

THE DOUBLE DISGUISE



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by Frances K. Judd

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**THE DOUBLE
DISGUISE**

FRANCES K. JUDD



“What a perfect disguise!” she thought in alarm. (See [Page 178](#))

KAY TRACEY MYSTERY STORIES

THE DOUBLE DISGUISE

By
FRANCES K. JUDD

ILLUSTRATED

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CHAPTER I

THE STRANGER

“Oh, isn’t this snow heavenly!” exclaimed Kay Tracey, a bright-faced high school girl, as she jumped off the train at her home station of Brantwood.

A group of girls and several boys tumbled eagerly down the steps behind her, all laughing and shouting at one another.

“I’m so glad we’re going to have Friday off from school. We’ll have a glorious week-end, coasting and skating!” exulted Kay’s gay companion, Betty Worth.

“Brrrr!” shivered Betty’s twin sister Wilma. “This is the kind of weather I love to spend indoors, curled up by an open fire, with a good book to read.”

The twins, Betty and Wilma Worth, as may be guessed from their remarks, were not at all alike. Betty, the fair-haired, lively one, was always bubbling over with gaiety and activity, while book-loving Wilma, her dark-haired sister, was thoughtful and quiet. Both were alike in one thing, however; their devotion to their best friend, Kay Tracey.

Kay, herself, was a slender, attractive girl with thick, curly brown hair and a friendly, direct look in her clear

eyes. She was a great favorite with the school group which commuted daily from the little town of Brantwood to the nearby high school in Carmont.

As the young people surged merrily across the station plaza, all rejoiced loudly in their freedom for a week-end of fun, except one discontented girl. This was Ethel Eaton, who was heard to grumble:

“Bother this cold! My toes are simply freezing!”

As the pushing, jostling passengers stamped over the slippery ground, a woman suddenly slid and fell heavily to the pavement. Her handbag flew open. Out spilled everything from it. The catch on her suitcase also snapped open and its contents, too, were strewn over the snow.

The unfortunate woman, a middle-aged person, was half stunned by the sudden violence of her fall. Eyes closed, she lay still, dazed and jarred breathless, amid the wreckage of her scattered possessions.

Kay and the Worths rushed up to help her, but were brushed aside abruptly by a young man who assumed charge of her things in a possessive manner. He was a short, slender fellow, very blonde, with an almost girlishly smooth pink-and-white complexion.

Kay recovered the woman's coin purse from the snow and was about to brush it off when this young man snatched it from her almost as if he suspected her of trying to keep it. At this Kay protested.

“Just a minute, please! Don’t worry about my keeping the purse; I am just helping this lady. By the way, may I ask why you are taking charge of her things? Do you know her?”

“I’m her son!” retorted the young fellow in a surly manner, and went on hastily collecting the various objects which had burst from the suitcase.

Kay had nothing more to say, but she gave him a suspicious look as she turned away to help the unfortunate woman. Assisted by the twins, the victim now was trying to sit up. She groaned and tugged feebly at her hat, which had fallen over one ear. The sisters brushed off the soft wet snow which had fallen inside her coat collar.

“Do you think you can walk?” asked Kay, stooping over to extend a helping hand.

“It’s so wet and cold here, perhaps you had better rest awhile inside the station,” added Wilma.

“You are very kind,” murmured the woman, struggling to rise. By leaning heavily on the girls’ arms she made her way, limping, into the warmth of the building, and sank down on a bench.

“Thank you so much!” she breathed, her voice low and gentle.

She leaned back and closed her eyes, her face as white as the snow which powdered her from head to foot. Kay noted the well-bred accents of the lady’s voice, and her clothes, which were in excellent taste and of expensive

quality. Plainly, she was a person of both culture and wealth. At that moment she opened her eyes and a little color drained back into her cheeks.

“My handbag and my suitcase!” she murmured anxiously. “I’m afraid I dropped them and spilled things.”

She made an effort to rise, but sank back, feeling faint, and shut her eyes again.

“Your son has them,” Kay said reassuringly. “Don’t worry about them. He’ll bring them in and meanwhile I’ll get you a drink of water.”

Kay hurried to the cooler while Betty dashed out to hail a taxi. Wilma stood by brushing off the melting snow. Suddenly the woman looked up at Wilma and asked:

“Who did she say has my things?”

“Your son,” comforted Wilma.

“My son!” ejaculated the lady sharply. “Why, I have no son! I’m not married! My name is Miss Alice Janey, and I’m quite alone in the world and have been since my dear father died. I don’t know whom you mean!”

“A young man who rescued your things told us he was your son, didn’t he, Kay?” queried Wilma as her chum returned with the paper cup of water.

“Oh, dear me!” lamented the lady in distress. “He’s an impostor! What has he done with my bags? It is very

important for me to have them as they contain valuables!” she added, rising uncertainly to her feet.

Kay rushed out to look for the blonde young man. He was nowhere to be seen! The lady, greatly disturbed, attempted to reach the door, but her faintness returned and she slumped back on the bench.

At that moment Ethel Eaton, the disgruntled girl who had complained of the cold, now pushed her way through the gathering crowd. She forced herself forward importantly until she reached Miss Janey.

“You must lie down at once and have a doctor!” Ethel announced.

She immediately began to take charge in her bossy fashion, giving orders to which no one paid the slightest attention. She commanded the curious crowd to stand back, and persistently pushed the victim down upon the bench. When Kay returned, Miss Janey, annoyed at Ethel, addressed herself to the Tracey girl. The alarm about her lost bags seemed to have restored the woman’s stunned wits and she exclaimed:

“I have been robbed! Quick! Get a policeman and catch that man!”

Kay, dashing out again, bumped into Betty who said she could not find a taxi. She added that no doubt the lady’s son had gone to get one, as he had hurried up the street with the bags.

“Which way did he go?” Kay gasped, and raced in the direction Betty pointed.

She was nearly run down by a car which skidded to a halt with a shrill scream of brakes.

“Watch where you’re going!” warned a man’s voice from the car window.

Kay looked up to behold her own cousin, Bill Tracey. He was a promising young lawyer who had shared the Tracey home and its responsibilities since the death of Kay’s father. There was nobody the girl would rather have seen at that particular minute!

Breathlessly she poured out the situation to him as she scrambled into his car. Bill lost no time in speeding after the stranger.

“There he is!” exclaimed Kay in triumph and excitement as they bore down upon the hurrying figure of the slim young fellow with Miss Janey’s suitcase.

The car leaped ahead, only to be stopped by a traffic jam at a cross street. Meanwhile the stranger speedily hastened on. As soon as possible, Cousin Bill edged forward but there came the sharp squeal of a policeman’s whistle. A traffic officer held up a forbidding hand. Bill Tracey leaned out of his car and shouted:

“Officer, you’re needed! Jump in and help us catch that fellow running away with a stolen bag!”

The uniformed man instantly hopped inside and Bill tore along. The next traffic light turned red, but with the officer signaling and the horn bellowing, they charged through. They were gaining on the thief who was still to be seen in the distance. Suddenly he took a quick turn and vanished.

“Maybe he stepped into that dingy roadster which shot out from a side street,” suggested Kay.

Its license plate was too encrusted with snow to be readable, but a blonde head seemed faintly discernible from the window as the car darted away. A vain chase revealed no sign of which turn this auto took at the next corner, and also no further glimpse of the thief. At length Bill, Kay and the officer turned back in disappointment.

The Traceys and the friendly policeman went at once to the railroad station. The twins were still there with the distracted Miss Janey. Cousin Bill and the officer interviewed her and learned that the runaway robber, who had posed as her son, had made away with all the contents of her safe deposit box. She was about to transfer her valuables and certain secret papers to a bank in Brantwood where she intended to make her home.

“I used to visit here when I was a girl,” she explained. “As my home is now broken up and it is necessary for me to economize, I plan to settle in Brantwood where I used to be happy. I hope to spend the rest of my life trying to complete some work that my late dear father and I were interested in. But now, if everything I value is lost, I don’t know what I shall do.” Her pale lips trembled.

The policeman said cheerily, “Don’t worry, Madam, we’ll catch that thief and get your valuables back for you.”

Despite this reassurance, the unhappy victim of the robbery turned chalk white and fainted away.

CHAPTER II

A CHASE

As Miss Janey collapsed, Kay caught her and eased her down upon the bench. The twins quickly loosened her collar and rubbed her cold hands.

Ethel, delighted at the excitement, ran fussily for another cup of water. In her eagerness to be the one to revive the patient, she squeezed the frail paper cup too hard and the water spurted all over the poor woman's face and trickled down her neck.

“A big help you are, Ethel!” commented Betty, mopping up the ice water with her handkerchief.

The splash, however, had proved a clumsy but effective restorative. Miss Janey's eyelids fluttered and she looked up at the faces bending over her.

“I'm sorry!” she sighed. “Please help me get to the hotel. I shall be all right if I can go to bed and rest after all this shock.”

“You shall go to no hotel!” declared Kay Tracey emphatically. “You are going straight home with me. I have telephoned Mother to have the guest room ready for you!

You have been through too much,” the girl continued hospitably, “to spend a forlorn night alone in a hotel! Come, Miss Janey, my Cousin Bill will put you into his car and we’ll take you home in a very few minutes!”

In spite of her protests, the woman soon found herself installed in the rear seat of Bill’s car, supported on either side by a twin. With Kay on the front seat with her cousin, they soon were turning into the Tracey driveway.

Mrs. Tracey was awaiting them at the door. Before Kay could introduce the newcomer to her, Miss Janey gave an intent look at the girl’s mother and uttered an excited exclamation.

“Kathryn! Can I believe my eyes! After all these years! What a coincidence!”

“Alice Janey! Is it really you? Why, you haven’t changed a bit!”

The two girlhood friends fell into each other’s arms, laughing and forgetting entirely the girls and Cousin Bill who stood staring in amazement.

“Alice! Do tell me what has happened!”

“Oh, Mother,” interrupted Kay, “don’t you think poor Miss Janey ought to get settled in her room before we bother her with any more details?”

“Forgive me!” cried Mrs. Tracey. “Of course you are right, Kay. I was so excited I didn’t think! Come, Alice, let me

make you comfortable in your own room. The girls will bring you something hot to drink. Then you will feel more like telling what has happened.”

When at last Miss Janey was snug in bed, sipping hot tea, the twins and Kay told the story of the robbery.

“That thief was rather good-looking,” ventured Betty.

“Too sissy!” said Kay. “I’m surprised such a person had the nerve to carry out such a daring robbery.”

“It just goes to show that one never should judge by appearances,” commented Mrs. Tracey.

“Oh, I hope they catch him!” murmured Miss Janey in despair.

“He’ll be caught if we have to do it ourselves!” declared Kay so energetically that their anxious guest indulged in a smile.

“If Kay makes up her mind to run him to earth, you may be sure she will do it!” Mrs. Tracey remarked. “It is getting to be a habit with her!”

She rehearsed some of the detective work which Kay, with the help of the twins, had carried out successfully on former occasions. It all began when a mystery presented itself which afterwards came to be called “The Secret of the Red Scarf.” Kay, finding a young orphan boy in trouble, endeavored to find his missing elder sister for him and had a series of exciting adventures doing it. From that time on, the Tracey girl came upon mystery after mystery. These she not only

was instrumental in solving but also in using to restore happiness to unfortunate people. Her most recent case was that of “The Lone Footprint.”

“I think solving mysteries is the greatest fun in the world,” declared Kay enthusiastically. “And now, if we are to solve yours, we must know a little more about what happened and what you have lost.”

“To begin with,” answered the woman, “I was nervous about carrying the contents of my safe deposit box with me alone on the train. I suppose I should not have done it. There were papers of father’s, however, that I hated to trust to anyone else or even to the mails. I thought an ordinary suitcase would arouse no suspicion of its valuable contents, and I cannot understand how it burst open so easily when I fell.”

“Perhaps you were pushed by the thief,” suggested Kay.

“At the time it seemed a plain case of slipping on the snow,” continued Miss Janey, “but I do remember being shoved roughly for no reason at all. Probably it was done on purpose. I fear it is all part of a well-laid plan. The idea that I am the victim of a plot terrifies me!” The woman’s eyes grew dark with fear as she spoke.

“If that is the case, the sooner we break up the plot the better!” cried Kay. “That man, I am convinced, escaped in the shabby roadster. There was snow on the license plates so nobody could read them. I am sure I have noticed that machine from time to time on the lonely river road. What do

you say, girls,” she asked, turning to the twins, “shall we take a ride up that way and see if there is any sign of that car?”

“Right away!” assented Betty, springing from her chair.

“That river road is so desolate!” hesitated Wilma, but seeing a glint in her sister’s eye she finished resolutely, “We’d better go at once, before it gets dark!”

Miss Janey made a timorous protest, but the girls never heard it, for already they were racing downstairs. In a jiffy Kay had the family car out on the road and the energetic trio were on their way. They had been breezing along for some time when the auto gave a discouraging cough and began to slow down.

“What’s the matter?” asked Wilma uneasily.

“Out of gas!” groaned Kay, as the machine came to a standstill.

“We’re miles from a gasoline station!” moaned Betty.

“Half a mile only,” corrected Kay, hopping out. “Come on, Betty, we’ll go back and get gas. Wilma, you stay here in the car and keep watch.”

Trudging to the fuel pump and then back again through the snow, and lugging the heavy gas can between them was tedious work for the two girls. They were glad to get back to the auto. The container was deposited in the road while Kay unscrewed the cap of her empty gas tank.

At that moment there came the roar of a machine approaching at reckless speed. Down the road, swishing snow on either side, it careened. The auto came at such a wild rate that it rocked and leaped whenever it struck frozen hummocks, and skidded dangerously through the slippery drifts.

“Watch out! That driver’s crazy! Don’t get hit!” cautioned Kay sharply.

Betty hastily skipped out of the way just in time to be missed by the roadster with the snow covered license plates! It whizzed by in a flash.

In jumping to safety, Betty had abandoned the gas can in the road, close to the side of the Tracey car. The roadster barely had missed sideswiping the auto itself, but had run over and flattened the container. The fuel now was running out in a puddle in the snow.

“Oh dear!” lamented Wilma. There was a distressed note in her voice.

“Never mind, we were lucky not to be hit!” consoled Betty, shaky from her narrow escape.

“Did you notice the driver?” cried Kay. “It was the sissy fellow who stole the suitcase!”

“How maddening that he spilled our gas!” stormed Betty.

“I should say so!” raged Kay. “Let’s hustle right back for more and we may catch him yet!”

“Don’t leave me alone if that robber is going to be tearing up and down this road!” objected Wilma, leaping out of the car to join the other two.

Three crestfallen girls settled down to the long, cold hike back to the filling station.

“There’s Ethel Eaton getting air in her tires,” cried Betty, shouting out, “Hi, Ethel, we’re stranded down the road. How about giving us a lift back there, with some gas to start our car?”

Ethel greeted this idea frostily. “Sorry, but I haven’t time now,” she answered.

“If that isn’t exactly like her!” fumed Betty in disgust, as the unfriendly girl began to back her auto into the roadway.

As she did so, a big black sedan roared down the road at a dare-devil rate. Ethel, on the wrong side of the highway, backed directly into the path of the on-rushing machine.

Realizing too late that it was tearing straight at her, Ethel tried desperately to get out of the way before being hit. Her wheels spun futilely in the snow and then her engine stalled! With a blast of the siren, the shriek of brakes and a loud crash, the fast car smashed into Ethel’s!

CHAPTER III

WOMEN OF MYSTERY

Ethel's scream tore the air. Wilma hid her face in her hands. Kay and Betty dashed forward, sure that the Eaton girl was not hurt because of the lively way she was shouting at the two men who had crashed into her.

“Why don't you look where you're going? Why do you drive at such a crazy speed? I'll sue you for this!” she shrieked in fury.

“You backed right in front of us, Miss, and you were on the wrong side of the road!” answered one of the men from the other car.

“I shall make a charge of reckless driving against you!” raged Ethel.

“We're chasing a runaway thief,” explained the second man, getting out of the sedan.

Then the Eaton girl saw that they were officers in uniform and that she had hit a police car! She had nothing more to say.

“That thief passed us, going like the wind,” Kay informed the men quickly.

“He nearly ran over us down the road where our car is stranded. We’re out of gas,” added Betty, paying for another canful which was now ready for her.

“Jump in with us and we’ll drop you off at your car. You can show us the way that thief went,” said one of the officers.

The girls hastily piled in, deserting Ethel. In no time they were by their own auto. The police car slowed down for the girls to jump out, then whizzed away.

Kay carefully poured the second supply of gas into the tank. As it was growing dark and colder, it seemed best to drive back to the station to fill up and then return home. Ethel was still there, arranging for repairs to her car. Kay, goodnaturedly forgetting the girl’s ungracious refusal to give them a lift, now offered her a ride back to town. The invitation was accepted glumly. The Eaton girl wore a sly look of satisfaction at the thought that Kay and the twins had won no credit for capturing the robber.

The Tracey girl drove her chums home and reached her own house just in time for supper. Her mind was too intent upon catching the robber, however, for her to feel hungry. She was glad of the opportunity to talk again with Miss Janey. By this time the woman was much clearer about the whole situation.

“I can recall something now that I forgot before,” she confided to Kay. “When I was at the bank arranging to

get everything out of my strong box I remember seeing a young woman who seemed almost too interested in what I was doing. At the time she merely annoyed me by being too inquisitive. She forced her company upon me and insisted upon talking too much while I was waiting. I may have said something to her, in a general way, about my plans, in answer to her many questions.”

“Can you remember anything you said?”

“Let me see. Yes, I think I mentioned Brantwood because she seemed to know the place and said it was such a pretty town. She asked where I was going to live, saying she had a relative here and was familiar with some of the streets.”

“I hope you didn’t tell her!” said Kay.

Miss Janey looked worried. “No, I don’t think so. I am too reserved to divulge my business to strangers, though in a casual sort of way I may have mentioned that I had bought a house. The young woman just seemed to worm things out of me against my will. I thought then that she was a harmless, talkative girl. Now I am not so sure.”

“Probably she was trying deliberately to find out your plans,” remarked Kay.

“I am afraid so,” confessed the woman.

“What did this young person look like?” Kay asked curiously.

“I didn’t pay much attention to her,” replied Miss Janey regretfully. “I had my mind on my own affairs and did not look at her closely.”

“Can’t you recall how she looked?” urged Kay.

Miss Janey pressed her fingers to her eyes and made an effort to bring to her mind an image of the young woman.

“Well, she was blonde; I remember that. Rather curly hair. There was nothing distinguished about her. I am not sure I should recognize her if I should see her again. She was dressed plainly in something dark.”

“Was she taller than you?” prompted Kay.

“She was medium tall and slender. It seems to me she wore black gloves to match her coat. I am fairly sure that her coat was black and tailored looking. Yes, things begin to come back to me now. She wore a little face veil and that is probably why her features are not clear to me. She was rather well dressed, though not conspicuously.”

Kay was busy scribbling these details in a little notebook. Now she looked up to say:

“You are sure she was blonde?”

“Yes, quite sure of that.”

“She may have been related to the blonde thief.”

“Oh, do you think so?” asked Miss Janey nervously.

“Yes, I believe she was. No doubt the two plotted to steal your things after the young woman had found out what you were carrying and where you were going.”

“You really believe she was his accomplice?”

“I do. And I think we must catch her as well as the man in the case,” replied Kay.

“I thought so little about her at the time, and now it is alarming to be told she may be a figure of mystery!” said Miss Janey, giving a sigh of weariness.

“Oh, I have tired you!” Kay cried. “You must get some rest. Then we can go into the whole affair more deeply tomorrow morning.”

After the excitement of the day, the household was late in settling down for the night. Long after the lights were out and the town clock had struck midnight, the telephone rang. It roused Mrs. Tracey who fumbled for slippers and robe, then pattered down the hall to answer it.

“Maybe they caught the thief!” thought Kay, who had awakened also.

Her mother’s puzzled queries over the phone, however, soon made it plain that this was not the reason for the midnight call.

“Who is this?” demanded Mrs. Tracey sleepily. A harsh crackling in the receiver startled all fatigue from her. “What’s that? Who? Oh, he has hung up!”

“Who was it?” demanded Kay, hurrying to her mother’s side.

“Sh! Don’t alarm Alice Janey!” warned Mrs. Tracey.

“Someone just threatened that if we meddle in this theft of her bags we shall put ourselves in great danger! Oh dear, what shall we do? I’ll ask Bill’s advice!” she decided, and knocked nervously on the lawyer’s bedroom door.

The young man gave a drowsy response. Kay and her mother stepped softly into his room, lowering their voices so as not to disturb their guest as they spoke.

“Bill, I’m dreadfully upset!” Mrs. Tracey whispered.

“Someone just phoned threatening us with danger if we interfere in any way with the robbery of Alice’s bags.”

It took the aroused sleeper a few seconds to understand fully what was being said. Then he spoke cheerfully. “Oh, it’s probably just a joke. Don’t worry about it. Doubtless some friend of Kay’s thinks that’s funny! You may be sure there are a couple of school girls giggling over it this minute!”

“Oh, Bill, I wish I thought so, but it was a man’s voice!”

“Well, it’s one of the high school boys, then, teasing Kay because she is always getting involved in these detective affairs!” the lawyer assured her.

“I know!” burst out Kay. “It might be Ethel Eaton’s idea. It would be exactly like her to do such a thing!”

She then recounted the girl's mishap and their encounter with her that afternoon.

"You've hit it, Kay," agreed Cousin Bill. "That's exactly it. Ethel is playing a practical joke."

Mrs. Tracey gave a sigh of relief. "Yes, that's very likely," she admitted. "The voice sounded as if it were disguised."

With this explanation all went back to bed again, their minds at rest in regard to the call.

The next day nothing was said to alarm Miss Janey about the matter. The telephone had not awakened her and she was so refreshed by her sound sleep that she insisted upon moving into her new home.

"I am not going to stay here and impose on you, Kathryn," she said. "Besides, I am eager to get settled in my own place. Then I hope we shall see lots of each other and renew old times!"

Mrs. Tracey and Kay, therefore, devoted the day to installing their guest in the pretty house she had bought on the outskirts of the town. It stood on a wooded hill overlooking the river. While the women were exclaiming over the lovely view, Kay was thinking privately that the place was a little too lonely! At twilight Miss Janey herself noticed this feature.

"Dear me," she said with a shiver, "I shall have to get a servant-companion here, for I don't want to live alone so far from town and so near those woods! In fact," she added ruefully, "I rather dread spending this first night by

myself! I don't suppose, Kay, that you could stay with me? Tomorrow I shall look for a suitable maid."

"I'll be glad to stay!" said Kay readily, although she had a feeling that the blonde thief or his mysterious girl partner might pay an unwelcome visit.

Perhaps this idea kept her from sleeping soundly that night. At any rate, Kay awakened many times and listened uneasily in the darkness.

"Is that my imagination, or do I really hear voices?" she wondered finally.

It was the creepy hour of two in the morning, yet certainly there was the hushed murmur of voices downstairs. Without turning on a light, Kay crept stealthily, barefoot and on tiptoe, down the hall.

Yes! Someone certainly was down there! A light was shining in the kitchen!

Kay leaned cautiously over the banister and peered through the lighted doorway. The sight that met her eyes was so surprising that she nearly lost her balance and fell over the railing in astonishment!

Miss Janey, in her bathrobe, was staring, half hypnotized, at a weird old woman who looked more like a witch than anything else!

"Another Woman of Mystery!" marveled Kay.

CHAPTER IV

THE WITCH'S PROPHECY

Kay hung breathless over the railing, gazing with a kind of horrible fascination at the scene below her. There stood Miss Janey, motionless, before the scarecrow figure of the mysterious woman.

She seemed to be completely under the power of this creature who was speaking in low tones and making slow, uncanny motions with her hands. Miss Janey uttered no word, but kept her eyes on the wrinkled face and listened as if bewitched.

The crone appeared to be putting herself and the friend of Kay's mother into a spell. So unearthly was the sight, that for the life of her the girl could not make a motion to intrude.

"Horrors! I hope she isn't bewitching me too!" she thought, shifting her position uneasily. "It's very queer," she reflected, "that Miss Janey said she was all alone, and then holds a secret meeting with this strange woman! She is certainly keeping something from us! There must be more to this robbery than she cares to tell!"

Resentment burned in Kay's heart as she felt that Miss Janey had not really played fair with the Traceys. The

old witch's hoarse voice cracked on and on. Kay held her breath and listened. What was this she was saying? Slowly, slowly the crooked fingers moved before Miss Janey's fixed eyes and slowly, slowly came these words:

“You see a lonely wood. A deep, gloomy wood. And now you see a house in those woods. It is dark. It is empty. Hear its shutters rattling in the wind! Now see a woman moving through the trees toward that house, in the black night. She enters! Ha! She seeks a dusty cupboard! She opens the cupboard door and there—and there——”

At this point Kay's breath gave out and her scalp prickled. The mystic woman continued:

“—there lie two bags—two bags, my dear!” she cackled, weaving her hands to and fro before Miss Janey's face. “Yes, there they are, still filled with your treasures, untouched. Follow the trail to the lonely house in the wood, by night, and recover them before dark figures, which I see approaching, wrest your fortune from you!”

The old woman let her hands fall suddenly. Released from her trance, Miss Janey sighed, moved and spoke.

“Thank you for telling me. You are always such a help! I shall do as you advise, and here is your pay,” she said, pressing some bills into the outstretched palm.

Mumbling over this money, the frowsy fortune-teller shuffled out and vanished into the snowy night.

“Probably flew off on a broomstick!” thought Kay with a nervous chuckle.

Then she crouched out of sight as Miss Janey ascended the staircase and passed her, moving like a sleepwalker.

“Whew!” whistled Kay softly. “She actually consulted a medium about her lost property! Why, she must have known that woman for some time as she evidently has conferred with her before.

