edge of Milton. A plump, rosy-cheeked woman came to the front door and indicated that the car was to be driven into the garage.

“You’ll probably want to leave it there during your stay at Moon Lake,” she assured Mrs. Crandall as she assisted with the removal of the luggage. “Automobiles can’t be driven out on the peninsula without considerable risk.”

“Surely we’ll not be compelled to walk from here?”

Mrs. Crandall gasped. “I thought we could take our car directly to the old stone house.”

“The road is too narrow and stony,” Mrs. Weston replied.

“However, carriages are available. Rigs can be hired at Ralon’s stable.”

“It will be fun riding in a carriage!” Jean cried in delight.

“Fun!” Lettie echoed mockingly. “It will be terrible. I wish I had stayed at home.”

“Perhaps you’re not the only one who wishes you had,” Evelyn muttered in an undertone.

The girls entered the house, and with Mrs. Weston carried the luggage to the various rooms.

“Louise and Jean will sleep together,” Mrs. Crandall announced. “Helen and Evelyn will share the south room, while Lettie will remain with me on the lower floor.”

It was all the girls could do to maintain straight faces, for Lettie obviously was infuriated by such an arrangement. However, she dared make no protest.

Mrs. Weston served a delightful supper. Afterward everyone enjoyed a walk about the streets of Milton, and arrangements were made for the use of Mr. Ralon’s horses the following morning.

Before retiring, Louise and Jean, who enjoyed talking with strangers, had a pleasant chat with Mrs. Weston. They asked her many questions regarding the locality which they planned to visit.

“You will find it a very lonely place,” the woman revealed. “I shouldn’t care to go there myself.”

“Why not?” Louise inquired alertly.

“Well, I’m a trifle superstitious,” Mrs. Weston admitted with a self-conscious laugh. “So many strange things have happened on the peninsula.”

“What sort of things?” Jean asked.

“Accidents—or so they have been termed. A year ago a boy drowned there. Another man was hit by lightning. Folks claim the place has a jinx on it.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Crandall has never heard the tale,” Jean remarked slowly.

“Please don’t tell her, Mrs. Weston,” Louise urged. “If you do she won’t want to visit the place.”

“Oh, I’ll keep still,” the woman promised with a smile.

The girls were tired from their day’s journey. Shortly after nine o’clock the house quieted down for the night. The Danas’ bed was not as comfortable as it might have been, so despite her weariness Louise slept lightly.

Soon after midnight she was awakened by the sound of knocking on the front door. Louise crept out of bed and went to the window.

Mrs. Weston, with a bathrobe drawn about her ample figure, already had opened the door. Louise could hear her arguing with a man. Finally she seemed to give in to his wishes, for she closed the door and went to call someone on the lower floor.

Louise rushed back to the bed and awakened her sister. "Jean, come to the window!" she whispered.

"What's wrong?" the girl mumbled drowsily.

"A man is standing down there waiting to talk with someone. I think he is Mr. Anthony!"

At this Jean became thoroughly awakened. She stood close beside Louise as they peered down at the midnight visitor.

"He does look like the gentleman," Jean agreed. "I wish he would turn his face this way."

"I'll bet he came to talk with Lettie!"

In this opinion Louise was mistaken, for a moment later Mrs. Crandall appeared in the lower doorway. The two conversed in low tones. Then, to the amazement of the Dana girls, the man went to his car and returned with a small package. He handed it to the headmistress and then drove away.

“What do you make of the affair, Jean?” Louise asked as the sisters stole back to bed.

“It seems queer, all right. Perhaps Mrs. Crandall will explain everything in the morning.”

At the breakfast table the headmistress made no mention of the midnight visitor. Louise and Jean were too discreet to speak of the matter, and did not reveal their knowledge to any of the other girls. At nine o’clock the old-fashioned carriage arrived from Mr. Ralon’s stable and the question immediately arose as to who should drive.

“I’ll be glad to,” Jean offered, and was told she might do so.

At first everyone had a hilarious time as the carriage rattled and creaked over the rutty road which led from Milton along the shores of beautiful Moon Lake. Jean handled the horses well and they trotted along at a lively clip.

As they progressed farther up the peninsula the girl was compelled to pay more attention to her driving, for the road wound dangerously close to the water’s edge. On the other side the thoroughfare was lined with a dense growth of virgin trees.

“Oh, I love it here!” Louise declared gaily. “It’s just the site for a girls’ camp, Mrs. Crandall.”

“But so wild looking,” the headmistress replied with a little shiver. “It would be necessary to build a good road.”

Her words were interrupted by a shrill scream from Evelyn Starr. The girl gripped Jean's arm, causing her to jerk on the reins.

"A bear!" she cried, pointing toward the woods. "I saw it through the trees just then."

"Oh! Oh!" Lettie wailed, fairly beside herself with fear.

"Turn back, Jean. I'm afraid of this dreadful place! I want to go back to Milton!"

"We can't turn on this narrow road," Jean answered calmly.

"Anyway, a bear won't hurt us if we don't bother him."

"I'll never move," Lettie announced tearfully. "Oh, why did I have to come to a horrid place like this?"

"Try to control yourself, Lettie," Mrs. Crandall said sternly.

"There is no danger."

Even as she spoke, the wheels of the carriage sank into a deep rut and the occupants of the vehicle were severely jolted.

"No d-danger!" Lettie chattered. "In another minute we'll lose a wheel. Then we'll be stranded here and the bears will come——"

"Lettie!" Mrs. Crandall reproved. "Please, I beg of you, don't try to conjure up ridiculous fears."

The carriage jogged on for a quarter of a mile farther, entering deeper into the woods. Suddenly Jean drew rein.

The road had come to an abrupt end!

CHAPTER VII

THE STONE MANSION

“We’re at the end of the road,” Jean exclaimed in perplexity. “You can see there is nothing ahead of us but a dense growth of bushes.”

“Oh, dear, I never would have come had I suspected it would be like this,” said Mrs. Crandall. “I was told that the road led all the way to the stone mansion.”

“It’s evident no one has traveled along here recently,” Jean declared thoughtfully. “I shouldn’t be surprised if the road has just been lost.”

“Lost?” the headmistress inquired doubtfully.

“I mean swallowed up by the bushes. If someone will hold the reins, I’ll get out and investigate.”

Evelyn Starr obligingly relieved Jean of them, and both the Dana girls alighted.

“Do be careful,” Mrs. Crandall warned anxiously as the sisters vanished into the dense undergrowth.

A moment later Louise and Jean came hurrying back to the carriage.

“It’s just as I thought!” Jean cried. “The road picks up again only a few yards farther on. The bushes have blocked it from view.”

“But how are we to get past?” Helen Brewster asked in perplexity. “We can’t hack our way through.”

“We’ll all hold back the bushes while Jean drives past,” Louise declared.

Everyone save Lettie sprang from the carriage.

“I’ll not stir,” she announced grimly. “There may be another bear around here somewhere.”

While Mrs. Crandall and the three girls held the bushes, Jean, with Lettie as sole passenger, drove through the opening. Evelyn accidentally lost hold of one of the branches and it whipped directly across Lettie’s face, causing her to howl with pain.

“You did that on purpose, Evelyn Starr!” she cried furiously, refusing to listen to the girl’s apology.

The road wound on for a good distance through the woods. Then without warning the party came within view of Moon Lake once more. Through the gap in the trees they saw the sloping shore, and set back from it about a hundred feet was a massive, ivy-covered stone house. The ancient dwelling occupied two stories. Its triple chimneys were immense, and it did not require much imagination to realize that at one time the structure had been very imposing.

“I wonder who formerly owned the estate?” Louise mused as the girls sat for a moment staring at the scene before them.

Everyone expected that Lettie Briggs would make belittling remarks regarding the site, but strangely she declared that it was exactly to her liking. Mrs. Crandall was the member of the party who plunged the group into the depths of despair by saying:

“This has been a dreadful trip and I regret that I did not investigate matters more fully before we started. The locality is entirely too wild for a summer camp. I don’t want to disappoint you, girls, but I think the only thing for us to do will be to return to Starhurst immediately.”

“Oh, Mrs. Crandall!” the students chorused in protest.

“You promised us an outing,” Lettie declared crossly. “It isn’t fair to take us back the minute we get here.”

“I wish that we could see the inside of the stone house at least,” Louise said wistfully.

“I have the key,” Mrs. Crandall admitted. “Oh, well, since we have come all this way it will do no harm to look at the interior.”

Jean tied the horses to a convenient tree, and the visitors alighted from the carriage. Mrs. Crandall unlocked the front door of the stone house. A gust of damp, cool air greeted her as she stepped inside.

“Why, the interior of the house is fairly nice!” she exclaimed in surprise, glancing about. “The floors are in good condition, and the rooms are of generous size.”

“It looks as if the former occupant left some of his furniture!” Jean exclaimed, indicating a chair and a table.

“Those pieces are of fine quality,” Mrs. Crandall observed. “I fail to understand why anyone would leave them behind.”

The girls wandered from room to room, finding a few additional pieces of furniture, all of the same excellent design.

“Perhaps someone has been living in the house recently,” Louise remarked thoughtfully.

Jean shook her head. “The place hasn’t that appearance. The furniture obviously was left by the former owner.”

They went upstairs, and the younger girl’s opinion was confirmed by their failure to find beds or cots. Mrs. Crandall soon completed her inspection and went back to the lower floor.

All save Louise and Jean followed her. They deliberately lingered, for they had noticed something peculiar about the construction of the house. It seemed to them that in the second floor hall the ceiling above the paneled wooden walls was much higher than was necessary.

“I’ve never seen anything just like it before,” Jean remarked as they inspected the place carefully. “Do you

suppose the builder made a mistake in the construction?"

"It looks deliberate to me," Louise rejoined. "But I can't understand why a house would be built in this fashion."

Just then Mrs. Crandall called from below to warn the girls that she was ready to lock up the house. Regretfully Louise and Jean descended to the lower floor. They did not speak of their discovery to the others.

"I wish we could stay here a little longer," Evelyn said wistfully. "The beach is so pretty."

"It will be late before we reach Milton," Mrs. Crandall declared. "However, I do not wish to deprive you of your outing. If you would like to stay we might remain another day at Mrs. Weston's place."

In a measure the girls were reconciled, and everyone save Lettie enjoyed the slow ride back to the village. Somehow the bumps did not seem so hard, nor the forest so terrifying this time.

The journey had wearied Mrs. Crandall, and she retired to her room as soon as they reached the Weston home. Jean and Louise drove the horses back to the stables and then set forth to locate Aunt Harriet and Cora Appel.

"They surely have arrived by this time," Jean declared. "It will be fun to surprise them!"

The sisters had no trouble in locating the house. As they came up the street, they espied the Dana maid

sitting on the front porch, making her rocker swing violently back and forth.

“Hello, Cora,” Jean greeted her gaily. “How does it feel to be an heiress?”

The maid sprang up from her chair, dumbfounded at sight of the two girls. An object in her lap crashed to the floor, shattering into a dozen pieces.

“Oh, see what I done now!” Cora Appel wailed. “I bought that vase only an hour ago to send to my niece, and now it’s broke!”

“Never mind,” Louise comforted her as she reached down to help gather up the fragments. “Now that you have inherited money you’ll be able to buy a dozen vases.”

“I can’t get used to being rich,” the maid said. “I’m so all of a flutter I don’t know whether I’m coming or going. Your aunt said I was just to set here and try to calm myself while she unpacked, but I ought to be a helpin’.”

“No, she’ll get along better without you,” Jean said, smiling.

Cora Appel had never been of much use in her most efficient moments, and it was evident that in her present state of excitement she would be worse than usual.

“How much money are you inheriting?” Louise inquired with friendly interest.

“Oh, I don’t know yet, but it will be a sight. The money was left to me by a bachelor uncle. He was a sea-farin’ man, and my, he thought a lot of me.”

“You were the apple of his eye!” Jean suggested slyly.

“Of Core she was!” Louise added mischievously.

“Yes, I was the apple of his eye,” Cora Appel repeated, failing to comprehend the double play on words. “He left me all this money when he died, and now I’m a-goin’ to buy me a new silk dress with one of them circular skirts, an’ some new shoes, and maybe I’ll go on a trip to Niagara Falls. I’ve always wanted to see all that water runnin’ over the rocks.”

“You certainly have made elaborate plans,” Louise laughed. “Is Aunt Harriet in the house?”

It was unnecessary for Cora Appel to reply, for just then Miss Dana appeared in the door-way. Upon seeing Louise and Jean she gave a gasp of astonishment and clasped them in her arms.

“How nice it is that we can be united here, if only for a day or two,” she declared happily after the girls had explained their mission in Milton. “I count the hours while you are in school.”

“Mrs. Crandall plans to take us back tomorrow,” Jean said regretfully. “We’ve been trying to persuade her to remain longer, but I’m afraid she’ll not do it.”

“I hope to return to Oak Falls by the day after tomorrow,” Aunt Harriet revealed. “I trust Cora’s affairs will have been settled by that time.”

She drew the girls aside, confiding to them that the trip had been even worse than she had anticipated.

“Poor Cora is helpless as a babe. I almost wish she hadn’t inherited any money, for she has taken on such ridiculous airs.”

“Has Cora really come into a large sum of money?” Jean asked curiously.

“It will not be as large an amount as she anticipates, I feel certain. We are to meet the lawyer tomorrow and I’ll learn all the details from him.”

“It was good of you to accompany Applecore here, Aunt Harriet,” Louise said. “She never could have managed alone.”

The girls spent a pleasant hour with their aunt, telling her of their exciting trip to Moon Lake. Finally, as it grew late, they regretfully said good-bye.

On their way back to the Weston tourist home they passed a small village store where nearly every article imaginable was sold.

“Let’s stop and get a quart of ice cream,” Jean suggested. “I’ve been wanting some all day.”

As the girls entered the cluttered little shop, they were startled to hear a rear door slam. Louise caught a fleeting glimpse of a white-clad figure darting away. The storekeeper, a wiry little man with a streaked mustache, scratched his head in a puzzled way.

“Well, that customer was sure a queer one,” he remarked. “After buying two dollars’ worth of stuff she went off and left everything.”

“You mean the girl who just hurried out the rear door?” Jean questioned with interest.

“Yes. Seems as if she must have been afraid you’d see her. She just took one glance and made for the exit!”

“Who was the girl?” Louise inquired, thinking that she might have been Lettie Briggs.

“She had dark hair—that’s all I know about her. A stranger in town. Milton is overrun with giddy girls. Some teacher from a place called Starhurst brought ’em here.”

Jean and Louise smiled broadly, but did not confess that they were members of the same party. From the storekeeper’s description they could not figure out who had fled as they entered the shop. They decided that the girl probably was not Lettie. This belief received confirmation when, upon their return to the Weston tourist home, they learned that she had retired already. Evelyn and Helen were still awake, but both denied that they had been away from the house in the past hour.

“I can’t think who that person might have been,” Louise said thoughtfully when she and Jean were alone in their room. “There’s a chance Mona Martin followed us here——”

“Mona!” Jean exclaimed.

“She had set her heart upon visiting Moon Lake. Then she left Starhurst only a little while before we did, ostensibly to return home. Perhaps she came here instead.”

“It’s possible, Louise. But why should she be afraid to meet us?”

“Perhaps she fears we’d tell Mrs. Crandall.”

After deciding that they would not speak of the matter to the headmistress, the girls retired. They slept soundly, but toward morning Jean found herself wide awake.

She sat up in bed. Was it her imagination, or did she really smell smoke? Suddenly she reached over and shook Louise.

“Get up!” she said anxiously. “Something is burning!”

Before her sister was fully awake, Jean had darted to the door and flung it open. A billow of smoke poured into the room, and she could see bright flames shooting up the stairway.

“Fire!” she shouted in alarm. “The house is on fire! We’ll all be trapped!”

CHAPTER VIII

FIRE!

The flames were spreading rapidly. As Louise sprang from bed and darted to the door, she feared that her sister's dire prediction might come true.

"We must warn the others, Jean," she cried.

Frantically the girls ran along the smoke-filled hall, pounding on doors and calling "Fire! Fire!"

They raced back to their own room to dress and gather together their belongings. In a minute Helen and Evelyn joined them there.

"The stairway is cut off!" Helen gasped. "What shall we do?"

"We'll have to climb out on the porch roof and slide down the pillars," Louise said. "It's our only chance."

"Has anyone awakened Mrs. Crandall and Lettie?" Evelyn asked.

"They are on the lower floor with Mrs. Weston," Jean said tersely as she flung her clothing into a suitcase. "Probably they are safe, but anyway, we can't get down the stairway!"

“Oh, no!” Evelyn exclaimed in quick protest. “Only this evening Mrs. Crandall asked to be transferred to a larger bedroom upstairs. She and Lettie are at the end of the hall.”

“And I didn’t knock on that door!” Jean cried in dismay. “I thought the room was empty!”

While Louise helped Evelyn and Helen out on the roof of the sloping porch, her sister raced back down the hall. The smoke now was so thick that breathing was difficult.

Jean pounded on the door. Hearing no response, she flung it open.

“Lettie! Mrs. Crandall!” As the two awakened, she cried, “The house is on fire! Just grab your things and come. There’s not a second to lose. The floor may crash!”

Lettie began to weep, and while Jean was trying to help Mrs. Crandall stuff garments into a suitcase, the girl ran to the window.

“I’ll not be burned to death!” she screamed. “I’m going to jump!”

Jean leaped toward her, catching her by the arm just in time to save her from plunging over the window sill.

“Every bone in your body will be broken if you do that!” she exclaimed. “There’s time enough to escape if only you’ll be calm.”

She escorted Mrs. Crandall and Lettie through the hall, steering them into her own room which opened above the porch. Helen and Evelyn already were safe on the ground, and Louise had tossed down most of the luggage.

Lettie lost no time in sliding to safety, but the Dana girls had a difficult siege with Mrs. Crandall. The woman was afraid of a severe fall, and not being at all athletic, she found it a difficult feat to swing over the edge of the porch and grasp a column.

By the time she had reached safety, the Dana girls' room was unbearably hot.

"Come on, Louise," Jean urged anxiously. "We're waiting too long."

"You go ahead. I want to save some bedding."

Jean would not leave without her sister, so together they rolled up mattress, quilts, pillows, and tossed everything out the window. Then they slid down the pillars to safety.

"Where is Mrs. Weston?" Louise asked anxiously, glancing around her.

Just then she glimpsed the woman wandering about the yard. The girls ran to her, fearing that she had been severely burned. Mrs. Weston was only dazed by the great calamity which had come upon her; her conversation was unintelligible. The girls tried to learn if she had called the local fire department, and finally gathered that she had notified no one.

“The town is too small to have a regular fire company,” Jean declared to her sister. “It’s all volunteer work. I don’t know whom to call.”

By the time they were able to extract the necessary information from the dazed Mrs. Weston, the entire house was ablaze, and the girls realized that there would be no hope of saving it with the meager fire equipment available.

“Well, at least everyone escaped unhurt,” Evelyn murmured, as they stood ruefully watching the blaze. “If Jean hadn’t awakened just when she did——”

“What was that sound?” Louise interrupted.

“Oh, it’s Bingo!” Mrs. Weston shrieked. “My darling little dog is locked up in the kitchen. He’ll be burned to death.”

Jean and Louise darted forward, determined to save the pet. They did not hear Mrs. Crandall’s scream of protest, nor did they stop to consider the risk they were taking.

Jean smashed a kitchen window, and Louise climbed through the opening. She was gone several minutes and those outside grew frantic. Finally she reappeared, the little white dog clasped in her arms.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” Mrs. Weston murmured gratefully as she claimed her pet.

The volunteer firemen arrived upon the scene within a few minutes, but water pressure was low, and their one hose

sprayed only a small stream of water. However, the men were able to carry out some of the furniture, more bedding, and nearly all of the kitchen equipment before the walls crashed in.

“I am thankful that my car is still safe,” Mrs. Crandall declared. “We must start back to Starhurst as soon as it is light enough to travel.”

“Oh, you promised us a day here,” Helen Brewster wailed.

“We can find another boarding house,” Lettie added.

A tour of Milton revealed that every tourist place was filled. It was then that Louise and Jean offered a suggestion.

