

By the author of the NANCY DREW BOOKS

THE CLUE OF THE BLACK FLOWER



THE DANA GIRLS MYSTERY STORIES
By CAROLYN KEENE

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Louise and Jean pulled Lettie out of danger

The DANA GIRLS Mystery Stories

THE CLUE OF THE BLACK FLOWER

By
CAROLYN KEENE

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THE CLUE OF THE BLACK FLOWER

CHAPTER I

A Mysterious Gift

“Here’s a going-away present for you, Louise!” cried Jean Dana, hurrying into the sisters’ study at Starhurst School for Girls. She was carrying a small corsage box, addressed to Louise, which she had found on the table of the school’s entrance hall.

Louise, tall, dark-haired, and pretty, finished closing a suitcase on the bed and looked up in surprise. “Flowers for me?” she exclaimed. “From whom?”

Her sister, an attractive, blond, sixteen-year-old, gave Louise the box and chuckled. “That’s a mystery,” she said. “There’s no florist’s name on the box and no card on the outside—just your name. Hurry and open it!”

Louise, a year older than Jean, quickly untied the ribbon on the box. “Oh, a black orchid!” she exclaimed, lifting out the exquisite flower. “Isn’t it beautiful!” Then her expression changed. “Why—” Louise paused. “It’s—it’s artificial! I wonder who—”

Louise broke off as she picked up a tiny envelope in the box and opened it. A blush spread over her face and Jean teasingly asked:

“Which admirer is it this time?”

“I can’t understand this,” Louise replied, her brow puckered. “The card says Jack Andrew. But he’s in our home town, Oak Falls. And this didn’t come by mail.”

“I don’t think that Jack sent the orchid,” Jean stated. “He would never send you an artificial flower—not even a gorgeous one like this one!”

Louise agreed but remained puzzled. The sisters had known Jack since grade-school days and Louise had occasionally dated him. Jack was pleasant and generous, but a quirk in his personality—boasting that he could easily afford the best—annoyed Louise. She tried to discourage his attentions.

“I believe that the whole thing may be a joke,” she said slowly.

“And I have a clue to who played it,” said Jean.

She explained that when she had picked up the box, she had seen Lettie Briggs and Ina Mason standing nearby, giggling. Lettie was disliked by many of the Starhurst girls because of her mean disposition and constant bragging. Envious of the Danas’ popularity, she had played many tricks on them. Some of these had been malicious enough to have caused Lettie’s expulsion from school if the headmistress, Mrs. Crandall, had heard about them.

“I guess you’re right,” said Louise. “So I shan’t write and thank Jack for the orchid.” She laughed. “I suppose

that's just what Lettie wants me to do. So actually the joke's on her, and I have a lovely flower. I'll wear it on the trip."

The Danas and several of their close friends from school were going that day to Camp Winona, where they would be junior counselors for the summer. The camp, owned and operated by the headmistress of Starhurst, was situated about a hundred miles from the school. The young counselors were to receive some advance training there before the camp opened a few weeks later.

"This flower will be just the finishing touch for my outfit," said Louise with a chuckle as she pinned the orchid onto the shoulder of her pale-blue linen dress. Then she picked up the suitcase and carried it into the hall.

Jean put a few last-minute items into her bag, closed it, and took the suitcase outside. The corridor was piled with small luggage and steamer trunks. Excited students, looking forward to summer vacation, scurried back and forth. Parents were arriving by car to take some of the girls home, while others were leaving by bus or train.

The Danas' uncle Ned and his sister Harriet, with whom the orphaned Dana girls lived in Oak Falls, were coming in the family car to drive their nieces to Camp Winona.

"They're here now!" said Louise, who had gone back into the study and was looking out the window, down at the main entrance of Starhurst.

The girl smiled affectionately as her tall, ruddy-faced uncle approached the doorway. He was captain of an ocean liner, the *Balaska*. Whenever he was in port, Uncle Ned made a point of seeing his nieces if possible. On the front seat of the car Louise could just see her gentle, middle-aged aunt.

As she and Jean hurried along the hall toward the stairway they heard Lettie Briggs' high-pitched voice from her bedroom. "Ye-es," Lettie was saying in bored tone, "I'm going to that pesky camp. But I don't want to. My family had planned a trip to Europe for me, but my mother's ill, so I have to stay around."

As Louise and Jean passed the room they glanced through the open door. From the disorderly appearance of the place, Lettie appeared far from being ready to leave! The room was a shambles. Its lanky, sallow-faced occupant was not packing. She was busy twisting her hair into an ultramodern style, and addressing her remarks to one of the younger students.

Louise and Jean looked at each other and smiled. They knew that the reason for Lettie's going to camp instead of Europe was not because of her mother's illness. Lettie had failed two subjects, and had been told by Mrs. Crandall that if she did not make them up during the summer she would not be permitted to return to Starhurst in the fall. Lettie would do this at Camp Winona which had a special study program for students with low marks.

When they reached the first floor, the Danas heard laughter and chatter, and cries of, "See you next fall!"

“See you in two weeks!” “Don’t forget to write this summer!” The sisters joined in the good-bys and the farewell kisses, then went to the small reception room where their uncle was waiting.

“Ahoy, my hearties!” he cried, getting up and hugging each of them. “If you’re ready, we’ll stow your luggage aboard and sail off.”

“Okay, skipper!” Jean said, grinning, and Louise chuckled.

Gaily the three went out to the car, and while the captain put their luggage into the trunk compartment, the girls greeted their aunt. Miss Dana immediately noticed the black flower on Louise’s dress. “How charming,” she said, admiring the silk-and-velvet orchid, “and how lifelike!”

“I’ll tell you about how I got it,” said Louise. As they rode along, she related the story, and also the sisters’ suspicion about Lettie Briggs. “And to complete her practical joke,” said Louise, “she wrote Jack Andrew’s name on the card.”

“But why would Lettie use Jack’s name?” Aunt Harriet asked.

Jean answered with a laugh. “She’s crazy about Jack and is always trying to make him date her. But he’s still interested only in Louise. I think that Lettie was hoping to make Louise look foolish by thanking Jack for something he didn’t send.”

“But I’m not writing to him.” Louise chuckled. “So Lettie guessed wrong this time.”

Aunt Harriet said that she had read in the Oak Falls paper that Mr. and Mrs. Andrew, Jack's parents, had recently returned from a trip to Brazil.

Uncle Ned chimed in. "It's an intriguing place—the most modern of cities, and the wildest of jungles."

"I'd love to go to Brazil some day," said Jean. "I wouldn't even mind meeting a live jaguar."

Halfway to the camp, the Danas stopped at the Wedgwood Restaurant where they had planned to have luncheon. The large, log-cabin building was set among towering trees. Inside, the owners of the place had an exquisite collection of rare Wedgwood pieces on display. Travelers passing the restaurant always made a point of stopping in to see the pottery and to eat the delicious meals which were served.

While Louise was eating she became aware that a black-haired, dark-skinned man at a table across the room kept staring at her and smiling. He was a complete stranger to her, and, although she tried to avoid glancing in his direction, Louise finally became disconcerted by his staring. She quickly finished her dessert. Then, observing that his had not yet been served, she decided to leave the room and asked to be excused.

"I'd like to walk around outside," she said to her family. "I'll meet you at the car."

To her dismay, the man, who was of medium build and walked with a swaggering step, followed her outside the

restaurant.

“Pardon me, miss,” he said with a Spanish accent, “but I have been admiring the beautiful black flower you wear. Would you tell me, please, where you obtained it?”

Louise was startled by the question. “It was given to me,” she replied, walking off. “I don’t know where it came from.”

“But you must have some idea,” he said, accompanying her. “The store? The town? Tell me. I must learn it.”

Louise insisted that she did not know, whereupon the man’s eyes narrowed. “Do you consider it valuable?” he asked abruptly.

Louise was mystified by this question. “Why do you ask?” she countered.

Instead of replying, the man stepped closer and reached out toward the flower. Louise hastily backed away. Growing more and more annoyed at the stranger’s persistence, she said coldly, “I don’t know whether it’s valuable or not.”

“I will give you five dollars for that orchid,” the man said in a coaxing tone.

Louise’s eyes opened wide. “You want to buy it? Why?”

The stranger changed his tactics. He smiled and said, “You see, miss, my wife has been wanting a fine, artificial black orchid for a long time. I have not been able to find one for her. Please, will you sell yours? Surely you can find another.”

Louise shook her head. “I’m afraid that I can’t. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but this was a gift.”

As Louise started to turn away, the man’s face took on a hard, determined look. “You *will* sell me the flower!” he threatened.

At that moment Louise’s family came from the restaurant. They caught the stranger’s last remark and Captain Dana stepped forward quickly. “What’s going on?” he asked Louise.

She told her uncle of the man’s request and her refusal to sell the flower. The broad-shouldered captain, his eyes blazing, looked down at the stranger. “I’ll thank you not to bother my niece further,” he boomed. “Good day.”

The man moved off toward a parked car, but called back over his shoulder, “You’ll be sorry you did not let me buy that orchid. Now it will probably bring you bad luck!”

“Well, of all the nerve!” cried Jean, as the Danas stepped into their car. “Bad luck, indeed!”

For a few minutes they all discussed the unusual incident, then Uncle Ned said as he started the car, “I’ll tell you a story I recently heard of real bad luck. On my last voyage there was a passenger named Allen. He’s an investigator for an insurance company—tries to find missing persons who are beneficiaries. He told about a couple named Wilson who had gone to South America as a bride and groom from the United States.

“Later on, the insurance company received a letter from Mr. Wilson saying that he, his wife, and one-year-old twin babies, Beverly and Ralph, were going into the Amazonian jungle. The letter specified that if anything happened to Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, the money payable under his policy, a large sum, was to be put into a trust fund for the two children. Later, a report came that the father and mother had been killed by savage Indians. But there was no trace of the children.”

“What does Mr. Allen think happened to them?” Louise asked.

Uncle Ned said the investigator felt that since the twins’ death was not reported, they were probably alive but in the hands of Indians. “They’d be six years old now, but there’s still no clue as to where they may be.”

“Oh, how sad!” Aunt Harriet remarked. “Their relatives must be dreadfully concerned.”

“As a matter of fact, the Wilsons had no near relatives or even business associates. They were free-lance writers interested in biology, and traveled a lot.”

Jean sighed. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to go to Brazil and solve the mystery!”

“It certainly would,” Louise replied. “We could— Oh, Uncle Ned, look out!” she screamed.

A small truck, apparently out of control, had cut across the road from the opposite lane. It was headed directly for the

Dana car.

CHAPTER II

The Black Orchid Society

Swerving the car quickly, Captain Dana avoided a crash with the truck heading toward him from across the road. The two vehicles passed each other with only inches to spare, but now the Dana car was in the wrong lane. Looking first in both directions to make sure that there were no cars approaching, the captain quickly steered his car back to the right side of the road, then braked to a stop.

“Oh!” cried Aunt Harriet, who had struck her forehead on the windshield.

Louise and Jean had slipped forward in their seats, then had been thrown backward. They were frightened and shaken up. Other than this everyone was all right.

Uncle Ned heaved a huge sigh. “That was a narrow squeak, lassies!”

The family’s next thoughts were of the driver in the truck, which bore the words *Sunset Lake Greenhouses*. He had rammed into an embankment.

The sisters jumped out and ran toward the truck. The driver was a man of about thirty-five, who seemed to

be stunned. Although he still gripped the wheel, his eyes had a somewhat uncomprehending expression.

“Are you hurt? Can we help you?” Louise asked him quickly, noting at the same time that he was almost bald and heavily suntanned. Apparently he spent a great many hours in the sun.

Jean was already opening the cab door of the truck and the two girls helped the stranger to the roadside. He stared intently at the black orchid on Louise’s dress, reached up to take it, then dropped his hand and shook himself as if coming out of a trance.

“I’m—I’m all right,” he said finally. “My steering gear broke.”

By this time Uncle Ned and Aunt Harriet had come to his side. The man said he was Hans Sterling, owner of Sunset Lake Greenhouses.

“I’m in kind of a fix here,” he said. “I’d appreciate it if you would stop at a garage a few miles up the road and send back help.”

Then, suddenly remembering that he had almost involved the Danas in an accident, Mr. Sterling asked if they too were all right. Uncle Ned assured him that they were and promised to send assistance as quickly as possible.

A few minutes later they reached the garage and the captain immediately relayed Mr. Sterling’s request to the owner.

“Poor Hans,” the garageman said. “He certainly has had a lot of bad luck. Fine fellow, too, and one of the best orchid growers in the United States.”

“Orchids—that must have been why he eyed my flower so intently,” Louise thought.

“Did Hans give you that black flower?” the garageman asked her suddenly.

As Louise explained that it was artificial, the garageman leaned into the car unbelievably and looked at the orchid. He shook his head. “Sure had me fooled. I never heard of a real black orchid and wondered if Hans was raising some.”

Louise, recalling the peculiar actions of the obnoxious stranger at the restaurant, wondered if he too might have some connection with Sunset Greenhouses. She described him and asked the garage owner if he knew the man.

“Nope. Hans, his wife, and children do all the work.” He hesitated a moment, then said, “Hans could make lots of money if he’d do less experimenting and grow more flowers to sell.”

He promised to start off at once with his wrecking truck to aid the orchid grower. As the Danas drove away, Aunt Harriet remarked, “This seems to be our day for orchids.”

Jean chuckled. “That man at the restaurant said we’d have bad luck because you kept the orchid, Louise. And we pretty nearly did.”



The stranger suddenly reached for the black orchid

Some time later the Danas got their first view of beautiful Sunset Lake. Trees of various kinds, with a heavy sprinkling of pine, dotted both sides of the three-mile shore. The lake was about half a mile wide. On one side, toward the lower end of the lake, the Danas could see Sunset Lake Greenhouses. About a mile up the opposite shore was Camp Winona.

Because of the delay due to their near accident, the Danas were the last to reach camp. At the entrance gate Uncle Ned took the girls' bags from the trunk compartment, then said he and Aunt Harriet must leave at once, because he was due back aboard his ship the following morning.

"Have a wonderful summer and don't get into mischief!" he teased his nieces.

As Aunt Harriet kissed them good-by, she said solicitously, "Do be careful, and if you come upon a mystery to solve, please don't take any chances."

Louise and Jean promised to be wary, knowing how she worried about them. The sisters had had many adventures since they had solved their first mystery at Starhurst, *By the Light of the Study Lamp*. Their most recent adventure had involved them with *The Ghost in the Gallery*.

After waving farewell to their family, Jean and Louise picked up their bags and walked down the wooded hillside toward the office. Ahead, to left and right were cabins of various sizes. One they knew contained the dining hall and kitchen;

others were the crafts shop, lodge, and infirmary. The remainder were sleeping cabins.

As they reached the cabin marked *Office*, Lettie Briggs came out. Her face was red and defiant. Without even saying hello to the Danas, she burst out, “Where are you going to live?”