“Maybe Miss Janey moved to Brantwood on purpose to be near this strange person! I can’t wait to see whether she will follow directions and actually find her possessions! If she does, I guess that old fraud hid them there herself! I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if that awful old woman were in cahoots with the thieves!”

Much bewildered, Kay crept back to bed, her mind churning with mysteries so that she thought she would never get to sleep. She did, however, and so soundly that she did not awaken until the sun was shining in her eyes and Miss Janey’s footsteps were echoing from the kitchen. The woman was serenely preparing breakfast as if nothing strange had happened during the night.

Kay was dumbfounded to find that her hostess showed no sign of and spoke no word concerning her odd midnight session. Indeed, she appeared so exactly as if nothing whatever had happened, that Kay began to doubt her own senses. She found herself rubbing her eyes and wondering whether she had not dreamed the whole thing!

How glad she was, though, when gay shouts outside announced the arrival of the twins who urged her to join them in skiing down a nearby hillside.

“Oh, that was glorious!” Kay exclaimed later, when a morning of snowy sport had blown the cobwebs from her confused brain. “I had almost forgotten all our problems,” she laughed, “but here we are back at the house and must go to work solving them, I suppose!”

“What a gorgeous car! Whose is it?” asked Wilma, pausing to admire a new auto which was parked before the door.

“That must be the one Miss Janey had a salesman send out for her. Isn’t it a beauty!” Kay cried.

The girls’ inspection of it was interrupted by the arrival of a brisk young woman who inquired, “Does a Miss Alice Janey live here? She telephoned in answer to my newspaper ad for a position as a maid. I’ve come for an interview. My name is Jessie Hipple.”

Both Miss Janey and Kay were thoroughly satisfied with the applicant, who appeared to be very competent and pleasant. She seemed to have so much commonsense that Kay felt at ease about leaving the house. Before she could do so, there was a loud peal from the doorbell. When Betty ran to answer it, two burly policemen entered.

“Oh, have you good news for me?” cried Miss Janey.

“We haven’t caught your thief yet, Ma’am,” replied one of the men.

“But we are following several clues and expect to recover your property before long,” the other assured her.

The officers then began questioning her on different points in the case. Kay feared that this might upset the new maid and make her unwilling to take the position, but the girl was not in the least disturbed. She appeared so interested and sympathetic that it seemed as if she might prove to be of real help.

Suddenly Kay was astonished to hear Miss Janey remark openly, “I feel perfectly confident of regaining my belongings, for I dreamed that they are hidden in a certain empty house. I have great faith in dreams!”

The policemen looked at each other, while Kay found an opportunity to whisper to the twins about the strange meeting with the soothsayer.

“She didn’t dream it, or if she did, I had the same dream!” the girl declared. “I certainly saw that weird old witch and heard her tell where the stolen goods are hidden!”

“Let’s trail Miss Janey when she goes to that house tonight!” urged Betty eagerly.

Wilma agreed and both sisters accepted the woman’s invitation to spend the day with her. It was a very long day, the girls thought, but at last the sun set. Sure enough, at dusk Miss Janey set off by herself in her new car.

Kay and her friends promptly followed in their machine. By the time they reached “the deep, gloomy wood” it had grown

darker and only the glimmer of the tail-light ahead served to guide them over the lonely country road.

“Hurry, Kay, we may lose sight of her!” begged Betty as the light vanished abruptly. “She must have turned into that lane.”

The engine groaned and the wheels of the car skidded and whirred in the struggle through the deep snow. Ahead, through the trees, there loomed the black hulk of the empty house. The red light paused before it a moment, then winked out.

“It’s all exactly like the witch’s prophecy!” marveled Kay. “And there goes Miss Janey, wending her way through the dark to the house just as she was told to do. It’s precisely like a dream—or a nightmare!”

“Let’s park here. We’ll make better time on foot!” suggested Betty. “Quick, jump out and run!”

The three girls leaped from the auto and plunged through the drifts. They could just discern the dark figure of Miss Janey stumbling up the slippery path to the dismal mansion. As the gleam of her flashlight played over the porch, they saw a great door suddenly yawn open and close upon her. For a moment the woman’s flashlight blinked and flitted through the windows like a restless lightning-bug, then it was extinguished. All was inky blackness.

The girls forged on, panting. They were up to their knees in snow. Excitement made them forget their wet, cold garments.

Kay, quicker than the others, hustled ahead. Wilma, striving to catch up, lunged forward and suddenly felt the ground give way beneath her feet. She shot dizzily through space in a breathless landslide. Down, down she coasted, loose snow piling over her head as she sank into an unseen pit.

Betty, just behind, clutched wildly at her sister and tried to drag her back. Her added weight sent more snow cascading into the hole and whirled her down on top of Wilma. Both were smothered under a cave-in of more snow sliding upon them from above.

There they lay, buried alive under the avalanche. It seemed futile to try to get out, but the twins beat madly upward toward the surface, fighting for air.

Kay, racing ahead, stopped in her tracks as their muffled cries for help brought terror to her ears!

CHAPTER V

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Kay dashed in the direction of the twins' frantic screams.

"Where are you?" she shouted.

"H-e-r-e! H-e-l-p!" resounded faintly from somewhere.

Kay looked around wildly. There was no sign of the girls, yet they were calling from close by. She whirled, peering about in a desperate game of hide-and-seek.

"W-h-e-r-e?" she yelled.

"H-e-r-e!" came a mournful howl.

"This is like witchcraft, sure enough!" muttered Kay, much puzzled as the cries grew sharper, though the twins remained invisible.

Then came a violent upheaval of the very ground itself. Kay was aghast to behold two specters rise out of the earth at her feet! Her mouth fell open with amazement. Before she could close it again, the ghosts brushed off their white veils of snow and revealed themselves as two very wet and breathless girls!

“What in the world—?” gasped Kay.

“We fell into a hole!” explained Betty.

“Careful, Kay, or you’ll fall in it too!” warned Wilma, as her chum stepped near it.

“This whole thing is enough to turn one’s hair white,” shivered Betty. “First a mysterious midnight seance, then our finding this nightmare house in the woods exactly like the prophecy——”

“And you two vanishing like a magician’s trick and returning from the inside of the earth!” finished Kay.

“I expect any minute to see three witches dancing about and chanting,

‘Double trouble follows me,
In a ghostly fantasy!’”

said Wilma, her teeth chattering with cold and nervousness.

“Come on, hurry!” prompted Kay. “We must go to see if Miss Janey finds her things in the cupboard!”

But their mishap had quenched the twins’ thirst for adventure.

“You couldn’t hire me to go into that haunted house!” declared Betty flatly.

“I don’t want to, either!” wailed Wilma. “Don’t go, Kay!” she pleaded. “Please.”

“I most certainly am going!” the Tracey girl vowed. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything! You can wait here!” she added and ran off.

“Oh, dear,” moaned Wilma, “if anything should happen to her I’d never have the courage to go into that spooky place after her!”

“I do hope she keeps out of trouble!” grunted Betty.

She jumped and stamped vigorously to warm up and shake off the snow caked upon her. Wilma followed her example.

Meanwhile, Kay had reached the house. She groped her way onto the dark porch and fumbled for the doorknob. It turned easily and the huge door swung open. She found herself in an empty hall, where it was much too dark for her to see her way about. She listened intently for some sound from Miss Janey, but the place was still.

“What was that?” she thought suddenly and her heart thumped faster.

The crunch of footsteps on the snow outside had broken the stillness. Kay was just about to hail the twins when there was the heavy tread of men’s feet on the porch. The girl shrank into a shadowy corner, thinking:

“It’s probably those policemen, following up Miss Janey’s story of her dream.”

She was just about to step out, ashamed of her momentary fright, when a flashlight at the door revealed the newcomers. She could see them plainly. They were not policemen.

Coat collars up, and hats pulled well down over their faces, two men crept in stealthily. With furtive glances over their shoulders, to be sure they were not being followed, they slipped softly indoors. Kay crushed herself flat against the wall. Finding a coat closet behind her, she slipped inside.

Just in time! The men now flashed their searchlights around the hall and certainly would have spotted Kay, had she not slowly pulled the closet door shut. She could hear them striding from room to room.

“Hey, what’s that?” called out one intruder’s voice suddenly.

“Where?” echoed the answer.

“There, on the floor!”

There was a moment of silence, then a long-drawn-out whistle of surprise. Kay, imprisoned in utter blackness, put her ear to the door and strained every nerve to hear. Then she cautiously peeked out of a crack.

“Why, it’s a woman!” both men cried out together.

Kay trembled for Miss Janey’s fate. What could have happened to her?

“Dead, do you suppose?” queried one man.

There was a shuffle of feet, then silence and finally, “No, she’s not dead. What’ll we do with her?”

“Carry her down the trail,” suggested the other man.

Again a shuffle of feet along the hall and the bang of the front door. There was a crunching of footsteps on snow again. These grew fainter and fainter.

Kay silently waited a moment, then ventured from her hiding place. She stepped swiftly to the porch and could make out the marks of footsteps. The men themselves already were out of sight. Had they carried away the ill-fated Miss Janey?

Peering into the night in the opposite direction to that taken by the strangers, Kay could just make out the forms of Betty and Wilma. They were struggling loyally through the snow in her direction.

“Betty! Wil-ma!” she hallooed.

“Oh, Kay, are you all right?” called Wilma.

“Did you see those men?” asked Betty.

“What were they carrying away?” demanded Wilma.

“I think they had Miss Janey!” Kay informed them excitedly.

“W-h-a-t!” exploded the twins.

Hastily their chum explained and added, “Quick, we must follow them. If it *is* Miss Janey they have, we must rescue

her!”

The three friends floundered along a little distance through the woods in the direction the men had gone. The stinging wind had blown loose snow over the footprints, however, and there was no way in the blackness to follow them.

“Perhaps it wasn’t Miss Janey after all. Maybe she is still in the house,” reflected Kay. “Let’s go back.”

The girls retraced their steps to the spectral mansion. Kay entered boldly but the twins followed timorously. Feeling her way through the hall the leader found that her eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. She could see fairly well now but there was no sign of Miss Janey nor of anyone else.

“I thought the house was empty,” quavered Wilma, huddling close to her twin.

“It is empty!” Betty replied.

“Well, I mean vacant,” Wilma corrected herself. “See, the place has a lot of old-fashioned furniture. Do you suppose someone lives here?”

“I don’t believe so, but I’d hate to come upon anyone who does!” Betty shuddered.

Crash!

The twins clutched each other as the noise startled them.

“What was that?” quavered Wilma.

“Ouch!” came Kay’s voice ruefully. “I whacked my head on an open cupboard door!” she moaned. “Why, what—?” and her voice trailed off in a crescendo of surprise.

“What is it, Kay?” demanded Betty, groping forward.

“What is it and where are you? This is a regular blindman’s buff!” complained Wilma.

“I’m here. I grabbed at that cupboard to keep myself from falling, and look——”

“How can we look when it’s so dark?” asked Betty irritably.

“Pretend you’re a cat and try to see in the dark!” Kay encouraged her. “What do you suppose I’ve found?” and her voice fairly squeaked with excitement.

“What?” asked the twins impatiently.

“I’VE FOUND MISS JANEY’S BAGS!”

“What!” squealed the twins.

Betty and Wilma squatted down on the floor near their chum and squinted at the discovery.

“Sure enough!” cheered Betty.

“Did you ever!” crowed Wilma. “That witch-like woman was right. How did you——”

“When I grabbed at the cupboard to keep from falling,” explained Kay, “my hand touched a panel that slid back and out fell these bags!”

“A secret compartment. How exciting!” said Wilma, examining the cabinet.

“It’s the ‘dusty cupboard,’ just like the description given by that fortune-teller!” verified Kay. “Now let’s see if the rest of the prophecy comes true and the valuables are still here.”

Her hands swiftly opened the luggage, while the twins crowded close to look. But alas! no sign of Miss Janey’s possessions was to be seen. The suitcase and the purse proved to be empty when examined and shaken.

“That’s the first time the prophecy has failed,” mourned Betty, while Wilma kept on searching in a vain hope that the things had fallen out of the bags.

“No,” said Kay slowly. “The prophecy hasn’t failed; in fact, it is pretty accurate. As I recall it, Miss Janey was warned to hurry and reclaim her property before two dark figures, which were approaching, would ‘wrest her fortune from her.’ Well, those men who were here were plainly the two dark figures. They seem to have made away with not only the fortune, but——”

“Miss Janey herself!” supplied Wilma, interrupting.

The three friends stood in the dark, mysterious house, too disappointed to say anything more for a few moments. Suddenly through the silence there came to their ears the soft swish of movement, as of something living, yet unseen. The next moment a sepulchral voice croaked in their ears:

“Begone! Begone at once!”

With a cry of terror Wilma and Betty caught Kay by her wrists and fled, dragging their chum with them in a frenzy of fear. As they galloped along, an echo of hollow laughter rang out after them, followed by the slamming of the massive front door.

CHAPTER VI

ETHEL'S TRIUMPH

Away fled the Worth twins, hauling Kay along between them. In vain she slid, blocked her feet and tried to balk or bring their mad flight to a halt. They only jerked her determinedly and sped on.

“Stop!” pleaded Kay. “Wait! Let me go back! I want to investigate! I’m sure I recognize that voice we heard!”

It was useless for her to plead or struggle.

“We’re getting out of here and you’re coming with us!” the twins retorted grimly.

Tumbling over one another through the thick snow, the trio had difficulty in finding where they had parked their car. At last Wilma saw it and they scrambled inside. Kay consented to take the wheel.

“We’ll stop off and see if Miss Janey is at home or missing,” she said.

Jessie Hipple, the new maid, had the door open, anxiously gazing outside as they approached. The headlights revealed a worried frown on her face.

“Is Miss Janey with you?” she called.

“No, isn’t she home yet?” Kay replied, feeling dismally sure of the answer.

“No, she hasn’t come back and it’s getting very late!” answered the girl nervously.

Kay and the twins jumped from the car, quietly warning one another not to alarm Jessie with news of Miss Janey’s strange abduction.

“It begins to look as if her disappearance were a really serious matter!” Kay whispered as the chums went up the path.

“I’ve had supper ready and waiting for hours and hours and now it’s all spoiled!” lamented the maid as the girls came up on the porch.

“Miss Janey may be along any minute now,” said Kay hopefully, although, to tell the truth, she felt by no means convinced of her own words.

“We’d better hurry along,” put in Wilma.

“Oh, must you go?” Jessie protested in disappointment. “I thought maybe you’d eat what’s left of the supper! I can heat it up in no time! I wish you folks would stay,” she pleaded pathetically. “I hate to be left here all by myself! I’m so worried!”

“I don’t blame you,” sympathized kind-hearted Wilma.

“We’d love to stay,” Betty assured her, “only our families will be worrying about us.”

“I’d better go home for a while at least,” said Kay thoughtfully. “If Miss Janey doesn’t come back, Jessie, telephone to me. I’ll come here again and start a search for her!”

While the girls were climbing into the car once more, Kay confided to them in an undertone her real reason for wanting to go home.

“To tell the truth,” she said, “I am eager to consult Cousin Bill about all this.”

“Yes, it’s very strange,” said Betty soberly.

“It seems like a kidnaping,” sighed Kay. “We may need a lawyer and a lot of help to rescue the poor woman.”

“I hope your cousin is at home when you get there,” said Wilma.

The three girls rode along with feelings of uneasiness increasing in their minds. Kay told the twins goodbye at the Worth house and hastened anxiously to her own home.

“If Cousin Bill is only here!” she thought as she leaped up the front steps.

In this hope she was to be disappointed. Mrs. Tracey sat alone in the study, placidly knitting. She thought nothing of

Kay's being late since she supposed the girl was enjoying her stay at Miss Janey's home.

"Where's Cousin Bill?" was the first thing her daughter asked as she burst into the room.

"He had an engagement and didn't come home for supper," replied her mother, puckering her forehead to count, "One, two, three, oh pshaw, I've dropped a stitch!"

So engrossed was she in her knitting that she did not notice the girl's excitement. Kay shattered her mother's peace with news of Miss Janey's alarming disappearance.

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Tracey in astonishment and fright. "Tell me everything. If I only knew where to get in touch with Bill!" moaned Miss Janey's school friend.

"Perhaps we had better go back to her house pretty soon. If she's not there by that time, we can telephone around the neighborhood to try to find him," suggested Kay.

"Yes, I think that will be the best plan," her mother agreed.

"I'd like something to eat before we go," said Kay plaintively.

"Gracious, haven't you had your supper?" said Mrs. Tracey and hastily set out odds and ends from the ice box.

Kay ate a hasty meal, then started out with her mother for Miss Janey's home. Jessie Hipple hurried to let them in and made gestures for silence.

“Miss Janey got back,” the maid whispered, “but she’s gone to bed with a splitting headache. She said she didn’t want to be disturbed by anybody under any circumstances.”

Mrs. Tracey hesitated in her reply. Kay felt decidedly foolish to think of the alarm she had given her mother.

“Did Miss Janey say anything about where she had been or what delayed her?” Kay asked.

“No, she didn’t say a word,” Jessie answered. “She just went to her room. I imagine she’ll be all right in the morning.”

“Most mysterious,” thought Kay.

“Well,” said Mrs. Tracey, only half satisfied, “if she needs anything, don’t hesitate to call us. Take good care of her, Jessie. She’s an old and dear friend of mine!”

“I’ll take care of her!” promised the maid loyally.

“What a relief!” chuckled Kay as she and her mother left. “We were scared to death about her being kidnaped and here she is, safe and snug in bed! Don’t you think we ought to celebrate?”

“By all means,” laughed her mother. “Let’s go to the movies!”

To the movies, therefore, mother and daughter went in the spirit of festivity. They settled down, giggling together. The picture was spinning along when all of a sudden it sputtered and stopped. At the same moment there was a commotion in

the film booth and loud, angry voices were raised. The audience began to mutter and call out, stirring around to see what the trouble was.

There were cries of “Come along with us!” and a furious answer, “Get outa here!” Then a stentorian voice roared, “You’re under arrest!”

Immediately the whole house was in an uproar. People sprang to their feet shouting, “What’s the matter?” This was followed by louder cries of:

“Stop, thief!”

“Catch him!”

“It’s the police!”

Unfortunately someone screamed, “Don’t shoot!” This was followed by hysterical shrieks and wild confusion as the audience tried to get out.

A stampede started with the entire crowd shoving savagely for the aisles. A woman near Kay was knocked down and trampled upon. Another fainted.

“Don’t step on her! Gangway, there!” shouted a man.

Children began to cry. In the milling around that now took place more than one person groaned with injuries. The situation took on a serious aspect. Policemen, lined up at the operator’s booth, boomed out rough orders for quiet.

Kay was successfully pulling her mother, who had lost her coat, to a side exit, when the girl heard a familiar voice. It was ringing out in triumph.

“Why, that’s Ethel Eaton!” said Kay.

“What’s she saying?” asked Mrs. Tracey crossly, clutching her wrecked hat.

Ethel answered this herself by proclaiming loudly, “I’m the one who recognized that thief! I saw him through the booth window there! I knew he was the man they’ve all been looking for! He stole a lady’s purse and suitcase at the station the other day.”

“You don’t say so!” cried an admiring voice from the crowd.

“Yes, I knew him the minute I laid eyes on him! I never forget a face!” Ethel continued. “I slipped out quietly and got the officers to come and arrest him. To think he was in here operating the movie all the time he was being hunted around town!”

At this announcement the crowd surged over to view the culprit who was now firmly in the hands of two policemen in the lobby. A murmur arose as the officers started to lead the prisoner out. The throng was pushed back to let them through. Suddenly the thief clutched his mouth and stomach and mumbled:

“I’m sick!”

With a scuffling sound he bolted into the wash room, while Ethel took the center of the scene, boasting about her cleverness at securing his arrest.

“That’ll be a feather in your cap, young lady!” complimented the policeman on guard at the washroom door.

Another officer pushed past him, club in hand, and strode after the thief who had claimed to be ill. One glance at the room and the man stormed out bellowing:

“He got away! The washroom’s empty and the window’s open!”

CHAPTER VII

A BOLD DEMAND

Ethel Eaton did not forget that a policeman had said, "This will be a feather in your cap, young lady!"

From that minute on, the girl, thirsty for fame, began looking forward to the thrill of public praise for her deed. She found herself day-dreaming in school, picturing in her mind interviews with reporters who might wish her photograph and her story for the newspapers.

"My picture? No, please! You know I am very retiring," was one of her imaginary conversations. "I shun publicity. After all, what have I done? Only my duty as a citizen. It was nothing! Well, if you insist! But I don't know why you would want to feature a picture of me!"

Alas for the vain girl's aspirations! The public took no notice of her achievement. No reporter sought her out. Instead, there was a good deal of indignation among people who had been injured in the theatre commotion.

Being ignored and then criticized infuriated Ethel. She decided to go straight to Miss Janey and demand a reward.

“The woman owes me something for identifying her unknown robber as the movie operator.”

One afternoon, unable to stand the strain any longer, she set off determinedly and called at the Janey home. It provoked her to find Kay there.

The Tracey girl and the older woman had become fast friends. The spinster was delighted whenever the daughter of her old chum would drop in for a cheery chat. Neither of them was overjoyed when Jessie Hipple ushered in Ethel Eaton. A chair, however, was drawn up for her and the caller was given a cup of tea before the open fire.

“I wonder, Miss Janey, if you realize I was the one who located your robber?” she began.

“Why yes, I believe I owe you a debt of gratitude,” responded the woman.

“Don’t you think you owe me something more than gratitude?” insinuated the girl.

Kay flushed angrily but Miss Janey answered gently, “Possibly I do. I had in mind offering a reward for the apprehension of the criminal and the return of my valuables.”

“But the thief escaped and your belongings are still missing!” cut in Kay, astounded at Ethel’s boldness.

“You keep out of this, Kay Tracey!” snapped the other girl. “It does not concern you!”

“It concerns me to this degree, that I shall not permit you to hold up my mother’s friend for money in this impudent way!”

“Oh, I suppose you want to be the one to win the entire reward by catching the man yourself!” sneered the unpleasant girl.

Miss Janey was distressed. “I do want to compliment you, Miss Eaton, on your cleverness in identifying the man. Who knows but you may succeed later in having him captured? Then I shall pay you a liberal reward.”

So saying, the woman smiled and rose in courteous dismissal, while Jessie Hipple briskly showed the caller to the door.

“Well,” sputtered the departing visitor, “the very idea!”

In revenge she spread a story at school that her brilliance as a sleuth went unrewarded “because of the stinginess of the old maid.” For this, Ethel only succeeded in bringing ridicule upon her own head. The school paper printed a cartoon of her marked: FOILED AGAIN! The picture showed a really clever likeness of the girl. She was holding a magnifying glass in one hand and a butterfly net in the other. Escaping from the net was a butterfly labelled THIEF.

Ethel was undismayed by this banter. She began devouring detective stories and for English class wrote a composition entitled, “Great Detectives.” So proud of it was she that she gave it to one of the boys to read just before

the period when the work was to be handed in. He in turn passed it around to several students.

Ethel was delighted to be called upon to read her paper aloud to the class. She stepped to the front of the room and began to read with great gusto. Suddenly she stopped.

“Go on,” encouraged the teacher, Miss Waters.

Stammering with embarrassment, Ethel read a little further, then stopped again. The woman, irritated, spoke sharply:

“Come, come, Miss Eaton, can’t you read your own handwriting?”

Overcome with chagrin, the girl murmured huskily and retired to her seat. She was on the point of bursting into tears.

“Miss Eaton, you must hand in your theme,” said the instructor firmly.

“Oh, please! I’d rather not!” pleaded the girl in distress.

“Bring it to my desk at once!” insisted the English teacher.

Reluctantly the wretched author laid the manuscript on Miss Waters’s desk and returned to her place, her cheeks aflame.

“Now let us see what is in this paper that is being kept from us,” the teacher remarked grimly.

Ethel’s composition, as she had written it, went something like this:

GREAT DETECTIVES

Did you know that the Prophet Daniel who once was thrown to the lions, became a great detective? He tried to convince the king that the huge heathen idol did not really eat the banquet spread before it. One night Daniel strewed ashes on the floor around this idol. The next day he showed the king the telltale footprints of people who came to steal the food by night. This is an early record of detecting by tracing footprints.

Other solutions have been employed. In the story of *The Gold Bug* the hero shows how to decipher a puzzling code. The policeman who pursued *Jean Valjean*, the escaped convict, shows the value of persistence in following a trail no matter how cold. *Sherlock Holmes* made famous the principle of “deduction” in solving crime, which is used today by our G-Men.

It is my hope to become a great detective myself some day, perhaps the first woman to gain fame in this field!

This was Ethel’s original wording, but not what the teacher’s surprised gaze fell upon. She saw her own name upon the page, as well as mention of Miss Conway, the history instructor, Mr. Reynolds, the dramatic coach, Miss Hanson, the gym teacher, and even the high school principal! Much mystified, she read aloud from the paper as follows:

“Did you know that Miss Waters, who once was thrown to the lions, became a great detective? She tried to

convince Miss Conway that the heathen Mr. Reynolds did not eat the banquet set before him.”

An explosion of laughter shook the class. Miss Waters could read no further. She rapped for order and tried to go on, but the account of Miss Hanson, the gym teacher pursuing the escaped convict, the high school principal, threw the students into shrieks. Finally the English teacher pounded for order and asked:

“What is the meaning of this slur upon the school faculty, Miss Eaton? You certainly display a strange sense of humor to say the least!”

The miserable girl, her face scarlet, sprang to her feet and made a heated accusation. “I did not write it that way, Miss Waters! Someone has changed the wording to get me into trouble! I believe someone showed it to Kay Tracey and she did it!”