“Why couldn’t we stay at the old stone house, Mrs. Crandall?” Louise asked. “We could buy army cots at the local store and borrow Mrs. Weston’s bedding.”

“Yes, why not!” Evelyn exclaimed enthusiastically. “That would be just like a camping trip.”

“The locality is too wild,” Mrs. Crandall protested. “Besides, there would be no cooking utensils nor anyone to prepare our meals.”

“We could borrow Mrs. Weston’s kitchen utensils,” Jean declared gaily. “And I think I can provide a cook!”

“Applecore?” laughed Louise.

“Yes, I’m sure Aunt Harriet would be glad to give her up for a day or two.”

“What about her inheritance?”

“She’ll not lose it. Aunt Harriet will be able to deal with the lawyer much better alone.”

“You girls plan everything so swiftly that I can’t follow you,” Mrs. Crandall said with a smile. “However, if you can arrange matters, I have no objection to spending a night at Moon Lake.”

Louise and Jean rushed away to talk with their aunt, returning a few minutes later to announce that Cora Appel would be glad to serve as cook during the little expedition.

Cots were purchased at the local store, together with additional mattresses and a generous quantity of staples. It was luncheon time before the party was ready to leave, so Mrs. Crandall proposed that the noon meal be taken at the Milton Tea House. When at last everything was in readiness for the departure, Lettie could not be found. Only Cora Appel’s nonsensical talk of the many things she would buy with her fortune made the time pass quickly and kept Mrs. Crandall and the girls from worrying.

At last Lettie sauntered into view, and when taken to task, explained vaguely that she had found it necessary to attend to an important errand outside of the village. “I lost my way and it took me a long time to get back here,” she said crossly. “I don’t see why you have to make such a fuss about it.”

The matter might have been forgotten, but just as the party was ready to depart a farmer drove up. He glanced searchingly at the girls in the carriage, and singling out Lettie, said:

“Young lady, you owe me two dollars more. I want my pay.”

Lettie flushed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she retorted coldly. “I never saw you before in my life.”

“What?” the farmer demanded indignantly. “You deny that you hired me to drive you——”

“Oh, I’ll not argue,” Lettie broke in angrily, fearing the man might reveal her secret to the others. “Here are your two dollars. Now leave me alone.” She flung the bills at the farmer, then urged Louise, who held the reins, to drive on.

Jean and Helen followed the party in a light wagon loaded with bedding, cooking equipment, and food. The girls were jolted unmercifully as they bounced over the rough peninsula road, and to add to the difficulties of the trip the roll of bedding kept falling from the wagon at the most inconvenient moments. However, the journey provided considerable merriment as well, and even Mrs. Crandall laid aside her usual dignity as she helped to repack the luggage.

Shortly before the carriage and wagon came to the old stone house, Louise suddenly noticed a bright patch of red flashing among the trees. The color vanished in an instant, but she

was certain it had not been an animal for the hue was too bright.

“I’m sure it wasn’t a bird, either,” she thought in bewilderment. “It looked a little like a girl’s dress, but of course it couldn’t have been.”

Louise did not mention her observation, for she knew that Mrs. Crandall, who was inclined to be nervous, might worry. When the girls finally reached the old stone mansion she spoke of the matter to Jean, but her sister was too busy unloading the wagon to give it serious thought.

The lower floor of the ancient house soon was thoroughly aired, and at Mrs. Crandall’s suggestion the beds were made up there. While the other girls swept out some of the accumulated dirt, Jean and Louise helped Applecore prepare supper. Actually they did very nearly everything, for the maid could not find the proper utensils. She fluttered nervously about the empty kitchen, opening and closing cupboard doors without purpose.

“How can I cook in a place like this?” she wailed. “The stove won’t light and there’s no ice.”

“Nearly everything is pre-prepared,” Louise told her patiently. “There is potato salad, tomatoes, bread and butter, cake and relishes. Jean and I will broil the steaks on the fireplace I noticed outdoors. All you need to do, Applecore, is to set the table and put some of the supplies in the cupboards.”

“I’ll try,” the maid promised, “but I’m not myself today. First comin’ into my fortune, and then that awful ride through the woods—everything upset me. I don’t like this place either. It might be haunted.”

“Don’t be silly,” Jean chided severely.

The Dana girls took the steaks and went outside to build a fire.

“This is luck!” Jean exclaimed as she viewed the outdoor hearth. “Someone left a big pile of kindling all ready for use.”

Louise was poking about in the dead ashes. “Here’s another queer thing,” she said in an undertone. “These ashes are wet.”

“Wet?”

“Perhaps I should say damp. Someone has used this fireplace within the past few hours! And Mrs. Weston told me no one from town wants to come out here.”

Unobserved by the two girls, Applecore had followed them from the kitchen, bringing a package of meat which they had overlooked. Upon hearing Louise’s words she gave a little shriek and dropped the steaks.

“Now see what you’ve done, Applecore,” Jean said severely. “The meat will have to be washed before it can be used.”

“I’m not going to stay in this place another hour,” the maid declared with a shiver. “I told you the house is haunted. If someone’s been cooking food——”

“Ghosts don’t eat,” Louise said with a smile as she rescued the meat. “This fireplace probably was used by picnickers.”

The Dana girls had no opportunity to discuss their discovery just then, for they did not wish to say anything which might disturb Applecore. Later, after the delicious supper had been served and eaten, they withdrew from the other girls to talk over the matter.

“I suspect someone is prowling around the grounds,” Louise declared soberly. “It will pay us to be on our guard.”

“Let’s not tell Mrs. Crandall what we have observed,” Jean warned. “She might take it into her head to leave immediately, and that would never suit me.”

“No, I’d like to stay here long enough to learn who is skulking about the place. You know, there may be something to Mrs. Weston’s tale after all.”

“About strange things happening here?”

“Yes, Jean, I have a queer feeling—I can’t explain it—but I sense that all isn’t right at this old stone mansion.”

“I have the same hunch,” Jean agreed. “The place seems to be deserted, and yet one can *feel* a presence.”

When the Dana girls returned to the lower floor of the house where everyone had gathered, they found their friends engaged in relating harrowing ghost stories. As each member of the circle took her turn, the tales became more exciting. Poor Applecore began to tremble with fear, and even Lettie Briggs sat with her back to the wall as if to stave off an unexpected attack by some spectre.

“Well, girls, it is growing late,” Mrs. Crandall said at length. “After all these spooky stories I am afraid none of us will sleep. However, we all know that there are no ghosts. This house is perfectly safe or I should not have brought you——”

“What was that noise?” Lettie asked tensely.

For an instant the headmistress looked startled. Then she laughed carelessly.

“Let’s have no more jokes tonight, Lettie,” she said sternly.

“Oh, Mrs. Crandall, I really did hear a strange noise overhead,” Lettie answered in a frightened whisper.

“I thought it was a board creaking,” Louise said quietly.

“I am certain it was nothing,” Mrs. Crandall said firmly. “Ghost stories are not advisable, in my opinion, for they stimulate the imagination——”

Her words died away. The group had become very quiet; everyone listened intently. On the floor above a board squeaked.

“There it is again!” Lettie whispered fearfully. “A ghost!”

CHAPTER IX

A CREAKING BOARD

At Lettie's words Cora Appel uttered a shriek and slumped to the floor. When no one paid her the slightest heed she revived quickly enough, but continued to moan and wail. Meanwhile Louise and Jean, with flashlights in their hands, darted up the stairway to investigate the sounds.

"No, no, don't go up there!" Mrs. Crandall called warningly. "It may be risky."

The girls did not hear her. Reaching the top of the stairs, they proceeded more cautiously, flashing their lights about as they went from room to room.

"There's no one here," they shouted down to the others.

Mrs. Crandall and all the girls except Lettie and Applecore came trooping upstairs to join in the search, but there was no sign of an intruder.

"After all, it was only a creaking board," Louise declared with a laugh. "Yet it sounded exactly as if someone had stepped upon it."

"I shall sit up for the remainder of the night," Mrs. Crandall announced firmly as they all went downstairs

again.

“Let me act as guard in your stead,” Louise offered quickly.

The headmistress shook her head. “No, thank you. After what has occurred I could not sleep a wink anyway.”

She sent the girls off to bed, stationing herself in a chair not far from the stairway. Soon the house was wrapped in silence.

Louise slept soundly as did her companions, but toward morning she awoke suddenly and sat up. In the faint glimmer of dawn she could see Mrs. Crandall nodding in her chair, fighting to keep awake. Feeling sorry for the woman, Louise dressed quickly.

“Let me take your place now, Mrs. Crandall,” she urged. “It is nearly morning, and you are very weary.”

“I am tired, Louise.”

“I’ll maintain a careful watch,” the girl promised. “Please try to get some sleep.”

The headmistress allowed herself to be persuaded. She crept to her bed and dropped off into deep slumber within a few minutes after her head had touched the pillow.

Presently Louise left her chair to go to the window. The sun was just coming up and the sky above the placid waters of Moon Lake bore the brilliant colors of an artist’s brush. As she stood admiring the scene, her attention was

suddenly distracted by a flash of red in the bushes not far from the house. The girl ran to the door, but could discover nothing. The brilliant object had vanished.

“I’d investigate, only I must stay close to the house,” Louise told herself. “I believe someone is hiding in the woods.”

After remaining for a few minutes outside she went back inside to resume her vigil. An hour later, thinking that it was time for someone to start breakfast, she awakened Cora Appel. The maid sprang from her bed, shrieking with terror.

“Do hush!” Louise said severely. “You’ll awaken everyone.”

“Oh, it’s you, Louise,” the maid gasped in relief. “I was dreaming, and I thought a wild animal was after me!”

“Five hungry girls will be pouncing on you if breakfast isn’t ready soon, Applecore. Time to begin your duties.”

The maid’s shriek of alarm had awakened everyone, and the group began to dress hurriedly.

“Let’s all go for a swim!” Helen Brewster proposed enthusiastically.

“I can’t permit that,” Mrs. Crandall said regretfully. “It might be dangerous.”

“Well, at least we can gather some lilies for the breakfast table,” Jean declared. “I noticed some at the water’s edge last evening.”

With Helen and Louise she wandered down to the beach. The lilies were not as accessible as she had thought they were, but the girls decided one might reach them by climbing far out on a scraggly tree limb which drooped into the water.

“Do be careful,” Louise warned anxiously as she saw that Jean meant to attempt it.

The girl crawled out onto the limb, moving but an inch at a time. Maintaining a hazardous balance, she reached down and plucked the water lilies. The stems were tough. Finding one which was particularly stubborn, she tugged at it with all her strength.

Suddenly she lost her hold on the tree limb, and before Helen or Louise could reach out to save her she had plunged into the lake. She came to the surface sputtering and laughing, the water lilies still clutched tightly in her arms.

“Come on in,” she invited gaily. “The lake is grand this morning!”

While Louise and Helen waited a trifle impatiently, she splashed about, thoroughly enjoying herself.

“I may as well have my swim after all,” she declared. “My clothes are soaked, anyway.”

“Have a care you don’t step into a hole,” Louise warned.

“The beach is as level as a floor. It slopes out so gradually that even a non-swimmer would be in no danger.”

Jean proved her statement by wading out to shoulder depth, then returned to the beach. Louise hurried her into the house to change into dry clothing.

“I shall tell Mrs. Crandall about the wonderful swimming place,” Jean declared enthusiastically. “It will be a pity if she should decide against turning this locality into a girls’ camp.”

The headmistress appeared to have forgotten her fright of the previous night, for when breakfast was over she admitted to the group that the peninsula site did appeal to her. She even discussed plans for altering various rooms.

“I was thinking it all out during the night,” she declared. “The downstairs would provide a dining hall, a splendid recreation room and an adequate kitchen. The bedrooms might serve as an office, infirmary, and quarters for the youngest campers.”

“We’ll measure everything for you if you wish,” Jean offered quickly.

“Why, that’s very thoughtful of you, I’m sure,” Mrs. Crandall beamed. “I thought I would take Lettie with me and go for an inspection trip about the grounds. I must learn if there is a source of good drinking water available.”

Lettie made a grimace which the headmistress did not see. Since leaving Starhurst Mrs. Crandall had kept the Briggs girl under almost constant watch, and the student fretted at the check upon her freedom.

Shortly after the two had gone, Helen and Evelyn set forth to estimate the amount of clearing which would be necessary before cabins might be constructed. Louise and Jean were left alone in the stone house.

“I believe Mrs. Crandall is thinking seriously of locating the camp here,” Jean said enthusiastically to her sister.

“Yes,” Louise nodded, “but it will be just our luck for that old ghost to return. Another scare like the one we had last night, and she’ll pack up and take us all back to Starhurst.”

“Do you really think someone is prowling about the house?”

“I don’t know, Jean, but it seems queer to me that the fireplace has been used recently. I’d like to investigate the house thoroughly, now that we’re alone.”

“We can do it while we’re measuring the place for Mrs. Crandall.”

The girls found a tape line, and with paper and pencil went from room to room taking accurate measurements.

“This old house was just built for Mrs. Crandall’s purpose!” Louise declared enthusiastically. “It’s almost perfect.”

Coming presently to the upstairs hall which had puzzled them because of its peculiar construction, the girls took special care in measuring, and were more than ever convinced that something was amiss.

“Do you know what I think?” Louise demanded suddenly, rocking back on her heels and staring up at the ceiling.

“What?”

“I believe this house has a third story.”

“There’s no stairway leading up to it, and we’ve not been able to find a trapdoor in any of the ceilings.”

“Just the same, that’s my theory, Jean. Let’s examine the rooms.”

They wandered back and forth, taking measurements and testing the partitions. While exploring one of the closets, Louise requested her sister to lift her up so that she might rap on the ceiling. It gave forth a hollow sound.

“Do you hear that?” Louise cried excitedly. “I am certain that there is a room above!”

CHAPTER X

A FAMILIAR CHANT

“The ceiling does sound hollow,” Jean agreed. Unable to hold Louise another instant, she lowered her sister to the floor. “Oh, dear, I wish we had a ladder.”

“So do I,” the other replied, “but there’s not likely to be one anywhere around this place.”

“And there are no tools here which would help us make one.”

After completing their inspection of the upstairs, the girls went out of doors, making a complete tour of the exterior of the house. Jean had thought that there might be an outside stone staircase leading up to a hidden floor under the roof, but they could locate none. The upper part of the dwelling was so heavily covered with untrimmed ivy that it was impossible to tell if third story windows existed.

At length, convinced that they could learn no more, the Dana girls walked slowly down the beach, gathering curious pebbles and shells. Unexpectedly they came upon an old fisherman who had found himself a nook in an isolated little cove.

“Morning,” he greeted politely as the girls approached.

“Good morning,” Louise returned cordially. “Have you caught any fish?”

“Not yet,” the old man answered gruffly. “The trout ain’t been bitin’ lately.”

“Is this a good lake for fish?” Jean inquired.

“Best in the state. Not many folks come here so the waters ain’t been fished out. Who be you gals, anyway?”

“We’re campers staying up on the Point,” Louise said with a smile.

The girls chatted on, learning that the fisherman’s name was Jake Groper and that he lived only a few miles away. Presently they became a bit bolder and asked if they might sit in the boat and watch him fish.

“You kin if you’ll keep quiet,” the old man agreed. “But fish won’t bite if it’s noisy.”

The girls gave him their promise, and for a long while they kept it faithfully. But it grew tiresome sitting there with nothing to do. The fish refused to snare themselves on Mr. Groper’s line and the old man began to lose interest in the sport, so that he did not object when Louise asked a few questions.

“I understand that at one time all this land along Moon Lake was the property of the Agawa Indian tribe,” she mentioned casually.

“That’s right,” Mr. Groper agreed, puffing at his corncob pipe. “I guess they had their wigwams all along the shore here.”

“Have any Indian relics been found in the vicinity?” Louise inquired.

“Arrowheads and a few pieces of pottery,” the fisherman replied gruffly. “I picked up an arrowhead only last month down the shore ’bout a mile from here. But I can’t tell you much about the Indians. You’ll have to ask Ma Harper. She’s the one that can answer your questions.”

“Perhaps you know more about the former owners of the old stone house down on the Point,” Louise suggested, taking a new tack.

“I dunno as I can tell you much about the folks that lived there, either,” the man said with a shake of his unkempt locks. “Fer the past twenty-five years the place has been empty.”

“Has it been closed that long?” Louise asked. “Why, I’d never have believed it.”

“The family that lived there was a queer outfit. I guess they’re all dead and gone now.”

“Who owns the property at the present time?” Jean inquired.

“I dunno that either,” the fisherman said with a shrug. “’Pears to me I heard it was to be sold fer taxes, only I don’t see

who'd buy it, because nobody 'round Milton's got any money."

The old man picked up the oars and rowed the boat to a new location farther down the shore. As he cast his line into the water again he insisted that the girls remain quiet.

Finally, growing weary of inactivity, Jean picked up an extra rod from the bottom of the boat, and baiting the hook, tossed it into the water. However, before she could settle herself into a comfortable position a strange sound floated out across the lake. The old fisherman and the Dana girls sat listening in amazement.

From far back in the woods a clear feminine voice could be heard singing, but the words were unintelligible. It was the same weird chant which Louise and Jean had applauded at the Starhurst School concert.

"Mona Martin!" Louise exclaimed.

"You are right," Jean added in a startled voice. "She must have come to Moon Lake!"

"Say, how do you expect me to catch any fish with all this talkin' and singin' goin' on?" the man demanded crossly.

"I'm sorry," Louise said apologetically, and both girls lapsed into thoughtful silence.

Presently Jean suggested that they would like to be put off on shore, but the fisherman was in no hurry to leave the vicinity.

“This is a good place, an’ the fish ought to bite,” he muttered. “Ornery critters, that’s what they be.”

Suddenly Jean felt a tug at her line. She was so startled that she almost dropped the pole.

“You’ve hooked a big one!” the man exclaimed. “Don’t let him get away.”

Assisted by Louise, Jean managed to land a large trout. A few minutes later Mr. Groper gaffed two smaller ones.

“Not a bad haul,” he said as he gathered up the oars. “I’ll row you in now.”

The man obligingly took them all the way to the Point, and as they thanked him for the ride he gave Jean an extra fish.

“There, that will make you a nice mess for your lunch,” he declared. “One fish will be plenty for me.”

“Oh, by the way,” Louise said after she had thanked him, “where can I find Ma Harper? I may want to talk with her some time.”

“She lives in Milton,” the man replied. “Anyone kin point out her cottage to you.”

The headmistress and the other girls had returned to the stone house while Louise and Jean were away. They were all delighted to have fresh fish for luncheon.

“Mrs. Crandall, I want to go back to Milton this afternoon,” Lettie said when the meal was over. “It’s a matter of important business for my father.”

The head mistress could not conceal a frown. “Your requests come at awkward times, Lettie.”

“I have to go,” the girl said peevishly. “I wouldn’t ask if I hadn’t promised my father I’d attend to a business matter for him.”

“I can’t permit you to drive in alone, Lettie.”

“Jean and I can go with her if you wish, Mrs. Crandall,” Louise offered quickly. “We’d like very much to have a visit with Aunt Harriet while she is still in Milton.”

“I think Cora Appel wants to go, too,” Jean added. “She was saying this morning that she’s afraid she’ll lose her fortune unless she consults with a lawyer.”

“With so many requests on file, my answer must be ‘yes’,” the headmistress rejoined with a smile. “But I shall look for you all back before dark.”

During the ride to Milton the Dana girls tried to draw Lettie out regarding the important business which was taking her to town, but she would tell them nothing. Cora Appel bored everyone with her endless chatter, so that Louise and Jean were glad when they reached the village.

“I’ll say good-bye to you here,” Lettie said quickly, springing out of the carriage and leaving the Dana girls to watch the

team.

“Just a minute,” Jean called. “We’ll be starting back at five o’clock sharp, Lettie. Meet us here, and please don’t be late.”

“See that you aren’t late yourself,” the Briggs girl snapped as she hurried away.

The Danas sent Cora Appel on ahead to inform their aunt that they would be at the cottage soon. Then, after leaving the team at the livery stable, they walked down the main street.

“I want to stop at the store a minute,” Louise declared. “I’d like to make a phone call.”

“To whom?” her sister inquired in surprise.

“I suppose you’ll think I’m being foolish,” Louise rejoined apologetically, “but I want to call Mona Martin’s foster parents. I inquired from Mrs. Crandall where they live.”