“We don’t know yet,” Louise replied pleasantly. “I suppose we’ll be assigned to temporary quarters until the other campers arrive.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s fair!” Lettie stormed. “Just because Ina and I are going to take a couple of extra courses this summer doesn’t mean we should have to live in the study cabin the whole time.”

The Danas could hardly keep their faces straight. Who was Lettie trying to fool? Probably only herself.

“Poor Ina”—Jean chuckled as she and Louise went on—“she probably flunked because of Lettie.”

Near the office was a pile of baggage which had been shipped to Winona on the school truck. In it were the Danas’ two steamer trunks and new portable radio, a gift from Uncle Ned, which was still in the carton.

In the office the girls were greeted pleasantly by Mrs. Crandall. The camp director was tall, willowy, and a stern disciplinarian. But she was liked and respected by all the Starhurst students for her fair and impartial attitude.

She assigned the sisters to *Pathfinder*, a trim-looking cabin along the shore. The girls hurried there and were greeted enthusiastically by two friends.

Evelyn Starr, a slender and attractive girl, said, "Isn't this heavenly? We're going to have a marvelous summer!"

Doris Harland, who had delicate features and lovely blue eyes, added, "We will if Lettie Briggs stays out of our hair. She's been complaining ever since we arrived. I predict that she'll take it out on one of us sooner or later."

The others laughed, then began unpacking some of their clothes. The Danas' trunks had been brought to the cabin, but not their new radio. Later, when it still had not arrived, Jean became concerned and mentioned this to Louise.

"It must have been taken to some other cabin," said Louise.

She and Jean went on a search, but the missing radio was not found.

"It's strange," said Jean finally. "The radio must be here somewhere. Well, the only place we haven't looked is the kitchen."

She and her sister hurried to the room adjoining the dining hall. As they neared it, they heard music. Entering the kitchen, the girls saw Barney, the camp's handyman, dialing a portable radio which stood on a table. Beside it was an open carton. The Danas exchanged puzzled glances. Was this radio theirs?

“New radio?” Jean asked the man.

Barney, an elderly, slow-moving individual, was good-natured and always helpful. He smiled at the girls and said, “Yep.”

The sisters managed to take a close look at a label on the carton. It was addressed to them! When Louise questioned the man about the radio, he freely admitted that Lettie Briggs had told him it was for the kitchen.

Louise and Jean were in a quandary. How were they going to take their gift away from Barney without hurting his feelings?

Louise decided to tell him the truth and concluded by saying, “Barney, I’ll see that you have a radio in the kitchen.”

This seemed to please the handyman, who said he most certainly did not want to keep someone else’s property, and offered to carry the radio at once to the girls’ cabin.

When he was out of earshot, Jean burst out, “Lettie certainly has a nerve! If we hadn’t happened to see that carton, she might have gotten away with her little trick.”

Louise frowned. “Two jokes in one day is two too many.” After a moment’s thought, she added, “What say we give Lettie a scare?”

“I’m all for it,” Jean replied. “Let’s do it right now.”

From the office, Louise procured a piece of camp stationery and an envelope. She addressed them to Lettie Briggs and on the note printed:

Return the stolen property or suffer the consequences.

The Black Orchid Society

Keeping out of sight, the girls went to Lettie's cabin, where Louise wadded up the note and tossed it through an open window. Then the sisters quickly hid behind trees to await developments. From their hiding places they could watch Lettie and Ina through the open doorway. After reading the note, Ina gave a little shriek of fright and looked around as if suddenly startled by a ghost.

"Oh, Lettie!" Ina cried in dismay.

By this time Lettie had collected her wits. "Louise and Jean found out. They're smart all right," she said, "but so are we, Ina. I've got a good idea about how to get square. You just wait and see!"

The Danas strained their ears to catch what Lettie's plan was, but she spoke too softly. When they were sure that she was not looking in their direction, Louise and Jean left their hiding place and scooted to their own cabin. By the time morning arrived and the training program for the young counselors got into swing, Lettie's threat was forgotten.

The Dana girls were assigned to handicraft class. This was under the direction of Miss Helen Blakesey, a high-school teacher. She was a charming, young, blond-haired woman who suggested that the camp counselors call her by the nickname Blakesey. The sisters marveled at the deftness of her fingers as she worked.

“Have you girls decided what you would like to make?” she asked the sisters, laying down a clay head she was modeling.

“Yes,” Louise replied. “Artificial flowers.”

Blakesey was pleased at the girls’ choice, and told them that her favorite handicraft had always been the making of imitation flowers.

From her deep skirt pocket, Louise took the beautiful black orchid which had come to her so mysteriously. Blakesey was intrigued by the flower and remarked that it was an unusually fine imitation.

“It probably was made in a foreign country—I’d say France,” she added. “I’ll see if we can find the maker’s name.”

But though she examined the petals and stem thoroughly with a magnifying glass, Blakesey could find no manufacturer’s name. Next, she consulted a reference book on orchids to locate a picture or description of this particular species. But the teacher could find no reference to a black

orchid or one of any other color which looked exactly like the artificial one.

“The person who made this flower must have used his imagination,” she remarked.

Louise had been thoughtful during Blakesey’s search and announcement. She was still mystified by the persistent stranger at the restaurant and his warning, “You’ll have bad luck.” What had he meant? Then, too, there was the unusual interest of the orchid grower, Hans Sterling. Were the men interested in her flower because it was so different, or was there something sinister about it?

In the meantime, Jean had been telling Blakesey the story of the artificial orchid and the attention it had so far attracted. To avoid any further unpleasantness, the teacher advised Louise not to wear the flower again.

“One thing I’m sure of,” Jean said. “Lettie has no idea that this orchid has any particular significance, or she never would have parted with it.”

“Or would she?” Louise mused, recalling Lettie’s threat. “Without letting her know, I must somehow try to find out!”

CHAPTER III

A Baffling Diary

As several other young counselors gathered for the artificial-flower-making class, Louise and Jean continued to discuss Lettie's threat. But presently Blakesey was ready to begin her instruction and the sisters gave their full attention.

"The art of flower making is very old," the teacher said. "It dates back at least to ancient Roman days. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries some of the flowers fashioned were so exquisite that they were exhibited in museums.

"These flowers were made not only of materials, but also of porcelain and jewels. It was the style for the grand ladies of the period to appear with a floral hair ornament or a necklace designed to order by a craftsman.

"Today flower making is done in many countries, but France remains the leading nation for fine, intricate work."

Blakesey held up Louise's black orchid. "This is a prime example," the instructor said, "of outstanding workmanship."

"Then it probably cost several dollars?" Jean burst out.

Blakesey smiled. “I don’t know what the purchase price was, but I’m sure it was bought in one of the finest shops,” she replied. Louise and Jean became more perplexed than ever about the black orchid.

“You girls,” the teacher went on, “will find flower making a fascinating hobby. But it takes skill and practice to make a flower as fine as the black orchid. Today I will show you the various implements that are used in the art.”

From a shelf she picked up a tool with a large wooden handle and a steel stem. At the end of it was a steel ball, one and a quarter inches in diameter.

“This is the largest of the modeling tools,” Blakesey explained, “and is used to press or bevel the flower or leaf. There are six of varying sizes. The smallest one is called the forget-me-not size. I’ll show you how to use it.”

The instructor picked up the small tool and laid it in a little electric stove to heat. Then she reached for a small cushion about four inches square and on it laid a pale-blue, forget-me-not pattern made of stiffened muslin.

When the iron had been heated to just the right temperature, Blakesey deftly pressed the end of it into the center of the forget-me-not, and twirled it. A moment later the petals of the little flower stood up in a natural fashion.

“The next tool,” said the young woman, “is called the roller. And it actually does that—rolls the material, particularly that of the leaves, into the proper curvature. And

last of all comes the spade. This is used to stroke or make lines on the leaves.”

Blakesey showed the girls how a flat piece of green cloth actually came “alive” when lines were put on it, so that it looked like a miniature fern leaf. She now asked her students if they would like to experiment in handling the tools.

They nodded and each picked up one of them. Louise was particularly fascinated by the spade. She practiced making lines on the leaves for a while, but soon realized how amateurish the results were.

At that moment a bell tinkled in the distance, indicating that the period was over. “Swimming is next,” said Louise, as she handed her spade back to Blakesey. “I think artificial flower making is going to be fascinating. I hope before camp is over to make a black orchid like mine.”

The group, including Blakesey, hurried off to their cabins to change to bathing suits. A short time later the young counselors gathered on the dock, where each swimmer put on an exhibition to prove her proficiency in the water.

When it became Evelyn Starr’s turn, she executed a series of beautiful dives which the others applauded. Then, returning again to the diving board, Evelyn leaped high into the air, did a perfect jackknife, and disappeared below the surface of the lake.

“Excellent,” commented Alice Smitty, the instructor, as the other swimmers waited for Evelyn to reappear. But

nearly half a minute went by and her yellow bathing cap did not bob up above the surface.

Louise was worried. “Oh, I hope that Evelyn didn’t hit her head or get stuck in the mud!” she said to Jean.

“Let’s find out,” Jean suggested. She spoke briefly to Smitty, then dived in. Louise followed.

The sisters went straight to the bottom, looking to left and right for Evelyn. To their relief, they saw that she was all right. Evelyn was yanking at a rowboat stuck in the mud. But just as they reached her, she gave up and rose to the surface for air.

Louise and Jean curiously began to tug at the sunken boat themselves but could move it only an inch before they found it necessary to surface.

“Let’s all go after the boat,” Jean proposed, and Smitty gave her consent.

The girls went down to the bottom of the lake in groups of four and worked to free the craft. It took the entire swimming period for them to accomplish the task, but finally they brought the battered boat to the surface and beached it.

“She was rammed,” remarked Doris Harland. “Look at the gash in her side!”

The large hole had evidently been made through the name on the rowboat. All that remained of the name

were two large brass letters with an A at the left and an R at the right.

“I wonder what the name of the boat was,” Louise mused.

Evelyn could not resist a joke. “My guess is that it was *Black Orchid!*”

The Danas laughed, but when they started for their cabin, Louise remarked, “It could be a million things. After we’re dressed, there’ll be some free time before lunch. Let’s come back and see if we can find a clue to the boat’s owner.”

Returning to the dock fifteen minutes later, the Danas, together with Evelyn and Doris, began a search of the old rowboat. Louise struggled to open the bait box and finally did. Inside were several fishhooks, a line, and the skeletons of four minnows!

“I guess this boat was sunk a long time ago,” Louise remarked.

Just then she noticed that the floor of the bait box seemed to be a miniature door. Tugging at it, she pulled the door up. Beneath lay a small, water-soaked book.

“How strange!” she said, lifting up the old volume and showing it to the other girls. “This is a funny place to put a book.”

“It looks as if someone had hidden it here,” Jean remarked.

The pages were tightly stuck and it was impossible to pull them apart to read any of the contents. Louise decided to dry out the old volume in her cabin.

A gentle breeze blowing through the cabin windows on the book for several hours dried it enough so that she could separate the pages and make out a few words here and there in a woman's delicate handwriting. The small book was evidently a diary, but it was so water-blurred as to be mostly illegible.

Louise did discover that the diary was not entirely filled with writing. The owner had stopped abruptly keeping the daily journal. Why?

Suddenly Louise cried out, "Here are some words that are fairly clear! They're the last in the book. And how strange they are! Listen!

"We are in grave danger. I fear for my children's lives. These natives are terrifying and their wild chanting drives me crazy. I—"

The assembled girls crowded around Louise and each one read the unfinished notation. What could it mean?

"There's no telling now," said Louise, "but I'm going to try solving the mystery."

Jean said she thought the best way to begin would be to find the missing brass letters. "Let's do some diving during the swim period this afternoon and look for them."

The whole camp was intrigued by the find of the old boat and the diary, and wanted to help solve the mystery. Louise, just before swim period, went to talk over the matter with Mrs. Crandall. The director advised that the police be contacted. She asked Louise to make the call to headquarters and give a full account of what the girls had discovered.

Captain Rolley, who answered the call, was extremely interested and asked Louise to hold the line. Several minutes later he came back and said that he had looked in the files, as well as asked other officers at headquarters, for information about the sunken rowboat.

“We have no record of such an accident,” he said. “I’ll take a look at the boat sometime, but the old diary puzzles us. My guess is that since no one here ever heard of any natives around these parts like those mentioned, the book was brought from some other place.”

This theory only served to complicate the mystery, Louise decided, as she hurried off to join the other girls. For half an hour they dived in a search for the missing brass letters, but without success.

They had just concluded that the letters must be deeply buried in the mud, when Doris Harland surfaced, waving a small object.

“Here’s something!” she cried out.

CHAPTER IV

A Theft

All the Camp Winona girls crowded around Doris as she came ashore with her find from the bottom of the lake.

“What letter is it?” Jean called. Then a second later she answered her own question. “Why, it’s only an old brass key!”

“I know,” said Doris, a bit crestfallen. “But I thought that it might be a clue.”

“Perhaps it is,” said Louise kindly.

She took the large ornate object from Doris and examined it. From its size and shape she judged it to be the key to a door or gate of an old-fashioned house.

“Just where did you find it, Doris?” she asked.

“Near the boat. It was stuck in the mud.”

Jean thought that perhaps the police might be able to identify the key because of its size and the fact that it had a rather unusual design in the encrusted handle—two nymphs playing in the water.

The hunt for the missing brass letters went on for another hour, but none of the swimmers found any.

That evening at supper Louise and Jean found that it was their turn to sit at the table occupied by the camp director and her husband, Professor Crandall. The sisters liked the professor very much. He was several years older than his wife, very quiet and at times absent-minded in manner. But he was an excellent teacher and the girls enjoyed his classes. The professor had arrived at the camp only that day, having stayed in Penfield to finish some research.

As the meal ended, Mrs. Crandall arose and said, “Girls, we’ll have our first sing tonight. I’d like each of you junior counselors to take a turn leading it. We’ll gather at seven-thirty in the lodge.”

It was only seven o’clock, so the Danas took a walk along the waterfront with Professor Crandall. He had often given them helpful advice when they were solving mysteries and now they asked him for his thoughts about the sunken rowboat, the diary, and the brass key.

The professor thought for a few moments, then replied, “If the sinking of the rowboat was an unimportant incident and happened a long time ago, I doubt that you will solve the mystery. But if it’s more recent and involves a crime, or something equally important, you may hear from the person concerned if he finds out that you’ve salvaged the boat.”

“By the person, do you mean the one who caused the accident—the one who rammed into the rowboat?”

Professor Crandall nodded. “So I’d advise you girls to keep your eyes open.”

“We’ll do that all right,” Jean promised.

She, Louise, and their escort went on to the lodge where all of them thoroughly enjoyed the sing. Louise even coaxed the professor to sing a couple of humorous college songs. His audience laughed and clapped for encores.

Soon it was Louise’s turn to lead the singing. She was in the middle of “Oh, Susannah!” when she happened to glance toward one of the windows.

Framed in it was the face of the man who had wanted to buy her black orchid! The face disappeared quickly.