A protesting uproar arose from the pupils. Ronald Earle, a member of the Student Council, stood up to champion Kay’s cause, but Miss Waters demanded silence. Announcing that the matter would be taken up by the high school authorities, she dismissed the class.

“It was so funny I didn’t even mind being blamed for it!” laughed Kay to the Worth twins as she set out after school to call on Miss Janey.

The girl had continued to see the woman often. This was partly because of her real liking for her, and partly

from the fascination of puzzling over the robbery and Miss Janey's strange meeting with the soothsayer.

The Tracey girl had promptly restored to the owner the empty purse and the suitcase which she had found in the cupboard in the "haunted house." Up to this time, however, no mention had been made by either of them to the old witch-like woman who had called at midnight.

"It was strange that you thought of going to that particular house to find your things," Kay hinted. "How do you account for seeing this, as you said, in a dream?"

"It was not a dream, exactly," confessed Miss Janey. "It was clairvoyance. The scene was revealed to me by an old woman who has mystic powers."

Kay could hardly restrain a smile as she heard these words. "Surely you don't believe such hocus pocus!" she exclaimed unbelievably.

Miss Janey drew herself up disapprovingly. "My clairvoyant, 'Nanna,' has long advised me regarding my personal affairs and has proved herself reliable. I have found that what she says comes true."

Miss Janey spoke so crisply that Kay ventured no further comment. It was clear that the woman held to her own beliefs and that no one could shake her faith.

Miss Janey said very little about herself. She avoided further reference to the adventure at the house in the woods and did not divulge what had happened to her the

night the men carried her away. Kay, of course, was curious, but not wishing to be rude, she changed the subject.

“What are you planning to do to fill in your time this winter?” she asked, recalling some reference to work Miss Janey hoped to complete.

“I am going to devote myself to chemical research,” the woman announced, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. At Kay’s interested response, the scholarly spinster explained, “My dear father was a chemist and inventor. We used to work long hours together in his laboratory. His many patents still yield me a good income from royalties.

“It was his secret formula for a new substance, similar to glass but having more uses, which was in my safe deposit box. This is more valuable, really, than anything else I have. Now that this formula has been stolen, I am afraid my father’s work may be lost or sold by the thief.”

“Haven’t you a copy?” asked Kay.

“Unfortunately no,” replied the woman sadly. “There is one hope, however. My father had not perfected certain points but no one knew this but myself. It is my plan to complete this work in memory of him. I have had one of the rooms here fitted up as a laboratory. Would you like to see it?”

“Love to!” assented Kay eagerly. “Chemistry has always been one of my favorite subjects. How thrilling, to have a laboratory of your own!”

Delighted at the girl's enthusiasm, Miss Janey showed her into the workshop and promised to help the young student with her school chemistry. Kay's eyes danced with pleasure. Just then Jessie interrupted to say that "Nanna" was at the door. Miss Janey smilingly urged Kay to try her hand at some simple experiments, and hastened out to her caller.

Left alone in the laboratory, Kay was soon deep in work on one of her high school chemistry problems. After a few minutes she paused, test tube in hand. She had an uncomfortable feeling that someone was staring at her.

Glancing over her shoulder she was startled to see a sinister face peering through a window at some of Miss Janey's important papers on a desk. Reacting quickly to the strange emergency, Kay decided to cut off the lights. She reached out and pulled a switch.

A blinding flash and paralyzing jar knocked the girl to the floor. Immediately a blue flame licked out its long tongue toward Miss Janey's precious papers. Kay, in a helpless heap on the floor, watched it, terrified, but she was unable to move a finger!

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNEXPECTED ANNOUNCEMENT

Jessie Hipple, smelling smoke, raced toward the laboratory.

“Fire! Fire!” she shrieked.

Bursting into the room, she found it black with smoke and streaked with scarlet flames. Kay lay on the floor! With a frantic screech for help the maid pounced upon the victim and dragged her out of harm’s way.

A sense of feeling now returned to the Tracey girl’s numb hands and feet. She staggered into a standing position and then joined the maid in beating out the fire, snatching Miss Janey’s papers to safety.

The acrid fumes of smoke and shrill cries for help brought the woman scientist scurrying to the scene. To Kay’s amazement the chemist seemed not at all surprised at the havoc and quietly helped put out the blaze.

“It was all my fault,” said Kay. “I’m dreadfully sorry.”

“How did it happen?” asked Jessie, shaking her head gloomily.

The girl explained about the evil-looking face at the window, the valuable papers and her desire to protect them by turning off the lights.

“You merely pulled the wrong switch,” explained Miss Janey, unconcernedly. “I knew this fire was going to occur. It’s not your fault, my dear, but just part of Fate’s pattern! Already I had been warned of it. Old Nanna came to the door to tell me about a fire which would threaten my property. No sooner had the words left her mouth than I heard Jessie scream.

“Perhaps you see now why I put so much faith in Nanna’s warnings. Since you rescued my papers I feel you have helped me wonderfully and you are not to worry about your part of the accident. I am sure a fire would have broken out, even if you had not been here.”

“I’ll bet the old witch or an accomplice was peering through the window, and saw the whole thing,” Kay reflected. “Maybe they even planned to steal those papers and then set fire to the place. My being here and causing a blaze probably was just a coincidence.”

The scholarly spinster already was at work in her disordered laboratory. Kay hurried home that she might consult Cousin Bill.

“It looks to me as if some scheme is causing all the misfortunes which beset the poor woman,” the girl puzzled. “I think it’s time we begin to search for a plot instead of merely hunting a sneak thief.”

Kay was still weighing this matter in her mind when she reached the Tracey home. Cousin Bill was in conference with two men in the living room. As Kay went by, she was struck by something vaguely familiar about the callers.

“Where have I seen them before?” she asked herself, but could not remember ever having met them.

At that moment her cousin spied her at the doorway and cordially summoned her inside the room. He introduced his visitors as Mr. Tilden and Mr. Lee. As soon as the men rose and greeted her, something in their motions and voices clicked with recollection in Kay’s brain.

“Why, they’re the two dark figures who went into the House of Mystery and carried Miss Janey away that night!” she thought, startled.

Cousin Bill’s voice brought her out of her momentary trance. “These men are detectives, Kay, who are helping us with Miss Janey’s case,” he explained.

The girl could not have thought of any announcement more unexpected than this. Yet she was relieved.

“What did you do with Miss Janey that night you carried her out of the house in the woods?” she quickly demanded.

The men glanced at each other in surprise, then Mr. Lee asked, “How did you know about that?”

“I was looking at you through a crack in a closet door!” confessed Kay, laughing at the amazed expressions on their

faces.

“Well,” said Mr. Tilden to Bill Tracey, “you have told us your cousin was a pretty keen detective, but we had no idea she was as hot on the trail as all that!”

“Sounds as if you beat us to it!” chuckled Mr. Lee.

“I’ll admit that I found the lost bags—” Kay began.

“Found the lost bags!” interrupted both men. “Where?”

“They fell out of a secret compartment when I touched a sliding panel by accident,” Kay informed them. “But they were empty when I discovered them.”

The detectives expressed both surprise and regret at this statement.

“By the way, you haven’t told me yet just what you did with Miss Janey,” said Kay.

“We found her in a dead faint, carried her into the fresh air and revived her. Then we took her home,” summarized Mr. Lee.

The detectives and Cousin Bill resumed their conference and soon were going over reports. Kay learned that Miss Janey was suspected of helping certain persons swindle widows who had been left money. These people had a scheme whereby they promised to double the woman’s money in short order. Needless to say the victims never saw their funds again and often were left penniless. It

was to round up this ring that the detectives had been brought into the picture.

“How could anyone imagine Miss Janey to be dishonest!” cried Kay indignantly. “Why, of all people in this world I believe her to be absolutely honest. She’s no thief!”

The men were unsympathetic. “Yes, she looks the very picture of respectability, so her appearance is the thing that would deceive others. Poor widows would trust her and that would make it easy for her to cheat them of their money.”

“I will never believe Miss Janey cheated anyone in her life! If she is involved in such a scheme you may be sure she is innocent of any wrong doing. Perhaps she is being used as a tool by some shrewd men or women. It is more likely that she herself is being robbed.”

“How do you account for her knowing about the house in the woods?” Mr. Tilden queried.

Kay recounted all she knew of the uncanny woman known as Nanna. The men were instantly alert to the importance of this weird character.

“Could you locate this person and notify us, so that we may follow her?” asked Mr. Lee eagerly.

“Yes, I think so,” Kay promised. “Miss Janey seems to be in constant touch with her, although I do not know where she lives.”

“I feel that we have made real progress in unraveling this mystery,” said Mr. Tilden, rising to depart. “If you can find that woman and call us at once, we’ll be grateful. In the meantime we’ll follow up a few other clues.”

Hardly had the door shut upon them than there came a timid knock. Cousin Bill, going to open it, explained to Kay who the person probably was.

“A rather poverty-stricken client of mine,” he whispered. “One of the ‘poor widows.’”

His description fitted the caller who entered. She was a middle-aged woman, very ill-at-ease. Her clothes were a dingy black. Her wilted hat had much the crushed aspect of the discouraged woman herself. Her face was ghastly pale and her eyes red from weeping.

“Mr. Tracey, the lawyer?” she asked nervously. “I understand you want me to tell you everything I can about losing my money. It was all the money I had in the world,” she quavered, “and how I was so foolish to risk it I can’t understand.” Tears welled to her eyes again. “It was because I’ve been so pinched for things for my poor children since their father died, that I was hopeful of improving our condition: I was told by a man who came to the house that I could double my money if I would take it to a certain old mansion in the woods.”

Kay and Bill Tracey exchanged significant glances at this.

“I had almost reached the house,” the widow went on, “when I took a wrong turn and lost my way. I asked a stranger I met to direct me. He very kindly did, taking my arm and helping me through the snow. I felt very much obliged to him at the time but afterwards I discovered my purse had disappeared. I am sure that man took it.”

“Was there much money in it?” asked Cousin Bill.

“It contained every cent I had in the world! I had drawn it out of the bank to take to that house. Of course I could not swear in court that the man picked my pocket, yet I feel that it was all a plan of his and the person who had come to my house to rob me and perhaps others!”

Having related her pitiful tale, the poor widow gave way to tears.

“There, there, Mrs. Dale, cheer up,” encouraged the lawyer. “Things look black now but we are well on the way to solving the matter and restoring your loss. Keep up your courage and leave things in my hands. I expect we shall have good news for you within the next few days!”

Little encouraged, the woman departed, her whole figure drooping with gloom.

“Kay, will you direct me to this mysterious house in the woods?” asked her cousin.

“I’ll be only too glad to do so!” returned the girl energetically.

Both, accordingly, started at once for the sinister haunt. When their car turned into the lane that led to the mansion, the snow was still so deep that it seemed best to park and walk the rest of the way. It was a long, cold march through the drifts. The short winter afternoon was nearing an end and already the sunset had dwindled to ash grey.

Kay admitted to herself that she was glad that her stalwart cousin was with her. This feeling was increased as they reached the dilapidated porch and pushed open the door. There was not a sound.

Suddenly, through the silence, rose a series of gruesome groans. Kay felt her skin tingle. From beneath their very feet echoed what might well be the heartrending moans of someone dying in agony!

CHAPTER IX

“HELP!”

So startling were the wails, that for a moment both Kay and her cousin stood stock still. They listened in amazement as the sounds re-echoed through the high-ceilinged room. Finally, after one cry had risen to a high-pitched scream, then died away into a whimper, the listeners stirred.

“Where is it coming from?” whispered Kay.

“*Where are you?*” shouted Bill Tracey loudly. “What’s the matter?”

The answer to this was a renewed moaning which broke into a choked sob.

“I think someone cried for help,” said Kay.

A thorough search revealed nobody in any of the rooms, but the melancholy plaint continued. Sometimes it seemed to come from below, sometimes from an adjoining room.

“It’s almost as if someone were shut up inside the wall,” reflected Cousin Bill.

This gave Kay an inspiration. After a few minutes of tapping, each tap answered by a wail, she cried out. There at her feet, cunningly concealed, was a trap-door. The lawyer wrenched it open on its rusty hinges and the two gazed down into the black depths below. Not a sound! Then, rising like the wind in the trees outside, came again the pitiful cry. Someone below stirred.

“Help!” sobbed a weak voice.

Bill Tracey instantly lowered himself into the opening and stooped to find a boy! The lad, who was about fifteen years old, was wild with fright.

“Le’me out! Le’me out!” he blubbered.

“Wait a minute, sonny,” comforted Bill Tracey, lifting the youngster out through the trap-door. “How did you get in there?”

“None o’ yer business!” shrieked the terrified boy, scrambling to his feet.

Without waiting to thank them or explain his strange predicament, the lad raced to the front door. Pulling it open, he flung himself out into the snow.

“Catch him!” yelled the lawyer, leaping out of the trap-door himself and scrambling in pursuit.

Kay followed the boy, who fled as fast as possible, bounding over the snow like a rabbit. Terrified by being chased, the

frightened urchin suddenly stumbled and sprawled head over heels into a drift.

Instantly Kay pounced on him and held him until her cousin could catch up. The boy fought madly for his freedom, biting, kicking, scratching and thrashing about furiously. It was all the girl could do to pin him down. Bill Tracey clutched him firmly.

“Good for you, Kay,” he congratulated his young cousin. “If we had lost this young man we might have lost valuable evidence. Now let’s see what he can tell us.”

Kay coaxed the child along and bundled him into the Tracey car. As it began to dawn on the boy that he was in the hands of friends, he stopped struggling and gave himself over to weeping.

“I was tr-tr-trying to g-g-get back my mother’s m-m-money!” he wept.

“Who is your mother, and how did she lose her money?” urged the lawyer.

“She’s Mrs. Dale and I’m Ted Dale,” sniffled the miserable fellow. “She came to this house to give her money to some people and they were going to give her twice as much back again. But they never did! They stole it all!”

With that the poor lad burst into a fresh torrent of tears.

“And—and—I tried to find it and I fell through that hole. Somebody slammed the door shut on top of me and I

couldn't get out.”

A new series of hysterical boo hoos began. Kay cuddled the lad and mopped his face with her handkerchief, while Bill Tracey drove rapidly back to town, his face grim.

Teddy Dale had quieted down by the time they reached the Tracey home. Kay insisted that he come in and have a hot dinner. As the girl watched him gulp down the food she thought:

“That poor child is half starved. I don't believe he gets enough to eat, now that the family money is gone!”

She resolved to devote all her energies toward helping to solve the plot that was robbing widows and leaving children hungry!

“If the same swindlers are robbing Miss Janey as well as the Dales, that gives me two good reasons for catching them,” she decided.

Kay drove Teddy home and left him and his mother with assurances of all aid from herself, her lawyer cousin and the detectives. She started to do this the following afternoon. As she walked along the main street of Brantwood, she met Wilma Worth.

“Hello, Kay!” her chum greeted her. “Come and have a hot chocolate with me while we wait for Betty to finish at the dentist's.”

“I’m on my way to do something in connection with the mystery,” Kay confided. She rapidly rehearsed the latest developments at the House of Mystery. “I think it is very much to the point to learn who owns that place,” she concluded. “What do you say to our going to the tax collector’s office and finding out?”

The two were soon inquiring at the town hall. The collector referred to a huge leather-bound volume.

“That place belongs to an old woman by the name of Mrs. Lucy Larrop,” he informed the girls.

“Who in the world could she be?” murmured Wilma as the girls skipped down the stairway.

“That is what I shall find out!” asserted Kay determinedly.

“How do you propose to go about it?” Wilma queried.

“I believe I’ll ask Miss Janey if she is acquainted with the owner of that house,” Kay considered. “After all, she went there and may know something about the place.”

“But would she tell you?” questioned her friend dubiously.

“We’ll see,” replied Kay. As the girls went into a soda shop for a drink, Kay entered a telephone booth in the corner. She came out laughing.

“Good news?” was Wilma’s eager cry.

“Astonishing news!” Kay answered. “When I asked Miss Janey if she by any chance knew who owned that old mansion in the woods she answered right away.”

“Is it anyone we ever heard of?”

“Is it!” chirped Kay, her eyes dancing with excitement. “I should say so! Can you imagine—it’s Nanna, the old witch!”

“What!”

“I dropped the receiver and nearly collapsed when I heard it,” laughed the young sleuth.

“Well, what’s our next step?” asked Wilma, excited over the situation.

“I think the best thing is to go home and consult Cousin Bill when he comes for supper. We don’t want to make any move which might confuse things for the detectives.”

“Yes, we’d all better work together,” agreed Wilma.

Betty, who had been at the dentist’s, appeared just then and the girls at once told her the latest news. They finished their drinks and hurried to the Tracey home. Someone was there before them.

“It’s that poor Mrs. Dale, the mother of the boy we found in the haunted house,” whispered Kay as the chums entered the hall.

Mrs. Tracey was talking with the dejected woman in the living room. “Kay, come in!” she called. “Mrs. Dale is in trouble again!”

“Oh, dreadful trouble!” sobbed the widow, dabbing her handkerchief to her wet eyes. “The police have arrested my Teddy!”

“What for?” asked Kay in surprise.

“For breaking and entering a house, they say. It was because he went into that awful old mansion to look for my lost money. And now he’s been arrested for attempted burglary!”

With these words the wretched woman broke down and wept as if her heart would break.

“Don’t cry!” begged Kay compassionately. “Cousin Bill will get him out with no trouble at all, I am sure. We found your son and know all about the case. After all, he’s only a child. And a child can’t be held for burglary!”

Kay announced this with such confidence that Teddy’s mother wiped her eyes and looked up hopefully. “Oh, do you think it will come out all right?” she breathed.

“Absolutely!” declared Kay. “And now to telephone Cousin Bill and get his advice.”

The lawyer said they should go at once to the station house and meet him there. Gratefully Mrs. Dale clambered into the auto with Kay and the twins.

Upon entering the police court, Mrs. Dale gave a little cry at the sight of her son. He looked very small and scared, sitting between two huge, blue-uniformed officers. Lawyer Tracey was conferring with the judge. There was no one else in the room. All eyes focussed upon the girls and the widow as they entered.

“Is anyone else coming?” Cousin Bill inquired.

“Why no,” answered Kay, puzzled.

Her relative came over to explain. “Nobody has appeared to press this charge against the boy. Apparently as soon as it was found that the Dales had backing and that I was here to defend him, the case was called off. Teddy is free to go home with his mother.”

“What a pity,” commented Kay, annoyed. “If the person who complained had only shown up we might have learned who the inmates of that mysterious house are.”

“Yes, they slipped through our fingers this time, but we shall catch them yet,” replied the attorney.

“You’ll never guess, Cousin Bill, who owns that house!” Kay reported. “A Mrs. Lucy Larrop, the old crone who is Miss Janey’s fortune teller!”

“You don’t mean it!” cried Bill Tracey. “Still, she might own it and not necessarily be living there herself or have any connection with the present tenants.”

“True,” agreed Kay. “But I believe she is mixed up in it somehow.”

The two Traceys were still discussing this earnestly as they left the station house. So earnestly were they talking, in fact, that neither one noticed Ethel Eaton, who passed and eyed them sharply. Suddenly a wicked thought crossed the unpleasant girl’s mind. “That’ll fix Kay,” she said to herself.

It was after class the following morning that Ethel lingered to speak to the head of the chemistry department, Doctor Staunton. He was a serious, scholarly, middle-aged man, whose mind was so intent upon his work that he was not aware of the petty intrigues among his pupils. As Ethel laid her notebook on his desk she remarked:

“I suppose my papers are not as good as Kay Tracey’s!”

The teacher replied, “It is not necessary to compare them.”

“Perhaps not,” answered Ethel pettishly, “but everybody thinks Kay’s so smart.”

“She does very good work.”

“And no wonder!” retorted the Eaton girl. “She gets a great deal of help from Miss Alice Janey, the research chemist.”

“A splendid opportunity for a student to learn the subject,” remarked the instructor.

His delight at Kay’s enterprise roused Ethel’s jealousy still further.

“A splendid opportunity for something else, too,” she said with a sly smile. “Perhaps you don’t know that Miss Janey is developing her father’s famous secret formula and that Kay Tracey has stolen it!”

“What are you saying?” cried out the gentle teacher.

He sprang to his feet and pierced Ethel with a sharp glance. The girl squirmed a little under his glare, but retorted pertly:

“Oh, yes, it’s well known. Everyone thinks the Tracey girl is so perfect but I can tell you this—” and she rolled the words on her tongue as if they tasted sweet—“she has been taken to court charged with the theft of the Janey formula!

“Her cousin, who is a lawyer, is trying to defend her. It must be a great disgrace to the family. I saw them coming out of the police station yesterday and Kay was so ashamed she wouldn’t speak to me. She kept talking to her cousin and pretending not to see me. I guess after this people will think she’s just a little too smart!” Ethel gave a sour laugh.

“Are you sure of what you’re saying?” cross-questioned the teacher.

CHAPTER X

A PROBLEM

Ethel was enjoying herself immensely. “Everyone knows that Kay set fire to Miss Janey’s laboratory on purpose to make it appear that the valuable papers had been burned. Instead she pocketed them but she was caught.”

With these astounding words the trouble-maker flounced out of the room to spread the scandal throughout the school. By noon hour she had actually believed the tale herself. The story was not told to Kay, who therefore was surprised to be handed an envelope by Ronald Earle a little later with a summons in it.

“I was asked to give this to you.”

Kay glanced at the note as the two strolled down the corridor together.

CARMONT HIGH SCHOOL
OFFICE OF THE PRINCIPAL

Miss Tracey is to come to this office after school today for an interview with Mr. Preston and Doctor Staunton regarding her chemistry.

“I can’t imagine what this is for,” she said. “My marks in chemistry have been satisfactory.”

“Probably going to pin a medal on you for being so bright in your work,” cheered Ronald, who did not find that subject his strong point.

Kay, completely innocent of the reason for the call to the office, went to meet the teachers without a care in the world. She found Doctor Staunton going over her papers and notebook with Mr. Preston. She could not help overhearing the chemistry teacher’s comment.

“This student has done brilliant work, quite beyond any scholar in the class.”

Just as Kay felt a little swell of pride, she was astounded to hear Mr. Preston remark, “On the other hand, do you think she has done this work honestly, or has she had someone do it for her, while she passed it off as her own?”

Horrified, the girl stood still in her tracks. There must be a mistake of some kind! Worried, she advanced into the room.

Both men looked up as she entered. Kay felt that there was something exceptionally stern in their glances. The reason was soon made clear, as Mr. Preston spoke.

“Miss Tracey, Doctor Staunton has been going over your work with me and we agree that it is remarkably good.” Kay’s heart beat more calmly. “It is so remarkable, in fact, that we are wondering whether it is your own or

whether you are passing in papers done by some professional.”

Kay flushed scarlet and bit her lip. Never had such an accusation been made to her in all the years in which she had been an honor pupil. Cut to the quick, she could not speak for a moment. Her silence was misinterpreted by the men who guessed that her hesitancy was due to guilt.

“Isn’t it true,” probed the chemistry teacher, “that you work in the laboratory of Miss Alice Janey, and thus it would be possible for you to get her to do this work for you?”

Kay was crimson with anger. Trying to control her voice, she answered furiously:

“It is impossible, because both Miss Janey and I are persons of honor! You may interview her and get her word for it that I never dreamed of such a thing. She has taught me in her private laboratory and inspired me with enthusiasm for the study, that’s all. How can you believe that a scholar of her standing would stoop so low as to aid anyone in wrong doing?”

“Miss Janey may be innocent of what you are doing,” suggested Mr. Preston. “Let me ask you a question: Is it true that you have stolen her father’s formula and been taken to the police about it?”

The utter astonishment on the girl’s face must have convinced the men that something was wrong.

“I have never stolen anything in my life,” Kay replied. “As to my stealing that formula, what could I do with it? There is something more to all this than I can figure out. I’m going to talk to my mother and my cousin who is a lawyer.”

Having made this shrewd reply Kay marched from the room without another word. Ronald Earle was waiting for her in the hall. He took her books and asked cheerily:

“What was it all about?”

To his amazement the girl seemed to be on the verge of tears. Something, he realized, had happened.

“Don’t mind me, Kay, what is it?” he urged sympathetically.

When she had told him, the boy gave a long, indignant whistle.

“The thing I minded worst of all,” finished the girl, “was being accused of dishonorable action. I don’t see where those men got such an idea,” she puzzled.

On the train ride home she and Ronald talked long and earnestly. She told him about the mystery of Miss Janey and the stolen bags. He helped her down the steps at their home station, then stalked along thoughtfully for some paces before remarking:

“I begin to see light. I’ll bet Ethel Eaton is at the bottom of all this. It seems to me she was whispering a good bit today. Of course she wouldn’t dare tell me any such

story. I put her in her place that day she accused you of changing her composition.

“I recall now one of the fellows saying something at lunch time and I believe Ethel told him. Probably she went to the teachers, too. She’s jealous of you for many reasons and especially envious just now because you outshine her in chemistry. She wants to break down your reputation and get attention for herself!”

“How perfectly horrid!” grieved Kay.

“She’s crazy and those teachers ought to have sense enough to know it!” growled her companion.

Realizing that Ronald was a good person to depend upon, Kay asked, “Would you be willing to go with me to investigate that house in the woods? I think the answer to many of these problems lies there. I hate to go alone, and I think Mrs. Worth would rather not have the twins go out there. It is a queer, gloomy place.”

“You bet I’ll go!” answered the boy with enthusiasm.

“When? How about now?”

“No, I can’t go today. I must see Miss Janey this afternoon and ask her to clear up this trouble of mine with the chemistry department. Let’s make it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow it is!” agreed the boy, and with a cheery salute they parted.

Kay went on to the spinster's home and found the woman just finishing some laboratory work. The two settled down for a chat before her open fire.