“You wish to learn if Mona went home after leaving Starhurst?”

“Yes. I feel confident she came here, yet I wish to make certain.”

“I’d like to know that myself, Louise.”

The girls entered the store and received permission to use the telephone. There was a lengthy delay before Louise finally was connected with Mrs. Martin and it was with difficulty

that she could make herself understood. She was painfully aware too that the storekeeper was listening to the conversation, for the telephone was not enclosed in a sound proof booth.

She tried to restrict her remarks, and for that reason Jean, who stood close beside her, could tell very little as to what information was being revealed by Mrs. Martin. At last, however, Louise hung up the receiver and turned to face her sister.

“What did you learn?” Jean asked quickly.

“Mona arrived at the home of her foster parents. Mrs. Martin said her husband is driving the girl back to Starhurst.”

“Then who could it have been that ran from us here in the store?”

“Apparently it couldn’t have been Mona as we believed.”

“And the person who sang the chant in the woods,” Jean added in a puzzled tone.

“If Mona is at home she cannot be at Moon Lake,” Louise admitted ruefully. “Our theory seems to be wrong, and we must work out an entirely new one if we are to learn the explanation for the queer happenings at the old stone house.”

CHAPTER XI

MYSTERIOUS HAPPENINGS

Upon arriving at the tourist home, the Dana girls learned that while they had been away from Milton their kind-hearted aunt had invited Mrs. Weston to share her room.

“I feel so sorry for the poor woman,” Miss Dana told Louise and Jean. “She is a widow and has barely enough money to live on.”

“Surely her house was insured?” Louise asked.

“No, she let the policy lapse only last month. I told her she might stay with me as long as I am in Milton. However, that will be for only a few days. As soon as Cora’s affairs are settled I must get back to Oak Falls.”

“Cora wants to see a lawyer today,” Jean declared. “That’s why we have brought her with us.”

After some discussion it was decided that Miss Dana, Jean and the maid should go to the lawyer’s office. Louise wished to visit old Ma Harper.

She parted from the others, and after inquiring from the storekeeper, made her way to a modest cottage at the south edge of Milton. A bent old woman with streaked gray

hair and a wrinkled face came to the door in answer to her knock.

“Yes, I be Ma Harper,” she nodded brightly. “You come for communion with the spirits?”

Louise was taken aback momentarily by the question. Suddenly she noticed a card in the front window which said “Psychic Readings,” and felt slightly reassured.

“Walk right in,” Ma Harper invited. “I’m not a-feeling so well today, but maybe if I can get myself into the right mood I’ll be able to contact the spirit world.”

“Oh, I haven’t come for a seance,” Louise said hastily. “I have been told that you are well informed regarding the early history of Milton, and I hope you can assist me in gathering material about the Agawa Indian tribe which at one time occupied the shores of Moon Lake.”

“Why yes, I can tell you about the Indians,” Ma Harper declared, offering the girl a chair. “My grandfather used to trade with members of the tribe, and I still remember the stories he told me when I was a child.”

“Do you mind if I ask a great many questions and take down notes?” Louise inquired, removing paper and pencil from her purse.

“Write down whatever you like,” Ma Harper said, looking pleased at the request. “Just tell me what you want to know.”

For an hour the two talked together. Louise discovered that the old lady was surprisingly well grounded in the history of the region. However, much of the information provided by Ma Harper had been gathered before by the girl so that her notes were practically duplications of those she had lost. Nevertheless, she did learn that several persons living in Milton boasted of Indian blood, among them Mrs. Weston.

“When the Agawa tribe was driven out by the coming of the white people, a few scattered Indians remained behind,” Ma Harper explained. “Some of the women worked as servants and finally intermarried. The descendants of three of those families still live here.”

Louise carefully noted down these facts. Then, just as she was ready to leave, Ma Harper offered to exhibit her Indian relics which had been the property of the old woman’s grandfather. For the most part the treasures consisted of woven baskets, pottery, and curious beads.

“Mrs. Harper, do you know any Indian songs?” Louise asked suddenly as it occurred to her that the woman might be familiar with the strange chant heard in the woods.

“No,” was the reply. “You don’t hear them pretty tunes these days. They’re gone for good, and it makes a body feel sad-like to think about it. Many delights of the past remain only in spirit.”

Ma Harper began rocking to and fro, mumbling to herself. Louise, fearing that the woman was about to go

into a trance, hastily thanked her for the information and left the cottage.

In passing the village general store, Louise halted to buy a loaf of bread which she intended to take back to the old stone house at Moon Lake. As she quietly entered the building, she observed Lettie at the telephone, her back to the door.

“Is Mr. Burns there?” the girl was asking in a loud voice. After a brief wait she added impatiently, “Well, then tell him, please, that Miss Briggs called and will go through with the deal.”

As Lettie hung up the receiver she observed Louise standing at a nearby counter.

“Well, did you manage to fill your ears?” the Briggs girl asked coldly.

“I came here to buy bread,” Louise returned, nettled. “But hereafter I’d advise you not to shout so loudly if you wish to keep any secrets.”

“Oh, my dealings with Mr. Burns aren’t exactly of a secret nature,” Lettie returned for the storekeeper’s benefit. “I don’t mind saying that we are involved in a big business deal, one which concerns the transfer of a large sum of money.”

Louise waited until the girl had left the store before making a call of her own. She asked to be connected with Professor Crandall at Starhurst.

“Oh, hello, Louise,” he greeted her eagerly. “I trust everything has gone well with my wife and the other members of your party.”

“Yes, we’re having a glorious time here,” Louise declared. “Mrs. Crandall requested me to tell you that we may remain at Moon Lake a day or two longer.”

“There is no need for her to return here until she is ready,” the professor replied. “Everything is running smoothly.”

“By the way, I don’t suppose my missing notes have been recovered?”

“Unfortunately, no. I have questioned several students but apparently the culprit is someone from outside the school.”

Louise chatted for a moment longer, telling Professor Crandall of the interesting information which she had gathered from Ma Harper. She asked casually if Mona Martin had returned to the school, and was somewhat puzzled to learn that the girl was still absent.

Louise found her sister and Cora Appel waiting for her at the tourist house when she returned there. The afternoon was nearly gone, and since the girls were to meet Lettie at five o’clock, a visit with Aunt Harriet had to be cut short.

“We’ll probably have to wait an hour for Lettie,” Jean remarked as they walked to the stable for the horses and carriage. “She’s never on time.”

They were pleasantly surprised when the girl appeared at the appointed place exactly at five o'clock. During the tedious ride back to Moon Lake Lettie was unusually quiet. As the carriage drove into the yard, Helen and Evelyn came running out to meet the girls.

"Oh, don't unhitch the horses!" the latter exclaimed. "Mrs. Crandall says we may pack up our things and leave this dreadful place tonight!"

"Leave it?" Jean demanded. "Why, what's wrong now?"

"We were all taking a nap," Helen explained excitedly. "Suddenly we were awakened by a horrible cry."

"We couldn't tell where it came from," Evelyn added. "It didn't sound like anything human."

"Maybe it was made by a wild animal," Louise suggested thoughtfully.

"Oh, no," Evelyn insisted, "it didn't sound like that, either. It was uncanny. We were all frightened half out of our wits, and Mrs. Crandall declares she'll not remain here another minute."

"It will be long after dark before we can drive back to Milton," Jean said discouragingly.

The Dana girls sought the headmistress, who was busy packing kitchen utensils. After a lengthy discussion of the situation she agreed that it would not be wise to attempt the trip through the woods after nightfall.

“We may as well remain until morning,” she consented reluctantly. “But a guard must be maintained throughout the night.”

The girls helped Applecore prepare a delicious supper, and the warm food brought a feeling of cheer to the little group. Even Mrs. Crandall relaxed slightly from her tense attitude. Jean and Louise asked her if they might take a short walk along the beach in the moonlight.

“I am afraid you might encounter danger,” the headmistress replied anxiously.

“Oh, we’ll be very cautious,” Jean said quickly. “If we should run into any trouble we’ll give the Starhurst ‘Yippi Yay’ call.”

Mrs. Crandall reluctantly granted them permission, and the girls hurried away before any of the others might ask to accompany them. They preferred to go alone, for they wished to make a thorough investigation of the woods in the immediate vicinity of the old stone mansion.

The Danas walked along the beach for a short distance, then cut through into the woods, taking care not to enter it so deeply that they would be unable to retrace their steps. Moonlight filtering down through the gap in the trees gave the forest an eerie appearance.

Suddenly Louise, who was walking slightly in advance of her sister, halted abruptly. Just ahead of her was a small clearing, and she had glimpsed a large, grotesque shadow flit across it.

“Jean, did you see that!”

“See what?”

“A strange shadow—I thought for a moment that it was made by a person.”

“Oh, you probably saw one that was caused by a wild animal,” Jean answered. “I didn’t notice anything.”

As the girls anxiously watched the clearing, they were startled to hear a loud splash from the nearby lake.

“There!” Jean exclaimed in relief. “It *was* a person or an animal.”

The sisters walked to the spot, but finding nothing of interest, retraced their steps toward the old stone mansion. Louise had worn no sweater and was shivering from cold.

“I can see smoke curling from the chimney,” she observed in delight. “Someone must have built a fire in the grate. It will feel good on a chilly night like this.”

The Dana girls were greeted with expressions of relief by their friends, who had begun to worry over their prolonged absence.

“We were just about ready to start after you,” Helen declared with a laugh. “Applecote was certain a ghost had ensnared you both.”

“We discovered nothing of interest,” Louise reported. “But I’m thoroughly chilled by the lake air. The fire will feel good.”

“Fire?” Evelyn asked in surprise.

“Why, yes, didn’t you build one?”

“No, we talked about it but thought it would be too much trouble. If you’re cold, I’ll kindle one now.”

“Never mind,” Louise replied. “But it’s queer——”

“What do you find so puzzling?” Mrs. Crandall inquired from the far side of the room.

“Why, nothing,” Louise stammered. “Nothing at all.”

Her troubled eyes met those of Jean, flashing a warning message. It would not do to alarm the headmistress and the girls by revealing their latest observation.

Yet smoke curling from the chimney could mean only one thing—the house was being shared with an unseen visitor. Who could he be, and why did the person not want his identity known?

CHAPTER XII

LOCKED OUT

Mrs. Crandall and the girls did not appear to notice that Louise and Jean were unusually silent during the remainder of the evening; nor was it observed that the sisters seemed somewhat worried and preoccupied.

Shortly after nine o'clock the headmistress suggested that everyone retire. Despite her previous announcement that she intended to maintain a guard, she did not speak of the matter again. The Dana girls assumed that it was because she was too tired to sit up two nights in succession.

"I think someone should stay awake," Louise whispered to her sister as they prepared their beds on the floor. "I feel uneasy since we saw smoke coming from the chimney."

"Let's take turns staying awake," Louise proposed. "We needn't say anything about it to the others."

"All right," Jean agreed promptly. "I think the plan is a wise one."

Louise offered to take the first watch, and although she pretended to fall asleep, she actually remained awake, staring up at the ceiling. When she was assured that no one

would hear her movements, she threw off her covers and quietly tiptoed to the kitchen.

“This is the only room in the house that Jean and I didn’t investigate thoroughly,” she told herself. “Now that the coast is clear, I mean to examine it more carefully.”

During the evening the girl had given deep thought to the mysterious happenings at the old stone mansion. It seemed to her that the strangely constructed dwelling must have a hidden room on the third floor.

“I have a hunch there is a secret stairway leading to it,” she mused. “Oh, how I wish I could find it before we leave here!”

Louise enjoyed a mystery for its own sake, but she had another important reason for wishing to locate the hidden room. Until the unknown occupant of the house should be exposed, it might be dangerous for them to remain at Moon Lake.

Louise flashed her light over the dusty walls of the big kitchen. She tapped them with her knuckles, listening for some hollow sound which might hint of a room on the other side of the partition.

“There’s nothing here,” she decided in disappointment.

Louise next turned her attention to the adjoining storeroom. A careful search of it revealed no clues. Finally, convinced that she was only wasting her time, the girl turned to leave.

She discovered only then that she must have allowed the storeroom door to close behind her. It stubbornly refused to open. Louise tugged on the knob and twisted it in both directions.

“The door may be a bit warped,” she told herself calmly. “That’s probably why it stuck fast.”

She placed her shoulder against the heavy oak panels, shoving with all her strength. She pounded the lock, but her efforts were futile. Suddenly the realization came to her that she could not get out.

“I’m really locked in!” Louise gasped. “The door must have been locked by someone. I was followed!”

For a moment the girl was terrified, but she forced herself to remain calm as she thought over the situation. She might cry for help, but her screams probably would do no good. Mrs. Crandall and the girls were in danger from an unknown person and it was all her fault. She had been on guard and should not have left her friends alone.

Louise flashed her light about the storeroom. High above her head was a tiny round window, but it would be too small for her to crawl through even if she could reach it.

“What shall I do?” she asked herself.

In the meantime Jean was sleeping peacefully in the living room, unaware that her sister was in trouble. Presently, however, she was awakened by a slight noise in the house. Rousing herself, she sat up in bed.

“I wonder what became of Louise?” she thought drowsily. “I suppose it’s time for me to take my turn at guarding.”

As she arose she heard a board creak overhead. The sound was similar to the one which had startled the girls upon the previous night, and for a moment Jean felt terrified. Then it dawned upon her that Louise very likely had gone upstairs to do a little more investigating.

“She shouldn’t be up there alone,” Jean thought anxiously. “Almost anything might happen in this queer old house.”

Deciding to join her sister and take over the night watch, Jean moved noiselessly up the stairway, her flashlight in her hand.

“Louise!” she called softly.

There was no answer.

For the first time it occurred to Jean that the noise which she had heard might not have been made by Louise. Reaching the top of the stairway, she flashed her light about in every direction. The hallway was deserted.

“Louise!” Jean called again.

It seemed to her that she heard scurrying footsteps in one of the bedrooms, but when she cautiously entered it she found it deserted.

“I didn’t imagine hearing those creaking sounds,” Jean told herself. “I am sure someone was moving about up

here, but apparently it couldn't have been Louise. What has become of her?"

After making a thorough investigation of every bedroom, the girl retraced her steps to the lower floor.

"Perhaps I should tell Mrs. Crandall about Louise being gone," she told herself anxiously.

Observing by her wrist watch that it was after two o'clock, Jean's alarm increased, for her sister should have called her long before to take over the watch. The conviction grew upon her that some harm had befallen Louise.

Entering the living room where the girls had spread out their bedding, Jean walked directly to the place where Mrs. Crandall slept. The cot was empty!

"Now what could have become of her?" Jean gasped.
"Perhaps she and Louise went off somewhere together."

Somewhat reassured, the girl wandered out of the house and down toward the beach. Suddenly she paused to inhale deeply. She was aware of a peculiar odor which permeated the air. At first Jean could not imagine what it might be, but presently she decided someone must be cooking meat.

"It's a queer time for anyone to be preparing a meal, though," she mused.

Jean could not locate the place from which the odor emanated. She walked farther down the shore and lost it entirely. As she was on the point of turning back to the

house, her attention was attracted by a dim light at the shore's edge only a short distance ahead of her.

Jean hastened toward it. She could see a shadowy figure moving through the trees. It was too tall to be Louise.

“Maybe it’s the mysterious prowler,” Jean thought excitedly.

Noiselessly she moved forward, and when she was close to the person, she suddenly turned on her flashlight, training the bright beam directly on the other’s face.

A woman screamed. She was Mrs. Crandall.

“Oh, I’m very sorry!” Jean apologized in her confusion. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I thought you were a prowler.”

“Is it you, Jean?” the headmistress inquired nervously, peering at the girl.

“Yes, I am searching for Louise.”

“Louise!” Mrs. Crandall exclaimed, and in her excitement she gripped Jean’s arm so tightly that it hurt. “Don’t tell me she’s not in her bed!”

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. CRANDALL'S MISTAKE

“I’ve searched for Louise everywhere,” Jean declared. “I’m afraid something has happened to her, for she was guarding the house.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Crandall murmured in distress, “it is all my fault. I should have kept watch myself. I intended to do it, but I was so tired and sleepy. I thought I would doze only for an hour and then without alarming the girls stay up for the remainder of the night. I slept so soundly that I did not awaken until a short while ago.”

“Was Louise in her bed at that time?”

“I confess I did not look to see. Oh, Jean, I’m glad you have come, for if Louise really is missing I may have made a dreadful mistake.”

“A mistake? What do you mean, Mrs. Crandall?”

“When I awakened I heard a noise in the kitchen,” the headmistress explained. “I went to investigate and saw a shadowy figure vanishing into the storeroom. Feeling certain that it was the mysterious ghost, I softly closed the door and locked it.”

“You may have shut Louise up in the storeroom!” Jean gasped. “She was supposed to be guarding the house.”

The two hastened to the mansion. Jean unlocked the door of the storeroom, and as she flashed her light into the interior, Louise was revealed sitting with her back to the wall.

“It was all my fault,” Mrs. Crandall admitted ruefully. “I thought you were the intruder, Louise, and so I locked the door. I fear I shall never make a detective.”

Mrs. Crandall was induced to return to bed, leaving Jean to maintain watch until morning. Long after the house became silent she sat up listening, wondering if she would hear the boards creaking again on the floor above; but there was no further disturbance.

In the morning Louise spoke of her idea regarding a hidden staircase which might lead to a room on the third floor. She and Jean decided that as soon as they should be alone in the house again they would complete their investigation by examining the flooring of the entire dwelling as well as the walls of the living and dining rooms.

The Danas thought too that it would be well for the party to search every foot of ground in the immediate vicinity, for Mrs. Crandall had told them that at least ten acres would be included in the proposed camp site. Therefore after breakfast Helen, Evelyn, Jean, and Louise set out on a hike to explore the grounds.

“I think Mrs. Crandall is growing more interested in this place each day,” Helen declared, after they had walked for over ten minutes. “When we first came she said we would have to return immediately, but now she appears perfectly willing to extend our visit.”

“This place is ideal for a camp,” Louise remarked thoughtfully. “Excluding the expense of making a road and building cabins, it would cost very little to put everything in shape. Until the profits should warrant the construction of tennis courts and bridle trails, sports could be confined to the lake.”

“You seem to have figured everything,” Helen laughed.

“I still haven’t puzzled out a number of mysterious things connected with the place,” Louise rejoined significantly.

Before she could say anything further, Evelyn, who was walking a few paces ahead of the other girls, suddenly gave a scream of pain and fell to the ground.

“Oh, my foot! My foot!” she cried.

Her companions rushed to her side, and were horrified to see that the girl’s ankle had been caught in an animal trap which someone had secreted in the underbrush.

Louise quickly released Evelyn, but when the girl tried to stand she moaned with pain and collapsed on Jean’s shoulder. It was evident that she could not walk back to the house, so the others made a chair of their arms and took turns carrying her.

As they approached the mansion some little time later, Helen ran on ahead to summon Mrs. Crandall. She came hurrying back a minute later to report that the house was deserted.

“The carriage is gone, too. Mrs. Crandall must have taken Lettie and Cora and driven to Milton.”

“We’ll have to dress Evelyn’s foot ourselves,” Louise said anxiously. “But we really should take her to a doctor.”

While Jean was heating water, the others removed the injured girl’s stocking and searched their luggage for first-aid equipment. Louise went outside to peer up and down the lake. It occurred to her that if only she could summon the lone fisherman who frequented the Point he might be induced to take Evelyn to Milton in his boat. However, the man was nowhere to be seen.

The girls had just finished bandaging the girl’s foot, when the sound of horses’ hoofs was heard coming down the road. Jean rushed to the window.

“Why, it isn’t Mrs. Crandall with the carriage!” she exclaimed in surprise. “It looks like that man called Tony riding horseback!”

“Tony!” Louise cried. “Oh, you must be mistaken.”

However, the next minute she observed that her sister was correct in her surmise as the man came galloping up to the door. He was indeed Tony, but his face looked greatly changed. He seemed to be suffering severely as he half fell from the horse.

“Quick! Do something!” he gasped. “I’ve been bitten by a poisonous snake!”

The others were too dismayed to move, but Louise darted into the house to search her luggage for the bottle of snake-bite cure which she had purchased from the old Indian.