Startled, Louise let her upraised arms fall to her sides. The other girls continued the song but were mystified by her action.

“Oh, excuse me, everybody, please,” Louise said hastily. She stepped from the front of the room, touched Professor Crandall and Jean on the shoulders, and whispered, “Come with me quickly!”

The man arose from the chair in which he had been sitting and Jean hopped up from the floor. Quickly they hurried after Louise, who was already leaving by a side door.

Catching up to her, Jean said, “What’s the matter?”

Louise hastily explained and the trio began a search for the intruder. In the dim light of the camp grounds they could not see very far ahead. The stranger was not in sight and they could not hear any sounds of running footsteps.

“Oh, dear, where did he go?” Louise asked in disappointment.

“He must be hiding,” Jean said.

“Not necessarily,” Professor Crandall told her. “Remember, the fellow had a head start. He could have left by boat or perhaps—”

“Listen!” Louise interrupted tersely.

They could plainly hear a motor starting up. A few seconds later a car whizzed along the main road at breakneck speed.

“I guess that’s your man,” said Professor Crandall. “Why do you think he was here, Louise?”

“To get my black orchid,” she replied. “I’m going to the craft shop and find out if he took it.”

Louise hurried back to the lodge for the key. She whispered to Mrs. Crandall and Blakesey what had happened and asked that the craft shop be unlocked. The two women followed her quickly. Lettie Briggs murmured something to Ina, then both girls dashed out after the others.

As soon as the light was flicked on in the craft shop, Louise ran to the shelf where her artificial black orchid had been

left. It was gone!

“You were right,” said Blakesey in astonishment. “That flower really must have some special significance.”

Jean had been looking around the room. Now she pointed to a broken window in the rear. “That’s how the thief got in! He must have trailed our car after we left the restaurant and probably has been spying on our activities here.”

So far as the others could see, nothing else in the shop had been disturbed, leaving no doubt but that it was only the flower which the thief was after.

Louise noticed Lettie and Ina peering through the doorway. As she walked toward them, the two girls scurried away. Louise ran after them.

“Lettie,” she called, “I must talk to you. Wait!”

“Am I supposed to be thrilled by that?” Lettie retorted flippantly.

Louise ignored the remark. “Lettie,” she said, “this is serious.” Then, as the other girl walked on tossing her head defiantly, Louise added, “You may be covering up for a criminal!”

This shocking announcement stopped Lettie dead in her tracks. Paling, she asked, “What do you mean? I don’t know any criminals!”

Louise explained that she strongly suspected Lettie of having played a joke on her by sending the artificial black orchid. Before she got any farther, Lettie screamed:

“I did not!”

“I don’t mind harmless jokes,” Louise continued calmly, “but in this case there seems to be something very strange going on in connection with the black orchid.”

“I tell you, I had nothing to do with your miserable flower,” Lettie insisted. “And if you think you’re going to get me mixed up with some criminals you’re after, you have another guess coming.”

All this time Ina had remained silent, a look of fright in her eyes. Louise could not decide whether or not the girl knew anything about the orchid.

“Tell Louise what I’ve said is true!” Lettie demanded, turning to her chum.

“Lettie’s innocent,” Ina quavered in a strained voice.

“If you’re telling the truth, Lettie,” Louise said, “I’m sorry that I accused you. Actually, it seemed like a very funny joke until that man came into the picture.”

“What man?” Lettie asked, her interest fired.

“I don’t know his name,” said Louise and walked away.

In the meantime, Mrs. Crandall had alerted the police, using a description of the suspect which Jean gave her. Barney, who was acting as night watchman for the camp but had been at the far end of the grounds during the theft, was instructed to watch the buildings more closely.

As Louise got ready for bed that night, she said to Jean, "I'm sure that the thief didn't go to all that trouble just to get an artificial black orchid for his wife."

"No," Jean replied. "I wish we had examined it more closely."

"I'd like to know too what's so important about Louise's flower," called Evelyn who had overheard the remark, "but I hope that man got what he wanted and won't come back here!"

"Maybe the owner of the Wedgwood Restaurant knows him," said Louise.

She telephoned the restaurant early the next morning and gave a description of the suspect, but was told that he was not known there by name; nor could the owner give any information about the mysterious man. Louise hung up, disappointed, and went to breakfast.

At the end of the meal Mrs. Crandall announced that the seven camp horses should be exercised and suggested that the junior counselors take a morning ride. They would be divided into groups and take turns. She read off the names. Jean, Louise, Evelyn, and Doris were scheduled to ride first.

When she finished speaking, Barbara Muncie, who was head of nature study and field trips, said, “Mrs. Crandall, I’d like to take the riders to the Sunset Lake Greenhouses.”

“That’s a very good idea, Babs,” the director replied. “And I’ll await a full report on what you girls learn about professional flower growing.”

At nine o’clock the girls met slender, rosy-cheeked Babs at the stables. Her husband Bob, the tall, muscular athletic director, had the horses saddled. All but one, a gray mare, stood quiet. The mare pranced about, seemingly full of vigor.



Jean was thrown violently from the saddle

The girls were assigned to their mounts and climbed into the saddles. Jean had been given the gray mare and from the beginning of the ride the girl noticed that her horse seemed very nervous. She stroked the mare's neck and spoke softly to her, but this seemed to make little difference.

Jean concluded that perhaps the horse had not been ridden for some time and that as soon as she got on the trail she would be all right. But the mare continued to act skittish.

Because of this, Jean decided to go to the rear of the line of riders. She hoped that the mare would settle down upon observing the calmness of the other mounts. Jean had no sooner taken this position when there was a loud crash made by a falling tree limb not far away. At once the mare reared with such violent suddenness that her rider was thrown from the saddle.

Jean landed at the side of the trail, hitting a tree trunk hard!

CHAPTER V

The Prince's Prize

Jean lay stunned against the tree trunk. Quickly the other riders reined in and dismounted. Louise was the first to reach her side.

“Oh, Jean!” she cried fearfully, alarmed that her sister might be seriously injured.

As the other girls crowded around, Jean's eyelids slowly flickered open. She looked dazed for a few seconds, then started to rise.

“Take it easy,” Louise warned her. After making sure her sister had no broken bones, she helped Jean stand up.

The fallen rider shook herself, then looked off to where her horse was prancing about in the underbrush. “She's an ornery critter all right,” she said wryly.

Louise, noticing how weak Jean's voice was, suggested riding back with her.

“I—I guess I'd better not go on,” Jean admitted, but insisted that Louise and the others continue their ride.

But Babs Muncie would not hear of this. “We’ll all return,” she said, “and take you to the infirmary for a checkup. Then I’ll take the rest of the girls for a short ride. We’ll save the trip to the greenhouses until you’re feeling better, Jean.”

With the teacher’s help, Jean got astride Louise’s horse and the sisters led the group back to the stables. In the meantime, Babs had captured the skittish mare, and she led her back to camp on a lead line.

Jean was advised by the young woman physician at the infirmary to take things easy for a couple of days. Fortunately, Jean had not received a concussion, but she was bruised and shaken up.

“I’ll watch your condition for a while,” Dr. Abbey said.

While Jean was resting in the infirmary, Louise and Blakesey decided to fashion a black orchid like the one which had been stolen. Louise felt that if she gave it to the police, they might be able to deduce something from it that would furnish a clue to the thief.

As they worked, Louise was fascinated by the procedure of making the flower. First the petals were cut from black velvet and silk material. These were dipped into a solution of gelatin and dried. Then they were worked into shape with the various special tools. Next, the column and artificial pollen were carefully attached to a wire and this in turn was inserted through the center of the flower.

“Now we’ll wind the stem,” said Blakesey, picking up some lamb’s wool.

This she deftly rolled about the stem to make a padding for the outer covering. Next, Blakesey took green plastic strips which she wound tightly over the lamb’s wool with her thumb and forefinger.

“It looks exactly like my original flower!” exclaimed Louise in delight when the operation was finished. “Only,” she added, “there isn’t any particular significance to this one.” Suddenly her eyes lighted up. “Blakesey, do you suppose something important—or valuable—could have been hidden down in the flower or in the stem of that black orchid?”

“It’s possible,” the instructor replied, “only it would have to be something very small.” But she had no idea what such an item might be.

Later that morning when Louise went to the infirmary to see Jean, who was feeling much better, she asked her sister’s opinion about what might have been secreted in the flower. Jean’s only guess was a note on thin paper, tightly rolled. “Say, that new orchid in your hand certainly is a good copy of your other one. I hope that the man who stole it doesn’t try to snatch this one, too.”

“I’m going to take this flower to the police today,” Louise told her. “Professor Crandall is driving to town and I’ll ride with him.”

Captain Rolley was glad to receive the flower and said he would study it. Perhaps an idea would come to him as to why the original was so important.

“So far we have no lead on that man who broke into your craft shop,” the officer said. “But we did find that a person by the name of Ramon Alvaro, who answers your description of the suspect, registered at the local hotel overnight the day before you first saw him. We’re inclined to think that he’s the fellow we’re looking for.”

“Where is Alvaro from?” Louise asked.

“He gave his address as Brazil,” the captain replied. “Rio de Janeiro. But the police there have no record of such a resident.”

Louise was deeply interested and was more convinced than ever that Alvaro was mixed up in some shady venture. “What could it be?” she asked herself.

Two days later Jean felt completely well and ready to make the trip to Sunset Lake Greenhouses. This time the Danas, Evelyn, and Doris were to be accompanied by Bob Muncie, who met them at the stables.

He said to Jean, with a smile, “This time you have a horse that will behave.” Turning to the others, he added, “I thought it would be best to stay away from town and take the long trail—the one that goes past the head of the lake.”

“Oh, yes,” the girls agreed.

It proved to be a beautiful ride along the mountainside. Here and there they spotted pink lady's-slippers growing, and Bob told them that these belonged to the orchid species. He added that the flower was called all kinds of imaginative names from "camel's-foot" to "Noah's Ark."

"But the really exquisite, showy ones grow in warmer climates," he said.

Two hours later the group passed another girls' camp, Pine Grove, so named because of the heavy growth of tall pine trees just beyond it. In another ten minutes they reached the Sunset Lake Greenhouses, set in a neat row along the shore line. Beyond them was the owner's white Colonial-style home.

The girls and Bob had just reined in and dismounted when a pleasant-looking woman came from the orchid house. She had close-cut black curly hair, and wore jeans and a dark-blue, short-sleeved blouse. Behind her trailed four young children.

"You are from Camp Winona?" the woman asked, smiling. "I received a phone call from Mrs. Crandall that you were coming."

Bob introduced himself and the girls after the woman identified herself as Mrs. Sterling.

"And these are my children," she said. "This is John, our oldest. He's seven. And this is Janet, six. Toby is four and little Honey is just two."

Each child grinned broadly when introduced. The boys were dark, the girls blond. None of them looked alike and each displayed a very distinct personality. They were very friendly, attractive children, and offered at once to show the visitors around.

“Your father will want to do that himself,” said Mrs. Sterling in a pleasant voice.

She led the way into the orchid house, where Hans Sterling was at work. He came forward and greeted his callers cordially, recognizing the Danas at once.

“These are the girls I almost hit with the truck, Ruth,” he said, then changed the subject. “Do you know anything about orchid growing?” he asked his visitors. To Louise he added, “I noticed when I first met you that you wore an artificial one.”

The visitors replied that they knew nothing about orchid culture, and Jean requested eagerly, “Please tell us something about it.”

First, Mr. Sterling explained that the long, narrow orchid greenhouse ran north and south to give the plants the longest exposure to the sun. He pointed out the flower benches along both sides of the iron-grill walk. On the benches were pots of orchids in various stages of development.

“It must be kept constantly warm and humid in here,” he said. “Underneath the grill floor, water from the lake runs in

and out all the time. But for sprinkling my orchids, I use rain water.”

On the ceiling of the peaked glass roof of the greenhouse were slatted bamboo shades. Mr. Sterling explained that with these he regulated the amount of sunlight his plants should receive.

“I’ve more or less tried to imitate jungle conditions here,” he said. Then, chuckling, he added, “That is, without wild animals or other dangers of the tropics.”

Louise and Jean suddenly recalled their uncle’s story about the people named Wilson who had lost their lives in the Amazonian jungle. Their thoughts were so intent upon the Wilsons’ lost twins that they almost missed the next part of the orchid-grower’s talk.

But their attention was recaptured when Mr. Sterling pointed to the column of a lovely large lavender flower. “This is where the pollen is formed,” he said. “When the orchid is growing wild, the pollen is transported by moths, wasps, bees, and flies to other plants. But in the greenhouse this is done by man. The pollen is removed by forceps and wrapped in tissue paper. It can be stored for several months until the orchid grower is ready to use it.”

He told his listeners, to their amazement, that the tiny seeds which formed down in the flower tubes later on sometimes numbered a million!

“And these seeds—” spoke up Bob with a chuckle—“are all of them planted?”

Mr. Sterling shook his head. “Only a few are selected by the growers,” he said. “These are put in glass culture tubes in a solution of agar. Then each tube is covered with lamb’s wool, or cotton and cellophane, to keep out germs.”

“I understand that a certain Brazilian grower uses tomato juice and water with agar very successfully,”

Mr. Sterling said. “Well,” he went on, “when the seedlings are large enough and hardy, they are planted in pots. Now comes the period of waiting. Some orchids take as long as seven years from seedling to first flower.”

“But they’re worth waiting for,” Mrs. Sterling spoke up with enthusiasm. “I think orchids are the most beautiful and interesting flowers in the world.”

As the Danas walked through the greenhouse and saw the many-hued varieties and the different sizes and shapes of the flowers, they, too, became enthusiastic. Presently Louise said to Mr. Sterling:

“I’ve been told that there are no black orchids—or in fact, any other kind of black flower. Is that true?”

The orchid grower did not reply for several seconds. Then he said slowly, “You are right, so far as anyone knows. But I understand that a prize of many thousands of dollars has been offered by a prince in India to anyone who can bring him a real black flower. The offer has been open for ten

years, but as yet no one has been able to produce such a flower.”

Suddenly young John pushed his way forward and said in a loud voice, “But Daddy is going to win that prize some day!”

As the visitors looked at one another, startled, Sterling’s face showed sudden anger. He commanded sternly, “Hush!”

“You are so going to win the prize, Daddy,” the boy persisted. “I heard you tell Mommy!”

The orchid grower became angrier. Shaking his small son by the shoulder, he said, “You talk too much! Go to the house and stay in your room!”

John was crestfallen, but obediently left the group. Then Mr. Sterling turned to his guests. “I am sorry for this scene. Children, you know, are apt to get things mixed up and cause their parents embarrassment.”

The campers made no comment. Instead, they thanked the horticulturist for giving them so much time and making their call so interesting and informative. The girls would have liked to go through the other greenhouses, but all of them sensed that Mr. Sterling was still quite upset and they said they must leave.

On the ride home, the Danas discussed the episode with their friends, wondering if there was any truth in John Sterling’s statement. Bob remarked that with such a prize in view, he would guess that every horticulturist in the world would be trying to produce black flowers.