The bright snugness of the room, the crackling logs and yellow flames, the sweep of winter landscape through the curtained windows, soothed Kay's spirits. Miss Janey was very sympathetic as she listened to the girl's story.

"I shall talk to those men and explain everything," she promised. "That Doctor Staunton ought to be a reasonable person. He has written some very interesting papers for the Chemical Society and appears to be a most intelligent man."

Kay was grateful for Miss Janey's support, but doubtful as to the response the two men at Carmont High School would give the woman. The response from the chemistry teacher, however, proved to be most helpful. In answer to a telephone call the next day, asking for an appointment at the school, Doctor Staunton protested against Miss Janey making the trip to Carmont. He insisted upon coming out to her home.

"I should like to show you my laboratory," said the woman chemist upon greeting him the following afternoon and before bringing up the subject of Kay.

The professor grew so enthusiastic over the equipment that before long the two had found each other most congenial. They chatted together as if they had been life-long friends and found that they knew many people in common. Doctor Staunton had been an ardent admirer of the work which had made Miss Janey's father famous.

It was some time before either of them thought of Kay and her school work. By then there was no doubt in the teacher's mind that the story about her had been a false one. So hostess and guest settled down to enjoy Jessie Hipple's tea and cakes before the fire. At that moment Kay and Ronald drove past the house on their way to explore the mansion in the woods.

"Look, there's Doctor Staunton's car parked in front of your friend's door!" said the boy.

"It was kind of him to come all the way out here," commented Kay.

"Maybe he wanted to see the place for himself," suggested Ronald.

"By this time I hope he knows that I didn't steal the formula," sighed Kay.

"Well, let's get along to the haunted house and look for the papers there," urged Ronald. "If you found the suitcase in that cupboard and if the formula was in the bag when it was stolen, then maybe it is still hidden in another secret compartment. Who knows?"

"Whew, that wind is blinding me!" panted Kay as they parked and started floundering ahead in the deep snow.

"Yes, and it's beginning to storm hard, too," said Ronald. "These tiny flakes sting like needles."

"I think we're in for a blizzard," prophesied Kay.

The two explorers fought their way toward the house through what was fast becoming a blustering storm.

“Who’s that?” asked Ronald, suddenly pointing.

A dark figure was silhouetted briefly against the whirling white of driving snow. Its hunched, bent form resembled only one person in the world.

“It looks exactly like the old witch Nanna herself!” Kay cried excitedly. “She’s locking up the place, so she probably lives there. I suppose she’s going out to one of her clients, maybe Miss Janey.”

“She’ll be buried in snow and need a Saint Bernard dog to rescue her!” declared Ronald.

“Quick, we must catch up and question her!” urged Kay vigorously.

Boy and girl plunged ahead through the storm, but the old woman had vanished.

“How disappointing to lose her just as we almost had a chance to quiz her!” lamented Kay.

“At any rate we know now that she lives here herself and does not rent her property to questionable tenants,” remarked Ronald.

“Let’s go on,” urged Kay. “It’s just as well Nanna’s out. Now we can examine the place.”

The boy readily consented and the couple labored against the howling wind toward the mansion.

“Where is that house?” asked Ronald at last. “I don’t see it!”

“It was here a moment ago! We saw Mrs. Larrop come out of it!” answered Kay, looking about through the blizzard, quite bewildered.

“Maybe it was here a minute ago,” laughed Ronald, “but it certainly is nowhere to be seen now!”

“My goodness, don’t tell me it’s a ghost house that vanishes like magic!” sighed Kay.

“I certainly don’t see it anywhere,” said her companion.

“Oh, Ronald, I don’t see the car anywhere either!” cried Kay.

“Look here,” replied the boy staunchly. “I know what happened! We’ve been going around in a circle! I think I recognize this crooked tree. I am sure we passed it before. We’re twisted in our direction with all this stuff blowing in our eyes. Let’s go around again and—yes, there it is!”

Sure enough, the house loomed up ahead, shadowy and sinister, but at any rate a welcome sight at that moment.

“I’ll be glad to take shelter inside!” panted Kay, leaping up on the porch. “Oh, the door is locked!”

“Of course it’s locked. We saw the old woman lock it,” Ronald answered practically. “Wait, I’ll climb to the

porch roof and try to open a window.”

He swung himself up and Kay saw his boots dangle in mid-air a moment, then vanish.

“Ugh! It’s slippery up here!” she heard him call out. “I—oh _____”

Suddenly, with the roar of an avalanche, the loose snow on the roof gave way with the climber’s weight. Off into space it shot like a waterfall. Ronald catapulted with it, plunging headlong downward.

CHAPTER XI

THE DISGUISE

“Oh, Ronald, are you hurt?” gasped Kay, running to the youth as he landed in the icy snow.

A wild churning indicated that the boy, although unable to answer, was struggling out.

“Give me your hand,” offered Kay, stretching out her own to aid with a helpful yank.

Up popped Ronald, stifled with snow that was packed into his mouth, ears, eyes and hair, down his collar, up his cuffs and into his boots.

“Whoof!” he blew out in a mighty puff, shaking himself like a wet dog. “No, I don’t seem to be harmed, but I’m frozen!”

He rubbed a wet glove across his eyes and then stood so rigidly still that he actually did seem to be frozen solid and motionless.

“What’s the matter?” Kay asked, peering back over her shoulder in the direction in which the boy was staring so intently.

“Who’s that going into the house?” Ronald whispered, pointing.

Two figures had emerged from the storm and were entering the mansion by a side door.

“Men!” muttered Kay. “They must be the swindlers!”

Immediately she crouched low and scurried toward the place they had entered. Ronald followed slowly, as he had been shaken badly by his fall. The Tracey girl reached the door and entered the house alone. She caught a glimpse of two blonde men, one slender, the other thick-set, going upstairs. Recognition of the former instantly flashed through her mind.

“The blonde thief!” Kay gasped. “He hid Miss Janey’s bags here in Nanna’s house after he stole them! He’s that movie operator downtown, the one Ethel Eaton identified. The fellow who escaped from the police! I remember now, they said his name was Jack Beardsley. I wonder who his friend is?”

The men disappeared upstairs and their footsteps could be heard clumping across the floor above.

“If only I could get the police now!” thought Kay.

The howling wind that shook the old house and the beat of driving snow hissing against window panes reminded her how impossible this would be. Well, she would not waste her time. Kay, therefore, hid once more in the coat closet which had sheltered her on the former occasion.

“At least I’ll get all the evidence I can to report!” she vowed.

After a wait that seemed endless, footsteps were heard coming downstairs. The girl peeked out. The sight that greeted her eyes made her blink with surprise. Instead of men, two women were descending to the hall! One was young, slender and blonde. The other made Kay gasp in astonishment.

“That’s Nanna! But I just saw her go out! How could she have returned without my seeing her? Or has she a twin? Or am I seeing double?”

Kay craned her neck to get a better look in the dim hall light which had been turned on. Surely there could be no mistake! There was the old crone, hunched over, shuffling along in her disheveled rusty garments, her arms out, fingers crooked. Then a man’s deep voice startled Kay.

“Do I look like the old witch?” it asked, and “Nanna” straightened up and laughed.

“You’re the image of her!” chuckled the young woman.

Kay noted that although this slender blonde was modishly dressed, her feet were suspiciously large and clumsy for so trim a figure.

“Those men are dressed as women!” realized Kay, fascinated. “That feminine-looking blonde thief makes a very good looking girl except for his feet! He can’t disguise them! And that bigger man is perfect as Nanna! Now I wonder what they are up to?”

It all seemed like part of a disordered dream, and Kay had to pinch herself to be sure she was really awake. She listened intently as the disguised men began talking over plans.

“We’ll flag that 7:35 train down there by that lonely stretch of marshland. There won’t be another train along for two hours and a half. That’ll give us plenty of time.” This was the heavier man speaking.

“How’ll we work it?” asked the slender fellow.

“Easy. Wave the red lights to stop the train and then explain that we’re two lone, frail women caught in the blizzard. You must come aboard because you’re afraid your poor, feeble old aunt—that’s me,” he said with an evil chuckle, “your old aunt might collapse in the storm.”

“So far, so good,” acquiesced “Miss Beardsley.” “What’s the next move?”

“After we get aboard we’ll hold up the passengers. The train can’t go far when it hits that pile of snow we put on the tracks. The storm must have added to it to oblige us, and the locomotive won’t budge until somebody clears the rails. That will give us plenty of time for our robbery and escape.”

“I hope it works out as easy as it sounds,” said the movie operator.

“Don’t worry. It’ll pan out as sure as my name is Ollie Desrale,” replied the other.

Ollie and Jack Beardsley then went into the kitchen, the latter saying, “Let’s eat before we go.”

Kay cast about for some way of tricking the men to hinder their purpose. They had left an innocent-looking knitting bag on the hall table. Stealthily the girl crept out to examine it.

Feeling inside, her hand drew out a half-knit sweater, and a ball of wool with needles thrust through it. Underneath lay the men’s wallets and watches. With an ear alert for returning steps, Kay quickly set both watches back thirty-five minutes before returning them to the bag.

“That ought to delay them and perhaps save the train,” she thought with a smile.

She then tiptoed softly away and stole out the front door to find Ronald.

“Where in the world did you go?” he asked, tramping up to the porch.

“Sh!” cautioned the girl, and rapidly reported what she had seen in the mansion.

“Whew!” whistled the boy in astonishment. “Come on quickly, let’s wreck their car so they can’t go!” he suggested.

“Wonderful!” Kay applauded softly, and the two raced off through the storm to find the robbers’ auto.

It was dark now and the blizzard made the night blacker. They might not have found the parked car at all if Ronald

had not bumped into it in ploughing his way doggedly through the woods.

“Here it is. Quick!” he cried.

Kay succeeded in starting the motor as Ronald pushed stoutly against the fender. Slowly the machine moved in the slippery lane and slid into a ditch!

“It will take a long time to get that out!” triumphed Ronald, as the two started away.

“Look out! Here they come!” warned Kay.

Sure enough, the two “women” were seen picking their way along, skirts held up and coats blowing like sails in the wind.

“Run!” recommended Ronald.

Sliding and stumbling, the two hustled through the snow toward their own sedan.

“Where is it?” panted Kay, baffled by the blinding flakes which had nearly covered the vehicle.

Fortunately a terrific gust of wind swept it clear enough to be visible as the couple approached.

“Another disguise,” laughed Ronald softly. “The car is masquerading as an igloo!”

It was no time for joking, however, for loud, angry voices, borne on the wind, could be heard. The men were berating

each other fiercely, each blaming the other for having left the car to slide into the ditch.

“Let’s get away from here!” said Ronald, struggling frantically to start the motor.

The engine was so cold it made only a hopeless whirring sound.

“Hurry, here they come!” said Kay.

Drawn by the whine of the machinery, the two men in disguises now approached rapidly. The younger one spoke in a high falsetto:

“Our car seems to be stuck in a ditch! I wonder if you would be so kind as to give my aunt and me a lift to the main road near the railroad track.”

The “frail” old woman now piped up in a cracked voice, “Such a predicament! I never could withstand this storm unless you help me!”

Without waiting for an answer, she opened the door of the sedan and stepped into the back. Her “niece” assisted her and then climbed in too, murmuring, “So kind of you young people!”

“Well, did you ever!” Kay whispered to Ronald, under cover of the roar of the motor which suddenly started. “A chance to drive them straight to the police station.”

The boy drove along as briskly as the storm would permit, but grumbled aloud about the bad road. The “ladies” in the rear seemed impatient at the poor speed and the high voice mentioned that it was getting late.

“What time is it, my dear?” queried the cracked voice of the false “Nanna.”

There was a fumbling in the knitting bag while a watch was consulted. Kay could hardly keep from laughing, especially as the answer brought forth a croak of dismay from the man in the witch’s disguise.

“Oh, it can’t be. I’m sure, my dear, your watch is much too slow!” the older one said.

“What time does yours say, Auntie?” squeaked the slender one’s voice.

“Why, mine must be slow, too! I thought it was half an hour later than this!” exclaimed the other.

Kay pressed her mitten across her mouth to suppress an audible chuckle. Ronald, chugging along through the snow, deftly took a turn away from the railroad tracks. He hoped this would not be noticed through the frosted windows.

Old “Auntie,” however, was too alert to be fooled by this. Both passengers rubbed clear spots on the glass and peered out anxiously.

“You’re going the wrong way!” one of them called out sharply.

“Turn back, smarty,” ordered the other roughly.

Neither man bothered any longer to speak in feminine fashion. They snarled commands from the corners of their mouths and ordered the car stopped. Ronald was jerked unceremoniously over backwards into the rear seat by one scoundrel. The other, the slim blonde, gathered up his skirts and clambered into the driver’s seat.

As he took the wheel, he gave a sharp glance at Kay and recognized her. Immediately he spoke to his companion in a foreign language which neither Kay nor Ronald understood. As the car strained forward through the gale the men talked in this unknown tongue, the older one fluently, the other haltingly. Evidently they were laying their plans.

“I suppose they are deciding what to do with us during the hold-up,” surmised Kay.

She was hoping the delay had allowed the train to pass unmolested. Unfortunately the tempest had made it late. Now, as they headed back toward the tracks, a long mournful whistle was borne to them on the wind.

“There’s the train!” snapped the driver, giving the car more speed.

“Hurry up!” prodded the other conspirator.

“How can I hurry in snow like this?” growled the man at the wheel, gritting his teeth.

Suddenly the sedan skidded wildly. Then it stopped with its nose in a drift. The engine promptly stalled. The machine was stuck fast!

On came the train with a melancholy blast, its headlight barely gleaming through the snow. With a dash the train robbers abandoned the auto and leaped out into the storm.

CHAPTER XII

A TRAIN ROBBERY

As the bandits vanished in the direction of the railroad tracks, Ronald Earle hurled himself after them. All were swallowed up in the wild night.

“Come back!” shrieked Kay to the reckless youth. There was no answer but the derisive howling of the wind. “He may be killed!” gasped the girl.

Feeling powerless against both weather and human elements, the girl sat stunned for a few moments. What should she do?

Suddenly two blood-red signals flashed frantically. The oncoming train answered with a long-drawn-out, mournful whistle. The line of lighted car windows showed it shuddering to a sudden standstill.

Half in hope of warning the people, and partly in the hope of finding Ronald, Kay plunged out toward the scene. A screaming gust of wind swept away her hat with demoniacal laughter. She sank into drifts above her knees but wrenched herself out. Both arctics came off and were buried in the snow. Falling, rising, stumbling, the girl forged forward, but she was too late.

“There are the bandits now!” she cried in disappointment.

Clearly framed in a bright window, the womanly figures of the disguised robbers could be seen entering the car. They went mincing down the aisle with short, feminine steps. No one suspected them!

On panted Kay, her eyes fastened on the scene in the car windows. By now the disguised pair were at the front of the car. Suddenly the innocent-looking women whipped out revolvers! They must have commanded, “Hands up!” for Kay observed that immediately arms were flung high over heads.

“Start handin’ over everything you got!” Jack Beardsley ordered. He held out the “knitting bag” and prodded the nearest passenger. “Drop your contributions in here and be quick!” he snapped.

He advanced methodically down the aisle, stripping each person of all money, jewels and other valuables. His pal was following, back to, watching to see that the victims did not attack from the rear.

“Don’t make me give you my watch,” begged one man. “It was my father’s watch! Look! It has his name, ‘Richard Birdsong,’ engraved on the case! It isn’t worth a thing except for sentiment!”

“Hand it over and turn your pockets inside out!” insisted the robber ruthlessly.

By this time Kay had reached the train. Near the end of the car sat a woman weeping. The girl did not know her but it so happened that she was a cousin to Ethel Eaton.

“Don’t take my ring!” the woman cried. “I’ll give you all my money. Here, take my purse, but leave me my sapphire ring!”

In answer, Jack roughly wrenched it from her finger. He dropped it gleefully into his sack.

By this time a brakeman had caught onto the rumpus and locked the door to the adjoining coach. As the robbers rushed across the platform between the two cars, they realized they had been foiled. Quickly they jumped down the steps and rushed away into the night.

Suddenly Kay felt herself yanked violently from behind, for someone had yelled, “Catch that girl! She’s their confederate!”

Before Kay realized what was happening, the railroad man held her and several passengers swarmed about her furiously. She was a prisoner!

“The robbers gave us the slip,” explained the brakeman to the others about him, “but we’ve got their girl. We’ll make her give us some information!”

Kay attempted to utter protests and explanations but her captors silenced her with gruff advice to “Save that for the judge!”

The brakeman dragged her roughly on board the train. Seeing her appearance, the indignant passengers were ready to believe the worst. They demanded their property back. In vain Kay shouted:

“You don’t understand! It’s all a mistake!”

Meanwhile, through the wild night the train started again. The engineer and his companion in the cab, unaware of the trouble, had supposed the waving red lanterns had warned of the drift on the tracks. They had shoveled it away and now Kay was being taken to the nearest station for arrest!

The poor girl had been half frozen in the wintry gale. Now she sat steaming in the overheated train. The snow on her melted, and her hair and clothes became a soggy, dripping mass. Things began to spin before her eyes. She felt first scalding hot, then her teeth chattered with unutterable cold.

Meanwhile word of the robbery had been relayed ahead. When the train finally drew into the station at the town of Clarkville, two uniformed policemen gripped Kay firmly. They hustled her into a patrol wagon and drove to Headquarters. By this time the girl felt very ill and feverish, but two thoughts kept buzzing in her head: she must get in touch with Cousin Bill; and what had become of Ronald?

“I had nothing to do with the robbery,” she kept saying again and again.

“You certainly don’t look like that type,” said one of the men at last.

By the time they reached the station house, the officers were convinced of Kay's innocence. Duty was duty, however, and they must escort her to the police judge.

"You better take off your wet shoes first, Miss," recommended one of the two who had brought her in.

Kay did so, and he set them near a heater to dry. The other man took her coat and spread it out near some hot pipes. A clerk in shirtsleeves said:

"You look all in, Miss! How about a hot drink?"

He brought in a cup of piping hot soup and gave it to her.

"Oh, that tastes so good!" said Kay weakly.

The food revived her, and presently she was taken before the judge. When he questioned her closely about the hold-up, Kay related everything exactly as it had happened. The ring of truth in her story was convincing.

"Now I should like to get in touch with my cousin, Mr. William Tracey, at Brantwood," she concluded.

"Oh, is Mr. Tracey your cousin?" asked the police chief, evidently much impressed.

"Yes, do you know him?"

"Very well. He has a splendid reputation in these parts, and of course you have a right to an attorney."

While telephoning to the lawyer for her, the chief remarked confidentially to the other officers, "I'm sure that girl had no more to do with the train robbery than I did!"

He was glad to release Kay as soon as satisfactory arrangements had been made.

"Your cousin is sending his two detectives here to take you home," the chief informed her. "You may go with them as soon as they arrive," he assured the weary girl.

This was welcome news! It had been an exhausting day and Kay felt relieved that it was nearly over. It turned out, however, that events were by no means over!

The Tracey girl was glad when at last the desk sergeant said, "Here come Tilden and Lee. Well, you got here in pretty good time," the chief congratulated them.

"Yes, considering the weather!" laughed Lee.

"It's a regular blizzard!" said the other detective. "I'm frozen stiff!"

"As soon as we warm up a bit, Miss Tracey, we'd better be on our way," urged Lee.

"Yes," added Tilden, "your cousin wants us to check up on the robbers' hide-out in the old house on our way back."

"We have to pass it anyhow," explained Mr. Lee, "and your cousin, Mr. Tracey, promised to meet us there."

“I wouldn’t tell them for anything,” thought Kay privately, “how much I long to get home—into a hot bath and a warm bed!”

Coming out of the well heated police station into the night’s boisterous blast, brought on a return of her chill. She did not mention her discomfort but rode along in silence. Finally, when the men stopped in the familiar lane and started to walk to the house, she followed gamely, endeavoring to keep up with their quick steps. It was a frigid march up to the dark, dreary mansion.

“There’s no sign of Cousin Bill here!” said Kay forlornly.

“Mr. Tracey promised to come,” Tilden assured her, “so you may count on his getting here.”

“We’ll have to keep a cold and silent vigil on this windy porch,” grumbled Lee, turning up his coat collar and holding both gloved hands over his red ears.

Kay leaned wearily against the railing. “For the first time in my life,” she thought dismally, her teeth chattering, “I’m right in the middle of a wild adventure and yet I’m yearning for my own snug bed! I must be slipping!”

It seemed forever before Lee finally remarked, “I believe that’s Mr. Tracey coming now!”

“He’s having a tussle with this storm!” sympathized Tilden, watching the lawyer’s laborious approach.

He reached the porch, breathless, and saluted the others silently. Then, as stealthily as burglars, the three men and Kay crept into the house.

The place seemed entirely empty. This time there were no moans, no creaks or footsteps, no hushed voices. The hide-away was dark and still.

“Let’s see what we can find,” said the detectives, snapping on the lights.

They began an intensive search on the first floor. It revealed nothing.

“The bandits went upstairs when they disguised themselves, so maybe there is some trace of them up there,” suggested Kay.

Up the hall steps the searching party went, keeping close together as a precaution. The shabby rooms held old-fashioned furniture and had a lived-in appearance, yet nobody seemed to be living there! The detectives made a thorough examination with no results.

“The nest is empty and the birds have flown!” remarked Mr. Lee ruefully.

“Wait a minute!” called Kay, backing out of a closet triumphantly with something in her hands.

CHAPTER XIII

AN EMPTY HOUSE

“This is the outfit Jack Beardsley wore!” Kay announced, holding up a girlish dress and coat. “And here are the queer old-fashioned things Ollie Desrale wore. I believe they are really Nanna’s clothes!”

“If that is so, it would seem as if the old lady aided these robbers in their crime!” said Bill Tracey.

The lawyer and detectives eagerly examined the strange evidence.

“Let’s take it all along with us as a possible court exhibit,” said the attorney, bundling the garments together.

“It’s very disappointing not to find any of the loot taken from the train passengers,” said Kay.

Another complete search was made but nothing more was located.

“We seem to have found all there is here,” said Bill Tracey at last, “and I think we had better get this young lady home. It’s very late and she looks absolutely worn out.”

“I’m afraid I am,” admitted Kay wanly.

“I’ll be glad to go too,” said Tilden. “It’s a real pleasure to leave this dismal old Buzzard’s Roost!” he declared, slamming the door behind him.

Kay could not help smiling and thinking this a good name for the unsavory spot.

“If our search has not proved altogether satisfactory,” Kay remarked, “at least we have the ‘Double Disguise’ in our possession!”

Upon arriving home the girl went at once to the telephone to inquire whether Ronald had returned.

“No sign of him, they say,” she reported, “and his poor mother is frantic!” Kay turned to Cousin Bill and said, “I’m terribly worried! Ronald was chasing robbers who carried revolvers! He just stepped out of the car and that was the end of him! What could have happened?”

“You’d better notify the police,” her cousin advised.

Kay immediately did this and drew a sigh of relief when they took over the responsibility and promised to send out men at once.

“Now, daughter,” interrupted Mrs. Tracey, “you are going straight to bed without further delay! I am positively alarmed about you! You’ve been chilled through and through! Why, your things are still damp! It will be a mercy if you aren’t sick in bed after all this cold and exposure!”

The tired girl was only too glad to obey. After a hot bath she tumbled into bed. Its welcome warmth soon made her drowsy.

Several times during the night her mother crept watchfully to Kay's bedside. The girl was breathing heavily. Her head was hot, her feet icy and she cried out wildly in her sleep.

"I'm worried about her," thought Mrs. Tracey nervously, as dawn streaked the sky. "It is very early but I shan't wait any longer to call the doctor."

The physician came at once and said, "It's a good thing you didn't delay. Her condition is serious, but I believe we have begun early enough to forestall anything worse. She will need careful nursing, however."

"I'll follow your instructions exactly," vowed the anxious mother.

By this time Kay's temperature had gone up alarmingly. Her breathing became more harsh and difficult. Her face was flushed, her eyes glassy. She muttered confusedly and hardly knew her frightened parent.

Toward noon the telephone called Mrs. Tracey from Kay's bedside. It proved to be Ronald himself!

"Where are you?" Kay's mother asked excitedly.

"Home again!" said the boy.

“Were you lost in the blizzard? Did the police find you?” she asked in concern.

“No, I hitch-hiked home myself after I came to.”

“Came to!” ejaculated Mrs. Tracey in alarm. “What do you mean? What happened?”

“Well, I chased and almost caught the robber dressed in the old woman’s clothes, when he whirled around and struck me with the butt of his revolver. You should see the black eye I have this morning!”

“Oh, Ronald!” cried Mrs. Tracey in great distress.

“When I came to, I was lying half covered with snow. The train had left and there wasn’t a soul in sight. Kay and the car were gone. It took me forever to hitch-hike home, and oh, what a headache I had!” moaned the boy. “I went right to sleep and just woke up. How is Kay?” he asked.

“The doctor fears pneumonia!” Mrs. Tracey answered in lowered tones.

She could hear the boy’s quick exclamation and cluck of dismay at the other end of the wire.

As Kay’s mother stood telephoning in subdued accents, she caught sight of Bill Tracey through the window. Mr. Worth, the twins’ father, was about to drive him to the scene of the hold-up, to rescue the Traceys’ car.

“Wait! Wait!” the woman called, and pounded on the window pane.

The man did not hear her. What would they think when they found the car was gone? The storm had cleared and sunshine was sparkling on the new snow. Plows already had opened the roads and Cousin Bill anticipated no trouble in driving home the family auto.

Alas! When he reached the spot where Kay had said the machine was, it was nowhere in sight!

“I’m sure this is the place,” the lawyer remarked, jumping from the seat where he had been sitting beside Mr. Worth. “Could it be possible the car is under a snowdrift?”

The two men explored the vicinity but to no avail.