“Thank goodness, I brought it with me!” she thought. “If only it works!”

The liquid was poured into a glass and given to the man. He made a wry face as he drank it, and for many minutes continued to moan and writhe in pain. Gradually, however, he relaxed and admitted that he felt better.

“Where did you get that queer stuff?” he asked Louise.

“From an old Indian.”

“Well, it was a good antidote for snake poison,” the man admitted grudgingly. “I’d have passed out for certain if you hadn’t given it to me.”

“I’m glad we were able to help you,” Louise replied soberly. “I hope our aiding you now will help to square things with you for your previous accident.”

“Sure, you’ve squared the account,” the fellow answered heartily. “Just to prove that I’m grateful I’ll take you into a good thing. If you have a hundred dollars to invest——”

“I haven’t,” Louise interrupted coldly.

“Well, it was just a suggestion,” the man said gruffly. “By the way, is Lettie Briggs around here?”

“No, she isn’t,” Helen answered before the others could speak.

“Which way did you come?” Jean inquired. “Didn’t you ride down the peninsula road?”

“Yes, I followed the trail made by a carriage.”

“Then you should have met Mrs. Crandall and Lettie on the way to town.”

“I didn’t see them.”

“That’s funny,” Jean commented. “They must have made remarkably fast time to Milton.”

“Well, if Lettie isn’t here I guess I’ll be getting back to town.”

“Just a minute,” Jean interposed quickly.

It had occurred to her that the man might be induced to take Evelyn with him on horseback, for the girl was urgently in need of medical attention. When she had explained the situation, he seemed very willing to be of service. However, as Jean hastened inside to tell Evelyn of the plan, it dawned upon her that Mrs. Crandall might not approve.

“I don’t care who the man is,” Evelyn declared when she learned of the proposed means of transportation.

“I’ll do anything to get relief from this aching ankle.”

She insisted upon riding back to Milton, so the girls carried her outside and lifted her onto the horse. Jean wished to introduce the man, and used that as a pretext for asking Tony his last name.

“Why, didn’t Lettie Briggs tell you?” he inquired with surprise.

“No, she didn’t. She merely calls you Anthony or Tony.”

“Well, that’s it,” the handsome man replied with a smile.
“Mr. Anthony.”

Helen and the Dana girls felt a trifle disturbed as they watched Evelyn ride away with the man. They were a little afraid that upon Mrs. Crandall’s return, the headmistress might criticize them for their action.

“I don’t see what else we could have done,” Helen declared.
“Evelyn had to have the care of a doctor.”

The girls went inside the house, and presently Helen selected a book and took it with her down the beach, leaving Jean and Louise alone in the big stone dwelling.

“It’s odd that Mr. Tony followed Lettie Briggs to Milton,” Jean remarked thoughtfully. “Why do you suppose he wanted to see her?”

“I have no idea, Jean. I’m far more worried about another matter, though. Why didn’t Mr. Anthony meet

Mrs. Crandall and the others on the road?”

“Perhaps the man came here by a different route, but didn’t want to say so.”

“There’s only one trail,” Louise protested, “so I can’t see how he could have.” She began to pace the floor nervously. “Perhaps it is foolish of me, but I can’t help worrying. I am afraid something may have happened to Mrs. Crandall!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE HIDDEN TRAPDOOR

“Oh, I think you’re inclined to worry too easily,” Jean told her sister. “Mrs. Crandall and the others probably will return in an hour or so.”

“Anyway, there’s very little we can do,” Louise admitted. “With no telephone and no means of transportation, we’re practically stranded here.”

“Now that we’re alone in the house, we shall have a splendid opportunity to complete our investigation.”

“Yes, we should take advantage of everyone’s absence,” Louise agreed. “But it seems almost useless to search farther.”

“Let’s go through the living and dining rooms,” Jean suggested. “If only we might clear up the mystery surrounding this place, I think Mrs. Crandall would buy it, and I’d like to see her do it.”

The girls went over the walls of both rooms and tested the floor boards to learn if any of them were loose. Louise examined the living room fireplace, peering far up into the chimney.

“Here’s something!” she cried suddenly.

As Jean rushed to her side, she lifted out one of the bricks, revealing a fairly large cavity in the wall.

“A secret hiding place!” Louise exclaimed gleefully, thrusting her arm into the opening. “But it’s empty.”

“Perhaps some of the other stones are loose too,” Jean declared hopefully.

The girls tested every single one of them, but there were no others which could be removed. The cavity which Louise had discovered did not seem to lead anywhere.

“It’s queer we can’t find any means of reaching the hidden room on the third floor,” Louise mused as they briefly rested from their labors. “Smoke doesn’t come out of a chimney unless there is a fire somewhere.”

“Do you recall noting which chimney it was, Louise? There are three of them, you know.”

“It was the middle one. I think the one on the right takes care of the kitchen, and the left chimney must carry off the fumes from the living room fireplace. But what room does the center chimney serve?”

“Obviously the room of mystery,” Jean laughed. “This is my theory, Louise: I believe that some person occupies a hidden chamber on the third floor. Probably he cooks his food there and builds a fire in a stove or something occasionally.”

“But how could a person reach the third floor save by a secret stairway?” Louise asked in perplexity.

“Let’s take another look at the outside of the place,” Jean suggested. “We may have overlooked something.”

The girls made a complete tour of the exterior of the house, paying particular attention to the corner joinings. In many places they tore the ivy from the walls. There was no evidence of an outside staircase, nor did they find any footprints or ladder marks on the ground.

“I guess we’re through now,” Jean declared in disappointment. “We’ve looked all over.”

“We failed to examine the floor or walls of the storeroom. I doubt that our doing so will do any good, but we may as well complete the job now that we’ve started it.”

Without a great deal of enthusiasm the girls went to the storeroom. They began tapping the oak flooring with their knuckles. Suddenly Jean gave an excited cry.

“Louise, I’ve found something that looks suspicious!”

She indicated two large knot holes which were, close together in one of the boards.

“What’s so unusual about that?” Louise asked, refusing to become excited. “They’re just flaws in the wood.”

“I think not! These knots are artificial, Louise. They’ve been put here deliberately.”

To prove her words, Jean got a screw driver which she had found in the wagon. The knot loosened, and the girls, after considerable prying, were able to lift it out. The second one likewise was removed.

“You see!” Jean cried triumphantly. “I can thrust my hand into the two holes now and they make a perfect grasping place! The board ought to pull up.”

She tugged at it vigorously. While it gave way slightly, the combined strength of the two girls was required to lift it.

“We’re pulling up the entire floor!” Louise gasped.

They lifted really only a quarter of it, a section which was approximately eight feet long and five feet wide. As Jean flashed her light down into the yawning hole, the girls saw a flight of steps leading downward.

“We’ve discovered something, that’s sure,” Louise declared. “But the stairs should go *up*!”

“This staircase may not connect with the third floor at all,” Jean agreed, “but it proves one thing—the house has a number of hiding places.”

“I doubt that this particular trapdoor has been raised in many years. If it has been used recently we’d not have had so much trouble in lifting it.”

“Well, let’s find out what is below,” Jean said, cautiously letting herself down through the opening.

“Be careful you don’t slip, Louise. These stones seem to be covered with green slime.”

“It’s damp and musty down under this old house,” Louise protested as she followed her sister. “I wonder where the stairway will take us?”

“I think we’re going down into a sort of cellar, Louise. But it’s dreadfully deep! Even now I can’t see the bottom of the steps.”

“What is that sound?” Louise demanded suddenly.

Both girls halted to listen intently.

“It sounds like running water,” Jean declared in awe. “Yet I don’t see how it can be.”

After a moment the girls resumed the descent. As they reached the bottom of the stairway each of them was seized with a sneezing spell.

“This dampness is dreadful,” Jean murmured. “Oh, there I go again——”

“Lucky for us the cellar seems to be deserted. We certainly have done everything to broadcast our arrival.”

The girls were amazed at the extent of the place. Huge stone pillars rose at intervals to support the massive house. Even a casual examination revealed that the cellar was much larger than the dwelling. The floor had not been cemented.

“I think that sound we hear is running water,” Louise declared as they moved cautiously forward. “Let’s try to locate the source.”

Flashing their lights about over the moldy walls, the girls moved forward slowly. The earth floor was uneven so that Jean stumbled and twisted her ankle painfully.

“Let’s use only one light,” Louise suggested. “Our batteries might give out, and then we’d be trapped in this dark hole.”

“Hole!” Jean said nervously. “This place seems to me to be as large as the Mammoth Cave.”

As they moved forward again the sound of running water could be heard more clearly. Finally in one corner of the vast underground room they found a tiny spring which bubbled noisily from the wall and ran off in a subterranean brook.

“Well, if this isn’t a discovery!” Jean exclaimed in delight. “From now on we’ll not need to boil any lake water.”

She bent down, and before Louise could warn her that the water might not be safe to drink, she had taken several sips.

“It’s remarkably good,” the girl declared. “As cool as if it had been iced in a refrigerator.”

“We’ve solved one of Mrs. Crandall’s problems, then. This spring would furnish a water supply for the camp.”

“All we need to do now is to locate the third-floor ghost,” Jean said with a chuckle. “Come on, Louise,

let's investigate the rest of this place before our light fails.”

Keeping close to the wall the girls made a tour of the basement room. They came presently to another corner.

“What’s this?” Jean asked suddenly. “Turn on your light too, Louise, so that I can see better!”

As the combined beams of the two flashlights played upon a curious structure, both girls gasped in amazement.

“It seems to be a circular stairway in sections!” Louise exclaimed. “Jean, this is our biggest discovery!”

CHAPTER XV

THE CIRCULAR STAIRWAY

While Louise held the light, Jean examined several sections of the steps lying in one corner of the cellar.

“Where do you suppose they came from?” Louise asked in awe. “I wonder if these sawed pieces weren’t taken from a secret staircase which originally led to the third floor.”

“That would be my guess,” Jean declared excitedly. “It’s surprising that the wood is still in good condition.”

“Yes. The varnish and paint must have protected it from decay.”

The girls set to work trying to fit the sections together. It was hard to lift the heavy pieces and Louise exerted herself more than she realized. Unexpectedly she sagged back against the wall, completely exhausted.

“Louise, you’re ill,” Jean cried in alarm, hurrying to her sister’s side.

“I’ll be all right in a minute,” the older Dana murmured. “I suddenly felt dizzy and weak. It’s probably only hunger. We’ve had no food in hours.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea how long we’ve been down here,” Jean admitted. “No wonder you felt dizzy, Louise. We’re going upstairs this instant.”

The girls retraced their steps to the first floor. To their surprise they found the house empty. Mrs. Crandall had not returned with the carriage, nor was Helen anywhere to be seen.

After helping themselves to food from the kitchen, Louise and Jean walked down the shore in search of their chum. They found Helen asleep on the beach.

“Wake up!” Jean cried, giving the girl’s arm a little shake.

“Dear me, I must have dozed off a few minutes.”

“A few minutes!” Louise echoed. “Half the day, you mean. Aren’t you hungry?”

“Now that you remind me, I am nearly starved. Is Mrs. Crandall here yet?”

“No, she isn’t,” Jean answered gravely. “Louise and I are worried. If she doesn’t come soon we’ll have to set out in search of her.”

As the girls walked back toward the house they were greatly relieved to hear the clatter of hoofbeats on the road.

“That must be Mrs. Crandall and the others coming now!” Jean exclaimed.

The three girls ran to the front of the house just as the carriage rounded a bend in the road. The headmistress was driving, while Applecore sat beside her.

“I wonder what has become of Lettie?” Helen murmured. A moment later when Mrs. Crandall alighted at the door the student asked the same question again.

“Lettie wished to remain in Milton for the night,” the woman explained. “Miss Dana kindly consented to chaperon her so I agreed that she might stay. However, I fear it was an imposition upon Miss Dana’s good nature.”

Jean and Louise exchanged quick glances but offered no comment. They too felt that their aunt would pay dearly for her generosity.

“We were worried over your absence,” Louise told Mrs. Crandall. “We thought probably you had gone to town but we weren’t sure.”

“Didn’t you find my note?”

“No, we didn’t. Where did you leave it?”

“On the kitchen window-sill. I thought surely you would see it there.”

“We overlooked it,” Louise replied. “Since you left we’ve had so much excitement that it never once occurred to us to search for a note.”

“I am sorry that I went away,” Mrs. Crandall declared. “But we needed supplies, and I did not think it would take me as long as it did to reach Milton.”

“We sent Evelyn there only a short time ago,” Jean told the headmistress. “She hurt herself——”

“That was what delayed me so long. I dropped in to talk with Miss Dana for a few minutes, and while I was at her place word came to me that Evelyn had been taken to Dr. Graham’s office. Of course, I hastened there at once.”

“What did the doctor say about Evelyn’s injury?” Louise inquired anxiously.

“Her foot is badly bruised, but fortunately no bones are broken. He recommended that Evelyn keep off her feet for a few days. She will remain with Miss Dana until we are ready to return to Starhurst.”

“It’s a pity Evelyn’s vacation had to be ruined,” Louise began but said no more, for just at that moment a blood-curdling scream issued from the kitchen.

“Burglars! Ghosts!” shrieked Applecore. “Come here, everyone!”

Mrs. Crandall and the girls ran to the kitchen, fear in their hearts. The maid, shaking with terror, pointed toward the storeroom.

“The floor is gone!” she exclaimed. “I started in to get some sugar from the sack on the shelf, an’ if I hadn’t looked down

just in time I'd have fallen into that awful pit! I was so scared I dropped the dish in my hand and let out a scream! Don't go near that place."

"Nonsense," Jean laughed. "Louise and I neglected to close the trapdoor, that's all."

"Trapdoor!" Applecore gasped, her eyes growing round with awe. "Is there something hidden down in that black pit?"

"Almost every house has a cellar," Louise replied evenly. "This place is no exception."

"It that all it is—just an ordinary cellar?" Applecore asked in relief. "I made up my mind I wouldn't stay here another day, but if that's all it is, I'm not so scared."

Louise closed the trapdoor while Jean gathered up the broken pieces of the dish Applecore had dropped. Nothing further was said about the underground room at the time, but a little later the Dana girls drew Mrs. Crandall aside and revealed their findings to her.

"If we remain here only a few more days I think Jean and I may be able to solve the mystery about this place," Louise said earnestly. "In coming upon those sections of stairway today we feel we have a real clue."

"Your discovery does seem to confirm the theory that the old house has a secret room," Mrs. Crandall replied slowly. "I admit I like this place, and if I can believe that it is safe, I shall not hesitate purchasing the property."

“Won’t you give us a few days longer here?” Louise pleaded. “If we can put the stairway together we’ll get an idea of its height, and then should be able to determine where it formerly stood.”

“We’ll stay as long as we possibly can,” the headmistress promised. “I have become deeply interested in this affair myself. I should like to see the mystery solved.”

“We’ll start working on the stairway immediately,” Jean said enthusiastically. “It will be similar to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle.”

As the girls turned to leave, Mrs. Crandall detained them to reveal a bit of information which she had gathered while in Milton.

“Your aunt tells me that yesterday she saw a girl in a grocery store who closely resembled Mona Martin. I am worried that it might have been she, for the young woman did not have permission to come here. She is supposed to be at her home.”

“Why, I don’t believe Aunt Harriet has ever met Mona,” Louise replied in surprise.

“She hasn’t, but she said that she thought she had seen this girl at Starhurst,” Mrs. Crandall explained. “From her description I feared she might be Mona.”

Louise and Jean reassured the woman by telling her of the phone call which they had made to the girl’s home. Later they were to realize that their reply had not been a very

logical one, for Mona easily could have made the trip to Milton with her foster-father. Yet why was the girl so eager to visit Moon Lake? This was a question which they were unable to answer.

Late in the afternoon the Dana girls, Helen, and Mrs. Crandall descended into the subterranean chamber to inspect the sections of the circular staircase. While the others attempted to fit together the various pieces, Louise searched the base of the chimney and the walls for an opening which would indicate that the steps once had risen in that place. She came back to report that she had discovered nothing.

“What success are you having with the staircase?” she inquired.

“None at all,” Jean replied in discouragement. “It’s so dark down here we can’t see very well. I wish we had the sections upstairs where it is light.”

“Can’t we carry them up?”

“They weigh a ton. I don’t see how anyone ever brought the pieces down here.”

“Perhaps if we all were to help we might be able to lift the sections,” Mrs. Crandall proposed. “We might try one of the smaller pieces first.”

The four succeeded in carrying the wooden structure as far as the stone stairway leading up to the storeroom, but they lacked sufficient strength to raise it through the opening.

“It is of no use,” Mrs. Crandall declared. “I am almost exhausted now.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to leave the pieces down here,” Jean admitted unwillingly.

“I have an idea!” Louise cried triumphantly. “We’ll let the horse do the work!”

“Just how do you propose to get a horse down here?” Jean inquired dryly.

“We’ll not bring him into the cellar. I recall noticing a long, heavy rope under the seat of the carriage. Why not tie one end around the pieces of staircase and the other to the horse and have him pull them up?”

“Why, I believe that could be done!” Jean exclaimed. “Let’s try it!”

“You mean, bring the horse into the house?” Mrs. Crandall asked in amazement.

“Only into the kitchen,” Louise laughed. “He couldn’t hurt anything for the floors will have to be refinished anyway.”

“I’ve never heard of such an idea,” Mrs. Crandall declared, smiling broadly. “But if you girls are confident you can manage the horse I’m willing to allow you to try it.”

Jean and Louise hurried away to find the rope and bring the horse. When Applecore saw them leading the animal into the kitchen she promptly fled to the cellar, complaining to Mrs.

Crandall that she did not approve of such goings on. In the doorway the horse balked, and while Louise pulled at the halter, Jean tried to push the animal.

“Be careful you don’t get kicked,” Mrs. Crandall warned.

The situation was so ridiculous that the headmistress found it impossible to maintain her usual dignified expression. Soon she began to laugh with the others, thoroughly amused at the Dana girls’ quandary.

After much persuasion and coercion the horse was pulled inside the kitchen, where he displayed far too great an interest in his surroundings. He tried to drink at the kitchen sink, he poked his nose into a pot of food which Applecore had left uncovered on the stove, and finally knocked over the table and several chairs.

“This place will be a wreck in a few more minutes,” Jean gasped as she tried to calm the animal. “Hurry, Louise, and get the rope fastened.”

“We’ll help lift the staircase from below,” Mrs. Crandall suggested, speaking for Helen who was standing beside her.

All save Jean went down into the cellar again, but it seemed to the girl that it took an eternity to make the rope fast. Her ingenuity was taxed to keep the horse from bolting out the kitchen door.

“Do hurry, Louise,” she called anxiously. “I can’t hold this animal much longer!”

“Just a minute,” her sister shouted from below. There was another long wait, and then came the anticipated command:

“All ready! Lead away, but have a care or the rope will break!”

CHAPTER XVI

A STUBBORN HORSE

As Jean tightened the rope which was attached to the horse's halter, the animal resisted her efforts to pull him forward. Jean spoke to him kindly and stroked his neck. Then she tried to lead him again, at which time he followed her until he was brought up short by the tautness of the rope that led down to the cellar.

"The staircase is caught on something," Jean called down to her sister.

Louise set about disengaging the burden so that it could be hoisted again.

"Try it now, Jean," she called presently from the subterranean depths.

Jean seized the halter rope once more and led the horse toward the kitchen door. The animal gave a tremendous lunge forward, but the back-pull of the load was more than he could overcome. Down he slipped on his haunches, while from the cellar there came the piercing voice of Applecore shrieking vehemently that she had been injured fatally.

"What's wrong down there?" Jean called anxiously.

“Why don’t you keep that horse going, once he starts?” Louise demanded. “He lifted the staircase and then let it fall on poor Applecore.”

“Is she badly hurt?” Jean asked in real concern.

“Oh, no, just frightened.”

“Well, then, look out,” Jean warned. “I’m trying it again.”

By some act of good fortune the third attempt was successful. When Jean urged the horse forward, the circular staircase to which he was so unwillingly attached swung free of hindering obstacles, and popped up out of the cellar as if a giant hand had heaved it from below.

It may have been the sight of the staircase itself or the sudden lurch he felt when it pulled free that frightened the horse; at any rate, he suddenly bolted through the kitchen door and Jean could not keep hold of the halter.