“I should think so,” said Jean, “and I’ll bet Mr. Sterling is, but wants to keep it a secret.”

By the time the riders reached Winona, the afternoon mail had arrived. Louise discovered that there was a letter for her from Oak Falls. She took it to her cabin and eagerly opened it. Suddenly her face fell.

“Oh, my goodness!” she exclaimed.

CHAPTER VI

The Tournament Starts

“What’s the matter?” cried Jean, Evelyn, and Doris in unison as they crowded around Louise.

“Is it bad news?” asked Doris.

Louise stared in blank astonishment at the letter she had opened. Finally she replied, “It’s not exactly bad news but it’s frightfully embarrassing.”

“What is? Who sent the letter?” Jean demanded, looking over her sister’s shoulder.

“It’s from Jack Andrew,” Louise said hesitantly.

“Well, what’s so unusual about that?” Evelyn questioned, a grin spreading over her face.

“Yes,” Doris teased, “I’m surprised that you don’t get a letter from him every day.”

By now, Louise was blushing furiously. “Jack really did send me that artificial black orchid!” she revealed, glancing again at the note.

“What!” the other girls chorused, and Jean added, “Well, I certainly guessed wrong about the orchid. And how did it get to Starhurst?”

“I’ll read you what he wrote:

Dear Louise,

Just before you left Starhurst for camp I sent you a rather expensive gift. Since I haven’t heard from you, I’m afraid that it must have gone astray.

As you may know, my parents were in South America. While Mother was in Barranquilla, Colombia, she bought several nifty artificial flowers. Among them were three black orchids. I thought you might like one, so Mother gladly gave it to me to send to you.

Father was going to Penfield on an important business trip recently. I asked him to leave the box at your dorm. I’m sorry you didn’t receive it—ten dollars gone to waste!

Have a wonderful summer and I hope to see you soon.

Love,

Jack”

Louise paused for a couple of seconds when she finished reading, then said, “Well, I certainly pulled a booboo that time. Am I embarrassed!”

“What will you do about it?” Doris asked.

“Send an apology, of course,” Louise replied. “But more than that, I’m going to tell Jack the whole mystery in connection with the flower. Maybe he or his mother can shed some light on it.”

Jean remarked that in any case one part of this mystery had been solved. The exquisite artificial flower had not come directly from France, but from South America.

“And Jack’s letter also proves,” Evelyn reminded the others, “that Lettie Briggs had nothing to do with the flower.”

“That’s right,” said Louise. “I owe her an apology also.” She frowned. “I must admit Lettie has me this time. I can’t think of anything I’d rather do less than apologize to her!”

“Don’t worry. It certainly won’t improve Lettie’s disposition any when she finds out that Jack sent you the flower,” Doris commented. “She’ll turn green with envy!”

Evelyn giggled. “That’ll be very becoming with her sunburned nose!”

Louise sat down at once to write her apology to Jack and to ask him to send any details he could about the black orchid. Next, she set off for the study cabin to see Lettie. Heaving a sigh, Louise walked in and approached the girl, who was talking to Ina.

“I came to tell you about a mix-up,” she said, and explained what had happened. “Please forgive me for thinking you

were behind it.”

“Oh, so the great detective’s made a mistake!” sneered Lettie, and burst into uproarious laughter. She looked at Ina who obligingly giggled. Smirking in self-satisfaction Lettie said nothing else and finally Louise turned on her heel and left the cabin.

She was annoyed and puzzled by Lettie’s attitude. Had she known all along who had sent the flower and kept this to herself? Louise felt more chagrined than ever.

“Well, it serves me right,” she told herself, as she walked to the dining hall for supper.

After dessert had been served, Mrs. Crandall arose to make several announcements. All of them were routine except one which interested the Danas very much. An invitation had come from Pine Grove Camp across the lake, the director said, for a tennis match between junior counselors before the official opening of the two camps.

“There will be a singles and a doubles match,” Mrs. Crandall stated. “To make it perfectly fair, we will hold a preliminary tournament here. The winners will play the Pine Grove Camp contestants.”

She asked that those who wished to participate come forward and sign up. Then there would be a drawing for places in the tournament.

Louise and Jean, who loved to play tennis, immediately went forward. After signing up, the counselors drew folded slips

of paper from a bowl on the table. There was excited chatter as the girls compared notes to find out against whom they would play.

“Oh, good night!” Jean whispered to Louise. “You and I are in the doubles against Lettie and Ina!”

“We have our work cut out for us,” Louise replied, knowing that their rivals were excellent in doubles play.

The tournament was slated to begin the following morning. The day dawned sunny and warm and everyone in camp was on hand to watch the event. As soon as the singles match had been played, Lettie stalked importantly onto the court, swinging her racket with an air of assurance.

“She has fire in her eye,” Louise whispered to Jean, as they tossed rackets for places on the court.

“Let’s put it out!” Jean retorted, giggling.

Lettie won the serve and sent a fast ball across the net. Louise returned it and the volleying began. The four girls were evenly matched and at the end of six games the score stood 3-3. The cheering was thunderous, but the campers tried to show no partiality, this being a request from Mrs. Crandall.

But as the match progressed, Louise and Jean pulled ahead and took the first set, 6-3. As the onlookers clapped enthusiastically, Lettie’s face was crimson. Twice she

mumbled that the decisions of Bob Muncie, the referee, were not fair.

“Just like her,” said Doris to Evelyn. “She sure is a poor loser.”

The second set started out better for Lettie and Ina, who won two close games in a row. Then the Danas took the next three. Lettie gritted her teeth, and once when the applause for Louise and Jean was loud, she turned to a group of girls and said sullenly:

“Oh, stop it!”

The next two games also went to Louise and Jean. Ina was still playing well, but Lettie had become very erratic. Her service balls went into the net time after time.

In the Danas' sixth game Lettie and Ina managed to bring it to deuce. This was Lettie's last chance and she knew it. Louise, who was serving, slashed a ball just inside the back line. Lettie ran for it, stumbled, and did a half somersault before falling to the ground. She got up quickly, then as if suddenly changing her mind, dropped again to the ground and began rubbing her leg. Ina rushed over solicitously as the Danas waited.

“I've sprained my ankle!” Lettie shrieked at the top of her lungs. “We'll have to play the last set again when I'm well.”

Hearing Lettie's outcry, the Danas hurried around the end of the net to where Lettie sat on the ground. By this time she

was moaning and insisting that she would have to be hospitalized.

“It’s all Louise’s fault,” she said. “And the old ball was outside, anyhow.”

“I’m sorry that you hurt your ankle, Lettie,” Bob Muncie spoke up. “But the ball was within boundaries.”

“Oh, have it your own way,” Lettie retorted petulantly. “When we play the return match, Ina and I won’t have any trouble defeating the Danas!”

She insisted that she could not walk and demanded to be carried to the infirmary at once. Bob obligingly lifted Lettie and walked off, with Ina following.

“So the game had to end before we had a chance to win it,” sighed Jean. “Wouldn’t you know Lettie would do something like that?”

Evelyn remarked, “I strongly suspect that’s exactly what Lettie did. She knew she didn’t have a chance to beat you, so she pulled the bad ankle act.”

Later that morning the Danas went to the infirmary to inquire about their opponent. Dr. Abbey came outside to speak to them. “I have already reported to Mrs. Crandall,” she said, “that Lettie’s ankle is not sprained. I doubt that she even twisted it.

“But, at Lettie’s request, I’m keeping her here. I think it best, too, for her to stay until she calms down. Bob Muncie has

told her that she forfeited the game and therefore is out of the tournament.” The pretty physician smiled. “I think you girls had better keep out of her way for a while.”

Louise and Jean understood, but Lettie’s attitude did not trouble them. All that counted was that they had played fairly and were still in the tournament!

As the sisters walked toward the dining hall to lunch, they passed the old rowboat which had been hauled out of the lake. “I wish we could solve that mystery,” said Jean. “Maybe,” she added thoughtfully, “the owner is still around here but didn’t want to report the accident to the police. But if the diary belonged to some member of his family, he may want it back.”

Louise’s curiosity was aroused anew. “Why don’t we take a hike this afternoon and question some people who live along the lake front about the boat?” she suggested.

The sisters received permission from Mrs. Crandall, and together with Evelyn and Doris started out after luncheon. They walked almost to the head of the lake before they found anyone who could give them a clue. It came from a man who was tinkering with the engine of an old motorboat. He kept on working as he talked to them.

To their first question about the accident which had caused the rowboat to sink he could give no answer. But when they told him about the brass letters A and R on it, he wiped his greasy hands on a rag, scratched his balding head, and replied:

“There used to be an old fellow around here who did a lot of fishing for lake trout. He had a rowboat. Seems to me he did lose it, but where or when I don’t know.”

“What was this man’s name?” Louise asked quickly.

“Arthur Redmond.”

The Danas were excited. Mr. Redmond might well be the owner of the boat. They would try to locate him and inquire if the diary belonged to some member of his family.

“Where does Arthur Redmond live?” Jean asked.

“In the next town, Greenport. It’s about ten miles from here.”

Since this was too far to walk, Louise and Jean decided to obtain permission from Mrs. Crandall to go in the camp station wagon with Bob Muncie and call on Mr. Redmond.

“Let’s hurry back to camp,” Louise urged, “and see if we can’t go to Greenport this afternoon!”

CHAPTER VII

A Storm Warning

By four o'clock that afternoon the Danas and Bob Muncie were on their way to the town of Greenport in the camp's station wagon. The athletic director teased the girls about trying to solve the mystery, and he offered to buy Jean and Louise a soda if Arthur Redmond gave them so much as one clue.

"I'll order chocolate right now," said Jean, grinning. "These old detective bones of mine have a feeling we're on the trail of something really big."

"Any further news on the stolen orchid?" Bob asked.

Louise explained that she was waiting to hear from Jack Andrew, but so far as the mysterious thief was concerned, there was no word. "Probably he has left the Sunset Lake area."

When they reached the center of Greenport, the girls got out. Bob said he had several errands to do and would meet them in one hour in front of the post office.

"I guess the best way to start hunting for Arthur Redmond," said Louise as Bob drove off, "is to see if he's listed in the telephone book."

The girls went into a nearby drugstore, which had a public booth, and looked in the local directory. No Arthur Redmond was listed. Jean spoke to the clerk, who said he had never heard of the old fisherman.

“There’s a sporting goods store up the street, though,” he added helpfully. “They might be able to give you some information.”

The girls made their way to the shop. The owner said he knew no one named Arthur Redmond. “But there’s an old fellow who sometimes fishes in the Patton River from the town dock. The men call him ‘Red.’”

“Let’s go down there, Louise, and check,” Jean suggested. They thanked the man and left the shop.

At the wharf the sisters had better luck. A dock hand knew the man called Red and believed that his full name was Arthur Redmond. He said that Red lived in a little shack about half a mile up the shore.

“You can’t miss it. It used to be a railroad station long ago and Red’s got some of the ties in his front yard as souvenirs.”

The Danas thanked him and hurried off. As the dockman had said, Arthur Redmond’s house was easy to spot. The former station was a one-room wooden building, very old and badly in need of paint. A cinder path led to the door, and on either side of it, discarded railroad ties formed the border of a square flower garden. Cheery geraniums were blooming in profusion.

As the sisters walked up the path, the door opened and a gaunt, bent old man stepped outside. “Howdy, folks,” he said. “Are you looking for someone?”

“Are you Mr. Arthur Redmond?” Louise asked.

“Yep.”

“Then we’ve come to the right place.”

Arthur Redmond looked puzzled, his eyes plainly asking, “And why are two girls here to see me?”

When Jean inquired if he used to live on Sunset Lake, the man nodded. “But I’ve been here nigh onto two years. Fishin’ got poor in the lake. It’s better here in the river.”

“Did you once own a rowboat with your name on it?” Louise asked him.

“I owned a rowboat but it never had my name on it,” the man replied. “It got loose in a storm one night and I never saw it again. Guess someone found and kept it, or it got smashed up.”

Louise explained that the girls were staying at a camp on Sunset Lake and had found a sunken rowboat. They were trying to locate the owner to return something they had found in it. “Was there anything special about yours to identify it?” she asked.

“Well, none as I can think of right offhand,” the old man answered. “But let me see now. Hmm—yep, there

was one peculiarity to that boat. Guess the feller I bought it from put it there.”

“What was it?” Jean asked eagerly as Mr. Redmond paused.

He said the rowboat had contained a crude, homemade bait box. “It had two compartments, one above the other,” the fisherman explained. “The bottom one to hold water for minnows, the top one for worms.”

The Danas glanced at each other excitedly, then Louise asked, “Did you ever keep anything in the lower part except bait?”

“Nothin’ else,” he answered, and from the tone of his voice and the honest look in his eyes, the sisters were sure that he was telling the truth. They related the full story and asked if he had any idea as to who might have owned the diary.

“By golly, that’s a corkin’ good mystery—kind you read about in the papers.” The old man’s eyes narrowed. “Sounds like whoever wrote in the diary might have been murdered! But I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

Louise asked him if he had ever heard of any mystery connected with Sunset Lake which might tie in with the strange words in the diary.

“No, I never did,” he replied. “Sunset Lake’s a pretty peaceful, quiet place. That is,” he added, “until one of them awful storms comes up.”

Red went into a description of a violent storm which had taken place the night his rowboat had disappeared. Not only had there been thunder and lightning, but also a torrential rain, which had done a great deal of damage. Hurricane winds which accompanied it had blown roofs off houses and uprooted trees.

“It rained for two days,” the fisherman went on. “Seems like we have one of them storms every couple of years.” He looked off into space thoughtfully. “I hate to say it, but I suspect we’re about due for one now from the feel in my bones. You’d better batten down at your camp.”

“We will,” Jean assured him.

After the girls left the old fisherman they discussed his story, which only made the mystery more puzzling. Apparently someone had found Arthur Redmond’s unclaimed rowboat and put a name on it. The Danas decided that when they had time they would continue asking residents of Sunset Lake about the rowboat.

Louise and Jean walked back to the center of Greenport and met Bob at the post office. Smiling, he asked, “Well, do I owe you both a treat?”

Jean grinned. “You sure do.”

While the three sipped sodas at an ice-cream shop, the girls told of their interview with Mr. Redmond. Bob congratulated them, then said he was disturbed by the possibility of a

destructive storm in the lake area. “If we see signs of it, we’ll certainly have to ‘batten down,’ as Redmond advises.”

The following morning there was no sign of a storm, however, and the Danas were posted to play the next round in the tennis tournament. Their opponents were to be Evelyn and Doris.

“We’re going to mow you down!” Evelyn teased as the four girls approached the court.

Nearly all the other campers had gathered to watch. Lettie and Ina sat cross-legged on the ground in the front row. As the game progressed, it became evident that they were rooting for Evelyn and Doris. Lettie clapped and shouted loudly whenever those two girls made a good play. When the Danas had a spurt of luck, she sat in glum silence.