“Ronald must have taken it,” decided Mr. Worth. “But it’s funny you didn’t hear from him.”

After driving around for some time the men came to a house with a telephone and asked to use the instrument. Ronald’s reply to Cousin Bill’s inquiry was startling.

“There’s only one conclusion,” decided the lawyer, returning to the Worth car. “The hold-up men drove it away. The question is, where to? I’ll report this to the police at once.”

The officer on duty at State Trooper Headquarters promised to send men out at once to try to locate the Tracey automobile. In disgust the attorney returned to Brantwood,

deciding to tell his cousin Kathryn the news, but to keep it from Kay.

The girl was having a hard enough time as it was, he decided. The next morning, to the surprise of the doctor and the delight of her mother and cousin, however, she was definitely better.

“The danger is over,” the physician assured the Traceys, “but she must be kept quiet for a few days to avoid a relapse.”

Kay’s convalescence was brightened by visitors who came to cheer her. Among these was Miss Janey, who was accompanied to the house by the chemistry teacher, Doctor Staunton. The sick girl was charmed with the beautiful roses the man sent up to her room in the hands of the woman scientist, but she was overcome when Miss Janey, fingering a gorgeous corsage which she wore, said:

“Professor Staunton sent me flowers too! I think he has exquisite taste! Flowers are a hobby of his. A most interesting man, my dear!”

Kay had thought of the woman as an unromantic, middle-aged person with little interest outside her laboratories and her memories. Now, behold, she was positively sprightly! Her cheeks had taken on a becoming pink, her eyes had lost their melancholy look and now sparkled gaily. She seemed younger, almost pretty, and yes, her hair was actually curled! Miss Janey had certainly found a fresh interest in life!

This discovery left Kay breathless. Nothing was more unexpected than that studious, bespectacled Doctor Staunton was sending corsages. Usually he was solemnly concocting some ill-smelling chemical brew! Kay was still bubbling over with this amazing turn of events when the twins called some time later.

“I never was more surprised in my life than I was to see Miss Janey all atwitter over her friend’s corsage!” Kay related merrily.

Wilma was led to burst into verse.

“Be not surprised if love blooms late!
Youth does not always find its mate.

Remember, underneath the snow
Christmas roses sometimes grow!”

she recited seriously.

Betty scoffed, but the three chums found much glee in chatting about Miss Janey’s budding romance. The twins’ visit had hardly ended before Kay had another caller.

“Teddy’s mother, Mrs. Dale, has come to see you, dear,” announced Mrs. Tracey, ushering in the widow.

“I was terribly sorry to hear you’re sick,” said the woman timidly. “You folks have been so good to me I did want to do something for you while you’re laid up! So I brought you a little present.”

The woman pulled a jar of jelly from her big cloth shopping bag. She held it up in the sunshine at the window.

“See how clear it is! I think it’s got a real pretty color and I hope you like it. Jelly’s nice for sick folks.”

“It looks delicious!” cried Kay appreciatively. “It’s every bit as pretty as the flowers. Thank you so much.”

Mrs. Dale flushed with pleasure at the girl’s enthusiasm.

“I got the recipe for that jelly from a real good friend of mine, a darling old lady by the name of Mrs. Lucy Larrop,” explained the widow. “At least that’s her real name but everybody who loves her calls her Nanna.”

Kay was so taken by surprise that she all but dropped the jelly to the floor!

CHAPTER XIV

THE STOLEN FORMULA

Quickly Kay recovered herself, since she did not wish the caller to get a suspicion of her surprise.

“Shall I ask any more questions?” she debated with herself.

The caller was looking out the window, a pleasant smile on her face. Apparently even her recollections of the strange, witch-like woman did her some good.

“This is my chance to get some clues, even if I have to stay in bed,” Kay decided. Casually she asked Mrs. Dale:

“Oh, do you know Nanna?”

“I should say I do!” responded the woman, unaware of the sensation she had caused. “I don’t know how I ever would have got along without her help! Mrs. Larrop never gives herself any rest; she’s always helping the poor and needy. You can call on her any time of day or night and she’ll come right to your bedside. She always knows the right thing to do, too. My, my, she knows everything!” marveled the Widow Dale. “In fact,” she went on with a faraway look, “she knows a good many things other folks don’t and she knows how to use her knowledge to very good purpose.”

This amazing twist in Nanna's character confused Kay and she pressed her caller for more information without appearing to be too eager.

"Well," obliged Mrs. Dale, "some people say Nanna robs the rich to give to the poor. I don't believe it, though. She's so good and kind, I doubt she ever robbed anybody in her life!"

"You say she's kind?" asked Kay in astonishment.

"Oh, yes! She's done a lot for me and Teddy and the other children. She helps anyone who needs it!"

"I've heard she has 'second sight,'" Kay remarked. "Do you believe she can foretell the future?"

"I don't know anything about that," responded Widow Dale, "but I do know that she always tells me the best thing to do when I am in trouble. Poor folks down our way think she's a regular saint!"

The idea of the old crone, who lent her clothes to aid a train robbery, being considered "a saint" was too much for Kay. She sank back on her pillows in utter bewilderment. Her head began to spin!

"I am afraid my daughter is tired after having so many kind visitors today," interrupted Mrs. Tracey, "so perhaps you and I, Mrs. Dale, had better let her get a little nap now."

Kay was relieved to have the caller go, but not so that she could sleep! She wanted to think over this startling new light on Nanna's character.

The girl could not make head nor tail of this new picture of the Larrop woman. It seemed to conflict with the idea of Nanna as owner of the robbers' den. Then, too, how did Miss Janey fit into the picture with this new light on the mystery?

As the door closed behind Mrs. Dale, Kay heard her mother answer the telephone. It was Cousin Bill calling to say that at last he had found the family car, or rather the police had.

"Where was it?" asked Mrs. Tracey.

"Why, a Good Samaritan found it stalled in a drift and obligingly dug it out and phoned the number to the police. Evidently it was abandoned by the robbers when the gas was exhausted. I have it now and it's in perfect condition. I'll be home in it in good time for supper!"

"Well, that is cheering news!" responded Mrs. Tracey.

"And how is Kay?" asked Cousin Bill.

"Lots better!" replied the girl's mother happily.

"Well, that news is even more cheering!" said the lawyer heartily.

Cousin Bill had scarcely hung up when the insistent telephone rang again. This time it was another report but not one of success. It was from Mr. Tilden.

"Will you please tell Mr. Tracey that Lee and I have gone over every nook and cranny of the old Larrop

place again, but not an item of the robbers' loot have we unearthed."

"Yes, I'll tell him," promised Mrs. Tracey.

"And please tell him, also," Tilden went on, "that we are hiding in the empty house and intend to stay there until someone shows up. If we can catch one of the tenants we'll know more about the train affair."

"I'll give him your message," Mrs. Tracey assured the detective.

Then she tiptoed back to tell Kay. But Kay was sound asleep.

"Poor child! She certainly needs rest!" sighed her mother.

Determined that her daughter should not be too strenuous for her own good and bring on the relapse of which the doctor had warned, Mrs. Tracey kept the girl home from school for several more days. Left alone one afternoon, the girl amused herself by experimenting in an improvised laboratory in the Tracey kitchen. Miss Janey had explained some difficult points which still delayed the perfection of her secret formula.

"Wouldn't it be thrilling if I could hit on a solution of the problem!" Kay mused.

Fiddling away earnestly with small glasses of fluids at the kitchen sink she suddenly made a discovery.

“Could this simple thing actually be a solution to the baffling problem?” wondered the girl in excitement. “Anyhow, it’s a step in the process. I’ll just dash out to Miss Janey’s and demonstrate my discovery!”

It was a lovely sunny day. Kay felt that good, rather than harm would result from a little outing in the fresh air.

“I wonder whether Professor Romeo will be calling on his Juliet!” she giggled, as she rang the Janey bell.

The woman scientist opened the door herself. She looked old and wan. So great was the contrast between the buoyant, happy person of a few days ago and the melancholy Miss Janey now, that Kay was stunned.

Gone was the sparkle in the woman’s eye. The pink had drained from her cheeks. The upright, sprightly carriage which distinguished her the day she wore her flowers was gone.

Kay’s heart felt a sharp pang. What had happened? She hesitated to refer to the great change which she had noticed. Miss Janey herself brought up the subject.

“You find me very downhearted today, my dear,” she began.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Kay responded with an effort. “Perhaps things are not as bad as you fear.”

“Worse, I’m afraid,” replied the spinster with a tremble in her voice.

Miss Janey led Kay into her cozy living room and produced a much-creased newspaper clipping.

“This item has upset me very much,” explained the woman with emotion.

“What is it?” asked the girl with curiosity.

“It is an account of another chemist who has a formula almost identical with my father’s!” explained the woman.

She then read the following excerpt from the news column:

NEW CHEMICAL DISCOVERY

A new formula of vital interest to industry in the manufacture of acid-resisting textiles has just been worked out by Gustavus Fearson, research chemist.

The Fearson Formula will make practicable a synthetic glass fabric which will not be brittle and easily breakable, but will have a convenient flexibility.

“Why, that is your father’s own secret formula, Miss Janey! Will it affect your work?” queried Kay.

“Oh, yes! This man may be able to take from me my claim to its discovery and the profits from it!”

“Oh, but that’s not fair! Your discovery came first!” objected Kay indignantly.

“Yes, but mine is lost!” replied Miss Janey dismally.

“Stolen!”

“How do you account for this man Fearson working out your father’s problem?” inquired Kay.

“He undoubtedly received the papers from the thief and has acted upon it!” declared the woman chemist.

“We must stop his use of it at once!” asserted Kay decisively.

“But how?” asked the distracted woman, wringing her hands in despair.

Kay marched briskly to the telephone.

CHAPTER XV

SURPRISES

“Wait! Wait!” cried Miss Janey, springing from her chair. “I don’t want you to get yourself into any trouble. I’ll—I’ll figure out something.”

“Please don’t worry,” said Kay. “We’ll just talk to this Mr. Fearson personally and ask him to explain where he got the formula.”

The long distance operator quickly put the call through to the unknown chemist. Miss Janey, who had been sick with apprehension for hours, could hardly believe that here in her own house was the voice of the man who had undermined her father’s valuable invention. Kay spoke to him in a business-like way, explaining the whole situation clearly.

“Miss Janey has a prior right to this invention and will put the matter immediately into the hands of an attorney to protect her interests!” the girl concluded.

The inventor-chemist at the other end expressed amazement at the girl’s inference. His earnest denials of wrong-doing seemed to have a convincing ring of truth, but still Kay was skeptical.

“I worked this out honestly and with no idea that anyone else had discovered the principle,” the man declared vehemently.

“It is very strange that it is so much like the Janey solution!” cut in Kay critically.

“Coincidence often happens! People frequently hit upon the same idea separately!” the man protested. “I should be the last person to deal in stolen goods!” he defended himself angrily.

“I think you had better come to Miss Janey’s home at once for a personal interview and try to clear up the situation,” Kay suggested.

“I will!” accepted the chemist, “and I warn you that if you plan to scheme dishonestly yourself by pretending prior claims to cheat me of the fruit of my labors, I, too, will turn my case over to a lawyer and fight to the last ditch!”

Kay bristled at the accusation of dishonesty and was about the reply when the connection was cut off.

“I hope he will come for an interview!” said the girl to her hostess. “You won’t have any trouble proving your point!”

“Oh, I am not so sure!” lamented Miss Janey nervously. “When my father’s papers were stolen, I fear all evidence of my claim to his formula was taken too!”

“Cousin Bill will know what to do!” said Kay confidently.

To Kay it seemed as if there was so much to be done that she became impatient of convalescing and decided that she was fully recovered! The next day she swung back into her usual activities and returned to school. She was particularly eager to resume her chemistry work, as her note book was several days behind in its schedule.

Doctor Staunton appeared to be more than ordinarily absent-minded in his chemistry class. Kay found him gazing dreamily out of the window, his thoughts far away. He permitted his laboratory pupils to conduct their experiments without his usual supervision, while he fiddled about in a preoccupied manner. Indeed, he proved so forgetful that, much to his students' glee, he neglected to give any homework assignment! Kay confided to her chums that the teacher was most certainly in love!

“In the spring a young man's fancy
Lightly turns to thoughts of love!”

quoted Wilma joyously.

“You don't call him young, do you?” asked Betty tartly, “and you don't think it's spring, do you, with all the snow of that blizzard still on the ground?”

“Love makes springtime in the heart,” replied Wilma romantically, and Betty groaned.

After school Kay went back to the laboratory to make up work she had missed during her illness. The teacher seemed vague about the past assignments, but asked eagerly:

“Have you seen anything of Miss Janey since the day we called on you?”

Kay replied that she had, and told him about the chemist who had chanced upon the same formula worked out by Miss Janey’s father.

“He is coming to call on her and discuss the coincidence,” the girl reported.

At mention of another man calling upon his friend, the teacher seemed quite agitated.

“What sort of a person is he?” Doctor Staunton questioned.

“I have no idea,” replied the girl, “because we talked over the telephone and we have no way of knowing what he is really like.”

The man now was thoroughly aroused. He paced up and down uneasily and dismissed Kay from further work for the day. As she went down the corridor she overheard Ethel Eaton rehearsing the horrors of the train robbery.

“My cousin Ella Eaton was in it,” she announced dramatically, “and she hasn’t got over the shock yet! She had her life threatened at the point of a gun! All her money and her expensive watch, valuable bracelets and ear-rings were taken as well as her favorite sapphire ring! It was dreadful!” declared Ethel with exaggerated emotion.

“And to think,” she went on, “that Kay Tracey was stupid enough to drive those robbers right to the

railroad to hold up that train! Where were her wits? Or had the men promised her some of the loot? It certainly was very queer! My cousin Ella says that the trainman caught her and had her arrested. That explains why she hasn't been to school. I don't see how she dares show up even now." Ethel announced this with a good deal of malicious enthusiasm.

Kay was stunned but she decided that for the sake of peace she would slip away unseen. Ronald, however, and some other boys caught Ethel's words and decided the only way to punish her was to play a joke on the unpleasant girl.

"Let's take this Eaton girl to the robbers' hide-out and give her a good scare," suggested Ronald to his chums.

The lively boys were only too delighted to play a prank. One of them sauntered up to Ethel and said:

"Promise not to tell if we let you in on a secret?"

"Oh, I promise!" cried the girl, all agog with excitement.

"We know where the robbers keep their disguises and probably hide their loot!"

"Would you dare to go with some of us fellows to investigate the place, just for fun?" invited Ronald.

"Or would you be afraid to go? Most girls would be too timid," said another provokingly.

Ethel's eyes danced. "I'd adore to go!" she gushed. "Perhaps I could re-capture that blonde thief! Or we might even find

the stolen goods!” To herself she added, “I guess that would show Kay Tracey she’s not so smart! Oh, how I would love to succeed where she has failed!” A jealous light gleamed in her eyes.

“Perhaps you’ll capture both the robbers and get back all the loot!” encouraged Ronald mischievously. “Let’s try, anyhow!”

It was arranged that Ethel should drive out to the old Larrop mansion at once with the boys. Ronald, in high amusement, confided the whole plan to Kay.

“Probably there won’t be a thing to be seen there,” said he. “We intend to give Ethel a thrill anyway, even if we have to impersonate the robbers ourselves,” he chortled.

Kay consulted the Worth twins. “Don’t you think we ought to trail them to see the fun?” she asked.

“Yes! I wouldn’t miss it for anything!” agreed Betty.

Wilma felt a little conscience-stricken. “Do you think we ought to let them play a trick like that on Ethel?” she asked doubtfully.

“We can keep them from going too far,” said Kay. “In the meantime we might turn up some new evidence at the old house.”

Accordingly, when the boys whirled off in a rakish roadster with Ethel, Kay and the twins followed at a discreet distance in the Worths’ coupe. The lads, in high spirits, led Ethel on

with wild tales told in the soberest of manners. They flattered her daring in venturing into the dangerous haunt.

When they reached their goal, the boys contrived to get Ethel to enter the mansion alone. They planned to play a practical joke on her by slipping around to another entrance and furnishing moans, groans and creeping footsteps, while keeping well out of sight. The best laid plans, however, often go wrong, and this one did, in a most unexpected way!

Betty, Wilma and Kay in the meantime had parked at a distance and held back from the house, uncertain what to do. They watched Ethel disappear inside the huge, forbidding front door. They saw the boys duck around toward the back. Suddenly the air was pierced by a terrible scream!

“What happened to her?” gasped Betty, turning pale.

Wilma clutched at her heart, too startled to speak.

“They’ve scared her all right!” groaned Kay.

She raced to the house. As she ran, the horrid thought occurred to her that perhaps the boys were not the cause of Ethel’s scream after all. What if the robbers themselves had caught her?

“If anything should happen to her, it will be my fault for letting Ronald carry out his trick,” Kay accused herself contritely.

“Help! Help!” rang out Ethel’s cries.

There was a great commotion indoors and then out burst the terrified girl upon the porch. Two men darted after her.

“Desrale and Beardsley!” thought Kay.

Ethel vaulted wildly over the railing and fell into the shrubbery below. Both men flung themselves after her. There was a terrific struggle that sent snow and dead leaves flying. Around the corner of the house charged the boys, wondering what had happened.

Kay ran on. She had hoped against hope that it was only the boys, masquerading as robbers, who had frightened Ethel. Now she saw Ronald himself and his friends plunge into the melée. She could only conclude that the bandits had caught the unsuspecting girl.

The two men had their hands full as Ethel and the high school boys fought like wild cats. Kay came sprinting to the scene of battle. Suddenly she shouted:

“Mr. Tilden! Mr. Lee! Don’t hurt them! They are all schoolmates of mine!”

The scuffle came to an abrupt stop at the sound of the familiar voice. The combatants, much disheveled from their strife, turned to see Kay Tracey running up.

“I forgot you men were hidden in the house!” she called out.

The detectives jerked Ethel to her feet. “Maybe this girl is the crooks’ accomplice,” said Tilden suspiciously.

“No, she isn’t their partner,” asserted Kay stoutly. “She’s a friend of mine!”

Dislodging Tilden’s grip on Ethel, the Tracey girl put her own arm protectingly around the girl’s shoulders.

“Take your hands off me!” snapped Ethel savagely. “This is all your doing, Kay Tracey! If anyone is the train robbers’ accomplice, it is you!”

CHAPTER XVI

KAY'S SUSPICION

Stunned by Ethel's unexpected attack, Kay drew back. Ronald quickly spoke up in explanation.

"This is all my fault! Kay had nothing to do with our coming out here," he said.

"Yes," added one of his friends, "you are always belittling Kay to us, Ethel, and we thought we'd just play a little trick on you to show you that you're not so brave or clever yourself!"

"O-o-h!" gasped Ethel, stamping her foot in fury.

"Perhaps now you won't go all over school telling how Kay couldn't handle the robbers and was afraid to try to!" put in another boy.

"Or it might get all over school that you were scared to death and screamed and ran away!" said another classmate gleefully.

"Yes!" chided Ronald. "You didn't know cops from robbers and Kay had to rescue you! What would you have done if you had been alone and had to face the real criminals?"

At this, Tilden, the detective, interjected. “You may think all this is very funny, coming over here and stamping around in a school-boy prank. But you are impeding the course of law and justice!”

“Yes, you certainly are!” agreed Lee in a bad humor, backing up his partner. “We’ll never catch those crooks,” he grumbled, “if you young people gambol around here and scare them away!” He glowered at the group resentfully.

“This affair is serious!” growled Tilden. “Some of you are going to get hurt if you mess in this robbery business. You can’t fool with desperadoes!” he warned sourly.

As a matter of fact, most of the bad humor of the sleuths was due to a feeling of disappointment. For a brief time they had hoped they at last had laid hands on a girl companion of the robbers. To find themselves duped by a crowd of hilarious high school students put them into as peevish a frame of mind as the pouting Ethel herself!

“It wasn’t the right thing to do,” Kay acknowledged, “and I know I speak for all of us when I apologize! But now I should like to suggest a possible new clue which you might be able to use to advantage!”

Speaking alone to the detectives, Kay related the affair of the chemist, Gus Fearson, and his development of the very formula which had been stolen by the blonde thief. This information drove away the glumness of the men and brought a hopeful gleam to their eyes.

“Ha! Maybe now we have something that will lead to those gangsters and their associates!” exulted Tilden.

“Thanks for the tip.”

“I’ll let you know all we can find out when Mr. Fearson appears!” promised Kay.

“Meanwhile we’ll go back to our dreary watch,” grumbled Lee. “It’s very dull sitting in that house all day, never seeing a soul! We haven’t even laid eyes on your friend Nanna!”

“Well, goodbye and good luck!” called Kay as they separated, the detectives returning to their posts and the students to town.

“Drop me off at Miss Janey’s house on the way back,” requested Kay of the twins. “I want to meet that chemist, Fearson, who is to come today to talk over the matter.”

The man already had arrived. He was a plain, earnest young person, with a straightforward way about him. He seemed very distressed over the affair, and genuine in his declaration that in no way had he been dishonest about the work.

“How could you have hit upon exactly the same formula as the one stolen from me?” Miss Janey demanded.

“I don’t blame you for asking,” he replied with a rueful smile, “and I’ll tell you just how it happened.”

“Please do, for it is almost too much of a coincidence to understand,” remarked Kay.

“I have something of a reputation in the industrial field,” the young man began, “and I assure you I would not do anything to spoil it. Some time ago I was approached by a young woman who wanted to rent part of my laboratory.”

“A young woman!” Kay cried out.

“Yes. She offered to pay me a consulting fee for my advice on some work. I consented. After a while she hit upon a series of experiments which resulted in part of the formula with which you are familiar.”

“She probably didn’t discover anything!” declared Kay indignantly. “She had the stolen papers all the time and simply copied them!”

“Possibly,” assented the chemist who obviously was puzzled about the affair. “I admit that she was no chemist. She could not seem to progress any further with her experiments and agreed to turn the development of the thing over to me with the understanding that we were to share the profits.”

“I wonder whether she could be the same young woman who pried into my affairs at the bank?” mused Miss Janey.

“More than likely!” cried Kay. “What arrangement did you make with her, Mr. Fearson?”

“All patents were to be taken out in my name,” he answered, “but I am under an ironbound contract to pay her large royalties for the use of her part of the discovery. This seemed fair enough, for the invention is sure to be of great importance in the trade. All seemed to be going

well until you called me and challenged my right to the formula. Frankly, I do not know what to make of it.”

“It is clear enough!” declared Kay. “That girl had the stolen Janey formula!”

“She must have recognized its value,” said Miss Janey thoughtfully, “and had learned that it could not be put to use without developing other chemical compounds.”

“I suppose it is possible,” replied the young man in bewilderment.

“Can you describe the woman?” asked Kay.

“Oh, yes. She is a slender girl, of medium height, always very neatly and fashionably dressed. I particularly noticed her voice which is high pitched but has an odd husky quality about it.”

“Were her feet large?” asked Kay with a smile.

“Well, as to that, I’m afraid I never noticed,” said the young man apologetically. “To tell the truth I am not very observant about ladies. In this case my attention was not upon her, but on the problems she presented for my solution.”

“What name did she give?” Kay pressed further.

“She calls herself Miss Adele Cortiz. I remember wondering why anyone with so Spanish a name could be so extremely blonde. The name suggests a dark-haired,

dark-eyed beauty. Miss Cortiz on the other hand is very light. Yellow hair and blue eyes, but no beauty!”

“She sounds exactly like Jack Beardsley in disguise!” mused Kay to herself, “but perhaps I had better not mention that fact just yet.”

She mentioned, instead, that her Cousin Bill was skillful in handling cases of this kind, and already he was interested in this one.

At this point the doorbell rang loudly. Jessie Hipple pattered from the kitchen to open it and in strode Doctor Staunton. He glared for a moment at the younger chemist as Miss Janey murmured an introduction, addressed a few words pleasantly to Kay, then seated himself as near his hostess as possible!

Kay instinctively felt that she was not needed or perhaps even wanted in this meeting of professional chemists, so she withdrew. She went directly to the laboratory and was surprised to find it lighted. Someone was in the room, but at first Kay could not tell who it was. Then Jessie’s head appeared above a desk.

“Oh, it’s you, Miss Tracey!” she said in a tone which Kay thought was far from cordial.

The maid bent down again. She was closely examining the floor.

“Did you lose something? Can I help?” Kay offered.

Jessie was evasive. She gave no direct answer but warned Kay to be careful of the valuable equipment.

“We don’t want any more destruction like that fire the other time you were in here!” she said sharply.

Jessie continued to search on the floor and mumbled a few words indistinctly about having dropped something. So peculiar was the girl’s behavior that Kay became suspicious and forced a straight answer from her.

“Well, if you must know,” grumbled the maid, “I knocked over one of those little test tubes there and I want to get up all the glass.”

A glance at the tube rack showed Kay that the ingredient which Jessie must have spilled was a poison. Before she could ask another question the culprit had left the room.

“This strong acid will eat holes in the floor covering!” thought Kay excitedly. “I’d better get something and wash it up or Jessie will be in trouble. I can’t imagine why she was tampering with these test tubes!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE ESCAPE

Quickly Kay seized a bottle of fluid and went to work, mopping the acid stains with its contents. While the girl was busy working, the door swung open and in walked Miss Janey.

“Why, what are you doing, Kay?” she asked in surprise.

Kay looked up from the floor. Rising, wet rag in hand, the girl replied, “Your maid had a little accident. She spilled some acid and I was mopping it up before it cuts holes in your floor.”

“What was Jessie doing in here?” queried Miss Janey, somewhat bewildered. “And why should she be handling acids or anything else?”

“I don’t know,” Kay answered. “Perhaps she was dusting.”