However, the circular staircase was too wide to pass through the doorway. With a great clatter it lodged fast. The animal had attained too much speed to be stopped easily, with the result that in a moment the rope around the pieces snapped like a string. Freed of his handicap, the horse trotted joyfully off toward the tree where his mate was tethered.

“Is the staircase damaged?” Louise cried anxiously, as she appeared in the kitchen.

“I’m more concerned about the house,” Mrs. Crandall declared as she too emerged from the subterranean

chamber. "After all, I haven't yet bought this place and don't want to pay a heavy bill for damages."

"I'm very sorry," Jean apologized contritely. "I did my best to manage the horse, but he isn't accustomed to being in a kitchen, and——"

"I don't believe anything has been hurt very much," Louise said, glancing about. "The staircase is a little battered, but I think we'll be able to piece the sections together."

Applecore was dispatched to tether the loose horse to a tree, while the others gathered about to study the curious wooden structures.

"I have an idea!" Jean exclaimed. "Let's carry these pieces up to the second floor and assemble the staircase there. I have a feeling that years ago it may have stood in the hall there."

The Dana girl's reasoning carried conviction and presently all were busily engaged in dragging the sections to the second floor. While it was hard work, the steps were not as steep as the one leading up from the subterranean chamber.

When the various parts had been placed side by side in the hall, Mrs. Crandall and the girls tried to arrange them so that the whole would make a perfect staircase.

"Doesn't it seem odd that the steps ever were taken down?" Louise asked thoughtfully as she tried to fit a stray piece into the general pattern.

“It’s queer that it ever was built in the first place,” Jean replied. “What do you suppose could have been the reason for the third floor?”

“We soon may have the answer to all of our questions,” Louise replied gaily.

After much pulling and hauling on the part of the girls, the sawed pieces of the staircase were fitted together into what would pass for the original. The Dana girls brought hammer and nails, and after a bit of amateurish but effective carpentry they managed to place the various pieces into a solid whole.

“Now that we have it, what are we going to do with the staircase?” Louise asked doubtfully.

“Yes, just what are we going to do?” Mrs. Crandall echoed.

“Why, we’ll try to set it up in the place where it stood before,” Jean declared enthusiastically.

“And just where is that spot?” Helen inquired.

“It might have been in several spots,” Jean replied after a moment of thought. “The stairway looks as if it would fit in nicely there,” she added, pointing.

“Yes, it does!” Louise agreed, darting across the hall to examine the floor. “But the boards are all the same color—it doesn’t appear that anything has ever been ripped away from here.”

“For that matter, the flooring looks the same throughout the entire hall,” Mrs. Crandall observed. “However, it is possible that the staircase was removed many years ago. In that case, the boards might have darkened sufficiently to cover any marks left by the staircase.”

After considerable discussion the four agreed that the south end offered the greatest opportunity for success. They decided to raise the staircase there.

“Easy now,” Louise cautioned as they slowly lifted the unwieldy structure. “If it should slip someone might get hurt.”

The four were so intent upon keeping the base of the stairway firmly on the floor that they failed to watch elsewhere. Suddenly there was a loud crash and a shower of glass came down upon them.

“Oh, we’ve broken one of the windows!” Jean exclaimed in dismay. “We rammed the staircase right into it.”

“We must give up our plan,” Mrs. Crandall said firmly. “It is too dangerous. Lower the staircase, girls.”

Louise and Jean were disappointed, but they dared not take issue with the headmistress. After all their work, it was discouraging for them to learn that they were not to be permitted to reap the reward of their labors. Mrs. Crandall’s promise that she would consult the owner regarding the former location of the staircase did not add to their cheer. They preferred to keep the secret entirely to themselves. That

evening after supper the Dana sisters wandered down the beach alone so that they might discuss the situation in private.

“Mrs. Crandall is a dear,” Louise declared in a low tone, “but she’s inclined to be too cautious. If it hadn’t been for that stupid old window I feel certain we’d have discovered the hidden room.”

“I have a theory that the door leading to the third floor was disguised by covering it with the paneled wall,” Jean said thoughtfully. “But why was that done? Oh, Louise, it’s maddening not to be able to learn the answer.”

“We’ll find a way to get into the place somehow!”

“Here comes Mrs. Crandall,” Jean warned in an undertone. “Let’s not say any more to her about it.”

The headmistress joined the two girls and they all walked along the shore for a considerable distance, enjoying the view. Presently it occurred to Louise that no one had thought of telling Mrs. Crandall of Tony’s visit to the old stone house.

“Yes, I learned in town that he had brought Evelyn to Milton on his horse,” the woman replied. “It was good of him to be helpful.”

“It’s odd you failed to meet him on your way to town,” Jean remarked. “You must have driven very fast.”

“Quite the contrary. The trip consumed more time than usual, for I am not a good driver.”

Jean and Louise exchanged significant glances. Their suspicion that Mr. Anthony had approached the house by a different route seemed to be confirmed. They asked Mrs. Crandall if she recalled just when she had reached Milton, and upon learning how long it took her to travel over the road, they were certain that Lettie's friend either had secreted himself in the bushes to allow the carriage to pass or had come by another trail. Not wishing to disturb the headmistress, they wisely kept their thoughts to themselves. A little later, when they were again alone, Louise and Jean discussed the man's motives in appearing at the old stone house.

"I thought at first that he must have followed Lettie," Louise remarked reflectively, "but now that I consider the matter more carefully I doubt that he's infatuated with the girl."

"I suspect he as well as others are after her money," Jean said.

"Lettie needs someone to advise her. If she's not careful she'll lose every penny her father gave her. We ought to warn her again, Jean."

"Yes, we should, but I shudder to think of the way she'd accept advice. Lettie has such a vicious temper."

Presently the girls wandered back toward the house. At Jean's suggestion they went to see if the horses were securely tied up for the night. To their dismay they found one of the animals missing.

“It’s the horse we used this afternoon to lift the staircase out of the cellar,” Louise observed. “Oh, I was afraid of this. Applecore can’t be trusted to do even a simple task.”

“She did recover the horse and tie him up, for I watched her,” Jean replied. “But very likely she didn’t make the rope secure about the tree. Applecore is so slipshod in her methods.”

The girls went into the house to report the loss. Applecore, when chided, vehemently insisted that she had tethered the horse securely. Since the hour was growing late, Mrs. Crandall would not permit Louise or Jean to go in search of the missing animal.

“I can’t have you wandering through the woods at this time of night even if we shall lose the horse,” she said firmly. “If he isn’t back by morning we’ll look for him then.”

Jean and Louise went out on the veranda, calling the beast by name. They soon gave up and returned to the living room, but not before they had made plans to arise early the next morning. It was Louise’s proposal that they construct a ladder which could be used to reach the high part of the paneled wall in the second floor hall.

“We have no lumber,” Jean pointed out.

“The woods are filled with it. I’m sure we can find suitable pieces.”

Mrs. Crandall and Helen were to serve as guards during the night, so the Dana girls soon retired. At dawn they awoke

and arose immediately after the other two had gone to bed. They stole quietly from the house.

“Why, our horse is back!” Jean cried in delight as the sisters approached the tree where the two animals had been tied.

“He must have wandered home for his breakfast!”

“Let’s tie him fast so he’ll not go off again.”

They hastened forward, but as they approached the horse Louise halted suddenly.

“Well, that’s surely queer,” she murmured in a low tone.

Jean did not understand what her sister could mean. She turned toward the older girl in bewilderment.

“Don’t you see?” Louise asked in a voice which was tense.

“The horse already is tied up and he’s covered with sweat. Jean, that animal didn’t run away. He was borrowed!”

CHAPTER XVII

WORD OF A DISASTER

“Who could have taken the horse, and for what purpose?” Jean asked in perplexity as she examined the animal’s halter. “Let’s look around and see if we can find any footprints.”

The girls carefully searched the vicinity. While their own shoe tracks were plainly visible, they could locate none which had been made by a stranger. There was no evidence of anyone hiding in the nearby bushes. The horse’s hoofprints were lost in a confusion of other tracks which led along the road to Milton.

“Shall we tell Mrs. Crandall about this?” Louise questioned.

“Let’s not. She’s in a mood to buy the stone mansion now, but if she should become alarmed she’d very likely pack up and never come here again.”

“Yes, that’s true, Jean. I think it would be wise to try to solve this mystery ourselves. If we say nothing she will assume that the horse wandered back during the night.”

The girls walked on into the woods, where they gathered suitable material for a crude ladder. Louise sawed tree limbs to the proper lengths while Jean nailed them

fast to two uprights. They made the ladder exactly the same height as the circular staircase.

“And now to carry it to the upstairs hall,” Louise said gaily as they lifted the awkward structure on their shoulders. “I hope we won’t break another window!”

Mrs. Crandall and Helen were awake by this time. While the headmistress did not exactly approve of the Dana girls’ plan of substituting the home-made ladder for the staircase, she refrained from voicing an objection.

“Who is to have the honor of ascending first?” Louise asked when they were all gathered upstairs. “Shall we draw lots?”

“That would be the fair way,” Jean nodded. “I’ll make out the slips. The shortest one wins.”

Helen drew hers first and it was very long. Louise took second choice, leaving Jean with a short piece of paper.

“It looks as if I win!” she cried gaily. “Hold the ladder steady, girls, for I don’t want to crash.”

“I think I should not permit this,” Mrs. Crandall protested faintly. “If you should fall——”

“We’ll see that she doesn’t,” Louise promised quickly.

Before the headmistress could say anything further the girls had raised the contrivance into position. With Helen and Louise grasping it firmly, Jean scrambled nimbly up the rungs.

“Do you see anything?” Louise asked eagerly. “Can you find any trace of a secret door?”

Jean slowly ran her hand over the paneling until she had covered all the territory within her reach.

“There is nothing here,” she reported in disappointment.

She descended the ladder, which was shifted to a new location.

“It’s my turn now,” Louise declared eagerly.

She mounted the structure, and balancing herself precariously, examined a new section of wall. At length she too was compelled to concede failure.

“It’s your turn now, Helen,” Jean said as the ladder was moved to still another location.

“I’d just as soon stay down here.”

“Then I’ll go up again,” said the younger Dana quickly.

Once more Jean climbed the apparatus and explored a new patch. Suddenly she gave a triumphant cry.

“I’ve found it, girls! I’ve found it!”

In her excitement Jean lost her grip. She snatched at the top rung frantically, causing the ladder to wobble wildly. It swayed back and forth while Louise and Helen tried desperately to steady it. Mrs. Crandall hastened to aid

them, but just as it seemed that it would be brought under control, the rung upon which Jean was standing suddenly gave way.

The girl clutched wildly at another rung. As the structure careened crazily, her feet swung entirely clear. For a moment it appeared that nothing could save Jean, but she was a natural athlete, and previous practice on a trapeze now stood her in good stead. She clung for dear life, while those below strained their muscles to keep the ladder under control.

Despite their best efforts, it fell sideways. Suddenly the top rung hooked over a long nail which at some previous time had supported a picture and held fast. Jean lost no time in climbing down to safety.

“My, that was a close call,” she laughed nervously. “I must have looked like a monkey the way I waded around in the breeze!”

Helen and Louise sank back against the wall, spent by their efforts.

“I’m ready to try once more whenever you girls recapture your breaths,” Jean announced courageously.

Mrs. Crandall shook her head. “I can’t permit you to mount that ladder again. It is not safe.”

“Oh, Mrs. Crandall—” Jean protested, but the headmistress silenced her with a gesture. “No, I am responsible for you girls while you are in my care. In my

estimation, a broken bone is of far more consequence than a hidden room.”

The Dana girls said no more, but were decidedly crestfallen as they followed Mrs. Crandall and Helen downstairs. Applecore announced that breakfast was ready and they all took their places at the table.

“What was it you discovered just as the rung of the ladder broke, Jean?” inquired her sister.

“I saw the faint outline of a small door,” the girl revealed. “The knob had been removed and the hole was plugged up.”

Applecore, who was serving, had been listening with her mouth wide open. At Jean’s words she allowed a cup of coffee to slip, and the hot beverage trickled down onto Mrs. Crandall’s dress.

“Oh, there I done it again!” the maid exclaimed in dismay.

The woman had not been burned, but her dress was ruined, and she was compelled to excuse herself from the table while she changed to another skirt.

“You really should be more careful, Applecore,” Louise chided. “After all, we brought you here and are more or less responsible for your conduct.”

“I can’t help spilling things,” the maid said tearfully. “I try, honest I do, but this old house has haunts, and when I hear you talkin’ about secret doors an’ things, I just forget what I’m doin’.”

After the breakfast dishes had been cleared away, Louise went for a walk along the beach. She had gone only a short distance when her attention was drawn to a bright patch of red some distance away. Instantly the girl's mind went back to the day of her arrival at Stony Point, when she and the others had caught a glimpse of a bright moving object among the trees.

“It's someone wearing either a red dress or a bright scarf!” she thought excitedly.

Louise ran as fast as she could in the direction of the woods. The patch of color vanished as if its owner had observed the girl's approach.

Louise could see no one as she reached the trees. At length she turned back toward the house and as she did so she noticed a small piece of red woolen cloth which had caught on a thorny bush.

“It looks as if it might have been torn from a scarf,” she told herself as she detached the piece and examined it. “Someone has been watching the house. When the person saw me coming he or she ran away, but left this clue behind.”

Louise carried the bit of red cloth to the mansion where she showed it to Jean.

“There's no doubt in my mind now but that someone besides ourselves is interested in this place,” Louise said thoughtfully. “I suspect whoever it is knows about the secret room, too.”

“And perhaps has a means of reaching it which we’ve not discovered yet,” Jean added. “Very likely it’s the same person who borrowed our horse and built the fire in the outdoor hearth.”

“The borrowing of the horse would seem to indicate that the person stays near by, only going away at intervals upon errands.”

“Yes,” Jean agreed soberly, “and I’d guess that the prowler is a hunter or someone versed in nature lore.”

“Why do you think that, Jean?”

“Because of the animal trap. It must have been set by this person to catch game for himself.”

“Unquestionably somebody is living on the peninsula,” Louise nodded, “but it’s beyond me how anyone can enter the locked room without being caught in doing so.”

“But the third floor must have been occupied. How otherwise can you explain the smoke which came from the chimney?”

“I can’t explain it,” Louise replied. “I think and think, but the solution is beyond me. If only Mrs. Crandall would permit us to use the ladder we built!”

Conversation ceased at that point, for just then Helen Brewster joined the girls.

“Mrs. Crandall and Applecore are talking of driving in to Milton. Do you want to go along?”

“I think I’d rather remain in camp,” Jean replied.

Louise was ready to give a similar answer, but before she could speak the girls heard the clatter of hoofs on the road. A rider was galloping toward the mansion.

“He must be Tony!” Jean exclaimed as the girls hastened toward the front of the house.

However, the horseman was not Mr. Anthony. He was a blond-haired young man whom they had never seen before. The fellow drew rein, and without dismounting said breathlessly:

“I have an important message for the Dana girls. Is either of them here?”

“I am Louise Dana, and this is my sister Jean. Who sent you?”

“A Miss Briggs in Milton,” the young man replied tersely. “She said to tell you that word has just come regarding your uncle’s ship.”

“The *Corinth*?” Louise gasped.

“I don’t know the name,” the youth replied grimly. “But there has been an explosion on board and the boat is sinking!”

CHAPTER XVIII

ALARMING NEWS

Louise and Jean were stunned by the news of the disaster. For a moment they remained speechless; then they begged the horseman to tell them all the details. He could add nothing to his first bare announcement.

“Oh, it doesn’t seem possible,” Jean murmured brokenly. “In all these years Uncle Ned has never had any trouble on his ships.”

“I can’t believe it yet,” Louise said quietly. “There must be some mistake. We’ll rush into town and find out. In the meantime all we can do is to hope and pray for the best.”

The horses were hitched up in a twinkling, and with Jean as driver, a party composed of the Dana girls, Applecore and Mrs. Crandall set off for Milton. The trip was made in record time.

“Go directly to Aunt Harriet’s place,” Louise advised her sister.

As the carriage approached the house, the girls were surprised to see that a crowd of townspeople had gathered in front of it.

“Oh, I’m afraid it’s true, then,” Louise said with a little sob. “People have come to find out the latest news.”

As the girls alighted from the carriage, they were startled to hear a loud wailing from within. They knew that Aunt Harriet would never give way to such a display of grief even though her heart might be breaking.

“It must be Lettie,” Louise murmured. “Her father and mother are on Uncle Ned’s ship.”

The girls pushed through the crowd and entered the house. Their guess had been correct, for it was indeed Lettie who was carrying on in such fashion, having worked herself into a state of hysteria. Disregarding Miss Dana’s efforts to comfort her, she continued to shriek at the top of her lungs.

“I just knew Captain Dana would manage to wreck his ship!” she cried. “If my parents drown he’ll be held responsible for their deaths!”

“Please, please don’t say that again,” Miss Harriet Dana pleaded. “I have taken a great deal from you, but I can endure no more. Have you no regard for my feelings? Captain Dana is my brother and I love him dearly.”

Lettie ceased her tirade only because Louise and Jean stepped into the living room at that moment. As Miss Dana collapsed on the sofa to be comforted by Mrs. Weston, the Briggs girl wheeled angrily upon the newcomers. Before they could say a word she flew at them, scratching Jean and clawing at Louise’s face.

“Lettie, have you lost your senses?” Jean cried as she fought off the attack.

The two girls succeeded in overpowering Lettie, and compelled her to lie down. She burst into tears, and burying her head in a pillow, gave way to uncontrolled grief.

“I am so glad you came,” Aunt Harriet murmured to her nieces. “I have endured so much.”

Louise and Jean tried to comfort the distraught woman, but they were unable to learn from her any of the details of the sea disaster. It was Evelyn Starr who told them what had happened.

“Lettie went down to the store to buy a box of writing paper, and while she was there she heard the news of the disaster over the radio. It came in as a special flash so there were no details. The ship was reported sinking with all on board.”

“Isn’t there some way we can learn more?” Jean asked plaintively.

“Mrs. Harned, the owner of this tourist house, has gone down to the store to wait for further news. She promised to let us know the instant any should come in.”

“Let’s go to the store ourselves,” Jean suggested. “We’ll get the flashes a little quicker that way.”

“We can’t leave Lettie here with Aunt Harriet,” Louise replied. “She’s apt to have another attack of hysteria.”

“We’ll call in a doctor,” Jean decided. “He’ll give her some medicine which will quiet her nerves.”

As soon as Dr. Graham arrived at the house, the Dana girls went directly to the general store which was crowded with townspeople gathered to hear the radio reports. While Jean dialed various stations in the hope of tuning in to a news broadcast, Louise telephoned Starhurst School to ask Professor Crandall if he had heard anything of the disaster.

The man replied that while he had listened to a radio news report only a short time before, no mention had been made of any hazards aboard the *Corinth*. Louise was about to hang up, when it occurred to her to ask if Mona Martin had returned to the school.

“Oh, yes, she is back now,” the professor answered. “Mona came with her father.”

“Well, that seems to eliminate my belief that the girl followed our party to Milton,” Louise told herself after she had hung up.

At the moment she was too worried over Captain Dana to give the matter further consideration. In the absence of late news regarding the disaster, she had begun to hope that Lettie had been mistaken; or, possibly for reasons of her own, had made up the entire story.

Scarcely had Louise walked away from the telephone than it rang. The storekeeper answered it.

“Miss Briggs is wanted,” he reported.

“She is in no condition to speak with anyone just now,” Louise replied. “Perhaps I ought to take the message.”

“It’s that young man who calls her nearly every day,” the storekeeper said contemptuously. “He’s a nuisance, always wanting me to run all over town looking for Miss Briggs.”

Louise went to the telephone.

“Hello,” she said into the mouthpiece.

Before she had an opportunity to explain that she was not Lettie, the man at the other end of the line began to speak rapidly.

“Hello, my dear,” he said in honeyed tones. “This is your Tony speaking.”

“I am not—” Louise started to explain that she was not Lettie, but the man gave her no chance to say anything. Interrupting, he went on:

“Listen, everything is fixed up. There’s nothing to worry about. Your father will be very proud of you in your business dealings. All I need now is your check for fifteen hundred dollars and I’ll look after everything.”