As Louise passed her sister on the back line while they were changing positions to serve, she remarked, “Lettie hasn’t forgiven us yet.”

“You’re right,” Jean replied, and added with a grin, “Lettie will have a nervous collapse if we win!”

Louise nodded, a twinkle in her eye. “But we’d better settle down, Jean. Evelyn and Doris are ahead.”

The score now was 4-2, in their favor in the first set. The sisters did “settle down” and won the game. Their luck had turned. The Danas continued to win and took the next set. But Doris and Evelyn played superbly and took the following set, 6-0.

Meanwhile, Lettie had shifted her position so that she could heckle Louise and Jean during the final set.

“Your goose is cooked now,” she said flippantly.

The Danas paid no attention, but as the set progressed, Lettie’s remarks became more malicious. At one point she even intimated that they were pets of Bob Muncie, who was refereeing, and that he was making unfair decisions in their favor.

Finally, Jean could stand it no longer. Walking over to Lettie, she said icily, “Pick on Louise and me all you like. We don’t care. But leave Bob Muncie out of this!”

Jean’s flare-up seemed to lend added vim and accuracy to her game. She slammed one ball after another over the net, invariably placing them so that their opponents could not reach the balls in time to return them. The final score for this set was 6-3, in favor of the Danas.

Evelyn and Doris came forward to shake hands over the net and congratulate their friends. “If you play as you did today,” Evelyn said, “you’ll win the tournament.”

“You can bet we’ll try,” Jean replied, as the girls started for their cabin.

When they reached it, Louise turned on the radio. A weather report was just being announced over a local station.

“Storm warnings are being issued for the area of three surrounding counties, with Sunset Lake as a center. Residents are advised to take every precaution against high

winds which may reach hurricane velocity. Heavy rains and wind are expected to reach the area late tonight.”

Recalling the old fisherman’s warning, Louise and Jean wondered if Camp Winona was properly protected against a bad storm.

“We’d better ask Mrs. Crandall if she has heard the weather report,” Louise suggested to Jean, and the sisters went to her office.

The camp director had not heard the report and was glad the girls had brought it to her attention. At once they offered to do anything they could to make Camp Winona more secure.

“That’s a very good idea,” Mrs. Crandall said. “Perhaps all the counselors will help. I’ll make up squads and announce them at luncheon.”

She did this and all the campers spent the early afternoon readying the place against a bad blow. Windows were boarded up, two tents near the lakeside where water sports equipment was kept were taken down and everything in them removed to cabins. All the canoes and rowboats were put under the porch of the lodge.

The afternoon’s work produced several minor accidents. Ina Mason hit her finger with a hammer and had to go to the infirmary. Blakesey fell off a ladder and gashed her leg. But finally the camp was secure and the girls went for a swim.

“The water’s getting rough,” Smitty remarked. “We’re going to have a storm all right.”

Directly after supper, the campers gathered in the lodge for an evening of music. Because of the weather report, however, Mrs. Crandall suggested that the girls go to their cabins early. By now, a gusty wind was blowing.

As the girls filed out the door one by one, the telephone rang. The director answered it, then called, "It's for you, Louise. When you finish talking, will you turn out the lights, please, and lock the lodge door? Bring me the key before you go to your cabin."

"Yes, Mrs. Crandall," said Louise as she picked up the phone. "Hello!"

"Louise?" said a masculine voice.

"Yes."

"This is Jack Andrew. How are you?"

"Fine. And you?"

Louise could not hear Jack's reply. The wind was blowing so hard that the lodge shuddered and the windows rattled violently. She could barely make out Jack's next words.

"Your letter—" Then silence. Next came, "Mother says—"

Suddenly the telephone went dead and the lodge was plunged into darkness. Louise hung up and groped her way toward the door.

As she opened it there was a tremendous crash outside and a scream!

CHAPTER VIII

Marooned

Pausing in the lodge doorway, Louise saw that the entire camp was in darkness and rain was pouring down in a torrent.

“I wonder where that crash was,” Louise thought. “Oh, I hope no one was hurt!”

She went back into the lodge for a flashlight which she recalled having seen on the fireplace mantel. After groping along the wall and bumping her knees and shins several times on benches and table legs, Louise finally found the flashlight. In relief she turned it on and started for the door.

Somewhere in the distance she heard a yell for help. Was it in the camp? The cry was not repeated.

Her heart pounding with worry, Louise locked the door and started through the rain toward Mrs. Crandall’s cabin. But the storm soon forced her to give up the idea of trying to deliver the key. The wind tore at her hair and she was fast becoming soaked. She could see only a few feet ahead of her and progress was slow because the path was strewn with debris. Water rushing down the hillside came almost to her shoe tops.

“I’d better return to my cabin,” Louise told herself, but began to wonder if she could make it safely.

Struggling forward, she soon found it necessary to turn her back against the fierce blasts which tore at her blouse, nearly ripping it from her back. Finally Louise reached a crosspath which led down the hill to her own cabin. She had pushed her way along the path only a few feet when she cried out in dismay.

A huge tree had crashed onto the cabin, crushing the rear end of it. Her sister and her best friends had been inside!

“Jean! Doris! Evelyn!” Louise yelled, terror clutching at her.

She started on a run, slipping and sliding in the mud. The stream of light from her flash showed the door to be open. She could see the beams of several other flashlights inside and figures moving around.

“Hello, hello! Is—is everybody all right?” she called hopefully, dashing into the building.

To her intense relief, she saw that Jean was safe. “Oh, thank goodness you’re okay, Louise,” she said.

Everyone in the cabin was safe, though Doris and Evelyn had been injured slightly. Both had been hit by falling timbers and cried out. This was what Louise had heard. Evelyn had a bruised arm, and Doris’s shoulder had been cut.

Mrs. Crandall, wearing a raincoat and sou'wester and carrying a lantern, bustled in. Despite the gravity of the situation, the Danas could not help but be amused to see their dignified and always "most-proper" headmistress dressed in this fashion.

Behind her came Professor Crandall, similarly attired. The two expressed immediate concern for their campers, but sighed in relief when they assured them that no one had suffered any serious injuries.

"I'm so happy that you're safe. You must move out of here at once, all of you," Mrs. Crandall insisted.

She assigned Evelyn and Doris to the infirmary for the time being, and told Louise and Jean to go to the study cabin.

"Lettie will just love this," Jean whispered to Louise. "She'd rather let in the rain than us!"

Her sister chuckled. "We might be safer outside at that," she retorted jokingly.

Mrs. Crandall said that she would take Doris and Evelyn to the infirmary at once. Her husband would wait and escort the Danas to their cabin after they had packed.

Rain was pouring into the damaged end of the cabin, so all the girls' trunks and personal belongings were pulled up to the sheltered part of the building. Then Louise and Jean packed suitcases, put on raincoats and hats, and set off with Professor Crandall.



“Jean’s trapped inside!” Louise thought in horror

When the Danas reached the study cabin, they said good night to the professor, opened the door, and walked in. Lettie and Ina were huddled together on a cot, sharing a flashlight. When Ina saw them, her frightened expression changed to one of relief. She sighed, apparently feeling that there was safety in numbers.

Lettie, on the other hand, scowled and said sarcastically, “I suppose old lady Crandall sent you two teachers’ pets here to see if we were all right. Well, we don’t need you, so you can go.”

Ignoring this, Jean asked, “Did you hear the crash?”

“Yes, I’m not deaf. I suppose that it was a tree.”

Jean told her the story and concluded, “I guess that you’ll have to put up with Louise and me for a while. We’ll try not to bother you.”

Lettie’s frown of disgust plainly told the Danas how unwelcome they were. “I can’t see,” she sneered, “why you had to pick *this* cabin. There are plenty of others in the camp.”

“Now, Lettie—” Ina began, but was silenced by a scorching look from her friend.

“We didn’t pick it. Mrs. Crandall assigned us here,” Louise explained, feeling very much annoyed.

“Yes?” Lettie said disbelievingly. “I’d like to bet that you asked her to put you here just so you could spy on me.”

“Spy on you? For what?” Jean asked.

Lettie did not reply, but Ina said immediately, “Lettie means about the letters that she and Jack Andrew write to each other.”

“Ina, you keep still!” Lettie ordered, her face turning scarlet. “Well, so long as Ina has told you, I’ll admit it. Jack thinks I’m someone pretty special.”

Louise and Jean smiled. They were glad that Jack was interested in someone else! Without commenting on Lettie’s remark, they began to discuss which of the empty beds they would use. They chose two in a corner of the room—as far away from Lettie and Ina as possible.

“It will feel good to get into some dry clothes,” Louise said. She was shivering.

The Danas decided to wear daytime clothes. It was foolish, they felt, to put on pajamas. The storm was raging so furiously that they half expected more trouble and wanted to be ready to dash out at a moment’s notice. But the night wore on with no further damage to the camp.

In the morning the steady downpour of rain continued and the campers were alarmed that the lake might overflow its banks and flood the camp. The girls gathered in the dining hall where a cold breakfast was served. Mrs. Crandall announced that there was no electricity to heat the main

stove. The emergency stove, run by oil, would be used only at dinnertime in order to preserve the fuel.

“Since we will find it necessary to remain indoors most of the time,” said Mrs. Crandall, “I suggest that we stay in either the lodge or the craft shop.”

This plan was followed that day and the next. It still continued to rain hard. The lake had risen nearly two feet and water gushed down the rain-soaked hillside, carrying stones, uprooted bushes, and small trees with it.

The second night, after the Danas had returned to the study cabin, they overheard Lettie and Ina talking in loud whispers.

“I’m not going to stay here,” Lettie announced defiantly. “It’s too dangerous. Why, this old building may be swept into the lake at any moment! No one could save us.”

“Oh, dear!” cried Ina. “Don’t say such things!”

The Danas could see that Lettie was managing to frighten Ina badly. The poor girl was quivering.

Louise walked over and put an arm around Ina’s shoulders. “Please don’t be nervous,” she said. “If Mrs. Crandall didn’t feel that it was safe here, she’d never let us stay.”

Louise’s words seemed to comfort Ina. She stopped trembling and said that she trusted the camp director completely.

“I’m sure that there will be a change in the morning,” Louise added. “Anyway, the rain will certainly stop soon. Let’s hope it’ll be tomorrow.”

In the morning, however, although the wind had died down, it was still raining heavily. When the campers assembled in the dining hall, Mrs. Crandall arose and said:

“I am sorry to make this announcement, but from now on there will be food rationing because of the lack of electricity. All our frozen food has thawed and it would not be wise to eat it. Furthermore, we have used up our oil supply for the emergency stove.”

Lettie made a sputtering sound and said in an undertone, “This has gone far enough! I won’t stand for it!”

No one paid any attention to her, as they continued to listen to Mrs. Crandall. “I had hoped,” the director said, “that we might be able to get more food from town. Bob Muncie went to investigate our chances for driving to Greenport. Unfortunately, he found it to be impossible. The road is cut off in both directions.”

There were murmurs of dismay from the campers. Several asked, “Why? What’s happened?”

Mrs. Crandall explained that on one side of the camp a huge tree had fallen across the road, blocking it completely. “On the side toward town,” she said, “there is a rushing mountain torrent. It would be impossible to drive a car through the water.”

“You mean we’re stuck here?” Lettie shrieked.

“Please keep your voice down, Lettie,” the camp director ordered calmly. “In reply to your question, I’m sure that we are perfectly safe. I had thought of trying to use a boat to get to town, but the lake is rough and also full of debris, so I do not feel that it would be advisable to attempt the trip. All I am asking is that everyone be patient with the type of menu we shall have to serve. It will be entirely dried food and canned goods.”

All the campers took the announcement graciously except Lettie. A little later, as the four girls in the study cabin were making their cots, Lettie continued to grumble that the situation was an outrage.

“I’m just not going to stand for it!” she announced finally. “I won’t stay here to starve to death!”

“Any better ideas?” Jean asked impishly.

Glowing, Lettie put on her storm coat, hat, and boots. Without saying where she was going, the angry girl dashed out the door of the cabin.

Ina stood stupefied, but the Danas were amused. Lettie would not get far, they were sure of that. Traveling was too difficult and hazardous.

“Let’s go up to the craft shop and make some artificial flowers,” Louise suggested to Jean. “And, Ina, don’t worry. Lettie won’t be gone long!”

The sisters put on their rain clothes and set off. They had gone less than a hundred feet when from the direction of the road came an anguished cry.

“Help! Help!”

CHAPTER IX

A Hazardous Rescue

Without waiting for the cry of help to be repeated, Louise and Jean dashed toward the road. The going was very bad. The girls slipped and fell in ankle-deep mud, delaying their progress.

Again they heard the call "Help!" To their surprise the cry was not so near the road as it had seemed the first time. Was the person in trouble being washed down the hillside in the torrent Mrs. Crandall had mentioned?

"I wonder if it could be Lettie?" Louise mused, as the Danas changed their direction, veering off to the right.

"It could be," Jean conceded. "Whoever it is, I believe the person is in the ravine."

Some distance beyond the last cabin was a rocky gorge about twenty feet deep. All the campers had been warned about the danger there and had not gone near it. As the sisters advanced toward the ravine, the cries for help became louder and more terrified.

"We must hurry!" Louise urged.

But, on the hillside, slippery with mud and sodden grass, it was almost impossible to make any headway.

“Help! Save me! I’ll drown!” came another agonized plea.

With superhuman effort the two girls reached the gorge. In it a raging current bubbled and foamed in a mad rush toward the lake. The water was about ten feet below the rim of the gorge, with an almost perpendicular descent down the rocky slope leading to it.

The sisters looked up and down the ravine. At first they could see no one and feared that they were too late to make a rescue. Then they heard the cry again, this time nearer the lake.

“I see her!” Louise suddenly cried and pointed.

Clinging to a jagged rock just above the water level was Lettie Briggs. Her feet were dragging in the current’s angry foam. From her deathly pallor, Louise and Jean judged that the exhausted girl could not hang on much longer.

“We’re coming!” Jean shouted. “Lettie, keep up your courage and hold tight!”

Lettie did not look up and the sisters concluded she had not heard Jean’s words of encouragement because the angry waters were creating a terrific roar.

Taking only a moment to survey the safest way to get to Lettie, the Danas zigzagged down the treacherous slope toward her. As if sensing their presence, Lettie looked

up. Her expression of terror turned to one of stupefaction. Apparently she had given up hope. Now she clung to the pinnacle of rock even harder with what little strength she had left.

“One more minute!” Louise called.

It was nearer three minutes before the Danas reached Lettie’s side. Grabbing her by the shoulders, they pulled her out of danger.

“Do you think you could make it to the top if we help you, or shall we carry you?” Louise asked kindly.

Lettie did not answer. She wobbled unsteadily, then fainted in Jean’s arms.

“We must get her back to camp as fast as we can,” said Louise. “Let’s put her across our shoulders, canoe fashion. It’s the only way to carry her up this slope.”

With Louise in the lead about three feet ahead of Jean, they lifted the limp form to their shoulders. Lettie’s head hung over Louise’s right shoulder, and her hips were across Jean’s. Holding onto her tightly with their right arms, the sisters clawed at the rocks with their left hands. Neither girl said a word and both wondered if they would ever get to the top.