“Well, never mind,” said the woman dubiously. “Mr. Fearson has gone and Doctor Staunton and I have come to an agreement with him for the time being. I should like to have you hear it, so that you can take the matter up with your cousin, Mr. William Tracey.”

Kay washed her hands, then followed Miss Janey into the living room where the professor still lingered. He explained the arrangement with Mr. Fearson.

“He is to go home and get in touch with this Miss Cortiz and notify us as to where she is to be found. Then we shall appear with officials to question her and perhaps secure her arrest if evidence warrants it.”

“Good!” applauded Kay. “It looks as if we were closing in on those rascals at last!”

“I devoutly hope so!” exclaimed Miss Janey.

“Now, now, you are not to worry!” the professor said solicitously. “Just leave it to us and your rightful ownership of the formula will be established.”

“I trust you are right!” sighed the discouraged woman.

“I am fully prepared to give expert testimony in any court, that your father’s original work antedated this Fearson development by a good many years!” Doctor Staunton assured her. “I was an admirer of your father’s genius, you know, and followed his career with great interest.”

At this Miss Janey beamed upon the professor gratefully. The man of science now bade her good-night and offered to drive Kay home, all well satisfied with the plan to trap Adele Cortiz the next day.

Young Fearson was an honest chap. His reputation had been built on his uprightness as well as on his skill as

an outstanding chemist. He realized that he would lose his standing in the scientific field if his honesty were questioned.

Never would Gus Fearson have cheated anyone and he was indignant that he had been made to appear to do so. As he rode home on the train he gazed meditatively out of the window and went over the whole situation in his mind.

“These people, Miss Janey, Doctor Staunton and Miss Tracey are clearly persons of intelligence and honor!” he reflected. “There is a great difference between them and Miss Cortiz, and it maddens me that I have been made a tool for her dishonest scheme!” he thought.

This idea churned about in his mind for most of a wakeful night. By the next morning he was so overwrought and furious at the very thought of the Cortiz girl, that he forgot the need of proceeding carefully. He was impatient to trap her into a confession of guilt and hand her over to the law. In consequence, he went directly to the hotel where the woman was staying and accused her point blank of wrong-doing!

“How dare you call me dishonest?” challenged the woman hoarsely after hearing the accusation.

“How dare you implicate me in a scheme which you know is crooked?” the chemist retorted stormily.

The lady was too delicate to bear the blast of his temper. She slumped in her chair and covered her face with a handkerchief, sobbing gently into it.

“Oh, how can you say such dreadful, cruel things!” she piped in her high, artificial tones. “It just goes to show it’s a man’s world and if a woman tries to compete in it her professional standing is questioned! Oh! Oh!” and she wept as if her heart would break.

Much embarrassed, Gus shifted from one foot to another. He did not know how to handle a woman in tears.

“Mr. Fearson,” she begged, “I am dreadfully upset by all this, as you see. Will you be so good as to stay alone a few minutes and wait for me? I feel positively ill! I must go to my room and lie down for a short time. Then I will make myself presentable and go with you to see these people who so cruelly misunderstand me. I am sure we can straighten out the whole thing. It is all a mistake!”

She spoke so convincingly that Fearson was more bewildered than ever. Could he be wrong about her after all?

“I’ll wait,” he agreed sulkily, “but don’t keep me waiting long. Those people want an explanation without delay or they will start proceedings against both of us!”

“I shall be ready to leave very soon,” murmured the woman brokenly.

Fearson, therefore, reluctantly sat alone for some time, impatiently looking at his watch and nervously comparing it with the hotel clock. He waited and waited, but Miss Cortiz did not return.

Had Fearson been less blinded by anger he might have noticed the lady's feet, which, as Kay had hinted, were too large to be truly girlish. Her hands, also, were thick and crude as they protruded from her dainty sleeves. Miss Cortiz had, it is true, a pink and white complexion, thanks to a clever bit of make-up, but the texture of her skin was coarse.

No sooner had she left Gus than Adele hurried to her room, stripped off her dress and stood revealed as Jack Beardsley in his shirtsleeves! Hurriedly he pulled on his trousers over his silk stockings. Jerking on a necktie and coat, the wily fellow beat a hasty retreat.

He went down the stairs rather than run the risk of being seen in the elevator. Then he slipped craftily out of a side door, avoiding the public lobby, and fled up a side street.

By the time Gus began to realize that something was wrong, the sly lawbreaker had vanished completely! Anyone following him would be on the lookout for a young woman, so, with this disguise carried in his suitcase, he felt comparatively safe!

When Fearson realized that the acquaintance he knew as Adele Cortiz had escaped him, he took an express train back to Brantwood. From the station he hurried to Bill Tracey's office for advice. The lawyer at once summoned Miss Janey, Lee and Tilden. All listened attentively to the chemist's story.

"That's Beardsley, all right!" assented Tilden morosely. "Too bad he got away again."

“Oh, do you think he is gone for good this time?” deplored Miss Janey.

“No, on the contrary he has made it easier for us to trace him,” said the lawyer. “I should advise you, Miss Janey, to come to some sort of temporary agreement with Mr. Fearson without going to law about it. Unless I am mistaken, this gentleman is willing to cooperate with us in catching the thieves.”

“Absolutely!” the young scientist assured them heartily.

The lawyer therefore drew up a tentative arrangement. “This is to withhold the product from the market until certain facts are determined in the case,” he explained.

“It seems satisfactory to me,” commented Miss Janey after carefully reading the document.

“To me also,” agreed Fearson after he had given it close consideration.

“Then, if it meets with the approval of both sides, you can sign here on the dotted lines and I will witness your signatures,” the lawyer instructed them.

This business matter was just being concluded when Mrs. Tracey walked in with an invitation.

“I want you all to come home and have dinner with us,” she urged hospitably.

Her words proved to be a welcome relief to the tension under which everyone had been. The group drove to the Tracey home, where a good meal and laughter took the place of serious talk.

The gay conversation was interrupted by the insistent ringing of the telephone bell. Bill Tracey went to answer it.

“This is Jessie Hipple speaking!” squeaked a frightened voice.

“What’s the matter, Jessie?”

“There’s a burglar in Miss Janey’s house!” quavered the terrified maid. “Oh, please come as quickly as you can! Mr. Tracey, I’m so scared! Do hurry!”

CHAPTER XVIII

A PHANTOM BURGLAR

At this startling piece of news, everyone at the dinner table sprang up. Leaving their dessert untouched, they rushed out to the Traceys' car. Cousin Bill then drove at top speed to Miss Janey's home.

As they came in sight of the house, they saw Jessie Hipple standing on the porch. She was shivering with cold and nervousness.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came!" she cried. "I'm freezing to death out here and I'm afraid to go in! There's a man inside."

"What makes you think so?" queried Bill Tracey, who had been through false alarms before with nervous people.

"Oh, I saw him!" declared Jessie positively. "At least I saw his shadow! A big, stocky sort of man, the least little bit round shouldered! Oh, my heart thumped so hard I thought it would pop!"

Nobody could help laughing, yet the maid was too deadly serious to mean to be funny. Suppressing their chuckles, the rescue party entered the house. It was brightly lighted and perfectly quiet.

“There’s nobody here!” scoffed Cousin Bill.

“Well, there was!” insisted Jessie plaintively.

“Have you looked in the cellar?” suggested Gus Fearson after the men had examined the premises.

“I have and there’s nobody there,” reported Detective Tilden.

Upstairs and downstairs the searching party looked systematically. No one was to be found.

“Not even under the beds or in the closets?” shuddered Jessie.

“Not even there!” Bill Tracey comforted her.

“Maybe he stole all the silver or something and ran away with it!” said the maid, wailing anew, but nothing seemed to have been stolen.

Kay was the only one in the group who was inclined to believe that Jessie’s extreme fright had some real foundation. She prowled around, investigating alone for a while. On a hunch she directed her search through the laboratory.

“A burglar might be after a chemical secret rather than the family silver,” the girl said to herself.

Then she saw a clue! There, lying on a little shelf beside a bottle labelled “poison,” was a man’s glove! Neither Miss Janey nor Jessie could account for its being there.

“This seems to be the only trace our phantom burglar has left behind,” remarked Cousin Bill.

“Now you see! I told you a man had been here!” cried Jessie in new terror. “You’re sure he’s gone now!” she sighed. Then a horrible thought struck her. “What if he should come back in the dead of night when Miss Janey and I are here all alone!” she moaned.

“Now, Jessie,” soothed her mistress in a quiet voice that calmed the girl, “if I’m not afraid, you needn’t be either!”

The discovery of the glove sobered Cousin Bill into a serious view of the case.

“I confess that I am mystified by that,” he admitted. “I don’t like it.”

Kay was alarmed at the possible significance of its nearness to the bottle of poison. She felt sure the liquid was the same as that which had been in the test tube Jessie had smashed in the laboratory. The Tracey girl wondered whether there was any connection between these happenings.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. Jessie, glad of an excuse to be busy, hurried to the hall. It occurred to Kay when she saw the caller that he answered the maid’s description of the burglar! He was “big, stocky, and the least little bit round shouldered!”

“But this is Doctor Staunton!” the girl said to herself.

“Well, well!” cried the newcomer heartily, “here you all are, and when I called a little while ago there was no one at home!”

“Oh, were you here before?” asked Miss Janey in surprise.

“Yes, I rang and no one answered. Then I found the side door to the laboratory unlocked and ventured in there. No one seemed to be in the house so I went out again.”

“Oh, you came and went?” asked Miss Janey.

“Yes, I drove up the road to a filling station and replenished the supply of anti-freeze solution in my car. On my way back I saw you through the window and thought I would come in!”

“I’m glad you did,” said Miss Janey hospitably.

“I had given up hope of seeing you this evening,” remarked the professor, turning attentively to her.

“We were having dinner at the Traceys’,” Miss Janey explained, “when my maid telephoned that there was a burglar in my house!”

“So we all came to catch him!” laughed Mrs. Tracey.

“Oh, I’m afraid I frightened poor Jessie by coming in the side door!” said the man apologetically.

“Did you, by any chance, leave this glove?” asked Kay, extending it to him.

Obviously it matched one still on his left hand. The professor gave it a casual glance, then said readily, “Oh, yes, that’s my glove. I must have left it here. I wondered where I had dropped it.”

“So you are the phantom burglar!” laughed Miss Janey, much relieved.

Jessie Hipple blushed in embarrassment. “Anyway I’ll be able to sleep tonight,” she sighed, bustling back into the kitchen.

“Come, Kay,” said her mother, “we must go home now, for you have a great deal of homework for school. What will Professor Staunton say if you are not prepared for a good recitation in his chemistry class?”

The teacher and his pupil exchanged smiles, and Kay followed her mother, Cousin Bill and Gus Fearson to the car.

“We’ll drop you off at the station,” the lawyer said to the young scientist. “You’ll just be in time for your train. If you can get on the trail of your friend Adele Cortiz, wire us at once!”

“I’ll do my best,” the man promised.

Gus Fearson was humiliated at his former failure to trap the thief, however, and his answer was dispirited. Bill Tracey clapped the man encouragingly on the shoulder.

“Don’t be downhearted!” he said. “You’ll trap the wily lady yet!”

“I hope so!” the other returned grimly, as he swung up the steps of the train.

Although it was late, Kay sat down at once to study hard on her homework. After a while her mother came to the girl’s desk.

“Remember, daughter, that you’ve been ill, and it won’t do to get all tired out!”

“I won’t,” Kay promised, “but I do want to be especially well prepared in this chemistry assignment!”

In consequence of her careful preparation, Kay’s recitation the next morning was exceptionally good.

“You seem to have this subject well in hand,” approved Doctor Staunton. “Suppose you stay after class and help some of the students who are behind in their work. There is nothing which fixes a thing in one’s own mind like teaching it to others!”

“Goody!” whispered Betty to Kay. “I’m sure you’ll make the subject less mystifying to me than he does!”

Ethel Eaton of course resented Kay’s presence and went ahead with an experiment by herself.

“Oh, Ethel!” cried Kay a little later, as she observed what the girl was doing. “I don’t mean to interfere but you’ll be in danger with that! It may blow up!”

“I don’t need you to teach me!” snapped the Eaton girl, infuriated at the criticism.

The willful student turned her back on Kay, fussed around with some equipment for a few minutes, then flounced out of the room. There was a sly look on her face.

Shortly afterward came the sudden pop of a slight explosion, followed by a tinkle of broken glass. At once there was smoke which made Kay cough. She whirled around to see what had happened and beheld a glare of flames! Ethel had started a fire but was not on hand to take the blame for it!

“She did this on purpose!” muttered Kay.

“Of course she did!” assented Wilma, flying to the rescue with Betty.

Together the girls beat out the fire energetically.

“If anyone should see this, it would appear that we are to blame for the accident!” Kay said in dismay.

“That was Ethel’s idea, no doubt!” Betty agreed furiously.

“Here comes someone now!” warned Wilma.

Sure enough, heavy footsteps thudded down the hall and turned in at the laboratory door. There stood Mr. Preston, the high school principal!

He stopped, stared, sniffed, then hastily strode over to the black, smouldering mass which the girls were extinguishing.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded in severe tones.

Wilma, a smudge of soot across her cheek, tried to explain. The principal, however, was so annoyed that he interrupted her sharply.

“Yes, yes! Very careless! Let me see what damage has been done.”

As he peered over the table the electric lights suddenly went out! In the semi-dark room Kay moved to clear away the charred mess. She misjudged her distance in the dusk and knocked a box of white powder from a shelf. It spilled over the angry schoolmaster’s hair!

Like a miniature snowstorm the chemical sprinkled over the man’s shoulders, and powdered him, head, face, collar, and coat. It blew into his eyes and nose, making him strangle and choke. He rubbed his eyes frantically and cried:

“What mischief are you girls up to after school hours? How dare you take liberties with school property? And what is this stuff you have thrown all over me?” he cried in misery, fumbling for his handkerchief.

Wilma and Betty could hardly keep from laughing, but Kay was very serious; in fact, she was in terror. Knowing what the powder was, she was fearful it would injure the man’s sight.

CHAPTER XIX

A LUCKY ACCIDENT

The sound of Mr. Preston's loud complaints drew the attention of the boys and the janitor. The latter replaced a burned out fuse and as the lights went on, joined the lads at the door of the laboratory.

Hushed laughter broke out among them at the sight which met their gaze. Mr. Preston, white with powder, was spluttering indignantly.

"A double disguise!" snickered Ronald to Betty, hardly recognizing the head of the school.

In the meantime Kay was pleading with the principal to wash the chemical from his skin and from his eyes in particular. Finally, with as much dignity as he could muster, the man hurried to the washroom. The boys soon heard him splashing, snorting and growling to himself as he attempted to clean off the chemical. When he emerged Kay, solicitous, asked about his eyes. To her relief the man said they felt irritated, but he was sure no permanent damage had been done.

"Oh, I'm so thankful," the girl exclaimed. "I'm dreadfully sorry the accident happened."

The next day Wilma, Betty and Kay were summoned to Mr. Preston's office and reprimanded. Betty was angry that Ethel, the real culprit, was not sharing the punishment, but Kay would hear of no tattling. Mr. Preston spoke sharply of the danger of playing with chemicals and added:

“That white stuff which was sprinkled over my suit changed the color of the cloth so that my clothes were ruined!”

Without giving any names, Betty made it very plain that someone else was to blame for the start of the trouble. She added that Kay had been requested to stay in the laboratory to help others.

“Very well,” said Mr. Preston at last. “The whole affair was very lawless and dangerous! It will be necessary for me to make a thorough investigation to impress upon all students that no liberties are to be taken in the chemistry department!”

Kay's face was serious, and she gazed at the principal so intently as he spoke that he was much gratified to think she paid such close attention. As a matter of fact, the girl's mind had wandered far from his words. Her thoughts were concentrated upon the fact that the chemical had turned his coat a queer color.

“I'm going to try that out on some cloth as soon as I can get to Miss Janey's laboratory,” she resolved. “Perhaps—” and a gleam of triumph came into her dreamy eyes as a plan flashed into her mind.

Kay lost no time in hurrying to the well equipped room of the woman scientist and putting her idea to the test. Carefully she mixed a little of the powder with a red fluid, then with a green one and finally with a colorless liquid.

“Doctor Staunton would be the first one to approve of my trying this,” she thought as she watched the various mixtures.

Tense with curiosity she now shook a liberal supply of the powder over an old piece of cloth. Anxiously she awaited results. At first nothing happened. Then gradually the color of the goods slowly changed before her eyes.

“Now for my scheme!” she said.

Drop by drop she added the liquids in the test tubes to various sections of the cloth. As they mingled with the fabric, other changes than those of color took place!

Kay hopped up and down in excitement. “The texture of the cloth itself is changing!” she cried in delight. “One’s getting rubbery, one’s spongy, this other is—oh hurrah!”

Bursting with excitement, Kay raced to find Miss Janey. She located the woman in her library chatting with Professor Staunton. Both he and his hostess were even more interested than Kay herself in the experiment.

The woman chemist, donning a brown smock, and perching her glasses firmly upon her nose, made a slight change in the experiment. The teacher modified the third mixture skillfully and succeeded in getting even better results. The three worked enthusiastically together until nightfall. Then the

man and woman straightened up from their absorbing tasks and beamed upon the girl.

“We’ve done it!” exulted Miss Janey. “This is the missing link in the chain of knowledge needed to perfect my father’s invention! In fact, your discovery, Kay, is better than the original!”

Kay blushed with pleasure.

“It is similar, but infinitely better!” added the chemistry teacher.

“How did you hit upon it?” asked the woman scientist.

“By a lucky accident,” confessed Kay, and told Miss Janey about the affair in the school laboratory, which of course Doctor Staunton knew about.

“You were quick to see its possibilities!” congratulated her instructor.

“Now we are independent of the Fearson Formula!” rejoiced Miss Janey. “If I fail to get all patent rights preventing his infringement, it won’t matter now!”

“No,” agreed the professor, “for here we have an entirely new method, based on the old Janey formula idea, but vastly improved. It ought to be worth a fortune in the trade!”

“And you, Kay, are entitled to a generous share of that money,” the grateful woman declared, “and you also, Doctor

Staunton. Kay had a part in discovering a new process and you in developing it!”

Again the group turned to the experiment, using many kinds of powders and fluids.

“Indeed it is wonderful!” cried Miss Janey as she worked on. “See this material. It is as clear as glass itself, and will not break or tear easily.”

“You can make a sheet of it like a transparent tablecloth of any color and as tough as muslin!” exulted Doctor Staunton.

Great was the rejoicing that night! Bill Tracey, who was called in for consultation in the problem of marketing the product, said:

“A splendid man in the fabric business is a great friend of mine. If you like, I’ll speak to him about marketing your product.”

“I’m sure I don’t want to run a factory myself,” laughed Miss Janey.

“To think your material is superior to that made with the stolen formula!” marveled Mrs. Tracey. “What a triumph and what a just victory over that disguised thief!”

That night old Nanna crept to Miss Janey’s door and added her congratulations.

“How in the world did you hear about it?” asked Miss Janey, much mystified. “Not a soul knew it but the Traceys and

Doctor Staunton!”

“I know many things,” cackled the old woman mysteriously. “Nothing is hidden from me! And now I will reveal the future for you!”

She made some weird passes with her hands and a faraway look came into her eyes.

“I see prosperity ahead for you! Wealth and great happiness! The happiness does not seem to rise from wealth. No. I seem to see the figure of a man——”

Miss Janey moved eagerly and this seemed to break the spell.

“The vision fades,” said the old seer, blinking and turning to go.

At that moment Kay Tracey arrived at the Janey home. Seeing the witch-like visitor, she decided to stop her and ask some questions. When the strange creature reached the road, Kay spoke up.

“Pardon me, Mrs. Larrop, but will you please help me?”

The woman looked surprised but did not speak.

“I must learn some facts about your house in the woods,” the girl went on.

“Why should I tell you about my affairs?” asked the soothsayer, annoyed.

“Because trouble and crime are resulting from the use of your home as a robbers’ den,” explained Kay. “Surely if you know everything, you know that! You must be aware also that the police are investigating the place. Won’t you clear up its mystery?”

The witch-like creature gave Kay a piercing stare, then walked past her in silence. The girl followed and tried again in desperation.

“Please help us! Otherwise you may be arrested and forced to tell all you know in court! Poor Mrs. Dale has been robbed of everything by people living in that house.”

At this Nanna uttered an ejaculation of regret.

“Some people think you are in partnership with the swindlers who live there! It is giving you a bad name whether you deserve it or not!” Kay went on.

At this the aged woman’s beetling eyebrows drew together in a scowl. Her wise old eyes burned.

“I own the house, true,” she croaked. “I rent it. But I never condone crime!”

“Then why do you rent your house to thieves?” challenged the girl.

“I had no intention of it being so used,” she went on.

“I rented it in good faith to a man calling himself Mentor Tryson. He said he wanted a quiet place in the country for his invalid sister. Now I have reason to believe

these tenants are crooks. If this be so—!” She raised her thin arms above her head in a threatening gesture. “Let them beware! A fate worse than imprisonment awaits them!”

With this foreboding prophecy, the aged sybil shuffled away muttering.

“She gives me the shivers!” thought Kay.

Not a word did the mystery woman mention of her own good deeds nor of anything about the kind of life she herself led. Kay heard something of this when she went to Mrs. Dale’s to take the widow and her children some home-made broth and an apple pie which Mrs. Tracey had sent.

“Everyone is so kind!” the woman remarked, thanking Kay. “And you cannot imagine how good old Nanna is to us! Why, I would have been put out of this little house into the snow, without a roof over the children’s heads, if it had not been for her!”

“What do you mean?” asked Kay.

“I could not pay my rent and the landlord was going to put me out. Somehow Nanna learned about it and paid the bill for me. I never would have known who it was if the landlord hadn’t told me. How can I ever thank her?”

“She is a strange character!” said Kay.

“She is an angel!” declared Mrs. Dale emphatically.

Kay said nothing of her own ideas to the woman. To her friends she confided a startling bit. "I cannot picture an angel running a den for thieves," she said to the Worth twins. "That woman must have been aware of the use those men were making of her place and her clothes!"

"Let's go out to the haunted house once more," proposed Kay. "The snow has cleared away enough so we'll be able to investigate the robbers' car. You remember Ronald and I ditched it the night of the blizzard and I believe it is still stuck there, unclaimed. It may contain some evidence."

"Yes, let's go!" agreed Betty.

"I hope we don't get into more trouble," said Wilma anxiously.

The girls ventured once more out to the lonely haunt. As they crept up the lane Betty cried, "Look, someone is working on that auto now! Can it be one of the robbers?"

CHAPTER XX

THE POISON VIAL

The girls hid behind some thick shrubbery and secretly watched as the robbers' car was put into running order. As soon as all four wheels were on firm ground again, and the engine running smoothly, a man slid into the seat. He pulled out a wallet, paid the wreckers and drove off.

He passed the girls, driving quickly through the snow but Kay got a good look at him. The man wore horn-rimmed glasses and his face was smudged with car grease. He was dressed like a laborer, in thick sweater with heavy overalls pulled up over it, and a workman's cap with car tabs pulled down.

Not long after he had disappeared down the road, Kay gave a startled cry. "I thought I recognized that man," she gasped, "only something seemed different about him. Now I know what it was!"

"What?" demanded the surprised twins.

"He was disguised!" cried Kay. "That man was the other robber, Ollie Desrale, Jack Beardsley's partner, remember?"

“I thought those thieves were very blonde!” protested Wilma, bewildered.

“Yes,” said Betty, “and this man seemed dark and swarthy.”

“Don’t you see?” exulted Kay. “That’s part of the disguise! The dark-rimmed glasses and black grease on his face make him seem dark. With thick clothing on, he appears to be heavier than he really is! Oh, his appearance is very cleverly altered,” Kay admitted, “but I am positive that was Ollie just the same! I never can forget his long foxy nose and cruel eyes!”

Kay stopped the garage truck as it passed and questioned the men who had towed the robbers’ car out of the ditch. “Can you tell me the name of that fellow who just drove off in the auto you fixed?”

“No. He just phoned us to come and pull him out of here and we did. Then he paid us. That’s all we know about him,” the driver answered, and drove away unconcernedly.

As the red truck vanished down the road, Detectives Tilden and Lee came along. When Kay told them what had just happened, both men were chagrined to find that the robber had taken the auto from under their very noses!

“We’ll chase him, anyway!” growled Tilden.

“Here’s his license number!” said Kay helpfully, handing the man a memorandum from her purse.

Shouting their thanks, the plainclothesmen floundered through the snow to a spot at some distance where they kept their own automobile hidden. Deciding that nothing more could be accomplished just then at the old house, Kay suggested that the three girls leave.

“Let’s stop off to call on Miss Janey!” she added, as they rode along.

When they stopped at the scientist’s home, they found that lady greatly disturbed.

“Oh, I’m so glad you came!” she cried in relief. “I am terribly alarmed and hardly know what to do!”

“What has happened?” asked Kay with concern.

“Someone has broken into the laboratory and stolen a vial of deadly poison which I had there for experimental purposes!”

“That *is* serious,” cried Kay in alarm. “*Who* could it have been?”

“I don’t know what to think!” answered the agitated woman.

“Can it mean that someone is deliberately planning to poison _____”

“I hope not!” gasped Miss Janey.

“Where was this chemical kept?”

The scientist pointed out the place on a shelf where the small bottle of poison had stood.

“That’s the very spot where I found Doctor Staunton’s glove the night of Jessie’s phantom burglar scare!” cried Kay.

Miss Janey immediately telephoned to ask the teacher whether he had used the acid to complete any of his work. The professor denied doing so and seemed as mystified about its disappearance as the others were.

“Could Nanna have taken it?” asked Kay.

“Oh, no!” declared Miss Janey positively. “There is no reason to suspect her!”

Kay was not so sure. When she and the twins resumed their ride home, all three discussed this possibility.