Louise was so stunned by this disclosure that she could not have spoken had she wished to do so. The man continued:

“Don’t forget the check, Lettie. Sorry I can’t talk to you longer, but I have a lot of work to do. I’ll see you soon.”

Louise heard the receiver click. Tony had hung up.

“Louise!” Jean motioned frantically to her sister. “I’ve dialed a news broadcast!”

Both girls drew up chairs by the radio, listening intently as the announcer discussed the war situation abroad, and told of a search for air fliers lost over the ocean.

“Not a word about the *Corinth*,” Louise whispered anxiously.

For ten minutes the announcer continued his talk, shifting from subject to subject. The girls became tense as they heard the man say:

“And now—a cheerful bit of news as we bring this broadcast to a close. The crew of the vessel *Dorin*, commanded by Captain Ed Bane, has been rescued, although the freighter and its entire cargo has been lost. This news report has come to you through the courtesy of——”

Jean sighed in relief as she switched off the radio.

“It wasn’t Uncle Ned’s ship after all, Louise. Lettie made a mistake.”

“Ned Dana does sound a lot like Ed Bane, and the *Corinth* has a similarity in sound to the *Dorin*,” Louise replied.

“Thank goodness, there was nothing to Lettie’s story.”

“We must hurry back to the house and tell Aunt Harriet the wonderful news!”

The Dana girls were provoked at Lettie for having caused everyone so much worry, but they were willing to forgive her, because they realized that the mistake had been unintentional.

When Louise and Jean reported their glad tidings there was great rejoicing at the tourist house. Aunt Harriet wept in relief, and Lettie felt so unburdened that she acted actually grateful to the girls for bringing her the news.

Louise thought that the time was ripe to speak to Lettie about the telephone call which she had intercepted. She tried to lead up to the subject gradually by questioning the girl regarding her friendship with Mr. Anthony.

“I don’t see that it’s any of your concern,” Lettie retorted with an angry toss of her head. “You’d resent it if I were to go around asking prying questions about your friends.”

“We’re only trying to be helpful, Lettie,” Louise said kindly. “We don’t want you to lose all the money your father left you.”

“What do you know about that matter?” Lettie inquired sharply. “You’ve been prying——”

“No, we haven’t,” Louise denied calmly, “but I answered a telephone call from Mr. Tony which was meant for you. I heard him say that you were to give him a check for fifteen hundred dollars.”

“Why, how dared you pry into my affairs?” Lettie demanded, flying into another rage. “I’ll not stand for

it! You can't treat me like that!"

Mrs. Crandall appeared in the doorway.

"Dear me, what is wrong?" she inquired in distress. "Lettie, you are not yourself today."

"Who could be calm with folks prying into one's affairs?" Lettie demanded furiously. "Mrs. Crandall, I shall never go back to the stone mansion. For that matter, I'll not set foot any place where I'll come in contact with Louise and Jean Dana! So there!"

CHAPTER XIX

AN INHERITANCE

After her bitter tirade against the Danas, Lettie Briggs burst into tears again and collapsed on a bed. Mrs. Crandall's stern attitude relaxed somewhat, for she realized that the girl had been under a severe strain. The headmistress drew Louise and Jean aside for a quiet talk.

"Ordinarily I should punish Lettie severely for such an unwarranted outburst," she declared, "but I feel I must make allowances for her unstable condition of mind."

"It was partly my fault," Louise admitted frankly. She told Mrs. Crandall about the intercepted telephone call, concluding with the remark that she was willing to offer Lettie an apology.

"That is very generous of you, my dear," the headmistress responded in relief. "Matters can be smoothed out, but of course Lettie must not return to the stone mansion."

"Aunt Harriet might be willing to keep her here," Jean said slowly.

"I dislike to impose further upon your aunt. Lettie was so unkind to her."

“Aunt Harriet is a forgiving soul,” Louise replied.
“I’m sure she’ll bear Lettie no hard feelings.”

When consulted about the matter, Miss Dana hesitated only briefly before saying that she would be willing to keep the Briggs girl with her. Mrs. Crandall was relieved, for she was eager to return to the stone mansion at the earliest opportunity. She had arranged with Jeff Potter, the town’s handyman, and his strong but moronic son Toby, to accompany her and advise as to the feasibility of piping water into the house from the cellar spring.

“If we all are ready we may as well leave at once,” the headmistress told Louise and Jean.

“Applecore isn’t here yet,” the latter said apologetically. “She went down to the lawyer’s office about an hour ago and hasn’t returned.”

“Here she comes now,” Louise, who was standing by the window, sang out. “Applecore is fairly prancing so she must have good news to report.”

As the maid entered the house, the girls observed that she had bought herself new finery. She wore a showy hat with a green feather which looked ridiculous perched high on her head. She had also purchased new patent leather pumps and a gold bag that was intended only for evening wear.

“All my life I’ve wanted clothes and things befitting a lady,” Applecore declared as she strutted about the room. “Now I’ll have everything I want and I’ll never do any

more work. I'll sit and read and I'll go to a picture show every afternoon. Maybe I'll travel clear around the world!"

"Has the lawyer given you your inheritance?" Jean inquired in alarm, for she knew that the simple-minded girl could not be trusted to handle even a relatively small sum of money.

"A thousand dollars in cash!" Applecore declared proudly, opening her pocketbook so that the girls might see the bills which were stuffed inside. "The lawyer made me put some of it in the bank, but I got the rest of it here—all that I didn't spend. My, it's nice being an heiress! I'll never scrub another floor or cook another meal. I'm going to have a good time from now on."

"You don't mean you'd desert Aunt Harriet just when she needs you most?" Louise asked quietly. "If you don't go home with her, she'll be there all alone until Uncle Ned returns."

"That's so," Applecore agreed, looking troubled. "Your aunt has been real good to me and I know she can't get along without me."

Louise and Jean hid their smiles and did not disillusion the maid.

"The thing for you to do is to return to the stone mansion with us," Louise said briskly. "In the meantime you can be thinking over the places you'd like to visit. It isn't well to start off without a definite plan, you know."

“I could send for circulars, couldn’t I?” Applecore asked eagerly. “I want to go to a place where there’s palm trees.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to decide that later,” Jean said with a smile. “Come into the carriage now. Mrs. Crandall is waiting.”

Applecore allowed herself to be persuaded, but all the way back to the stone mansion she amused the girls with the haughty airs she assumed.

Later in the afternoon Jeff Potter and his son Toby arrived at the Point to consult with Mrs. Crandall. While Mr. Potter and the headmistress descended into the cellar to inspect the spring, the youth lingered in the kitchen where Applecore was busy starting supper.

Louise and Jean, passing into the storeroom, observed that the acquaintance had progressed by leaps and bounds. Toby was enjoying a huge meal at the kitchen table, while Applecore hovered at his elbow.

“I hope there will be something left for us,” Jean whispered to her sister with a giggle. “The way that fellow eats, I fear we’ll all go hungry.”

The Dana girls joined Mrs. Crandall and the workman in the subterranean room.

“Oh, I have encouraging information,” the headmistress declared enthusiastically to her students.

“Mr. Potter says that water can be piped into the house at a very low cost. He and his son will do all the work.” A few

minutes later as the four emerged into the storeroom again, she added in an elated whisper, “Mr. Potter has given me an estimate for clearing the land and building cabins, too. His price is ridiculously low compared with Penfield standards!”

“Then you plan to go ahead with the work?” Jean inquired eagerly.

“I am thinking very seriously of it. However, I will not buy the place unless the mystery surrounding it can be cleared up.”

“Oh, that reminds me of something I wish to ask you,” Louise said quickly. “Would you object to having Jeff and his son set up the circular stairway while they are here?”

“Toby is talkative,” Jean declared before the headmistress could reply. “Don’t you think he would gossip about it in town?”

“Perhaps a general airing of the entire situation would help to clear matters,” Mrs. Crandall remarked thoughtfully. “I will ask Mr. Potter to set up the staircase, and if he questions us regarding it we will tell him the truth.”

As the three passed on into the kitchen, the Dana girls heard Applecore break off in the midst of something she was saying to Toby. They guessed that she had been telling him about her inheritance.

Mr. Potter was very happy to earn a few extra dollars by setting up the circular staircase. To the intense relief of the Dana girls he asked no questions. When the

work was finished he pocketed his pay and drove away with his son.

“A workman after my own heart,” Mrs. Crandall remarked. “If I buy this property I shall hire him to build the cabins and take care of the plumbing installation.”

“If Toby assists his father, you’ll need a padlock for the ice box,” Jean said with a chuckle.

The girls lost no time in mounting the staircase. They raced up to the last step where they were confronted by a blank wall.

“Look, here is the place I noticed when the ladder toppled!” Jean exclaimed, indicating a faint marking. “You can see the outline of a door.”

“We should have asked Jeff and his son to open it for us,” Louise commented.

“Then they would have asked questions. We ought to be able to get into the room ourselves now.”

“It looks as if mud might have dried in the old key-hole, Jean.”

“Yes, and something has been plugged into the place where the door knob must have been!”

“Let’s dig out the holes,” Louise urged. “I’ll get a tool.”

She returned in a moment with the implement.

However, when the mud had been removed the girls were disappointed, for even then they could not see anything by peering through the holes. The room beyond looked to be dark. They tried to push the door open but as they had expected, it was locked.

Mrs. Crandall then produced a box of keys, but not one of them would fit the lock. Jean tried drilling through the obstruction, but soon gave up the task in disgust.

“It feels as if a stone were on the other side of the door,” she declared. “I can’t make an impression on it. I wish I had a stronger tool.”

“Why don’t you look in Jeff Potter’s kit?” asked Applecore, who had just come upstairs to watch the work. “He went off and left it.”

Jean ran downstairs to examine the tools and soon came back, triumphantly bearing a saw which would cut metal.

“We’ll have that door open in a jiffy now!” she cried.

The girls took turns working with the saw, and presently the lock was broken.

“Everyone hold your breath now!” Louise commanded gaily. “I am ready to open the door.”

As she swung it outward there was a gasp of astonishment and disappointment. Instead of the room which the girls had expected to find, they stared at a solid stone wall!

“All our work for nothing!” Jean exclaimed in discouragement.

“Why, this only makes the mystery more intriguing,” Louise said cheerfully. “For some reason this entrance to the locked room has been blocked but there must be another way of getting into it.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to find it,” Jean declared gloomily. “I’ve exhausted all my ideas.”

The Dana girls replaced the metal saw in Mr. Potter’s kit and were glad that they had done so, for in a few minutes the workman and his son returned for their property.

Mrs. Crandall had thought of several questions which she wished to ask Mr. Potter. While the two chatted outside, Toby and Applecore wandered off together down the beach.

Louise observed the couple depart, but thought no more of the matter until nearly supper time. Then she became aware that Applecore was not in the kitchen and had made no preparations for the evening meal.

“What do you suppose became of her?” she asked Jean. “Surely she didn’t go back to town with Jeff and his silly son.”

“I’ll venture to say that’s exactly what she did do,” Jean replied. “Applecore’s head has been turned completely since she inherited her money.”

“Well, at least she might have left a note of explanation. If I didn’t feel so sorry for Applecore, I’d be downright provoked at her. But she’s such a helpless, flighty creature one can’t hold her responsible for her actions.”

They returned to the kitchen to start supper themselves. Mrs. Crandall, upon learning of the latest difficulty, offered to help. However, she was not a capable cook, and talked more than she assisted. Louise decided that it might be an advantageous time to glean a little information.

“I have been wondering how you learned about this stone mansion in the first place, Mrs. Crandall,” she remarked. “Did you secure the keys through a real estate man?”

“Yes, I did, Louise. My dealings were somewhat secret. While we were at the tourist house in Milton the owner brought the keys to me in a box.”

Louise and Jean looked quickly at each other. They recalled watching from the window when the headmistress had been called to the door by the night visitor.

“What is the man’s name?” Louise inquired in a voice which she tried to make sound casual.

“Why, I thought you knew him,” the headmistress replied in surprise. “The owner is Mr. Burns.”

CHAPTER XX

A NOTE FROM APPLECORE

“Oh,” Louise murmured in astonishment, and before she stopped to think added quickly, “Jean and I thought the man who came to see you that night was Mr. Anthony.”

Mrs. Crandall smiled broadly. Louise, blushing furiously, hastened to explain that she and her sister had observed the man quite by accident.

“I am sure you were not prying,” the headmistress replied kindly. “And you are right about the man. Didn’t you know that his last name is Burns?”

“We thought it was Anthony.”

“His full name is Anthony M. Burns. I admit I do not care for the man personally, but it was through him that I learned of this property.”

“Did you meet Mr. Burns in Penfield?” Jean asked casually as she scraped vegetables.

“It was through Lettie that I became acquainted with him,” Mrs. Crandall admitted a trifle reluctantly. “In fact, he brought a splendid letter of introduction from Mr. Briggs.”

The Dana girls told the headmistress of their own encounters with the man, and then asked her if she knew of any business dealings which Lettie had conducted with Tony.

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Crandall responded, looking worried. “I imagined that Mr. Burns was a close friend of the Briggs family.”

“He came to the school to see her, I understand.” Jean remarked innocently.

“Indeed, no,” the headmistress corrected. “Mr. Burns really came to talk with me about this Stony Point property.”

She then related many of the details of her dealings with the man, but the Dana girls could not agree with her that he was a reliable real estate owner.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t alarm you,” Louise said apologetically, “but I suspect Tony hasn’t a clear title to this property. Tell me, did he bring you the letter of introduction from Mr. Briggs after Lettie’s father had sailed on his round-the-world cruise?”

“Now that I think of it, he did. But the letter had been written a week before.”

“It easily might have been forged,” Louise told her. “If I were you I certainly should check up on Mr. Anthony Burns’s character before signing any papers. This property may not belong to him.”

“Dear me, now I *am* worried,” Mrs. Crandall declared.

“I certainly shall investigate the man thoroughly before I purchase the property.”

The talk presently switched back to the locked room on the third floor.

“I’m beginning to wonder if there really is a room at all,” Jean said skeptically. “From the ground it appears that a flat roof extends over the central portion of the upper floor, but for all we know it might be an open space.”

“How do you explain the creaking sounds which we have heard?” Louise questioned with a smile.

“Why, they might have been caused by animals or large birds walking across the roof—or to be more accurate, just above the ceiling of the second story.”

“Your theory is interesting, Jean,” Louise said, “but it doesn’t explain the smoke which came from the chimney nor the reason for a stairway being built to a blind door.”

“No,” Jean admitted, “I guess the mystery can’t be disposed of so easily.”

“Speaking of mysteries, I can’t help but worry about the way Applecore vanished.”

“Oh, probably she has gone back to stay with Aunt Harriet.”

“I wish we could be certain of that, Jean. Applecore is so scatter-brained, and now that she has her money she

especially needs someone to look after her.”

Presently, when supper was cooking on the stove, the Dana girls left Mrs. Crandall for a few minutes while they went outside to make certain that the horses were tied securely. As they were returning to the house, Jean suddenly grasped her sister’s arm.

“Look, Louise!”

She pointed toward the middle chimney of the stone mansion. A dark circular object which might have been a little over a foot in circumference could be seen disappearing down the opening.

“What was that thing?” Louise gasped. “It went right down the chimney! The opening must be very large!”

“It looked like an animal to me, but I’m not sure. It might have been an owl.”

“I never saw one as large as that, Jean.”

“It was a good-sized thing, whatever it was.”

“You don’t suppose it was a man?”

“A man?” Jean echoed. “Oh, I never thought of that. I feel certain it must have been an owl or an animal.”

Louise stood staring thoughtfully up at the chimney.

“Jean,” she said at length, “I believe it might be possible for a person to enter the locked room by means of that flue. I wish we could get up on the roof somehow.”

“How will we do it without a ladder? The one we constructed is worthless.”

“We’ll find a way somehow,” Louise announced determinedly. “But we can do nothing tonight. It’s too late.”

Entering the house, the girls said nothing of their latest observation to Mrs. Crandall. During their absence the headmistress had allowed the peas to scorch, and was very glad when Louise and Jean offered to finish cooking the meal.

Everyone was unusually quiet at supper time, and soon afterward Mrs. Crandall and Helen retired, leaving the Dana girls to keep watch throughout the night. The hours dragged slowly. Shortly after midnight Louise heard a creaking sound overhead, but when she and Jean crept up the stairway to investigate, the noise ceased. Toward morning one of the horses tethered by the tree gave a sudden whinny, but the girls could find nothing amiss when they went outside to investigate.

“There is something I’d like to do at the first opportunity,” Louise remarked to her sister as they awaited the dawn.

“What is that? Climb up on the roof?”

“I mean to do that too if possible, but I’d like to go to the county seat and investigate the records of this stone mansion property.”

“Why, I never thought of that, but it’s a grand idea!” Jean exclaimed. “The owner’s name will be recorded, and I’ll venture to say we’ll find that Mr. Anthony Burns doesn’t own an acre of land around Moon Lake.”

“I’ve distrusted the man from the very first. Of course, our dislike may make us exceptionally suspicious. It’s possible he does own this property, but somehow I can’t believe it.”

The girls arose and walked slowly about the house, staring up at the three massive chimneys.

“I wish we had a tall ladder,” Louise remarked. “However, I suppose Mrs. Crandall would be afraid to have us use it if we could find one.”

“I don’t see how we’ll ever be able to get up on the roof.”

“I keep thinking there must be some sort of outside entrance to the locked room,” Louise declared musingly. “Perhaps a stairway leading up the side of the house——”

“Sh!” Jean warned suddenly. “Here comes Helen.”

They turned to greet their friend.

“It’s my turn to do guard duty now,” Helen told them. “You girls go to bed for an hour or two while I prepare breakfast.”

“We don’t feel sleepy,” Jean protested.

“You’ll be all in before noon,” Helen insisted. “Now run along in and I’ll call you when the food is ready.”

Jean and Louise really were far more weary than they realized. Scarcely had they rolled themselves in their blankets when they were fast asleep. It seemed to the girls that they had not slept five minutes when they were awakened by an excited cry from the kitchen.

“Oh, see what I’ve found!” Helen cried. “Mrs. Crandall, come here!”

Jean and Louise hurried out of bed, following the headmistress to the kitchen. Helen waved a sheet of paper before their eyes.

“What is it?” Louise gasped. “A warning message?”

Helen shook her head. “No, it’s a note from Applecore.”

“Applecore!” Jean exclaimed in amazement. “She couldn’t have left it during the night.”

“Apparently it was laid on the window ledge yesterday afternoon, but the wind must have blown it away. I found it lying under the sink.”

“What does it say?” Louise asked anxiously.

Without replying, Helen offered her the note. Louise read it aloud:

“I am going to marry Toby and live happily ever after. You have been good to me and I am sorry to leave in a hurry.”

“Applecore has eloped with Toby!” Jean cried in dismay. “Oh, the poor, simple girl, whatever made her do it?”

“I think I can guess why Toby suggested the idea,” Louise replied a trifle grimly. “He may be a stupid fellow, but he understood the significance of Applecore’s little inheritance.”

“We never should have brought her out here,” Jean murmured self-accusingly. “But then who could have dreamed that she would become infatuated with Toby? Applecore isn’t very bright, but she is too good for that shiftless fellow.”

“If only we had found this note yesterday!” Louise said tensely. “Probably it’s too late to do anything now.”

“Yes, I guess they are married by this time,” Jean added gloomily.

“Perhaps not,” Louise said hopefully. “It seems to me one must register an intention to marry at least twenty-four hours before a license is granted.”

“That is the law in this state,” Mrs. Crandall nodded.

“Then we still have a chance to catch them!” Jean exclaimed.

“We must drive to Milton immediately,” her sister said quickly. “There’s not a minute to be lost.”

“I’ll hitch up the horses while you girls dress,” Helen offered, darting away.

Ten minutes later the four were on their way to the village. Jean did not spare the team as she tried to make all possible speed.

“I’ll never forgive myself if Applecore should marry Toby,” she murmured contritely. “We must get there in time to prevent it!”

CHAPTER XXI

WORD OF TONY

The Dana girls and their friends drove directly to the tourist home, thinking that possibly Cora Appel had returned to Aunt Harriet. However, the maid had not appeared there, and Miss Dana was stunned when she heard of the girl's plan to elope with Toby Potter.