Rain slashed at their faces and the rocks were as slippery as ice. Only a few sturdy outcropping bushes which the sisters grabbed for support made the ascent possible. Finally, they stepped over the rim.

“Well, the worst is over,” said Louise thankfully.

They had not gone more than a hundred yards toward camp when Bob Muncie hurriedly approached them. He looked both relieved and concerned.

“Is Lettie—?” He hesitated.

“She fainted,” Jean replied.

Bob said that Ina had asked him to look for Lettie. He at once relieved the Danas of their burden, putting the still-unconscious girl over his shoulder.

They made their way to the infirmary, where Dr. Abbey immediately began giving first aid to Lettie. In a few minutes the girl’s eyes opened and she looked at the others dully.

“You’ll be all right,” the young woman doctor said kindly. “Don’t try to talk yet.”

The physician, with the Danas’ help, put Lettie to bed, then Louise related what had happened. Dr. Abbey asked her to tell Mrs. Crandall and request the director to come to the infirmary.

The Danas did so immediately, then went to their own cabin. Despite their raincoats and hats, the sisters were dripping wet and shivering. As they changed their clothes, Louise told Ina of the near-tragic incident. At once Lettie’s chum burst into tears and dashed to the infirmary.

Louise and Jean lay down to rest for a while.

“That was a close squeak for Lettie,” Jean remarked. “Five more minutes and we’d have been too late.”

About noontime the rain ceased and by three o’clock the sun was out. Everyone welcomed its warmth, but the brightness revealed the real havoc the storm had wrought. The campers, restless after their long period of inactivity, welcomed a chance to help clear away the debris. They formed brigades to clean the twig-strewn paths and take down the boards which had covered windows.

Suddenly Jean recalled that the Danas’ next play-off in the tennis tournament was scheduled for the following morning. “The only court we could use is the asphalt one,” she said, “and I’d like to bet that it’s covered with mud.”

“Let’s find out,” Louise suggested.

Jean’s surmise proved to be correct. “Do you think we could shovel it clear?” she asked her sister.

For answer, Louise stuck her right forefinger down through the mud. “An inch deep,” she stated. “But if all the girls help, it shouldn’t take long to clean the court.”

“I wonder if there are enough shovels for all,” Jean said reflectively.

The girls went in search of Barney and asked him how many shovels and spades were in the camp equipment. After hearing why they were wanted, he produced one spade, one shovel, a hoe, and an iron rake.

“I’ll help you,” he offered. Swinging the tools over his shoulder, he started for the tennis court.

The sisters, meanwhile, rounded up a dozen girls who were glad to assist. All of them worked hard and the court was finally cleared.

“By morning it will be dry,” said Barney, “and I’ll sweep it good before you play on it.”

At suppertime a message came for the Danas that Lettie wanted to see them. When they walked in, she gave each girl a wan smile. They asked how she felt and Lettie said she was much better.

“When I was being swept along in that ravine all the way from the road—the bridge is out, you know—I thought it was the end for me,” Lettie said, shuddering at the recollection. “I want to thank you both for saving my life.”

The Danas were amazed at the girl’s humble attitude. This was a new Lettie—contrite and uncomplaining!

Louise said that both she and Jean were happy to have rescued her. Lettie admitted that she had behaved foolishly, starting off alone in the storm. The two girls silently agreed but voiced no comment.

Smiling, Jean said, “It’s over now, Lettie. Let’s not talk about it any more. You just get well.”

When she and Louise rose to leave, Lettie asked them to wait. “I wanted you to come here for another reason,” she

said. “I have something to tell you that may help solve the mystery of Louise’s stolen artificial orchid.”

As the astonished Danas listened intently, Lettie revealed that she knew they had sent her the note signed *The Black Orchid Society*. “I was planning to play a joke on you, using the note,” she said, “but it was taken before I had a chance.”

“By whom?” Louise asked.

“I think that it was the man who stole the flower.”

Lettie explained that she had taken the Danas’ message to the craft shop the day the flower was stolen. She had left it on one of the tables just before Blakesey locked up. “In the morning the note was gone,” she added.

Louise and Jean were amazed to hear this. If the thief had taken their note, what was his purpose? Did he feel that there was some connection between it and the flower that was of great importance?

As the Danas were mulling over this idea, Lettie suddenly said, “I’d like to work with you girls on the mystery. I’m sure that I can help you.”

The sisters were startled by the offer but tried not to show it. Quickly Louise said, “Thanks very much, Lettie, but the police are handling the case. It would be pretty hard for us at camp to try to find the man who took the orchid.”

“I suppose so,” said Lettie wearily. She closed her eyes. The Danas said good-by and left.

The following morning, the sisters tried to call the police to report what Lettie had told them, but telephone service had not yet been restored.

At ten o’clock they went to the tennis court which had been swept and was ready for use. The sisters played well and easily won their match. Only one round remained before the winners would be ready to play in the doubles against Pine Grove Camp!

At noontime Mrs. Crandall announced that the main road was now open. The camp truck would be sent to town to buy fresh supplies. There were cheers from her listeners.

“Mm-mm, fresh food again!” exclaimed Doris.

“And a chance to send our message to the police,” said Louise. “I’ll write it now and ask Bob to deliver it.”

Late that afternoon Louise and Jean had a surprise visitor at the lodge. It was Mr. Allen, the investigator from the insurance company which was searching for the Wilson twins. As he introduced himself, the girls were impressed by his bearing. He stood as erect as a soldier and was very distinguished-looking, with white hair and deep-set eyes.

“Your uncle, Captain Dana,” he began, “wrote to me about the trouble you had because of an artificial black orchid. I should like to hear the story in full detail from you, since it may have a bearing on the Wilson case.”

The girls were astonished. Between them, the sisters gave a complete account of what had happened from the time the black orchid had been purchased in Barranquilla to the evening it disappeared from the craft shop. They concluded with Lettie's story of how the note signed by them, *The Black Orchid Society*, had been taken also.

Mr. Allen was amused to hear how the Danas' joke had become so involved. Then, becoming serious, he said that an important message had come to him from Brazil.

“An Indian jungle runner, named Mulu, gave a cryptic message in broken English to one of our South American representatives. Then the fellow disappeared before the man could learn more.”

“What was the message?” Louise asked eagerly, as the man paused.

Mr. Allen replied excitedly, “That a black orchid would lead to the missing Wilson twins!”

CHAPTER X

A Native's Secret

A black orchid might lead to the missing Wilson twins! Louise and Jean could hardly believe their ears. But they listened intently as Mr. Allen continued his story.

“My company is eager to close the case concerning the children’s insurance money,” he said. “Since there is no black orchid in Nature, the native runner Mulu must have meant an artificial one.”

Louise asked Mr. Allen if he had any theories about the use of the artificial black orchid. “Could it be a symbol of some secret society?” she suggested.

“It may be,” Mr. Allen replied. “And since this foreigner you speak of, whom the police suspect is Ramon Alvaro, may be mixed up in it, I would guess that the headquarters of the secret society is in South America.”

“If the camp phone has been restored,” Jean spoke up, “would you like us to find out the name of the shop where Mrs. Andrew purchased the orchid?”

“I would indeed,” the insurance man answered.

Louise offered to make the call and went to the telephone. To her delight it was working again and she put in a call to Jack's home. The youth himself answered.

“Louise!” he cried, delight plainly showing in his voice. “It was a shame we were cut off the other night. I guess that storm hit your camp pretty hard.”

Louise said it had and she was sorry too that their conversation had been interrupted. “You were just going to explain about the black orchid when the line went dead,” she reminded him.

“That's right,” Jack said. “I was going to tell you that Mother had a call from some strange man. He asked if she had any black orchids left.”

Louise was excited to hear this. It was proof that someone wanted not one but several of the artificial flowers. He must have learned Mrs. Andrew's name from the Barranquilla shop. Louise listened intently as Jack went on.

“Mother told the man ‘No.’ Then he asked her what she had done with the others. At this point she insisted upon knowing his name, but he would not give it. So Mother hung up.”

“Did he speak with a Spanish accent?” Louise asked eagerly.

“Yes, he did.” Jack added, “Mother heard voices in the background during the conversation. She was sure that the name Ramon was mentioned. Will that help you?”

“Indeed it will!” Louise exclaimed gleefully. Here was a very revealing bit of evidence. “Jack,” she said, “does your mother know whether the call was local or from out of town?”

Jack excused himself and went to ask his mother. Presently Mrs. Andrew spoke to Louise, saying the call had come from Greenport.

“Why, that’s near here,” said Louise. Instantly she figured that Ramon Alvaro was the caller and that he had remained in the neighborhood longer than she had thought.

“Mrs. Andrew,” said Louise, “do you recall the name of the shop in Barranquilla where you bought the orchid?”

Jack’s mother thought for several seconds, then replied, “I remember it now. I was surprised because it had an American rather than a Spanish name. It was called Swan House.” The woman chuckled. “It seemed like a strange name to give the place. It was not a house and there was not a swan in sight.”

Louise laughed. “Did you, by any chance, see or hear the name Wilson while you were in the shop?”

“No, Louise.”

The two talked for several minutes longer, and Mrs. Andrew said that she gave the clerk her name and address, but Mrs. Andrew could offer no further clues and finally the conversation ended. Louise went back to report to Mr. Allen what she had learned.

“It is very helpful information indeed,” he said gratefully. “I’ll have this angle of the mystery investigated at once.”

The girls showed their visitor around the camp, then he said good-bye, promising to get in touch with them if he learned anything of interest. They in turn agreed to let him know if they heard further news of Ramon Alvaro.

After he had gone, the sisters continued to discuss why the suspected thief had stayed in the neighborhood after he obtained the artificial flower.

“It’s just possible,” said Louise, “that if there is a United States headquarters of the Black Orchid Society, it may be located in Greenport!”

“Yes,” Jean agreed. “After all, the Wedgwood Restaurant where we first saw Alvaro isn’t far from there. I’ll call Captain Rolley and tell him what we suspect.”

The following morning, Louise awoke thinking of another possible angle in the case. She had not forgotten little Johnny Sterling’s remark about how his father might win the prize for a real black orchid. Had the native runner, Mulu, referred after all to a living flower, and was there perhaps some intrigue behind the prize which the Indian prince was offering?

When Louise spoke to her sister about this angle, Jean agreed that it was a possibility, but said, “I doubt that you’ll get Hans Sterling to talk about it, even if he knows

anything. He made it pretty plain that whatever kind of blooms his rare plants are going to have, he won't tell us."

"Let's try, anyway," Louise proposed. "We'll get permission from Mrs. Crandall to paddle across the lake and call on the Sterlings."

Directly after breakfast, the girls approached the camp director who said they might take the trip. As the girls went for a canoe, Louise remarked, "I think it would be nice to take an orchid plant home to Aunt Harriet and we can make that our excuse for a second call. Wait till I get my purse."

Louise dashed back to the study cabin. As she ran through the doorway, she was amazed to find Lettie there. The girl was writing a letter which she quickly turned over, so that Louise would not see it. It crossed Louise's mind that the letter might be to Jack Andrew!

"Hello, Lettie!" she said cheerily. "How do you feel?"

"Oh, I'm all right," the other girl replied, "but I never want to see another storm like the one we had, or a ravine either!"

"I can't blame you," said Louise. She took a small purse from her suitcase and hurried outdoors.

"Are you going to town?" Lettie called.

"No," said Louise. She decided not to tell Lettie about her trip—it would be just as well to keep it a secret.

Joining her sister, who was waiting in a bright red canoe, the girls set off. There was not a ripple on Sunset Lake and they made good time. Halfway across to the greenhouses, they saw a motorboat coming at great speed. A redheaded teenager at the wheel, his face expressionless, tore past without even a nod.

The water became choppy and Louise deftly turned her paddle so that the canoe would ride the waves head on. But as it bounced over them, the little craft suddenly shuddered, then upended at the prow. For a second the girls had a feeling that they were riding on a roller. They leaned first to the left, then to the right to keep the craft from tipping over. Finally the canoe dropped back into the water with a loud *smack*.

“Wow!” cried Jean. “I thought we were going to turn over. We must have hit a submerged log!”

“I hope there isn’t a hole in the canoe,” said Louise worriedly. She looked at the bottom of the craft, half expecting to see water gush in. But fortunately not a drop came through the aluminum.

“We’re just plain lucky,” said Jean. “From now on, we’d better keep on the lookout in case there are any more logs underwater.”

The rest of the trip went smoothly. The girls beached the canoe in front of the greenhouses and walked up to the Sterlings’ home. They rang the bell twice, but no one answered.

“Everybody must be working in the greenhouses,” Louise suggested. “Let’s find out.”

She and Jean went from one greenhouse to another, calling out Mr. Sterling’s name. He did not reply, nor did any member of his family come to greet them.

“Do you suppose that they’re away?” Jean asked, puzzled.

“Oh, I’m sure someone’s around,” said Louise. “We haven’t been to the orchid house yet. They may be there and can’t hear us. Let’s find out.”

The girls entered the greenhouse through the door which was away from the lakeside. A short distance up the iron-grill walk stood the six members of the Sterling family. The father wore a grim expression. His wife and children were staring at him, apparently frightened.

Louise and Jean hurried forward.

“Is something wrong?” Louise asked. “You all look worried!”

Hans Sterling turned to the sisters. For a couple of seconds he did not speak, then he cried out in a strained voice:

“I’ve been robbed!”

CHAPTER XI

Sleuthing

Mrs. Sterling, somewhat less agitated than her husband, explained to the Danas that several rare orchid plants had been stolen. It had happened during the night.

“My prize plants! Years and years of work and waiting!” Mr. Sterling cried, coming out of his stunned state. “They were right here.” He pointed to an empty section on the bench.

“I’m sorry to hear about your loss,” said Louise sympathetically, and Jean nodded. “Is there anything we can do to help you?”

“Yes,” said the orchid grower. “Don’t tell the police. Don’t tell anybody!”

The sisters were mystified.

“If something very rare and valuable has been stolen, Mr. Sterling, the police would make a search for the thief,” Louise told him.

“You don’t understand, and I can’t explain,” the man replied. “Please don’t ask me. But somehow I must get my plants back before they bloom. And that may be soon.”

Louise and Jean looked at each other, with the same thought in mind. Should they tell Mr. Sterling that they were amateur sleuths? As their eyes met, each sister seemed to say “Yes” to the other.

Jean suggested to Mr. Sterling that if the police were not to know, then his only recourse was to have help from someone who was not a professional detective.

“I suppose so,” said Mr. Sterling. “But whom can I trust?”

“My sister and I have solved a few mysteries,” Jean continued. “We’d be happy to try finding some clues to the thief for you.”

The whole Sterling family looked at the Danas in astonishment. The orchid grower, still wary, made no comment. Smiling, Jean modestly gave him a few details about how she and Louise had solved *The Clue in the Ivy*.