“She’s such a weird creature, almost any queer act would be in keeping with her appearance!” remarked Betty.

“—secret, black, and midnight hag,” quoted Wilma gloomily.

“But is she as vicious as she looks?” questioned Kay. “That’s what I can’t decide after hearing Mrs. Dale praise her.”

“Suppose she’s crazy and not responsible part of the time for her wicked deeds!” suggested Wilma.

“Nanna may want to avenge herself on the tenants of her house,” mused Kay reflectively. “She threatened them with a ‘fate worse than imprisonment!’” the girl added with a shudder.

Another horrible thought popped into her mind but she refrained from frightening her friends with the notion. What if Nanna should set a poison trap in the mansion to kill the robbers and Tilden and Lee should be poisoned by mistake? After the Worth girls had left her, Kay continued to worry over this.

“I believe I’ll visit Mrs. Dale and see if she can throw any light on Nanna’s recent activities,” she resolved.

In order to have an excuse to call upon the widow, Kay raided her mother’s pantry the next day after school. She took some chicken broth and a freshly baked chocolate cake, which she felt sure would be welcomed by the half-starved Dale children.

She was not mistaken. Although Teddy was not at home, his little brothers greeted the girl with whoops of joy. Their mother’s eyes glowed with appreciation of the gift. Even the baby gave a little crow of delight as if she knew there was a treat in store.

Kay was depressed by the poverty evident in the house. The children were thin, pale little things, who now had distressing colds. Poor Mrs. Dale looked spent and weary, but smiled when the kind-hearted girl stayed a while to play with the baby. Soon she had the little boys laughing happily.

“Where’s Ted?” the girl inquired, looking about for the older brother.

A sad look came over the mother’s face. “My Teddy’s never at home much these days,” she sighed, her eyes filling with tears.

“Why not?” queried Kay sympathetically.

“He says it’s not like home any more. He tells me he is out seeking his fortune, poor child!” answered the lad’s mother. “He keeps saying he’s tired of being poor and he won’t stand it any longer. It frightens me to have him talk that way,” said the widow with a sob that worried the other children.

“Oh, don’t worry about Ted, he’ll be all right,” Kay comforted her.

Mrs. Dale refused to be comforted. “I’m so afraid he’ll do something dreadful in resentment at being so poor! He might steal! If he should do wrong, I couldn’t bear it!” cried his mother in distress.

“Ted isn’t going to do anything wrong!” Kay defended the boy staunchly.

“Oh, he might!” cried Mrs. Dale. “I tell him we may be poor but we must be honest, and he says, so roughly, that he doesn’t see why!”

“Well, all boys like to argue!” said Kay tolerantly.

“Yes, but Ted’s been very vicious and tough these past few days and I can’t handle him!” deplored the anxious parent. “Oh, if only his father hadn’t died and left me to struggle alone with all these problems! Sometimes it seems more than I can do!” and the poor woman wiped away her tears on the baby’s blanket.

Kay patted the widow’s shoulder in a desperate longing to comfort and help her. The woman, as if glad of someone in whom to confide, went on:

“Ted worries me so! Just before he went out today I found the strangest looking bottle in his pocket. It was marked ‘POISON.’ I said, ‘Why, Ted, what is this?’ and he just snatched it and ran out without answering.”

Kay’s heart turned a somersault. Could it be possible——

“Where did he go?” she asked excitedly.

“I don’t know. Poor boy, it’s only that he is beside himself to help me. Ted is not vicious by nature, but our unhappy circumstances have made him so!”

Kay was deeply alarmed. “What did the bottle look like?” she questioned the woman, trying not to let the boy’s mother see her concern.

“Oh, it was a blue vial, just about the size to fit easily into his jacket pocket. It had a red label with a picture of a skull and crossbones on it and the word POISON in big black letters. Underneath it told what to do in case of poisoning. Ted snatched the bottle away before I could read the name on it.”

“Can’t you remember what it was?” prompted Kay hopefully.

“No. It was something I never heard of before,” Mrs. Dale answered.

Kay excused herself as soon as possible and broke away from the little family group. Quickly she drove away.

“I must get to Cousin Bill as soon as possible and tell him about this. We must prevent trouble!” she thought in an agony of uneasiness. “I’m sure Ted got that poison from Miss Janey’s laboratory. Whatever can he be planning to do with it?”

CHAPTER XXI

SKATES, SKIS, SLEUTHS!

As Kay hastened to her cousin's office, she was haunted by the thought of Teddy Dale's possession of the bottle of poison. When the lawyer heard the story, he became as disturbed about the affair as the girl herself!

"I believe that young ruffian is definitely up to something! He may cause untold trouble before we can find him and prevent it," declared the attorney.

"Perhaps Ted has figured that the best way to help his mother is to go after the men who swindled her," Kay suggested.

"Maybe he knows where those crooks are!" cried Cousin Bill.

"Which is more than anybody else does!" added Kay.

The girl and her cousin hastened from place to place, where friends of the boy told them he might be. A State Trooper was sent to the old mansion to await the return of Tilden and Lee and to watch for Teddy Dale. Work in locating the boy came to naught.

“Not a clue,” sighed Kay, as she and the lawyer turned wearily homeward. “I’m going to phone to Miss Janey,” she added. “Some kind of a report may have come to her.”

In this hope the girl was to be disappointed also, for the woman had no clues and no theories to offer.

“Morning may bring a different story,” offered Cousin Bill, trying to be optimistic.

To the contrary, matters were worse in the morning. Mrs. Dale reported in great alarm that her Teddy had not come home all night. The detective had not found the thief who had got away in his car. His accomplice also still eluded the search of the police.

It was late in the day when a ray of light filtered through the dark puzzle. In connection with her school work Kay had been advised to see a certain motion picture dealing with the life of a great scientist. As the film was being shown at the local theater, the girl invited Miss Janey to attend the evening performance with Mrs. Tracey, Cousin Bill and herself.

It was when they were coming out of the place that the problems of the group once more loomed up. The owner of the movie house stood in the lobby and spoke to the Traceys as they passed him.

“No word about your film operator?” asked Cousin Bill.

“Not one,” responded the manager. “I did get a clue the other day, though I don’t know how much it is worth.”

“What was that?” asked Kay alertly.

“We ran a newsreel and I declare if it didn’t show a picture of our friend Beardsley right among some other people!”

“What film was it?” asked Bill Tracey tensely.

“It was one showing winter sports; skating, skiing, and all that sort of thing, up at the winter resort, Diamond Lake.”

“Why would Jack Beardsley be there?” asked Kay, puzzled.
“Is he a sportsman?”

“No, but the picture showed a crowd watching a ski jump. As sure as I stand here Jack Beardsley himself was in that crowd! He went up there, I suppose, to pick honest people’s pockets!” The theater owner spoke with the utmost disgust.

“Did you send anyone there to try to catch him?” asked Bill Tracey.

“No. I figured he’d be gone by the time anyone could reach it. Likely as not he’s all the way down to Florida by now!” The man scowled with the thought of the hopelessness of the chase.

Kay was not so easily discouraged. On the way home she said:

“Wasn’t it lucky we went to the movies? We really got a wonderful clue to Jack’s whereabouts! It was like something in a story book! Oh, Mother, may Betty, Wilma and I spend Saturday at Lake Diamond?”

“What for?” asked Mrs. Tracey absently.

“Oh, for the thrill of winter sports partly, and also to combine pleasure with business,” Kay laughed. “We would look for Beardsley!”

Upon reaching the house, Kay found the twins waiting for her to explain some homework. They were enthusiastic about the plan, so Mrs. Tracey gave her consent, but gave it hesitatingly.

“I hate to say no,” she said, “but I am always worried about you girls running into danger! I can’t go with you on Saturday,” she added, “as I have an engagement. I dread having you get into new perils, and it does seem as if you have a faculty for becoming involved in the most unexpected scrapes! You will really turn my hair snow white some day, I fear!” and Mrs. Tracey both laughed and sighed disapprovingly.

“That means we can go!” cheered Kay, seizing her chums’ hands and spinning around gaily in a victorious dance. “Grand! We’ll round up the villain, you wait and see!”

Saturday morning early found the girls, muffled in skating togs, mounting the train for Lake Diamond. The day was ideal for winter sports and the coaches were crowded with hilarious devotees of winter events.

The twins and Kay could hardly wait to reach the scene. They chattered merrily on the ride, peering out of the windows at the snow-clad landscape.

“If only Jack Beardsley is still there!” Kay remarked in guarded tones.

“I have a hunch that he will be!” replied Betty confidently.

“I hope you are right!” said her sister, “for here we are and we may soon find out!”

The train had stopped at the winter resort. The buoyant crowd of sports’ lovers trooped off with gay anticipation.

Lake Diamond was well named, as its ice and snow glittered in the brilliant sunshine like crown jewels! Snow was flung over the hillside like a cape of royal ermine.

“For goodness sake, look who’s getting off the train!” exclaimed Betty in amazement.

“Mr. Tilden!” cried her twin.

“Did you catch Ollie?” the girls demanded eagerly, giving the man a friendly hail.

“No luck,” he replied gloomily.

“Are you up here to trap Jack Beardsley?” asked Kay, knowing Cousin Bill had told him about the clue in the newsreel.

“I’ll get him if I can,” Tilden answered, “but ten to one the scoundrel has flown to a warmer climate. I wouldn’t blame him if he’d gone to Florida or Mexico! I hope he has,” Tilden added, “for then I may be sent to a

warm spot after him! This fearful cold is no fun for me. I'd rather be basking in the sunshine than flirting with frostbite!"

The girls could not help laughing at the detective's glum attitude toward the glorious winter weather.

"I'll be glad when this case breaks, if it ever does!" he grumbled. "I've been hiding in Lucy Larrop's old cellar and caught nothing but a cold. Now here I am on another wild goose chase! I tell you, hunting criminals is a terrible way to earn one's living! As soon as possible I'm going to retire and live on a farm where nothing ever happens!"

The girls left the disgruntled detective still mumbling about his hard lot and went to the inn.

"We'll reserve a table for luncheon," suggested Kay. "And let's look through the hotel register to see whether Jack Beardsley's name is there or maybe that of Adele Cortiz."

The chums pored over the volume for several minutes. Although they exclaimed from time to time over the familiar signatures of high school friends, there was nothing to give a clue to Beardsley's possible presence.

"Naturally he wouldn't register in his own name," objected Wilma.

"No! If he disguises himself he would choose a false name," said Betty, "and even disguise his handwriting."

“True,” agreed Kay, “but the newsreel showed he was at Lake Diamond. There are so many wealthy persons at this resort that it might be worth his while to stay around and devise ways of robbing them. In one disguise or another he would have to stay somewhere and this is the only hotel.”

“We’ll keep our eyes open,” vowed Betty, looking around.

The first person her glance fell upon was a familiar figure. At the same moment a voice, arguing disagreeably with the hotel clerk, fell upon their ears.

“Ethel Eaton, making a fuss as usual!” whispered Kay.

Ethel’s aunt, Mrs. Pinty, was shrilly adding her dissatisfaction to that of Ethel.

“It seems to me,” she scolded, “that for what we pay, we ought to get better service!”

With that she stalked off, nose in air. Ethel, with a snippy expression, followed her. Behind their backs the clerk raised his eyebrows and shook his head in despair.

“Apparently he feels as we do about them!” Kay commented.

As she turned to go out, she saw Detective Tilden coming in.

“What luck?” she asked cheerily.

“None,” he grunted sourly.

“Well, come along, girls,” said Betty with determined gaiety. “Let’s have a good time on our outing anyway, even if we don’t catch any crooks.”

The chums hastened into the sunshine and joined the throng at Lake Diamond, where various events were taking place.

“A skating race! What fun!” cried Betty, edging forward to see the contestants better.

Onlookers were packed so closely along the roped-off area that the girls became separated in the crowd. Kay did not notice this for her attention had suddenly become focussed on one particular skater.

CHAPTER XXII

CAPTURED

Teddy Dale was the skater who had attracted Kay's attention. She could not believe her eyes. How had the boy reached this place and why had he come here?

From what she could see, he apparently had come only for fun. Excitedly he was trying his best to win the race. Kay in turn forgot for a moment that she had been searching for the lad and a bottle of poison. Eagerly she watched him sprinting across the ice.

"Oh, I hope he wins!" the girl cried, hopping up and down in excitement. "If only his skates stay on!"

Poor Ted, like Hans Brinker, had an old pair strapped to worn-out shoes. If the frayed straps only would not give way!

"Only a little farther!" thought Kay, watching intently. "Oh, good! Now he's ahead! He's putting distance between himself and the others!" the girl rejoiced. "Oh, grand! He wins!"

Kay gave a shout of triumph as the Dale boy shot across the line first of all the racers!

“I wish his mother could see him!” she mused. “He looks so happy.”

Ted was basking in success now! The announcer was calling through a megaphone:

“Mile race for juniors won by Theodore Dale!”

After a lusty applause, the man went on, “Dale, it gives me great pleasure to award you first prize for your excellent speed in a well-skated race.”

Red as Ted’s cheeks already were from the cold wind, they turned even redder with the thrill of receiving a white envelope containing a five dollar bill. Never in all his life had the youngster possessed five whole dollars, all his own. The fact that he had won this through his own efforts added to his joy.

Kay pushed through the crowd toward him. Not only did she want to congratulate the boy, but she wished also to question him about some serious matters.

“Ted! Hooray for you!” she greeted the lad, gripping his hand in a hearty shake.

Then she led him aside and asked if his mother knew where he was. The child did not reply, but Kay knew from the way he hung his head and dug the tip of one skate nervously in the snow that the answer was “no.”

“Teddy, tell me, where is the bottle you took from Miss Janey’s laboratory?” the girl asked him suddenly.

“What bottle?” the boy spoke up, fear in his voice.

“A blue one. Since it contained poison, Miss Janey was afraid you might get into trouble with it.”

Realizing that Kay knew he had taken it, the boy answered surlily, “Nanna wouldn’t let me keep it. She made me give it to her. So I haven’t got it any more.”

“How did Nanna know you had it?”

“Why, she knows everything!” he answered in a matter-of-fact way.

“What was she going to do with it?” Kay questioned him suspiciously. To herself she thought, “It might be more dangerous in her hands than in his!”

“I don’t know,” the boy replied grumpily.

“What were you going to do with it?”

“Nothin’,” he retorted evasively.

“How did you happen to come up here? To skate?”

“Naw,” replied the boy. “I saw a newsreel in the movies and in it as plain as day was the man who took my mother’s money. So I got a ride on a truck. I want to find that man and get her money back.”

“Teddy,” said Kay, opening her purse and taking out a bill, “I want you to take the first train home. Your mother is frantic

about you and you'll never be able to catch that man who robbed her."

The boy took the bill, mumbled a few words of thanks and pushed out of the crowd. Kay turned to speak to the twins. They were nowhere to be seen!

"How funny! They were right here a minute ago," Kay said to herself.

Unable to find them, the girl started toward the hotel as fast as she could go.

"I must telephone to Miss Janey at once about Nanna taking the poison away from Ted," she decided. "It will set her mind at rest, and Mrs. Dale's too. I'll ask her to tell Ted's mother where he is."

Since the skating race had taken place at some distance from the inn, sleighs with prancing horses were drawn up for the convenience of people who might not want to walk back.

"Ride, Miss? Ride back to the hotel?" wheedled one driver, pointing his whip at Kay for attention.

Since she was in a hurry, Kay hopped into the sleigh. The driver lashed his horses and off they went.

Through the fresh, crisp air the animals fairly danced along, the red tassels on their harness fluttering, the bells tinkling a jolly song. Everything seemed gay, yet Kay had an uneasy feeling that all was not well.

The driver, huddled in a shaggy buffalo robe, seemed like a sinister figure in the midst of bright sunshine and sparkling snow. He wore dark glasses against the glare on the snow. These gave him an owlish and dreary appearance. His head, muffled in a fur cap, was drawn down into his fur collar. He sat glumly hunched over, but every now and then he cut the horses more sharply with the whip than seemed necessary.

“Why, he’s not driving back to the hotel at all! He’s driving away from it!” Kay realized suddenly.

A prickle of fright ran down her spine. Sure enough, the inn was receding farther and farther into the distance. The man was urging his horses on faster with cruel lashes of his whip. They were trotting swiftly along a road that wound up the side of a mountain bordering the lake.

The driver suddenly exclaimed angrily at his steeds and jerked the reins. Something in the tone of his voice and the motions he made, revealed his identity to watchful Kay.

“It’s Ollie Desrale, the train robber!” she gasped. “What a perfect disguise! He recognized me!” she thought in alarm. “Where is he taking me?”

Ahead and above them rose the mountain, its sides dark and gloomy with towering fir trees. The country here was lonely and deserted. Kay peered longingly down at the scene far below. She could still see the carefree skaters skimming to and fro. She could distinguish crowds of merrymakers and sports enthusiasts scattered across the snowy scene. But this

scene was now fast vanishing in the distance and people had become mere specks.

Evidently the coachman sensed Kay's uneasiness. Cruelly he thrashed his team as if to put more distance between him and the crowds at Lake Diamond, before the girl could object.

"Careful!" cried Kay sharply. The horses, restive under the whip, had plunged wildly ahead. They were careening on the brink of a perilous hairpin turn in the narrow mountain road. "You'll upset us!" she exclaimed. "Don't whip them so! Where are you going? Take me back at once!"

"Sit down and hush up!" growled the man fiercely. "You'll soon see where we're going! Sit down, I say!" he bellowed, for Kay had risen and was poised to leap from the sleigh.

She glanced frantically at the roadside for a snowy drift in which to fling herself. Desrale reached out to prevent her jump, and in doing so, dragged heavily on one rein. This pulled the team dangerously near the mountain ledge and the sleigh nearly overturned.

Kay jumped, falling into the soft snow. On raced the horses, now unmanageable. The man sawed madly on the reins, bawling "Whoa! Whoa, I say!" Angrily he yanked the lines. The maddened animals reared, plunged, slipped. Over the mountainside shot the ill-fated sleigh!

Down, down the hillside tumbled man, beasts and gay red vehicle. There was the roar of sliding snow, the wild whinny

of terrified animals, echoing cries from the man, and a hysterical jangle of bells now out of tune.

“They’re all lost!” groaned Kay, rising from a drift and not daring to look.

“Help! Help!” came a cry from below.

“He is alive! I must help him if I can!” thought the girl.

She struggled to the edge of the cliff where the accident had happened. A gruesome sight greeted her eyes. The ground was strewn with the tangled wreckage of the smashed sleigh. The crippled horses, trapped in their own harness, were in agony with broken bones. Not another word came from the man who had caused this calamity.

“I must get down there and see whether the driver is dead!” she moaned. “But just how I can do it safely, I don’t know.”

At this crisis came the welcome sound of sleigh bells rounding a turn in the lonely road.

“Someone’s coming!” Kay breathed in relief.

She was about to yell for help when the horrible thought struck her that perhaps this was Jack Beardsley following his partner! She crouched low under a bushy evergreen. The sleigh came to a halt. A man’s voice called, “Whoa! Hi, there below! Anybody hurt?” and footsteps came trudging to the edge of the road.

Suddenly Kay gave a cry of delight and scrambled from her hiding place. “Oh, Mr. Tilden! I never was more glad to see anyone in my life!”

“Miss Tracey! And I never was gladder to see anyone in my life, either! I thought you were killed, and if you had been, your cousin, Mr. Tracey, would have reckoned with me!”

“Why should he blame you?” asked Kay, mystified.

“He sent me to Lake Diamond on purpose to see that no harm came to you, but you are a hard person to protect!” he said with a sigh.

“Quick, we must see if Ollie Desrale is killed!” cried the girl, clutching at bushes as she climbed down the snowy precipice to the wreck.

“See if who’s killed?” questioned the man breathlessly, sliding after her.

“Ollie Desrale. You know, one of the robbers!” Kay explained hastily.

“Where did you find him?” gasped the man. A prick of jealousy stabbed him as he thought, “I’ve been scouring the place for that crook and then this girl picks him out!”

“I met him by mistake,” panted Kay, still picking her way down over icy rocks. “I didn’t know it, but he was the driver of the sleigh I took to return to the hotel. He drove me out

here and I jumped off just before he had the accident and went off the cliff!”

By this time the couple had reached the crushed sleigh and whimpering horses.

“Just look at that! Those poor beasts are injured beyond all help! The only thing to do is to put them out of their misery,” sighed Tilden.

The detective drew his revolver compassionately. Kay looked away, hands over her ears.

“Watch out for Ollie!” she warned the man as he aimed the weapon. “He may be in the wreck!”

“If he hasn’t made his getaway!” growled Tilden. “No! Here he is! Tangled up in the reins and badly kicked by the animals.”

The revolver barked twice. There was a moan and the brief thumping of heavy hoofs. Then silence. Kay ventured to turn and look.

“The horses are out of their misery, poor critters,” sighed the detective. “Now we can cut away the tangled leather and get Desrale loose!”

Cut and bleeding from his fall, the victim lay unconscious in a crumpled heap. Battered by the kicking animals, crushed beneath the splintered sleigh, it was a miracle that the criminal had escaped alive. Together Tilden and Kay removed enough of the debris to lift him out.

“Careful of broken bones!” begged the girl, wincing.

“We can’t get him up the cliff,” grunted the detective in discouragement. “We’d better leave him and go back for help.”

“Oh, but every minute counts!” pleaded the girl.

“Let’s take this seat cushion from the sleigh and rig up parts of the harness to it. Then we can pull Desrale up the hill on it.”

Already her fingers were busy with buckles and straps.

“You have more ideas and courage than I have,” admitted Tilden with grudging admiration for Kay’s ingenuity.

He set to at once and helped fashion a make-shift stretcher for the wounded man. This the two tugged slowly and carefully to the top of the hill, breathing sighs of relief as they got the patient to the road.

“Now to put him into my sleigh,” panted the detective, half exhausted with the difficult climb.

After the injured man had been lifted in, he was bundled warmly in blankets. Kay settled herself to hold his head in her lap on the rear seat. Tilden climbed in the front and slowly drove down the hill toward town.

“He’s coming to!” said Kay as Ollie, his eyes still closed, began mumbling indistinctly. “He’s trying to say something!” she added, leaning nearer to catch the words.

“What’s he saying?” queried the detective.

“Something about a Belden Apartment, I think. That is all I can make out,” interpreted Kay.

“Maybe he’ll give away some criminal secrets,” said Tilden.
“Listen to everything he may say!”

CHAPTER XXIII

A CLUE

The badly injured Desrale was taken to the Diamond Lake Hospital, and left there under a police guard. The officers of the law congratulated Kay on finding and rescuing the train robber.

Meanwhile Wilma and Betty had gone to the inn. Now they were in a flutter over Kay's strange disappearance.

"Where in the world could she have vanished to?" wondered Betty. "Maybe something has happened to her."

"You know Kay!" replied Wilma. "And you know anything is apt to happen to her! It's getting late and we'll miss the train if she doesn't show up," the girl fussed.

"Let's ask Ethel Eaton if she has seen Kay," suggested Betty.

"I hate to ask that girl anything," answered her sister reluctantly.

"Well, I will then!" declared Betty resolutely. "There she is now!"

The Worth girls hastened across the hotel lounge and greeted their unpopular classmate.

“Hello, Ethel! Have you seen anything of Kay Tracey? We lost her in the crowd down by the lake and haven’t seen her since.”

“I haven’t been near the lake,” replied Ethel with a superior air. “I’m afraid I’m not one of these brawny out-of-door girls! I’ve had a much more interesting afternoon.”

Her mysterious manner irritated Betty who asked tartly, “Well, and what was so interesting? I know you’re dying to tell us!”

Ethel tossed her head. “Sometimes you girls seem awfully young to me!” she said. “Personally I enjoy a little more sophisticated society!”

“And you were in sophisticated society this afternoon?” prompted Wilma.

“I should say so! I met an awfully interesting woman. She has the most compelling personality! I was simply fascinated by her. She’s very, very wealthy, and my dear, I wish you could have seen her lovely home! Simply lavish!”

“What was so interesting about all that?” asked Betty crossly.

“She showed me her jewels! I told her that I was simply mad about precious stones, and she invited me to her apartment to see hers. They were marvelous! I could imagine that I was in the palace of a rajah!”

“You do have a vivid imagination,” commented Betty drily.

Ethel disregarded this and went on, “I told her that my aunt, Mrs. Pinty, collects fine jewels as a sort of hobby. I asked the woman if she would care to see them. My aunt’s jewels are really very beautiful and rare, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know,” said Betty, and she added inwardly, “and I don’t care! All I want to know is, ‘Where is Kay Tracey?’”

Ethel, who, of course, did not know what Betty was thinking, continued rapturously, “So what do you suppose I did?”

“I have no idea,” said Wilma, adding, “What we really want to know is, have you seen Kay?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Ethel carelessly. “But do listen! I smuggled Auntie’s jewels over to show this lady. Auntie would have a perfect fit if she knew I did it, but what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her!” the girl chuckled.

Wilma and Betty, who did not admire deceit, refused to smile. Nothing daunted, Ethel rattled on:

“I wanted to show them to someone who would appreciate them. I do think there is nothing like meeting a person who has similar tastes, don’t you?”

“True,” admitted Betty, “but how long and how well have you known this new acquaintance of yours?”

“Oh, I just met her this morning, but after all it isn’t always the length of time that counts in knowing people. It’s the congeniality one feels. Now as long as I’ve known you girls I’ve never felt you understood me and appreciated the same things I do. With this new friend something clicked at once and I realized that she and I had a bond of common interests.”

“Well, as long as you’ve known us,” said Betty, “you’ll admit we never took your aunt’s jewels to enjoy unbeknownst to her! I do hope your new friend returned them and didn’t feel so appreciative of their value that she kept them!”

Ethel flushed angrily. “Just what are you insinuating?” she demanded.