"We must try to locate her before it is too late," the kindly woman said in distress. "Cora hasn't had her feet on the ground since she inherited that money. We can't let her ruin her life through a foolish act."

"There is a chance she may be at the Jeff Potter home," Louise suggested. "Let's go there and inquire."

The workman's cottage was located. No one seemed to be at home. Jean knocked several times and tried to peer in at one of the windows. Finally a stout, red-faced woman came to the door of a neighboring house shouting across at the party:

"If you're lookin' for Jeff, he's not at home."

"Do you know where we may find him?" asked Louise.

"They all went off early this morning to Bordentown," the woman answered. "There was Jeff and his wife

and Toby, and a girl I never saw before.”

“She must have been Applecore,” Jean said under her breath.

“Where is Bordentown?” inquired Louise.

“Why, that’s the county seat,” the woman told her. “You take the macadam road east out of Milton.”

The Dana girls were thoroughly alarmed, for they felt certain that Toby and Applecore had gone to the nearby city to be married, taking Mr. and Mrs. Potter with them to serve as witnesses.

“We’ll never catch them now,” Aunt Harriet murmured. “They must have at least three hours’ start.”

“Perhaps not,” Louise said encouragingly. “Let’s borrow Mrs. Crandall’s car and see if we can overtake them.”

The headmistress was only too glad to lend the automobile in such an emergency. Aunt Harriet felt that her nieces could take care of the situation without her, so she remained behind to chaperon Lettie and attend to Evelyn. Helen decided to wait in Milton for the group. An hour’s ride brought Mrs. Crandall and the Danas to Bordentown, which was a larger community than anyone had anticipated.

“We’ll have plenty of trouble trying to trail Applecore here,” Jean said despondently. “Where shall we start our search?”

“At the license bureau,” suggested Louise.

“I think that it might be wiser to go directly to the Justice of the Peace,” Jean proposed after a moment’s thought. “Time is precious now. While we are inquiring at the court house, the marriage ceremony may be taking place.”

Pausing only long enough to inquire the way to the office of the Justice of the Peace, the Dana girls continued their frantic search. The man reported that he had married no one that day, so with mingled feelings of relief and anxiety the Danas made a tour of the various Bordentown ministers. At every parsonage where they called the answer was the same—Cora Appel and Toby Potter had not been there. Finally the sisters visited the license bureau, but the clerk assured them that the eloping couple had not applied for a marriage permit.

“I wonder if we’ve made a mistake,” Louise said anxiously. “Perhaps Toby and Applecore didn’t come to Bordentown after all.”

“Knowing that girl’s flighty ways, I’d be inclined to think she has changed her mind at the last minute,” Jean ventured hopefully.

“Or perhaps she is buying a trousseau,” Louise added. “Cora had set her heart upon having an extravagant wardrobe.”

While Jean visited the various stores, Louise and Mrs. Crandall attended to an important errand. They called at another department of the court house and asked the clerk in charge of deeds if they might see the records pertaining to the old stone mansion on Moon Lake.

“What is the number of the lot?” the man asked gruffly.

The callers were compelled to admit that they did not know.

“You’ll have to find out before I can help you,” the clerk told them crossly.

“But surely you know the house I mean,” Mrs. Crandall protested.

“I can’t give you the records unless you have the number,” the man repeated firmly. “It takes too long to look them up.”

Mrs. Crandall was ready to turn aside, but Louise said coaxingly to the clerk:

“Please, we have come all the way from Penfield. A certain man is trying to sell Mrs. Crandall the stone mansion property, and we fear that he hasn’t a clear title to it.”

“Well, that’s different,” the clerk replied with an abrupt change of attitude. “I should have the number, but I know the property you mean and think I can find the records.”

He disappeared into another room. After fifteen minutes Mrs. Crandall and Louise grew weary of standing and sought chairs. Another ten minutes elapsed before the fellow returned.

“Didn’t you find the records?” the Dana girl asked quickly, for she observed that the clerk was empty-handed.

The man shook his head. "I can't understand it," he said in chagrin. "I can find only one record book pertaining to the land in the immediate vicinity of Moon Lake. The stone mansion property is not listed, and the other records are vague."

"But surely the various deeds have been recorded somewhere," Mrs. Crandall protested.

"You may be sure I'll look into the matter immediately," the clerk promised. "I have held my job for five years, and until today no one has ever inquired about the property."

Mrs. Crandall and Louise left the court house, rather discouraged by their failure to learn the name of the owner of the stone mansion. They met Jean at the car and she too had no good news to report.

"I have visited all of the larger stores," she said. "No one has seen Cora."

"I guess we've done all we can," Louise said with a sigh. "I'm beginning to think that we were misdirected to Bordentown."

After some discussion it was decided that the party should return to Milton. Louise and Jean pointed out to Mrs. Crandall that in view of the muddled court house records, it would be an easy matter for a swindler to sell property which he did not own.

"I have reason to believe that Mr. Burns has been trying to induce Lettie to invest a rather large sum of

money through him,” Louise revealed. “It may be a piece of this same Moon Lake tract.”

“We must return to Milton at once and question Lettie,” said Mrs. Crandall.

“I should like to check up with Mr. Briggs and learn if he ever wrote a letter introducing the man,” Louise declared.

“I understand Mr. Briggs will not return from his cruise for many months.”

“Jean and I could send a cable to Captain Ned requesting him to question Lettie’s father.”

Mrs. Crandall was reluctant to have the girls go to so much trouble in her behalf, but the Danas were eager to do it. Leaving the others in the car, Louise and Jean hastened to a telegraph office. In their message to Uncle Ned they requested him to send his reply to the general store at Milton.

As the sisters were returning to the automobile, they cut across a small park. Near a fountain, below which a few gold fish swam lazily, the girls thought they heard someone sobbing. They halted to listen and look about. The park was practically deserted.

“It sounds like a girl crying,” Louise declared. “She must be over there by the bandstand.”

“Let’s see what is wrong.”

The Danas hurried toward the platform, but at first could see no one. Then, as they peered beneath the stand, they saw the pathetic figure of Applecore.

“Cora!” Jean cried joyfully. “Thank goodness, we have found you.”

“What is wrong?” Louise asked kindly as she coaxed the girl out into the light. “Why are you crying?”

At this display of sympathy poor Applecore went into another spasm of weeping.

“You’re not married?” Jean inquired anxiously.

Applecore tossed her head indignantly. “I’ll never marry that cruel, mean man! He struck me, so he did, an’ all because I said I’d not live with his folks after we were married!”

“You were wise to change your mind about the wedding,” Jean told her in deep satisfaction. “Toby isn’t half good enough for you, Cora.”

“No, he ain’t,” Applecore agreed, and then broke into sobs again. “But I wanted to get married so I’d have a home of my own. Now I got no place to go—no one to look after me—oh, I wish I was dead!”

“Come, now, don’t talk such nonsense,” Louise said, slipping her arm about the weeping girl. “Aunt Harriet wants you to come back to her.”

“I’d like to go home,” Applecore wailed, wiping her bloodshot eyes, “but she’ll scold me for runnin’ off. I’ve had enough trouble—I can’t stand any more.”

“Aunt Harriet won’t lecture you,” Louise told her gently. “I’ll promise you that. Now comb your hair, Cora, and don’t cry any more.”

“I look a sight, don’t I?” the maid asked as she attempted to smooth out her wrinkled dress. “I tore a big hole down the back when I crawled under the bandstand.”

“With your inheritance you’ll be able to buy several new dresses,” Jean said consolingly.

Applecore was led back to the car. During the ride to Milton the group tactfully avoided the subject of marriage, and upon reaching the tourist home, the maid received no scolding from Aunt Harriet.

Louise and Jean lost no time in seeking Lettie, who seemed to have forgotten her declaration that she would have nothing more to do with the Dana girls.

“Well, what do you want now?” she inquired haughtily.

The sisters did not waste any words. They asked the girl point-blank if she had mailed Mr. Burns a check for fifteen hundred dollars.

“So you have learned his name?” Lettie answered. “Well, since you seem so good at acquiring information I’ll let you do a little guessing about the check.”

As she started to leave, Jean grasped her by the arm.

“Let me go!” Lettie protested with a squirm.

“Not until you answer our question. Either you’ll do so, or Mrs. Crandall will learn a few things.”

“What do you mean?” Lettie asked in alarm. “You’d not go blabbing to her about Tony?”

“We’ll tell her everything we know, and we know plenty!”

“I was only joking about the check,” Lettie said hastily.

“Did you send it?” Jean demanded.

“Well, yes, I did.”

“When did you give it to him?”

“I mailed it this morning to the Superior Sales Company.”

“If you should lose your money you can’t say we didn’t warn you,” Jean said severely. “We’ll try to help you recover the check, although after the way you have acted you don’t deserve it.”

“I don’t want your help—” Lettie began, but the Dana girls did not wait to hear what she had to say.

As they hastened to rejoin Mrs. Crandall, Louise and Jean decided that for the time being the matter of the check might wait. They knew that the real estate man would not receive it

until the following day, and before that time Lettie could stop payment.

The girls found the headmistress deeply worried over her own affairs. The visit to the court house had shattered her confidence in Anthony Burns, and she now felt that she might be occupying the Moon Lake property illegally.

“I’ll be very much disappointed if I cannot buy the place,” she confessed to the girls. “My plans are formulated, and save for the mystery which surrounds the house, the property is ideal.”

While the three were talking, Aunt Harriet, who had just returned from the general store, came into the living room.

“I have a cablegram from my brother!” she announced.

“What does he say?” Louise asked eagerly.

“Mr. Briggs replies that he has never heard of a man named Burns.”

“Then the letter which Tony brought to you, Mrs. Crandall, must have been faked!” Jean exclaimed.

The headmistress’s lips drew into a tight line. “I shall talk with Lettie about this,” she said.

For nearly half an hour Mrs. Crandall and her student were closeted in an adjoining room. Those who waited outside

could hear the girl weeping, and suspected that she was receiving a severe lecture. Finally the headmistress emerged.

“I have learned everything,” she told the Dana girls quietly. “It seems that Anthony Burns sought Lettie and paid her glamorous attentions. The girl was deeply flattered and did not expose him when he claimed to be a friend of the family. He interested her in the idea of buying a piece of property along Moon Lake as a surprise for her parents. She has sent him a check and previously gave him considerable cash to pay a lawyer for making a title search.”

“Tony Burns is interested only in acquiring her money,” Jean declared. “I’ll venture to say he never engaged a lawyer. And probably he has tried to sell a great many persons land around Moon Lake. We ought to have the man arrested.”

“So far we have very little real evidence against him,” Louise interposed quietly. “You can’t arrest a man upon suspicion only.”

“That is true,” Mrs. Crandall said quickly. “I shouldn’t care to involve myself in a scandal. We must move cautiously in the matter, for the man may own the land after all. In that case our accusations would be ridiculous.”

“I think the only thing to do for the present is to stop payment on Lettie’s check and return to the mansion,” Louise suggested.

Mrs. Crandall promptly agreed and the Dana girls got Lettie to call the Penfield bank. Presently everything was in

readiness for the departure of the headmistress and the Danas to Moon Lake. As Louise and Jean were climbing into the carriage, a boy came running down the street toward them.

“Is Mrs. Crandall here?” he asked breathlessly.

“I am Mrs. Crandall,” said the headmistress.

“A man sent me,” the boy explained. “A Mr. Burns is waiting to speak with you immediately.”

CHAPTER XXII

AN INDIAN CANOE

“Where is the caller now?” Mrs. Crandall inquired, displaying nervousness.

“At the general store,” the boy replied, and hurried away.

“I don’t care to talk with the man,” the headmistress said thoughtfully. “But I suppose I must. Louise and Jean, may I prevail upon you to accompany me?”

The Dana girls welcomed an opportunity to meet Anthony Burns again. As they walked with the headmistress to the store, they advised her to give the man no hint of the knowledge they had gleaned regarding the Moon Lake property.

Mrs. Crandall’s interview with Tony proved not to be a personal one. The lad’s announcement had been misleading and the caller was in reality only on the telephone. The man wished the woman to give him an immediate decision as to whether or not she would purchase the stone mansion. The headmistress put him off by saying that while she liked the property, she could not give her final verdict until the following day.

“Come to the stone mansion tomorrow afternoon, when we will discuss the matter further.”

Before leaving the store, Mrs. Crandall mentioned that she wished to telephone her husband at Starhurst School. Upon impulse Louise summoned courage to make a peculiar request.

“Mrs. Crandall,” she asked, “do you suppose it would be possible to have Mona Martin come here for a few days?”

“I imagine that could be arranged, Louise. Have you a particular reason for wishing to see her?”

“Yes, I have, Mrs. Crandall. Even before we came here Mona seemed to be deeply interested in Moon Lake. I believe she might be able to shed some light on the secret at the old mansion.”

To the woman’s reply that Louise sounded very mysterious, the girl only smiled. It was hard to explain a hunch!

“I shall ask my husband to bring her,” Mrs. Crandall promised.

The three returned to the tourist house a few minutes later. The journey to Moon Lake was delayed once more, for Aunt Harriet announced that she had just received word she must return to Oak Falls immediately and take Applecore with her. Mrs. Crandall found herself confronted with the problem of what should be done with Evelyn and Lettie.

“I’d like to go back to the Point,” Evelyn declared wistfully. “I can hobble around pretty well now, and I’ll try not to make trouble for anyone.”

“As if you could bother anyone!” Jean cried, giving her friend a squeeze. “We’ll be glad to wait on you every minute, if necessary.”

Lettie did not wish to return to the mansion, but she dared not offer objections when Mrs. Crandall decided that both the girls were to go. A little later the carriage set forth and in good time arrived at the stone house on the point.

“I’ll get supper,” Lettie said unexpectedly. During the ride she had spoken scarcely a word, and the others correctly guessed that she was feeling contrite.

Knowing that the girl was a very poor cook, Helen Brewster immediately offered to assist with the meal. Louise and Jean took care of the horses, and then, with time on their hands, they asked Mrs. Crandall for permission to go for a dip.

“I’m almost afraid to say you may do so. We don’t know the depth of the water at this point.”

“Jean and I are good swimmers.”

“Yes, you are,” the headmistress acknowledged. “Very well, you may go in, but be careful.”

The Dana girls changed into their suits and raced each other to the beach. They plunged in and swam a short

distance out into the lake, then came back until they were in water shallow enough to permit them to stand.

“I think I’ll investigate the floor of the beach and see if it is sloping all the way in to shore,” Jean announced as she prepared to make a surface dive. “Unless there are deep holes, this should make an ideal swimming place for future campers.”

“There may be no future campers,” Louise answered dryly. “If Tony doesn’t own the property it probably isn’t for sale.”

Without replying, Jean dived under the water. Nearly half a minute elapsed and she did not reappear. Growing frightened, Louise dived after her sister. In a moment both girls came up together, and Jean was laughing.

“I wish you wouldn’t stay under so long, Jean,” Louise protested as she recaptured her breath. “Maybe that’s your idea of fun——”

“I didn’t stay under just to tease you,” Jean interrupted. “I was examining something interesting under water.”

“A log, I suppose?”

“No, it wasn’t a log. It looked like a canoe.”

“A canoe?”

“Yes. One end seemed to be stuck in a sand bank.”

“That’s queer, Jean.”

“I’d have dug it out, only I couldn’t stay under water another second.”

“Perhaps we can get it out together.”

“Let’s try,” Jean said eagerly. “I’ll give the signal and we’ll dive at the same time.”

Working swiftly under water, the girls were able to pull the canoe from the bank and haul it out onto shore.

“Why, it’s really a dugout made from an old log!” Louise exclaimed. “I wonder whoever used such a crude creation?”

“Indians, perhaps.”

“It couldn’t be that old, I’m sure, Jean.”

“Just the same, here is an Indian symbol on the bow,” Jean pointed out. “But I agree with you, the dugout can’t be very many years old.”

While the girls were studying the mark and growing excited over their discovery, Helen Brewster called out that supper was ready. As soon as the meal was over the Dana girls occupied themselves with fashioning a pair of crude paddles, and until dark gave brief “passenger” rides.

The dugout was finally drawn up onto the beach. Then Louise and Jean went to see that the horses were tied up securely for the night.

“You know,” Louise said thoughtfully, “I’ve just figured out that Mr. Burns was the person who took my Indian notes from Professor Crandall’s office.”

“You thought you saw him at the Penfield Inn with the papers, didn’t you?”

“Yes, and now I’m certain he took them. He probably overheard some conversation and thought he might learn something about this Moon Lake territory.”

“Perhaps he is the person who’s responsible for the many strange happenings here at the mansion,” Jean remarked as her eyes roved toward the three high chimneys.

“I don’t believe the mystery can be explained so easily,” Louise returned with a smile. “It provokes me that we didn’t bring a ladder with us from Milton. Then we could have mounted the roof.”

“Yes, it was an oversight. I don’t know how we’ll ever get up there now.”

“We’ll find a way,” Louise said quietly. “Just give me a little time to think about the problem.”

The girls were walking slowly toward the house. Suddenly Jean stopped short, staring toward the lake shore.

“Louise, the dugout is gone!”

With one accord the girls ran to the place where the canoe had been left. The crude paddles still lay on the sand but the

Indian craft was gone. They could see faint markings, disclosing that the canoe had been dragged into the water.

“Well, this is the most baffling thing yet!” Jean cried. “Do you suppose someone has been using the dugout regularly, and hid it under water on purpose?”

“One thing is certain,” Louise replied grimly “If our mysterious ghost is out riding in the canoe, we know he *isn't* on the roof or in the locked room!” She grasped Jean’s hand, pulling her sister toward the house. “Come on, we’re going to get up there tonight, ladder or no ladder!”

CHAPTER XXIII

UNDER THE IVY

“Just how do you propose to reach the roof?” Jean drawled as she followed her sister into the house. “Will you sprout wings and fly?”

“We’ll do a few acrobatic stunts,” Louise chuckled, well pleased with an idea which had occurred to her so suddenly. “But first we must ask Mrs. Crandall for permission. If she should turn cautious again it will make me fairly ill!”

When consulted, the headmistress reluctantly agreed that the girls might try the plan, but in truth she had no idea of the hazards to which Louise meant to resort.

“Let’s hurry before she changes her mind,” whispered Jean.

The younger Dana climbed a tall tree, reporting to her sister that she could distinguish a flat roof extending over the locked room section of the house. Louise then brought up a heavy rope, and together the sisters attempted to lasso the chimney, with a view to one girl hoisting herself to the roof by means of it.

Fortunately for their own safety, the task proved to be impossible. Crestfallen, the girls descended to the ground, there to cudgel their brains for a new scheme.

Idly Jean allowed her flashlight to play on the rear wall of the house. Louise watched the moving beam. Unexpectedly she sprang forward to tear at the long strands of ivy with her fingers.

“Have you lost your senses?” Jean asked in bewilderment.

“No, I’ve just come to them at last! Jean, as you flashed your light over the wall I thought I saw something. Help me pull away this ivy.”

“It will never come off. The vines are too old and tough.”

“Yes, it will! Help me, Jean.”

After a little work the girls were able to remove a long section of intertwining vines from the corner of the building. As Louise flashed her light over the exposed wall, they both saw a series of stone steps leading up to the roof!

“Isn’t that clever?” Louise cried. “The building is so well designed that unless one looks at the steps sideways they appear to be a part of the ornamentation of the house!”

“They’re almost too narrow to ascend,” Jean said as she started to climb up. “Be careful, Louise.”

Cautiously the girls moved up the stone stairway, holding on to each other for support. When they reached the flat roof Louise demonstrated how easy it would be to shift the intertwining vines back into position.

“There doesn’t seem to be any opening in the roof,” Jean said in disappointment as she flashed her light about.

“But here are steps leading right up the big chimney!” Louise cried out in delight. “Isn’t it exciting?”

The girls ascended the chimney, and as they peered into its black depths they gasped in amazement. Another series of steps led downward.

“It’s the secret entrance to the locked room!” Jean exclaimed.

The structure was wide enough to allow the girls ample room in which to descend. The steps, however, led almost straight down so that the girls experienced some difficulty to keep from falling.

Jean, who was in advance, presently came to an opening. She halted and flashed her light into the dark interior.

“Louise!” she murmured in awe. “Look at this!”