When she finished, there was a long pause as Mr. Sterling thought over the suggestion. Finally he said, “Well, make a start. See what you can find around the greenhouse, and if you come up with anything worth while, I’ll let you continue the case.”

The girls considered this a rather dubious acceptance of their offer, but decided nevertheless to get to work.

“How many plants were taken?” Louise asked the orchid grower.

“About a dozen.”

“Then,” Louise went on, “probably only one person was involved in the theft. Could he have carried all the pots in a box or basket?” she asked.

“Yes.”

As Louise continued to question Mr. Sterling, Jean walked back and forth in the orchid house, looking for muddy finger marks or shoe prints that might yield a clue to the thief. Apparently he had been careful about this, for she found no noticeable fingerprints. And the thief’s footprints, if there were any, had become so intermingled with those of the Sterlings that they could not be distinguished.

“Were both doors to this greenhouse locked last night?” Jean asked.

“Yes. And no one could open them, not even with a master key,” Mr. Sterling replied.

Jean noticed that the greenhouse was aired by small ventilators set in the side walls. But they were too small for anyone to crawl through, she reflected.

“The thief must have gotten in through the roof,” she stated, looking up. “Is any part of the roof removable?” she asked Mr. Sterling.

Suddenly he smiled and looked at the sisters in admiration. “I guess you girls are detectives after all,” he said. Then, to Jean’s question, he replied, “One section of the glass roof near the rear of the house is removable.”

Jean walked down to look at it, then pointed to where two flowerpots had been knocked over directly beneath the removable pane. As soon as he saw this, Mr. Sterling said, “The thief knocked the pots over all right, either coming in or going out.”

“He must be familiar with your premises,” Louise remarked. “Is there a former employee whom you might suspect?”

Mr. Sterling shook his head. He said that only people of the highest integrity had ever worked for him. “And besides, I haven’t had any help for over a year and I put that removable pane in myself only two months ago.”

“How many people knew about the rare orchid plants?”

“Only the men who used to work here,” Mr. Sterling replied. “But even they did not know the real secret about them.”

Once more the girls hoped that the orchid grower would reveal his secret, but he did not explain. Louise led the way outside, where the girls made a further investigation. Here they discovered that it had been easy for the thief to make his entrance. There were two holes in the ground where he had placed a ladder against the side of the glass building.

“My theory is,” said Louise, “that the thief has been spying on you, Mr. Sterling, and familiarized himself with this greenhouse. He probably came here by boat late at night, bringing a ladder and a box or basket in which to carry the plants away.”

At that moment Jean gave a cry of surprise. A couple of feet from the ladder marks lay an artificial-flower-making spade. She picked it up and asked the Sterlings if it belonged to them.

“No,” Mr. Sterling replied, “and I’ve never seen a tool like that. What’s it for?”

Louise explained and the man’s brow puckered. It was evident that the thief had dropped it. But none of them could understand why a person who was interested in artificial flower making should steal rare orchid plants. Surely it could not be merely to imitate the flowers that some day might bloom on them.

“It’s a puzzle,” Mr. Sterling mused, “but this tool is a mighty fine clue.”

The orchid grower now said that there was no question in his mind but that the two girls were proficient amateur sleuths. He not only gave them permission to take the case but begged them to continue work on it immediately.

“We’ll do our best,” Louise promised. “And I strongly advise you to take every precaution to prevent a second robbery. The thief may come back for more of your rare plants. The next time, he’ll probably take every one you have!”

“I’ll be on watch,” said Mr. Sterling, setting his jaw firmly. “Nobody’s going to rob me a second time!”

Jean reminded him that he lived in a rather isolated spot and that he had no protection—not even a watchdog. “If a group

of ruffians should come up here, you wouldn't stand much chance," she said.

"Hans, the girls are right," Mrs. Sterling spoke up. Turning to them, she asked, "What do you advise us to do?"

Jean had a ready answer. "Move the rest of your rare orchids to a safer place."

"But what other place would there be where I could grow the plants and still keep my secret?" Mr. Sterling asked.

Louise had a sudden inspiration. "How about taking them to our camp?" she suggested.

The orchid grower looked at her in amazement. "Your camp?" he repeated. "But no one there could take proper care of the plants. They would all die."

Mrs. Sterling put a hand on her husband's arm. "Maybe that is not such an impossible idea," she said. "We have a fine portable greenhouse. Perhaps we could set it up at the camp and put the plants in it."

"But who would tend them?" her husband asked.

Smiling persuasively, Mrs. Sterling said, "The children and I could board at the camp. Then I could care for the orchids myself."

"That's a wonderful idea!" Jean said enthusiastically. "Oh, do say yes, Mr. Sterling. I'm sure that Mrs. Crandall would

love to have you. Besides, she is most interested in having the campers learn all they can about horticulture. Let's phone her and find out."

It took nearly ten minutes before Mr. Sterling was convinced, but finally he consented. Mrs. Sterling took the girls into the house and Louise put in the call. Mrs. Crandall was a bit startled by the request, but after a few moments' thought she declared that it might be a very good thing for the camp. Watching orchid culture at first hand would be very educational for the campers.

"It's all settled!" Louise exclaimed, putting down the phone. "And I know just the place for the greenhouse. It's in a nice open spot not far from the tennis courts."

Mr. Sterling and the children had followed the others to the house. When Louise made her announcement, everyone looked happy except John. "That's a girls' camp," he grumbled. "I don't want to go there."

The others laughed and his father patted him on the shoulder. "Of course you don't want to go to Camp Winona and I don't want you to. I need a man around here, anyway, to help me. You and I will 'batch' it while Mother and the other children are gone."

This solution made John feel better and he grinned. Standing up very straight and sticking out his chest, he said, "We men have to protect this place, eh, Dad?"

His mother kissed him and said, "That's right."

It was decided that Louise and Jean would take the three younger children with them when they returned to camp. Janet and Toby scurried off to pack some clothes.

Since it seemed best to carry out the rest of the plan after dark, it was arranged that Mr. Sterling would bring the portable greenhouse to camp on his big truck and set it up. Mrs. Sterling would follow later in a boat with the precious orchids.

“But I don’t want the responsibility of carrying those precious plants across the lake alone,” she said. “Louise and Jean, could you come back here and accompany me?”

“I’ll have to ask Mrs. Crandall,” said Louise, and called the camp director again.

She agreed to the arrangement, provided Professor Crandall accompanied the girls.

“I’ll leave here in the truck at nine o’clock,” said Mr. Sterling. “I should be at your camp before ten. If I’m delayed, I’ll telephone you.”

The Danas strongly urged the Sterlings to have some extra protection until the move had been accomplished. Jean had a suggestion. “Why don’t you just tell the police that a prowler has been bothering you and ask them to send a man up here this evening?”

“I’ll think it over,” the man promised. “It does seem sensible.”

As soon as the children were ready, the Danas led them to the canoe and they all climbed in. The girls paddled slowly, keeping careful watch for any objects floating in the water. They reached camp without incident and introduced the three children, who made an immediate hit with the young counselors.

But when Lettie discovered that Mrs. Sterling and the youngsters were to be in the study cabin, she objected violently. "I don't want a lot of squealing brats around me," she said loftily.

"Why, they'll be fun," said Jean, annoyed and fearful that the children would hear that they were not wanted.

Lettie calmed down a bit but did not try to make friends with Janet, Toby, and Honey. To the unpleasant girl's amazement, the children were very well behaved. Soon after supper they went to bed with no objection and the two older ones recited a beautiful prayer which they told the girls their mother had composed.

"They're just darling," whispered Evelyn. Later, when the Danas went for Mrs. Sterling, she would act as baby sitter.

Evelyn and the Danas stayed at the cabin until ten o'clock. Then Louise and Jean walked up to the road to await Mr. Sterling.

Cars rarely came along this side of the lake at night. There was not a sound except the chirping of crickets, distant voices, and the strumming of a guitar in camp. After some

time had gone by, Jean snapped on her flashlight and looked at her wrist watch. "It's ten-thirty, Louise," she remarked. "Mr. Sterling's late."

When quarter of eleven came, Louise decided to go down to the lodge and find out if he had telephoned. But she learned that no message had come, so she rejoined her sister. Eleven o'clock came and went. Both girls began to grow nervous.

"Something has happened to him!" Louise said apprehensively.

CHAPTER XII

The Night Prowler

After waiting another fifteen minutes, Jean could stand the suspense no longer. "I'm going to call the Sterlings' house," she said.

Louise, convinced now that something had happened to the orchid grower on the trip to camp, advised, "But if you talk to Mrs. Sterling, and find out her husband has left, try to keep her from becoming worried about him."

"All right," Jean agreed. "And if he did start out, we'll contact the police," she told her sister, and walked to the lodge to make the call.

To Jean's dismay, no one answered the telephone. The girl was more perplexed than ever. It seemed unlikely that both Mr. and Mrs. Sterling would leave the greenhouses unguarded. Had they met with foul play, and perhaps John, too?

Trying to shake off her worried mood, Jean recalled that Mr. Sterling had half promised to arrange for police protection that night. "Maybe," the girl told herself, "the guard was left alone and the three Sterlings are bringing both the portable greenhouse and plants in the truck."

Jean returned to her sister and the two discussed what to do next. It was growing very chilly on the mountainside.

“We’d better wait in the office,” Louise suggested. “If the phone rings, we can answer it.”

They walked back to the building, where Bob Muncie was taking his turn at office duty. He greeted them cheerfully and tried to reassure the girls. But after another half hour had gone by, Jean said:

“I think we had better ask the police to make a checkup.”

She had just picked up the instrument when Bob said, “Listen, girls, I hear a truck coming in the drive!”

The sisters hurried up the hillside and to their relief they found that the vehicle was from the Sunset Lake Greenhouse. Mr. Sterling climbed down from the cab and hailed them.

“Sorry to be late, girls,” the orchid grower said somewhat wearily. “I’ve been riding around the countryside for two hours—”

“Tell us what happened!” Louise begged as he paused.

“We’ve been worried stiff!” added Jean.

Mr. Sterling grimaced. “Well, it’s a long story, but I think I’ve thrown my pursuer off the track,” he began.

“Your pursuer?” the girls said in unison. “Who was he?” Louise asked quickly.

Mr. Sterling said he did not know. “A car pulled out of a side road behind me about half a mile from my greenhouse. I didn’t think much about it at the time, but as I approached your camp road, I noticed in my rear-view mirror that it was still behind me.”

“Not many people are on this road at night,” Jean put in.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Sterling. “That’s why I suspected that the driver of the car was following me. So I took a short cut back to the main road.”

“What happened then?” asked Louise.

“The car was still behind me. I drove along for a while hoping to see a state trooper, but no luck.”

Then, the orchid grower said, he had thought of a ruse. He drove to the Welch Brothers’ greenhouse, parked the truck, got out, and pretended to start unloading.

“Did that fool your pursuer?” Louise asked eagerly.

Mr. Sterling nodded. “Yes, he parked at the entrance to the driveway for about ten minutes, then drove off. By that time I thought that it was safe to come here.”

Louise told Mr. Sterling about trying to telephone his home. “My wife may have been in the orchid house when you called,” he replied. “There’s no telephone there and she probably didn’t hear your ring. And now I must get to work.”

There was no time now to speculate about Mr. Sterling's pursuer, but the Danas felt sure he must have been Ramon Alvaro. They went for Bob Muncie and Barney, who had agreed to help set up the greenhouse. Each piece was carefully carried from the truck and put into place.

In an incredibly short time a glasshouse, ten feet wide, twelve feet long, and eight feet high, was standing on the Camp Winona grounds. Benches for the plants were set up on each side of a three-foot aisle. When everything was ready, Mr. Sterling turned to the girls.

"Now if it's not too late, you'd better start across the lake for my wife. I should arrive home about the same time that you'll get there."

"Oh, it's not too late," said Jean. "We'll get Professor Crandall."

Louise and Jean found the professor in the rear of the lodge busily working on a book which he had been writing for several years. He looked up smiling, and without questioning the hour, put on a coat and followed the Danas outside.

With each sister carrying a flashlight and the professor swinging a kerosene lantern, the midnight adventurers went to the beach and set off in two large canoes. On the return trip Mrs. Sterling would accompany Professor Crandall, and the rare orchid plants would be carried in their canoe.

No one else seemed to be on the lake and nearly all the houses along the shore were in darkness. But a

bright light burned in the Sterlings' home and acted as a beacon toward which the canoeists paddled.

“This reminds me of Washington crossing the Delaware.” Jean giggled, as she worked with sure, swift strokes.

Reaching the greenhouse dock, the canoeists pulled their craft up onto the shore and set off for the house. They had not gone far when Louise suddenly grabbed the professor's arm.

“Look!” she exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. “Someone's sneaking around the house!” She pointed to the shadowy figure of a man outlined in the dim light from the living room.

At that moment the man raised his head to look into a window and involuntarily Jean cried out, “Alvaro!”

Both girls started to run, hoping to capture him. But Professor Crandall held them back.

“He may injure you!” he protested. “I'll get him!”

The elderly man started off at a fast gait. In his haste he failed to see an open cold frame, full of seedlings, which was in his path. *Bang!* Professor Crandall fell headlong into it and gave a startled cry.

Louise stepped into the frame and helped him up, while Jean made a mad dash after Alvaro, who had heard the commotion and started to run.

“Stop!” Jean cried out at the top of her lungs.

But Alvaro put on more speed. A moment later he disappeared, and as Jean tried to figure out which way he had gone, she heard a car drive off. In disappointment she turned back to the house.

Jean’s shout had brought Mrs. Sterling to the front door and Louise and Professor Crandall had arrived at the house.

“What happened?” the woman asked, as she ushered her callers inside.

Mrs. Sterling was alarmed to hear that a man had been looking in the window. She admitted that her husband had refused to call the police and therefore no one was guarding the grounds.

“Do you think that he was the man who stole some of our rare orchids?” she asked. “Maybe he’s taken more of them!” she exclaimed worriedly.

Just then they heard Mr. Sterling’s truck brake to a stop and in a few moments he joined the others. The orchid grower was very upset when he learned what had happened and berated himself for not having called the police.

He and the Danas went to make an investigation of the orchid house, and to everyone’s intense relief the thief had not been inside again. The rare plants were still in place, ready to be moved.

“But I think maybe you girls got here just in time to prevent another robbery,” Mr. Sterling said.

Returning to the house, the Danas told Mrs. Sterling how worried they had been because she had not answered her telephone. To their surprise, she said the evening had been very quiet and John had gone to bed early. She had been in the house the entire time and the telephone had not rung. She lifted the receiver—there was not a sound. The line was out of order.

Mr. Sterling told his wife about being followed and said, “The fellow must have thought I would be gone for some time and came back here before I could return.”

Louise asked permission of Mr. Sterling to report to the police as soon as she reached camp that Alvaro was still in the neighborhood, and told the Sterlings why he was wanted.

“I suppose it’s your duty to report him,” said the orchid grower, “but I’d prefer that you merely say you saw him and leave out the fact that he was here.”