“That you were very foolish to display your aunt’s valuable stones to some chance acquaintance about whose honesty you know nothing!” replied Wilma bluntly.

Ethel Eaton became furious. “You girls provoke me so. You are so smug about honesty and all that!” she snapped.

“Well, and did you get your jewelry back?” asked Betty.

“Why, of course! Don’t be silly!” Ethel retorted. “Here! See for yourself!”

She opened her capacious purse and drew out one of her aunt’s small jewel cases. She pressed her thumb on the catch and the lid flew open, revealing several pieces lying on the white satin lining.

But alas! they were not the rich, glowing stones that were Mrs. Pinty's treasure and delight. Winking up mockingly at the girls were glass imitations, obviously from a ten cent store!

"Oh, what has happened!" wailed Ethel, instantly realizing her folly and her loss.

"You've been tricked! Your aunt's valuable jewels are gone!"

"Oh, dear me, what shall I do!" cried Ethel, bursting into tears. "Here comes my aunt now! Oh, what can I do?"

"Tell her the truth," urged Betty stoutly.

"I simply can't! I'm scared to death!" sobbed the foolish girl.

"You can't do anything else!" declared Wilma, "and you needn't count on us to deceive your aunt!"

Mrs. Pinty had seen the three girls. She noticed at once that Ethel was crying hysterically. The woman swept across the room and spoke cuttingly.

"What have you two Worth girls been saying to upset Ethel? I cannot understand why it is that you and that Tracey youngster always torment my poor niece! Speak up, Ethel, and tell me what the trouble is!"

The Worth twins said nothing, but eyed their schoolmate intently.

“They haven’t done anything, Auntie!” sniffled the miserable culprit. “I just don’t feel well!”

The twins continued to look at the girl but they themselves said nothing. Their silence was more accusing than a stream of words could be. Ethel, unable to deceive her relative any longer, broke down, saying:

“Oh, Auntie! I’ve done the most dreadful thing and you’ll never forgive me, but truly I didn’t mean any harm!”

“What are you talking about?” said the bewildered woman irritably.

While Ethel, under the twins’ honest eyes, was making a clean confession, Kay herself appeared. Mr. Tilden still accompanied her. Both looked considerably disheveled and weary from their adventure on the mountainside.

So preoccupied had Betty and Wilma become with Ethel’s woes that they neglected to ask Kay where she had been. They simply called out in relief:

“Oh good, you’re back! Now you can help us, and Mr. Tilden can, too. You’re exactly the two people we need!”

“Why, what has happened?” Kay asked.

For a dizzy moment it seemed to her that things were happening too fast! In a hasty aside Wilma explained the situation. Kay then promptly introduced the plainclothesman.

“Mrs. Pinty, let me present Mr. Tilden, who is a detective. He’s the very person you want and here he is in the nick of time!”

“Mr. Tilden,” supplemented Betty, “let me explain that Mrs. Pinty has just been robbed of some very valuable jewelry. We didn’t know what to do, but I am sure you will!”

The detective looked pleased at this expression of confidence in him, and assured Mrs. Pinty of his aid. Just then Wilma caught a glimpse of the big wall clock, and she gave a little cry of dismay.

“The last train back to Brantwood leaves in four minutes, girls!” she exclaimed.

“Then that means we can’t get home tonight!” said Betty with resignation.

“What shall we do?” asked conscientious Wilma.

“I’ll telephone and fix things up,” Kay assured her. “They’ll think it is all worth while at home when they hear the news!”

“What news?” demanded the twins. “Kay! What have you been up to? We’ve been so concerned about Ethel that we forgot to ask you!”

“Ollie Desrale has been captured!” Kay announced proudly.

“Tell us all about it!” her chums implored.

“Let me telephone home first,” Kay begged.

A call to the Tracey home in Brantwood conveyed the news that Ollie was injured but under guard; that the loss of Mrs. Pinty's jewels required immediate attention; and that the last train for the night had gone!

When Kay assured her mother that Mrs. Pinty was staying at the hotel and would act as chaperone, she gave permission for her daughter to spend the night at the inn.

"Mr. Tilden will be here too," added the girl. "He has reported the robber's capture to the authorities but wants to stay and see if Jack Beardsley will show up."

"Well, do be careful, Kay," her mother pleaded.

"I'll be cautious!" the girl promised. "And Mr. Tilden is an able bodyguard, so don't worry! But please tell Mrs. Worth that the twins are all right and we'll all stick together under the watchful eye of Mrs. Pinty!"

With a cheery good-night, the girl hung up and returned to relate the day's adventures to her friends. They chatted together to their hearts' content, for the hotel manager had given them a room together, adjoining the one occupied by Ethel and her aunt.

Later Kay sought out the Eaton girl. "Please tell me something about your wealthy acquaintance who took the jewels," she asked.

Grumpily the girl agreed to do this. "All I can tell you is that the woman who tricked me is young and blonde and very pleasant," she related.

“What name did she give?” Kay asked eagerly.

“She called herself Adele Cortiz.”

At mention of the jewel thief’s name Kay’s eyes gleamed. “I believe I know that woman!” she said, smiling. “Where does she live?”

Ethel’s answer startled Kay, for it recalled to her mind the delirious mutterings of the wounded Ollie!

“She lives in the Belden Apartments,” was the Eaton girl’s reply.

CHAPTER XXIV

HIDDEN LOOT

Without letting Ethel know how the words "Cortiz" and "Belden Apartments" excited her, Kay returned to her room.

"Now at last we can put two and two together!" she exulted. "It's plain that Jack Beardsley is disguised as a woman and is busy swindling the rich people at this resort. Evidently he is staying at the Belden Apartments! I must get Mr. Tilden to catch him!"

The twins had left a note which read, "Have gone to watch the moonlight skating carnival on the lake. Join us at the boat-house."

Kay called Tilden on the house telephone. Evidently his room was empty, for in spite of insistent requests to ring him again, the switchboard operator reported, "No answer, Miss."

"Oh, bother!" cried Kay in keen disappointment. "Just when we could catch the thief, Tilden is nowhere to be found! Now what shall I do?" She puckered her forehead in thought, then made a brisk resolution. "I'll get the twins and we'll go to the Belden ourselves!"

Acting at once upon her decision, she seized her coat, hat and gloves and dashed out. It took Kay some time to find the Worth girls in the gay crowd at the lake. True to their promise in the note, however, both had stayed near the boat-house and eventually their chum located them.

“Quick, come with me,” she said in a low tone. “I have something much more exciting to do than watch the ice carnival!”

She squeezed an arm of each twin and excitedly dragged the girls out of the throng.

“Oh, Kay, what’s up now?” cried Betty, seeing the Tracey girl’s flushed face.

There was a hasty explanation.

“Do you think we ought to venture to that strange apartment without Mr. Tilden?” asked Betty.

“Or without letting anyone know where we are going?” added Wilma. “If we should get into trouble it will be hard for Mrs. Pinty, who is taking the responsibility for us,” she pointed out.

“Well, come along and keep a sharp eye out for Mr. Tilden. We may see him,” urged Kay.

The three chums pushed through the carnival crowd. They hurried on toward the Belden.

“There’s the apartment house!” Kay pointed in triumph, as they reached an imposing looking building on an exclusive street.

The girls had just reached the entrance when a well-dressed young woman came out. There was something vaguely familiar about her appearance.

“Jack in disguise,” whispered Kay, nudging the twins.

The swindler did not notice the girls. He stepped into a waiting taxi and they heard him say, “To the Diamond Lake Hospital.”

Torn between a desire to follow and an impulse to snatch this opportunity to search the “Cortiz” apartment suite, the three observers hesitated on the sidewalk.

“There’s Mr. Tilden!” gasped Betty.

The detective stepped from the shadows and into another taxi. “Follow that car!” he said.

His driver shot off in prompt pursuit.

“He was right on the job after all!” cried Kay. “And now that both Jack and Ollie are out of the way, let’s try to examine their rooms,” she exulted, entering the lobby.

“But how can we get into their quarters?” puzzled Wilma.

“Leave it to me,” whispered Kay.

She went to the superintendent's desk and asked for "Miss Adele Cortiz."

"Sorry, Miss, but she has just gone out," replied the man.

"Oh, dear me!" lamented the girl. "Isn't that too bad! We've come such a long way to see her! It's really very important, too. How disappointing!"

Kay succeeded in looking so crestfallen that the attendant could not help sympathizing!

"That's too bad!" he said. "Maybe you could come back again later?"

"Oh, but it's so cold tonight!" Kay answered with a shiver. "Couldn't we just run up and wait in her rooms?"

The man gave a shrewd glance at the three girls. He could see that they were straightforward and well-bred. Without any qualms he replied genially, "I guess, since you are friends of hers, it will be all right for you to go up and wait. She often has people visit her." He gave a key to the elevator boy, saying, "Take these young ladies up to the Cortiz apartment."

Up went the conspirators, trying not to catch one another's eyes for fear of giving way to a telltale giggle! The boy unlocked the door of the deserted apartment and in walked the young sleuths!

"As easy as that!" triumphed Betty as the door was closed.

“Are you sure nobody is in here?” whispered Wilma nervously, but a quick survey of the luxurious rooms showed them to be empty.

“Now for a search to find some of that loot,” prompted Kay briskly.

Betty paused to look around. “They certainly spend their ill-gotten gains to live in ease and luxury!” she commented bitterly.

“To think those wicked men live like this, while they rob people like poor Mrs. Dale who has to struggle with her half starved children!” exclaimed Wilma indignantly.

“Yes, doesn’t it make you boil!” cried Kay angrily. “Hurry up, let’s see if we can find some of the stolen property!”

“A good joke on Miss Adele Cortiz if we do!” said Betty, beginning to hunt. “It would give me great pleasure to have her return and find her booty gone!”

As they talked, the girls were making a business-like search of every likely hiding place in which the robbers might have concealed their valuable pickings.

“Look here!” called Kay, her voice fairly trembling with excitement.

Tucked in a bureau drawer for all the world as if they were the rightful belongings of the room tenant, were leather jewel boxes filled with great lustrous gems!

“Some of these must be Mrs. Pinty’s,” breathed Wilma, amazed.

“Certainly!” exulted Kay. “Look, this ring has her name engraved in it.”

“You can see that they’ve tried to scratch off the letters on other pieces but they are still readable!” Kay said.

“That search was more than profitable!” rejoiced Betty, now burrowing into a closet. She rapidly jerked open boxes and dug through them. She, too, was rewarded with success.

“I have found it!” she called.

“Found what?” demanded Kay eagerly.

“Sh! Someone might hear us!” warned Wilma nervously.

Betty produced a heavy manila envelope marked, “Cash and Securities of Mrs. Theodore Dale.”

“Oh, how perfectly grand!” applauded her twin softly. “Just think what that will mean to the poor widow and Ted and the other children!”

“This is certainly the Dales’ lucky day!” laughed Kay.

She now worked systematically in her search to find some trace of Miss Janey’s loss, the purse and the suitcase.

“They can’t be in the apartment,” she declared, “for I’ve looked in every nook and cranny and there isn’t a spot left

big enough to hide them.”

“Maybe Beardsley took out the valuables and threw the bags away to destroy that evidence,” suggested Wilma shrewdly.

“They must have,” Kay agreed. “Now where—” Her eyes ran swiftly over possible hiding places. “Oh, why didn’t I think of that before?”

Quickly the girl snatched off the covers from a bed and shook them. Then she lifted up one side of the mattress. There, well hidden, lay papers strapped together with thick elastic bands. With fingers shaking with excitement the amateur detective spread these sheets out for inspection.

“It is! Can I believe my eyes!” shouted Kay gleefully.

“Sh!” Wilma hissed in warning. “Don’t make so much noise!” she said in a hushed voice from the kitchen where she was engaged in searching industriously.

“But imagine! I’ve actually found Miss Janey’s famous formula!” Kay blurted out in thrilled tones.

“And this must be the rest of the woman’s stolen possessions!” added Betty, delving into the package.

“Quick! Tear open that other bed!” urged Kay.

“Wouldn’t it be awful if Beardsley should come back and catch us doing this?” said Betty, trembling as she jerked at sheets and blankets.

The other bed revealed no hidden plunder, but at this moment Wilma, who was methodically stripping the kitchen shelves, gave a cry.

“I’ve found something!”

The girl had dumped out cans labelled “Flour,” “Sugar,” “Coffee,” “Tea,” “Salt,” and “Spice.” As the contents had spilled, out had fallen the most surprising objects that ever masqueraded as kitchen supplies!

“What’s there?” asked Betty, amazed.

“Things that were hidden in these cans!” cried Wilma.

“Here’s an old-fashioned watch!”

She dusted off the flour that covered it and wiped the case clean. “There seems to be some engraving on it,” she informed the others.

“Let’s see!” begged Kay, reaching for the quaint timepiece. Then an exclamation escaped her. “Why, I know this watch!” she cried. “It’s one the robbers stole from a train passenger in that holdup!”

“How can you tell?” interrupted Betty.

“It says Richard Birdsong on it!” verified Kay.

“How can you remember the name?” questioned Wilma.

“It was such an odd name it stuck in my memory. In spite of all the excitement at the time I remember hearing the man

tell of his loss and thinking for no good reason that Dicky Birdsong was a funny combination.”

“Oh, Kay, you are wonderful!” said Wilma.

“What else have you found?” her chum asked, as the twin plunged her hand into the sugar and felt all around, finally uncovering a beautiful sapphire ring.

“Ella Eaton’s ring!” Kay exclaimed. “What a fuss she made at parting with it! Yes, we have unearthed the train robbery loot!”

“Hurrah!” cheered Wilma softly, then, “Hush!” she whispered. “What’s that?”

The three girls froze perfectly still. Wilma, poised on a kitchen chair, remained motionless, one hand holding a spice box in mid-air!

A key was being rattled in the lock. The front door swung open!

“Quick, hide!” whispered Betty in a panic.

Wilma slipped stealthily from her chair and tiptoed into the pantry closet. Her sister crowded frantically in on top of her, dragging Kay with her. Softly the latter closed the door.

A man’s heavy footsteps resounded across the polished floor of the living room. The girls had left the articles they had discovered upon the library table.

“He’ll find those things and all the mess we’ve made and know somebody has been here!” breathed Betty into Kay’s close-pressed ear.

“Now he’s coming into the kitchen!” Wilma whispered back.

To her horror she almost dislodged a pan in her panic. It might have crashed to the floor and betrayed their hiding place, but luckily Kay caught it with an adroit swoop. There was silence, save for their muffled breathing. Then came the scuff of footsteps across the kitchen linoleum.

“What’s all this?” muttered a masculine voice.

Evidently the intruder had seen the disarray of spilled flour, sugar, tea and coffee, and the articles the girls had dropped as they had leaped into their hiding place.

There was a low whistle and a terse “Ha!” Then came a clatter as the cans were moved. “Well, this is a nice haul!” said the man to himself.

“It can’t be our robber!” breathed Betty.

The footsteps now marched to and fro, then retreated into the living room again. After what seemed ages there was the sound of the front door creaking open again and banging shut. Then complete silence.

“He has left!” said Kay, opening the pantry door a crack and venturing to peek out.

“Let’s get out of here!” advised Betty urgently.

“All that loot is gone except the Birdsong watch which I slipped into my pocket, and the sapphire ring which I had on my finger!” mourned Kay.

There was not one sign of money, securities, or jewels left!

“How perfectly maddening!” cried Wilma.

“I can’t bear to think we actually found the Janey formula, only to have it whisked away again the next minute!” groaned Kay.

“Let’s get out of here before we’re caught!” begged Wilma.

The three girls cautiously opened the hall door and stepped out of the apartment.

“Hands up!” thundered a man’s commanding voice!

CHAPTER XXV

HAPPINESS

The startled girls flung their arms over their heads and stood stock still. Wilma had turned pale, Betty was trembling, but Kay burst out laughing.

“Oh, Mr. Tilden!” she cried, dropping her arms. “You gave us such a fright!”

“Is it really you!” gasped Wilma, also letting her hands fall. “I was sure it was Beardsley in a new disguise!”

“Sorry if I really scared you,” said the detective, smiling, “but I had to have my little joke! You girls will beat me at my own business if I’m not careful. I see you unearthed the loot!”

“Yes, wasn’t it wonderful to find it?” exulted Kay. “What fun it will be to restore the property to the owners!”

“The last we saw of you, Mr. Tilden, was when you jumped in the taxi and chased Beardsley. He was dressed up as Adele Cortiz!” said Betty.

“Oh, did you see me go?” he laughed. “You girls don’t miss anything, do you?”

“We heard Cortiz tell the driver to go to the hospital and we heard you tell your chauffeur to follow!”

“Yes, we got to the hospital at about the same time,” Tilden reported. “I waited until our friend in skirts had actually gone inside Ollie Desrale’s room. You remember we had a police guard there. They arrested the disguised Beardsley right at Ollie’s bedside. It worked out very neatly!” A grin of triumph lighted up the detective’s face.

“Good for you!” said Kay admiringly.

“Then what did you do?” asked Betty.

“I came straight back here to investigate the apartment. I surmised that the loot might be hidden here, just as you did. And I also suspected you were here!”

“How did you know that?” asked Wilma.

“I gathered from the description given me by the superintendent downstairs that the three girls who had gone to the Cortiz apartment must be you assistant sleuths!”

“That superintendent is going to be surprised when he finds out what has been going on right in his own building,” said Kay.

“We’d better go and break the news to him,” answered Tilden, pressing the bell for the elevator.

When they reached the ground floor again, all of them went directly to the superintendent to enlighten him.

“Why, the idea!” exclaimed the man, much perturbed. “To think such scoundrels were living right here in my building! We’ve always been so careful to keep a good class of tenants! I hope this doesn’t ruin the Belden Apartments’ reputation!”

“How did they manage to keep up the deceit?” asked Kay.

“Why, there seemed to be nothing to suspect! They were a quiet couple, the man and the one I took for his sister. I never imagined that young woman was a fake! The two of them came and went without any ado. They were easy to please, and both were so inconspicuous I never noticed much about them!”

“Well, they are both going to a place where they’ll be even less conspicuous from now on,” Tilden assured him with a satisfied smile.

“Girls, we must hurry back to the inn!” spoke up Kay. “It’s frightfully late and poor Mrs. Pinty will be wondering where we are! Besides, I can hardly wait to see her face when we return her jewels!”

“We’d better keep close to Mr. Tilden and let him guard those valuables or it wouldn’t surprise me if they were spirited away from us after all!” said Wilma pessimistically.

“Don’t worry, I’ll guarantee to get you and the gems back to Mrs. Pinty safe and sound,” promised the detective.

This he did, and the girls went quickly to their chaperone’s room and knocked. Ethel’s aunt flung

open the door and glared at the girls. She was in a furious temper at their going off without letting her know.

“Just a minute, Mrs. Pinty,” Kay said firmly. “We have something here which may excuse our staying out so late. I apologize for giving you any trouble but I think this will make you feel that we were justified.”

Before Ethel’s aunt could launch into another outburst, Kay handed the woman her jewels. Like the sun breaking through storm clouds came a smile across Mrs. Pinty’s face!

“Why—what—where!” she stammered in amazement.

Ethel sprang up. Seeing the valuables which had been lost through her own folly, she gave a cry of relief.

“How did you ever accomplish this?” exclaimed the happy woman, her face now beaming. “I never expected to lay eyes on these again! How can I ever hope to thank you? You cannot imagine what it means to me to recover my treasures!”

Kay rapidly outlined the story of the professional robbers and their double disguise.

“Why, I never heard anything like it in my life!” cried the amazed woman. “You have certainly been clever and courageous! Ethel, don’t you think it is simply marvelous that they traced the criminals and recovered all these stolen things?”

Her niece hated to admit that her classmates deserved praise. She mumbled ungraciously something about not knowing Miss Cortiz was a man in disguise.

“How was I to suspect a thing like that?”

Kay and her chums passed over this. Instead of replying they told of finding other loot in the apartment, including the sapphire ring stolen from Ethel’s cousin, Ella Eaton.

Mrs. Pinty laughed gaily. “Just imagine that dreadful man masquerading as a woman!” she said. “We can smile at it now, since you have so cleverly unmasked him, but how terrible for poor Ethel!”

A great transformation had come over the girl’s aunt. Only a few moments before she had been angry at the girls; now she was all smiles and praise for their accomplishment! This change finally melted Ethel’s coldness toward her schoolmates.

“I can hardly wait to get back to Brantwood and tell everybody our adventures!” she twittered.

To Brantwood they all returned the next morning. The Worth twins and Kay Tracey promptly hastened with Mr. Tilden to restore the famous formula and other property to Miss Janey and to enjoy her delight in recovering things she had despaired of ever seeing again.

“Let’s stop off at the Dales’ first and give them a thrill,” suggested Kay.

“Oh, yes! What a change it will make in their lives to get back the money,” said sympathetic Wilma. “They’re all out in front of the house,” she added as Kay stopped the car at the Dales’ gate.

“Look who’s visiting them!” murmured Betty. “Nanna herself!”

“Why, so it is!” said the Tracey girl. “How different she seems with the little boys pulling her along by the hand, than she does when she is foretelling the future at some midnight scene!”

“She’s actually smiling at those children!” observed Wilma.

“Yes, she seems positively human!” remarked Betty as the girls walked up the path to the house.

“Seeing her here makes me understand why the widow always speaks so warmly of her. She is an entirely different person from the old witch we thought her to be!” added Kay.

The Dales, seeing the girls approach, now gave a shout of welcome and scampered to greet them.

“Have you any more chocolate cake?” asked one boy, licking his lips.

“No, not this time,” laughed Kay, “but I have something else which I think your mother and Ted will like even better than cake!”

“What is it? What is it?” clamored the children excitedly.

Even shy Ted drew near and looked inquiringly at her. The widow, wondering what new event had occurred, stepped forward anxiously. Old Mrs. Larrop peered at the girl inquisitively. With a smile Kay and the detective handed over the stolen inheritance to Ted himself.

“Here you are,” the girl said. “You’ve tried so hard to get back your mother’s money that it gives me great pleasure to turn this over to you and let you be the one to give it to her!”

Ted could scarcely believe his eyes. He gave a whoop of joy and raced to Mrs. Dale.

“Look, look, mother! We have Daddy’s money back again, and now we won’t be poor any more!” The boy was fairly beside himself with joy.

Mrs. Dale could hardly speak for emotion. “How did you ever, ever do it?” she gasped.

Kay and the twins gave a vivid account of all their adventures in chasing the robbers and in learning of the double disguise. Ted’s eyes nearly popped out in amazement at the tale. As for Nanna, she was greatly perturbed at the account of the train robber who had dressed himself up to look like her.

“Why, people must think I’m friendly with them!” she exclaimed.

“I’m afraid we thought so ourselves, for a while,” Kay confessed.

“I’ll be very careful who lives in my house after this!” the old woman vowed grimly.

Further than that she did not confide her plans or secrets, but remained as much a figure of mystery as ever!

“Come, Kay, we must hurry along,” urged Mr. Tilden impatiently. “It’s not fair to keep Miss Janey waiting for her good news!”

“You are right,” agreed Kay. “We must go now! Goodbye, Mrs. Dale, and good luck!”

“I thank you more than tongue can tell!” cried the widow gratefully.

Away the group drove to the Janey home. A car stood in front of the house.

“Doctor Staunton appears to be calling again!” laughed Kay.

“Do you really think he’s in love with Miss Janey?” asked Wilma in a flutter of excitement.

The girls smiled as they hurried up the front steps. An imperative ring at the door bell brought Jessie Hipple trotting to answer it.

“That other gentleman’s in there and your cousin, too, Miss Tracey,” Jessie whispered. “Miss Janey’s professor fetched

them with him. They've all been talking science!"

Wondering what "other gentleman" Jessie meant, the girls moved quietly toward the living room door.

There sat Gus Fearson, deep in conversation with Doctor Staunton. Cousin Bill Tracey was engaging Miss Janey in a talk about producing the new glass cloth on a wholesale scale.

"Perhaps you won't need your old formula now," interrupted Kay impulsively, "but here it is!"

"Yes, and here are all the other things you lost when your bag and suitcase were stolen!" burst out Betty.

"What do you mean?" gasped the woman chemist.

The men sprang to their feet as the girls and Mr. Tilden entered the room and relayed their amazing news.

"How wonderful! How utterly unbelievable!" exclaimed Miss Janey.

"Good work, Kay!" applauded her cousin, smiling proudly at the girl.

Mr. Tilden, feeling his task was complete, soon left.

"Well, well! You students certainly deserve a high mark in detective work as well as in chemistry!" declared their teacher, Doctor Staunton.

“You are just in time to learn that Miss Janey has been good enough to overlook my attitude about her formula and even to recommend me to the company which is buying the patent!” explained Gus Fearson.

The girls warmly praised the woman for her generosity. It was an afternoon of general rejoicing.

“I can hardly believe that I am so happy today, when only a short time ago I was in despair!” sighed Miss Janey. “I would have given up all hope, Kay, if you had not been so helpful and cheerful from the very beginning!” Then blushing she added, “I think you should be the first one to know a little secret. Doctor Staunton and I are to be married in the spring!”

Kay, Betty and Wilma squeezed Miss Janey affectionately as they expressed their delight. After congratulating the professor, they left the attractive home.

“What a winter this has been!” cried Wilma, as they drove to town. “Just think, a robbery, a den of thieves, the swindling of widows and scientists, an old witch——”

“A train holdup!” said Kay, “and a fall over the mountainside _____”

“Capturing the thieves,” put in Betty with relish.

“And recovering their loot,” added Wilma with satisfaction.

“And through it all,” laughed Kay Tracey, “the mystery of the Double Disguise!”

“What next?” wondered the twins.

THE END

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[The end of *The Double Disguise* by Anna Perot Rose Wright (as Frances K. Judd)]