Meanwhile Professor Crandall and Mona Martin had departed for the old stone mansion, somewhat puzzled by Mrs. Crandall’s request for their immediate appearance there. At the time when the Danas were making their amazing discovery, teacher and student were bumping along over the peninsula road in the Crandalls’ small car. Since leaving Milton the professor had observed the increasing nervousness of his passenger, and at first had attributed it to her fear of the condition of the road.

“Now don’t worry, my dear,” he sought to reassure his companion. “We will be at the mansion very soon.”

“Oh, you don’t understand,” Mona murmured. “It isn’t the ride that is making me nervous.”

“What is wrong, my child? You seem so upset.”

“I dread meeting the group at the mansion. You see, I am not what you think I am, Professor Crandall. I know the Dana girls have discovered my secret. That is why they sent for me.”

“Your secret?” the professor inquired in astonishment.

“I am an Indian,” Mona said with a little sob. “That is why none of the girls like me.”

Professor Crandall stared at his companion with a new interest.

“Why, you should be proud of your Indian blood, Mona,” he said kindly. “Many distinguished citizens were born on reservations. But I am sure you are wrong about the girls not liking you. I have heard many speak highly of your accomplishments.”

“Lettie Briggs says that Indians are shiftless and lazy, not fit to associate with other persons. That’s why I tried to keep my secret.”

“Well, you shouldn’t judge all the girls by Lettie. She is not representative of our school.”

“The Dana girls were the only ones who suspected the truth,” Mona continued, brightening somewhat. “When I sang that Indian chant at the school concert they began to wonder, I think. And then, when I took Louise’s notes—”

“*You* took them!” Professor Crandall exclaimed, in his astonishment very nearly running off the road.

“I meant no harm,” Mona said humbly. “I wanted to correct a few errors which she made about the Agawa tribe. I thought she wouldn’t mind since I returned the papers.”

“And did you take the second set of notes from my office?”

“Oh, no,” Mona answered quickly, “only those from Louise’s room.”

“You are a descendant of the Agawas?” Professor Crandall inquired with deep interest.

“Yes, my ancestors formerly lived along the shores of this lake.”

“Why, that is amazing, Mona. No doubt you will be able to give me assistance in preparing my book on Indian lore.”

“I’ll be glad to tell you anything I can, Professor Crandall.”

By the time the travelers had reached the stone mansion, Mona was in a cheerful mood again. The professor had gone to great lengths to assure her of his sincere feeling that she should be proud of her unusual

heritage. As the car drew up to the door, Mrs. Crandall, Helen and Evelyn hastened out to meet the newcomers.

“My dear, you should have warned me about the condition of the road,” the professor gently chided his wife upon greeting her. “It is a wonder that we ever reached here alive.”

Mrs. Crandall scarcely heard the words. Grasping her husband by an arm she said in a voice tense with emotion:

“Oh, I am so glad that you are here. I fear some harm has befallen Louise and Jean. They have been missing over two hours!”

CHAPTER XXIV

INSIDE THE LOCKED ROOM

Stepping through the opening of the wide chimney, Jean and Louise found themselves in a strange room. Their flashlight beams revealed a chamber filled with unique Indian treasures—rugs, woven blankets, silver jewelry and pottery. The place was cluttered with priceless objects among which the girls moved cautiously lest they step on some fragile piece of pottery and grind it to bits.

“I never dreamed we’d find anything like this in the locked room,” Louise murmured in awe when at last she gained control of her voice. “These treasures are ages old and must be worth a fortune!”

“Who left them in this room?” Jean asked in bewilderment. “Surely not the last owner of the stone mansion?”

“These things may have been part of a rich man’s collection,” Louise said thoughtfully. After a moment she added excitedly, “It would be my guess that an Indian is the guardian of this room!”

“You mean *at the present time*?” Jean inquired quickly.

“We know that Indians were employed as servants in this locality, Jean. Maybe one of them here now is a

descendant of full blood. Then you recall that several times I have seen someone in red darting through the trees—I suspect now that it was an Indian in a bright colored blanket.”

“Yes, and the disappearance of the dugout would seem to indicate that the same person is skulking about here tonight.”

“We searched for footprints and found none,” Louise continued. “Probably that was because the Indian wore moccasins.”

“I believe we are well on the way toward solving the mystery,” Jean said in satisfaction. “Let’s hurry back and tell Mrs. Crandall.”

The girls started to cross the room toward the chimney, when suddenly they heard a scraping sound coming from the roof. Nervously Louise and Jean clung to each other, switching off their flashlights.

“Someone is coming!” Jean whispered. “We’re trapped!”

The girls crouched near the opening in the chimney, ready to defend themselves, if necessary. As they watched with bated breaths, a beam of light appeared. Then came a pair of moccasins, next a red blanket, and finally they found themselves face to face with a withered looking old Indian woman.

“Oh!” gasped Jean in relief.

The next instant she was blinded by the brilliant beam of a flashlight. Then the ray played over Louise.

“You make light,” the Indian woman commanded in halting English.

For a moment the girls did not understand, but they switched on their own flashlights so that the room was fairly well illuminated. The aged woman regarded them stoically, displaying neither surprise nor anger.

“I know some time you find room,” she muttered. “But Dawn Flower glad—soon she die. Like tell secret before end come.”

“Do all the things in this room belong to you?” Louise inquired gently.

“Dawn Flower keep them for tribesmen—many years pass—no one come back.”

Louise and Jean could not imagine what the old woman meant, but by asking many questions they finally pieced together Dawn Flower’s amazing history.

Years before, the Indians of the Moon Lake territory had been deeded the peninsula by the government to be held tax free. Through various schemes perpetrated by unscrupulous white men, descendants of the red men had been driven out and their property confiscated.

One such schemer had been the builder of the stone mansion. Hated by the Indians, the man had feared

reprisals, and as a secret retreat in time of danger, he had built two hide-outs; the cellar beneath the trapdoor and the hidden room on the third floor. Later the owner of the mansion had revealed the hiding places to a trusted Indian servant, who at the time of his master's death had passed the knowledge on to the father of Dawn Flower.

The circular staircase leading to the locked room had been constructed by the heirs of the original mansion owner. The locked door had been added as a convenient means of entering the secret chamber.

Knowledge of the secret had come to Dawn Flower from her aged father, who for many years had served as custodian of the treasured belongings of scattered tribesmen. Upon the death of her parent, Dawn Flower had assumed the care of the priceless relics, all the while haunted by the fear that the possessions might be stolen some day.

Learning that the stone mansion was vacant, Dawn Flower transferred the treasures to the secret room. Her son had taken down the circular staircase, chopped it into sections, and hidden the pieces in the cellar. To make certain that no one ever would reach the inner chamber, he had locked the door, removed the knob, and built a stone wall behind the structure.

“My son and his wife die soon after,” Dawn Flower revealed in an unemotional voice. “Leave small papoose. Dawn Flower take her—love her like own. Ten year go by. Girl disappear.”

“Oh, that was a pity,” Louise murmured sympathetically. “Don’t you know what became of the child, Dawn Flower?”

The old woman shook her head and brushed a wisp of white hair from her eyes.

“She wander from camp. Maybe drown in lake—maybe killed.”

“Or possibly she merely became separated from you and was sent to an Indian reservation,” Jean suggested kindly. “Then too, the girl might have been adopted by a white family.”

“Dawn Flower give up all hope now,” the old woman said sadly.

“Where do you live?” Louise questioned thoughtfully.

The woman made a gesture which took in the locked room and the entire mansion. Louise and Jean understood her to mean that she had been living alone in the old house. They now comprehended the significance of the fire in the outdoor hearth, the odor of meat cooking, the smoke issuing from the central chimney. The creaking sounds likewise were explained, for in walking over the floor of the secret room Jean had noticed that several boards were loose.

When questioned, Dawn Flower readily admitted that she was the mysterious person who had caused so much alarm in the household. Not wishing to disturb the campers, she had tried to make as little noise as possible, sleeping by day and hunting for game by night.

“So that accounts for the animal traps,” Jean commented.

“And did the dugout belong to you also, Dawn Flower?”

“Dawn Flower use boat tonight,” the old woman admitted.

“Sometimes go for swim. Once borrow horse.”

“Do you know who owns this Moon Lake property at the present time?” Louise asked, as it was evident that the Indian had told all of her story.

“All land along shore belong to tribesmen. Dawn Flower hold deeds.”

“Then Anthony Burns is nothing but a sharper!” Jean cried excitedly. “Dawn Flower, are you certain you have the deeds?”

“Papers with red seal.”

“You probably have a clear title,” Louise declared. “I understand now why records at the court house were vague.”

“We must take Dawn Flower to Mrs. Crandall at once, Louise.”

“Yes, but first I have a few more questions to ask. Dawn Flower, tell me everything you can about your little granddaughter.”

“She very pretty,” the woman answered proudly. “She have voice like lark.”

Jean and Louise exchanged startled glances as the same thought occurred to them simultaneously. Then Louise, with a slight tremble in her voice, said quietly:

“You have not told us the name of your little granddaughter, Dawn Flower. Was it—Mona?”

CHAPTER XXV

MONA'S BIRTHRIGHT

For the first time since her meeting with the two girls, Dawn Flower lost her stoic calm.

“Mona!” her voice rose to a high pitch. “That her name. Mona!”

A bony hand reached out to grasp Louise’s wrist. The fingers pressed so tightly into the girl’s flesh that she flinched with pain.

“You find?” the old woman asked in a rasping tone.

“I know a girl named Mona,” Louise answered. “She may or may not be your granddaughter. I will take you to her.”

The Dana girls conducted the old woman to the roof, and she showed them how to descend the steep stone stairs safely. As the three reached the ground they were met by the frantic searchers, who had been looking everywhere for the missing girls. Helen Brewster, who caught the first glimpse of Louise and Jean, stopped short and uttered a little scream.

“Whatever has happened? You’re both as black as a stove! And bringing an——”

“Don’t be alarmed,” Louise said with a gay laugh.
“The black is only soot and will wash off. I want you to meet Dawn Flower, the guardian of the locked room!”

Professor and Mrs. Crandall hurried forward, greatly relieved to observe that the girls had not been harmed. Great was their astonishment as the Danas hurriedly told of their discovery of the Indian woman.

“Where is Mona?” Louise asked quickly. “Did she come with you, Professor Crandall?”

“Yes, she is at the other side of the house. We all were searching for you.”

“Someone find Mona, please,” Louise requested. “We will go into the house, for Jean and I have a strange tale to relate.”

Helen ran to bring the dark-haired girl. As she entered the living room, her eyes went straight to the old Indian woman.

“Dawn Flower, this is Mona Martin,” Louise said quietly.

A strange look came over the Indian girl’s face. Her lips moved slightly and she murmured the words “Dawn Flower.” Then a beautiful light came into her eyes.

“Now I remember!” she cried. “Dawn Flower was the name of my grandmother! But I don’t understand—you——”

“Mona,” the old woman whispered, extending knotted hands. “You are daughter. Mark on forehead. Dawn Flower remember.”

Mona's hand went to her brow, where a faint scar was visible. As the truth came to her that indeed she was the granddaughter of Dawn Flower, she flung herself into the old woman's arms. For a long while they clung to each other, oblivious of the others in the room. Finally, however, Mona thanked Louise and Jean for having brought about the happy reunion, and told them everything she remembered of her early life.

"When I was about ten years old I wandered away from my grandmother's home. Somehow I reached the road, and there, after being hopelessly lost, I was picked up by some passing motorists who took me to a children's home.

"I was very happy in the institution, and after a year I was adopted by the Martins, who had no children of their own. They were very kind to me and I learned to love them. But at times I yearned for my grandmother and the old carefree life."

"Did you never try to return?" Mrs. Crandall inquired.

"I had no money of my own, and I could remember nothing of the locality where I was born save that it was near Moon Lake. I thought too that my grandmother might have moved on to another place."

"Actually, she came here to the stone mansion," Louise explained.

"Mr. and Mrs. Martin reared me as their own daughter," Mona continued her story. "I felt grateful,

and did not wish to distress them by talking of the past. I hoped some day to visit Moon Lake, but until Mrs. Crandall announced that she was bringing a party here I had been unable to gratify my wish.”

“My dear child,” the headmistress interposed sympathetically, “if only I had known why you desired to come here!”

“I was afraid to tell lest I be ridiculed because of my Indian blood.” As Mona spoke her gaze rested for a moment on Lettie. The girl flushed and looked away.

“We all honor you for it,” Jean said.

“Yes indeed,” Mrs. Crandall added. “You should be proud of it, Mona.”

“I realize that now. You have all been so kind.”

“I think you should tell your foster parents,” Professor Crandall suggested. “They have a right to know, but I am confident they will be sympathetic.”

“I did tell them everything only a few days ago. My foster father brought me to Milton, but nothing there looked familiar to me. I had never seen the town before. Dawn Flower did not take me there when I was a child.”

“Mona, were you the person who fled from the general store when Louise and I entered?” Jean inquired.

“Yes,” the girl acknowledged. “I should have faced you, but I feared you might tell Mrs. Crandall and she would punish me for following the party to Milton.”

“My dear, I always try to be just,” Mrs. Crandall murmured.

“I acted very foolishly,” Mona admitted. “I realize that now, but I heard Lettie say——”

“Oh, forget that,” Lettie interrupted hastily. “I didn’t mean anything.”

Louise and Jean had saved their surprise for the very last. They led an amazed group up the stone stairs, down the chimney, and into the locked room.

At sight of the wonderful collection of Indian relics Professor Crandall lost his usual dignity and darted excitedly from one object to another, declaring that each was the best specimen he had ever examined.

“So you have lived in this old house these last years, Dawn Flower,” Mrs. Crandall said to the old woman. “It is almost unbelievable. How did you obtain your food?”

“Fish from lake—game from forest,” Dawn Flower answered. “Hunter sometimes bring flour, salt, sugar from Milton. Trade for animal skins.”

“I can understand why no one in Milton suspected that you live here,” Louise remarked. “It’s no wonder that the townsfolk believed the old mansion to be haunted.”

“We thought it was too for a few days,” Evelyn Starr said with a chuckle.

“I think none of us accepted the ghost theory,” Mrs. Crandall corrected. “However, the mystery was a perplexing one, and I admit that if it had not been for the Dana girls I should have left the place the night of our arrival.”

When Louise and Jean revealed that Dawn Flower held deeds to the stone mansion property, the headmistress looked deeply chagrined. The papers were produced by the old Indian Woman, and upon examination they appeared to be legal.

“Tony Burns is a scoundrel and must be arrested!” the professor declared angrily. “I shall drive to Milton and file a complaint.”

“The road is a dangerous one to take after dark,” Jean pointed out. “Would it not be wiser to wait until tomorrow? Mrs. Crandall has an appointment with Mr. Burns here at the mansion. Why not set a trap and coax him to walk into it?”

“So far we have practically no proof that he has tried to swindle anyone,” Louise added.

The Dana girls’ suggestion was a wise one, and Mr. and Mrs. Crandall readily acknowledged the wisdom of biding their time. Early the next morning the professor drove to Milton, returning with the constable.

The officer secreted himself in a room of the mansion. With the stage properly set, the Crandalls awaited the arrival of Anthony Burns. The man did not disappoint them. Promptly at two o'clock he rode up to the house and was admitted.

"I have only a few minutes," he said hurriedly, "for I am taking a west-bound train this evening. The papers are all ready, but I must have cash for the property or the deal will be off."

"I have decided to buy the place," Mrs. Crandall replied, "but I must have definite assurance that the title is clear."

"Just look over these papers. You'll see that everything is in order."

Mrs. Crandall made a pretense of examining the forged documents. Then she wrote out a check for the property. Tony Burns took it from her hand a little too eagerly, but before he could pocket it the constable had stepped into the room.

"Mr. Anthony Burns," he said tersely, "you are under arrest."

The man fumed and protested angrily, but when confronted with the genuine deeds to the peninsula property he realized he could not hope to bluff his way out. Accused by Louise of falsifying the deeds, he finally admitted his guilt, confessing that he had learned of the incomplete records about the Moon Lake property and had thought the situation offered an opportunity to make easy money.

“You tried to cheat Lettie,” Jean said sternly, “and I have no doubt but that you’ve sold property to other gullible persons.”

Lettie flushed to hear herself spoken of as a gullible person, and Mrs. Crandall glanced quickly away. Well did she know that save for the Dana girls’ timely exposé, she too would have been one of Mr. Burns’s victims.

The man accordingly was taken away by the constable. Later in the afternoon word came that Jean and Louise had been correct in their suspicions; Tony Burns had sold several tracts of Moon Lake land to various persons.

The deeds held by Dawn Flower were examined by lawyers and found to be genuine. Should the land be sold, descendants of the Indians who originally occupied the property would profit handsomely.

Louise and Jean were elated at the outcome of their adventure but Mrs. Crandall appeared somewhat depressed. The girls guessed that she was feeling blue because she had been unable to purchase the stone mansion.

“The property now stands in Dawn Flower’s name,” the head mistress revealed. “Upon her death it will pass to Mona.”

Unnoticed by anyone, the Indian woman had entered the room in time to hear Mrs. Crandall’s words.

“That time come soon,” she murmured.

“Oh, I’m sure you will live for many, many years,” Jean said quickly.

The old woman shook her head. She touched her breast as if to indicate a pain which was deep within her.

Later that day the Dana girls talked with Mona regarding what disposition should be made of the old stone mansion.

“I cannot allow Dawn Flower to remain here alone,” Mona said. “She is very ill and must have the best of medical attention. We have talked matters over and have decided to lease the property to Mrs. Crandall.”

“Oh, I’m glad!” Jean exclaimed gaily. “We’ll have our summer camp after all!”

“The income will more than keep Dawn Flower to the end of her days,” Mona continued. “The other Moon Lake property will be sold. I understand that a friend of yours, a Mrs. Weston, is to benefit from the sale of one of the tracts.”

The Dana girls were delighted to hear this piece of news, for they knew that the widow had very little money left. There remained only the disposition of the Indian relics found in the locked room, and Professor Crandall prevailed upon Dawn Flower to allow him to have them removed to a museum. However, the aged Indian woman insisted upon retaining a few objects for herself and Mona, and delighted Louise and Jean by giving them each a beautiful silver bracelet.

With all the details of the lease arranged, Mrs. Crandall regretfully announced that she must take her party back to Starhurst School. On the last evening before the departure the girls sat on the beach and watched a full moon rise out of the lake.

“I still think I’d like to buy that property Tony tried to sell me,” Lettie said unexpectedly.

“What would you do with it?” Jean asked with an amused smile. “Start a rival girls’ camp?”

Lettie was full of hair-brained schemes, some of them very annoying to the Dana girls. At times she meant only to play tricks. One of these was to occur in their next mystery called “The Clue in the Cobweb.”

“There is just one question I should like to ask,” Mona said hesitantly. “Why did you girls send for me? You suspected I knew the secret of Moon Lake?”

“There were several reasons,” Louise answered, “but that chant which you sang at the recital lingered long in my memory. Then we heard it again down here. I finally decided either that you had been here and sung it, or that someone who had taught it to you was in this locality. Also, I have visualized you many times as an Indian princess.”

“I have no claim to such a title,” Mona replied with a gay laugh. “And it must have been Dawn Flower who sang it.”

“Won’t you sing the chant again?” Jean pleaded.

The girls never were to forget the picture which Mona made as she sat silhouetted against the sky, her head tilted slightly. She began to sing; and until the last weird strains of the tune died away no one moved.

“Beautiful,” Louise murmured. “Tell us the meaning of the song, Mona.”

“It is a chant of happiness,” the girl responded in a low, musical voice. “Until tonight I did not believe that life could hold so much. If only I could thank you all——”

Louise and Jean sprang to their feet, for they wished to forestall any expression of gratitude.

“You already have shown your appreciation in the very best way, Mona,” Louise said. “The girls’ camp always will remain a monument to your generosity.”

“Besides,” Jean added gleefully, “solving the mystery, here at Moon Lake has given Louise and me some of the biggest thrills we’ve ever had.”

It had been exciting. And there were still more thrills to come for the Dana girls, when they discovered the meaning of “The Clue in the Cobweb.”

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CAROLYN KEENE**

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[The end of *The Mystery of the Locked Room* by Carolyn Keene]