Although Louise could not agree that it was the best thing to do, she promised to honor Mr. Sterling’s decision in the matter. Then, while Professor Crandall waited at the house, the Danas went with the florist and his wife to pack the rare orchid plants into heavy cartons and put them into the canoe.

When everything was ready, the Danas returned for the professor. To their surprise, he was not in the house. The

girls went outside again and softly called his name. There was no answer.

“Oh, dear,” said Jean, “do you suppose something happened to him?”

“This is certainly our night for bad luck,” Louise replied. But she had no sooner said this when she saw the professor’s slender form along the shore.

The girls hurried toward him, still calling his name. When he continued to ignore them, the sisters looked at each other and smiled. “Absent-minded again,” Louise said, chuckling, “and a bad attack this time!”

“I’ll bring him out of it!” said Jean, and quickly beamed her flashlight across his face.

The professor came out of his reverie, blinked, and joined the sisters. The three walked to the canoes where Mrs. Sterling awaited them. They pushed off, waving good-by to her husband.

Not a word was spoken. Each member of the small cavalcade was tense. Would they get their precious cargo safely to Camp Winona?

CHAPTER XIII

A Tense Journey

Straining their eyes and ears for any unusual sight or sound, the four canoeists paddled grimly across Sunset Lake. At first it seemed as if every living creature must be asleep except themselves.

There was not a sound nor a light anywhere along the shore line. But suddenly each of them jumped as the mournful hooting of an owl broke the stillness.

“Whew!” said Jean. “That sounded as loud as a rifle shot.”

Louise chuckled. “And scared me as much as one!” she replied.

The owl continued to hoot. Then a hound started to bay. A moment later a fish jumped out of the water near them, startling the canoeists.

“This place is getting sociable,” said Jean, laughing quietly.

Professor Crandall, only a few feet away, reminded the Danas in a hoarse whisper that the slightest noise carries far over water. Any conversation on their part would certainly alert a spying listener.

“That’s right,” said Louise. “Mum’s the word from now on, Jean.”

After that, there was no conversation. The canoeists attended strictly to their paddling, and made good time. Two-thirds of the way across they were just congratulating themselves that they had thrown any pursuers off their track when they heard the muffled *putt-putt* of a motorboat. They listened intently to learn its direction. A minute later they realized that it was heading toward them!

“We’d better double our speed,” Louise said worriedly.

The four paddlers dug into the water and the canoes shot ahead at great speed.

“Oh, dear!” Mrs. Sterling cried suddenly in alarm. “That boat’s going to run us down!”

It did seem as if the pilot had this thought in mind. Though the canoeists were nearing the shore, and normally a motorboat would have stayed out in the middle of the lake, this one definitely was coming closer to the Winona dock. The canoes were directly in its path!

“We’ll have to signal the pilot!” said Professor Crandall. “Turn on your flashlights!” he ordered.

Instantly the four flashlights were flicked on. Mrs. Sterling had obeyed the command automatically, but the next moment she cried out, “Now we’ve made it easy for the man in the boat to find us! He may be the thief! He’ll take the orchids.”

To the Danas it seemed as if the woman's fears might come true. The engine of the motorboat was cut off, but the craft continued to come steadily toward the canoeists!



There was only a split second to spare!

“Don’t hit us!” Mrs. Sterling screamed.

Suddenly, with only a split second to spare, the pilot swerved his craft, missing the two canoes by inches. As the man gunned his motor and raced off, the four paddlers caught a glimpse of a touseled, short-haired woman beside him. Then they were gone. But the pilot yelled back to the canoeists:

“You’ve got no business on the lake without lights!”

The Danas and their friends were too shaken to pay much attention to his comment. The main thing was *they were safe!*

The rest of the journey was made in silence and within a few minutes the canoes were pulled up onto the Winona beach. Each of the passengers transported a carton of orchid plants to the portable greenhouse, and Professor Crandall carried Mrs. Sterling’s suitcase. After the plants had been set on the benches, Mrs. Sterling turned to the others.

“I can never repay all of you for your kindness.” Her eyes filled with tears. “In the excitement of getting here, I didn’t realize until just now that you three really took your lives in your hands to protect the Sterlings’ secret.”

The woman paused for several seconds before continuing and the Danas wondered if at last she was going to tell what the secret was. They were disappointed when she said, “I wish I could tell you what it is, but it seems best not to do so yet.”

She shook Professor Crandall's hand fervently and gave each of the Danas an affectionate hug. Then, going to the greenhouse door, she set an electric temperature gauge at 70 degrees, explaining that at night this was the best temperature for the plants.

"Eighty, or even somewhat higher, is all right in the daytime," she added.

As the group turned to leave, the Danas noticed for the first time that there was a device on the door for setting a burglar alarm. The bell of the alarm had been fastened under the eaves just outside the door.

"My husband has taken every precaution to guard these plants," Mrs. Sterling said. "It's unfortunate that he did not have a burglar alarm on our orchid greenhouse at home."

At that moment Mrs. Crandall appeared, wearing a long bathrobe and moccasins. The girls introduced Mrs. Sterling, who expressed her appreciation for all that the director was doing to help the Sterling family in their present predicament.

"I'm very glad to help you," said Mrs. Crandall, smiling. "And now I'd like all of you to come to my cabin for some hot cocoa and sandwiches. You must be very hungry and I'm sure that you'll sleep better if you eat something."

Until this moment the Danas had not thought about being hungry. But when Mrs. Crandall mentioned it, they realized

they were starving! It was two A.M. and they had eaten supper at six!

The spread which Mrs. Crandall had prepared was a tasty one and included minced chicken sandwiches, sliced oranges, and steaming cocoa.

As Louise finished eating, she said, “It was wonderful of you to do this, Mrs. Crandall. Please forgive me if I don’t show up for breakfast. I’m sure that this food will satisfy me until lunchtime.”

The corners of Mrs. Crandall’s mouth twitched as she suppressed a smile. Louise knew that she wanted to give permission for the girls to skip breakfast, but being a person who adhered strictly to rules, the headmistress said, “I shall expect you in the dining hall at the regular time, Louise.” But she did add with a smile, “It shouldn’t hurt a healthy girl to lose a few hours’ sleep!”

It was well after two-thirty before the group said good night and the Danas led Mrs. Sterling to the study cabin. In order not to disturb the others, the three crept in silently and undressed without turning on a light.

Extremely weary, they crawled into bed quickly and within a minute were sound asleep. It seemed to the Danas that their heads had hardly touched the pillows when they heard a bell ringing. At first they paid no attention, but when the insistent ringing continued, they gradually opened their eyes. Surely it was not time for breakfast!

As the two girls sat up in bed they realized that it was still dark outside. It was not rising time. Then why was a bell ringing?

Suddenly Louise was wide awake. Leaning across to Jean's cot, she cried excitedly, "It's the burglar alarm! Someone's trying to break into the orchid house!"

CHAPTER XIV

A Mischievous Boy

In a few moments all of Winona was awake and lights were switched on throughout the grounds. The campers, some of them in robes and slippers, but most of the girls clad only in pajamas, converged at the scene of the ringing burglar alarm. The Sterling children were the only exception. They slept soundly through the loud warning.

“What’s going on?” “Where did this come from?” cried the bewildered girls, as lights revealed the portable greenhouse.

Among the first to arrive at the glasshouse had been Mrs. Sterling and the Dana girls. Mrs. Sterling, using a key, opened the door and turned off the alarm.

A minute later Mrs. Crandall arrived and ordered the campers to remain a distance from the greenhouse. “The Danas probably will want to make an investigation,” she said. “Please don’t come too close and destroy any evidence.”

Lettie Briggs, who had been stalking forward, stopped short. But she glowered at the command. “Huh!” she said, loud enough for the Danas and several others to hear. “This is a case for the police, not a couple of amateur

detectives. No doubt Louise and Jean are the very ones who brought this trouble to camp!”

Several young counselors were inclined to agree. They were astounded to see a greenhouse which had sprung up overnight as if by magic! And furthermore, before they even knew about the building, it had attracted a burglar to the grounds!

“Lettie,” said Mrs. Crandall sternly, “will you please refrain from making any comment on my instructions? Return to your cabin at once. And I must request that all of you say nothing about the greenhouse being here until after the intruder has been caught.”

For a few seconds Lettie did not budge. Everyone expected her to defy the director. But the unpleasant girl evidently changed her mind about saying anything more. She turned on her heel and walked off.

Louise and Jean immediately began to examine the ground around the greenhouse for footprints. They had already concluded that it was Ramon Alvaro who had attempted the burglary. But, to their amazement, the only men’s prints in the moist soil were those of Professor Crandall and Barney and tracks made by Mr. Sterling’s farm boots. Both the professor and the handyman stoutly declared that they had not tried the door of the greenhouse since it had been locked by Mrs. Sterling.

“Did you see anyone on the grounds?” Mrs. Crandall asked the watchman.

Barney shook his head. “No, ma’m. But this is a big place to patrol. I guess the fellow who was here was watchin’ from a distance when I went by the greenhouse. Then, after I’d gone, he came here and tried to get in.” Barney chuckled. “But he didn’t make it!”

While he had been talking, the Danas had continued their investigation. Suddenly they noticed prints in the mud which had been made by a woman’s high-heeled shoes. Knowing that everyone at camp wore flat or low-heeled shoes, the sisters decided that the intruder must have been a woman. They pointed out this fact to the director.

Mrs. Crandall’s eyebrows raised. “Hm! Most unusual,” she commented.

Mrs. Sterling, who had been listening speechlessly to the various comments, said, “Mrs. Crandall, I have not met any of your campers except Louise and Jean and two of their friends. I’m afraid that after what has happened tonight the other campers will worry about a recurrence. I don’t want to make trouble. Perhaps it would be better if the children and I go home in the morning. My husband will come later and remove the greenhouse and plants.”

The Danas were shocked at the suggestion. Both of them wanted to protest that she must not do this, but they realized that the decision should be Mrs. Crandall’s. To their delight, the director said:

“Mrs. Sterling, my junior counselors do not scare easily. That is why I have chosen them. For the time being, I should like

you and your children to remain here. I shall take extra precautions to have the camp guarded.”

The director now ordered the campers to go back to their cabins. Then she turned to Mrs. Sterling, Jean, and Louise.

“A retired policeman lives about a mile up this road. I shall ask him if he will act as night watchman for part of the grounds while Barney guards the rest.”

“That is very kind,” said Mrs. Sterling. “But it won’t be necessary. If the Danas and their friends will help to take care of my youngsters, I shall stay here at the greenhouse most of the time.”

“You mean sleep here?” Jean spoke up.

“Yes,” Mrs. Sterling replied. “The camp grounds are large and I believe a clever intruder could get past any guards. So I think it best if I stay in the orchid house.” She looked at Mrs. Crandall. “Have you any objection to setting up a cot in here?”

“No,” the director replied, adding that perhaps it was the wisest solution.

As Mrs. Sterling waited, Louise and Jean, with Professor Crandall’s help, brought a cot from a nearby cabin. Then the girls said good night and went to their own sleeping quarters.

A few hours later Louise was awakened from a deep sleep, by a strange feeling that there was a heavy weight on her

chest. The next moment a child's voice said, "Get up, you old sleepyhead!"

Blinking her eyes, Louise found herself looking straight into Toby's face. The little boy began to jump up and down, saying, "Let's play fall down the mountain!"

"What in the world is that?" Louise asked him, laughing.

For answer, Toby told her to bend her knees. Then he climbed to the top of them. "Here I go!" he cried and slid down, plunking himself on Louise's stomach.

"Wow!" Louise cried. "That's some game! Where did you learn it?"

Toby proudly explained that his father had taught him and said he would like to play it again.

"Oh, no, you don't!" said Louise, a bit out of breath. "Here, I'll show you another game. We'll play horse!"

She told him to sit on her knees, then she pulled them up and down, so that Toby had the sensation of being jounced as if on horseback. The boy decided the game was great fun. He rode until Louise's legs began to ache. Chuckling, she begged him to give her a rest.

"Okay," he said. "I'll go wake up those other sleepyheads over there."

Before Louise could stop him, Toby had dashed across the room and landed on Lettie's chest. Coming out of a

sound sleep, Lettie shrieked that the cabin was falling down. Then, seeing the grinning child seated astride her chest, she flung him off unceremoniously.

“You brat!” she cried petulantly. “Stay on your own side of the cabin and don’t bother me! Scoot!”

But Toby, uncomprehending Lettie’s attitude, remained at the foot of her cot. The mischievous boy was not even daunted by Lettie’s look of rage. Quick as a wink he yanked the covers from the foot of her bed and began to tickle the soles of her feet. Once more Lettie shrieked.

By this time the Danas, Ina, and the other Sterling children were laughing uproariously. This made Lettie furious and also encouraged Toby to continue the fun.

“I’m a woozy worm!” he yelled gleefully, and started wiggling up the cot alongside Lettie.

This was too much for the girl. Springing out of bed, she caught the little boy by one shoulder, gave him a spank, and shoved him across the cabin toward the Danas.

“You’re mean!” Toby protested.

At that moment the rising bell rang. Louise and Jean hustled Toby and Honey off for face washing and toothbrushing. Then they helped them dress.

Janet, who had a great deal of poise for a little girl of six, washed and dressed herself most efficiently. Then she offered to watch her brother and sister, playing outside

with them until the Danas were ready to escort the children to breakfast.

While the sisters were hurrying into their clothes, Jean said suddenly, "Louise, so much has happened lately that I completely forgot about the next tennis match. It's late this afternoon!"

"That's right," Louise agreed. "We're playing Carol and Debbie. They're going to be hard to beat."

At breakfast all the campers except Lettie were charmed by the appealing children. When they finished eating, Evelyn took them for a walk.

Louise was the first of her cabin group to return to make beds. She had just finished smoothing the blankets on the children's cots when a girl's voice called her name.

"Yes?" she replied.

There was no answer, so Louise went to the door and looked around. Again she heard her name called and this time she stepped outside. As she did, a stone whizzed through the air and hit her hard on the right arm.

"Oh!" Louise cried out.

For a moment her arm stung, then a sharp pain shot from her shoulder to her fingers.

Jean came running up the hill. Seeing her sister clutching her forearm, she asked, "What's the matter?"

By this time the pain was so intense that tears came to Louise's eyes. "I was hit on the arm!" she explained to her sister. Then, an agonizing thought came to her. "Oh, Jean," she wailed, "maybe this will put me out of the tournament!"

CHAPTER XV

An Accident

Jean was stunned by her sister's words. Out of the tennis tournament!

"You're badly hurt!" Jean cried, knowing that Louise would not have made the announcement lightly. "We must go to the infirmary at once!" On the way there she asked angrily, "Louise, who threw the stone that hit you? It might have killed you!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Louise, trying to keep the tears back.

She said that no one had appeared to apologize and it looked as if the person might have thrown the stone on purpose. But she doubted if any of the junior counselors, even Lettie, would have done such a thing.

"I wonder if it could have been someone from outside the camp," Jean said. "Someone who doesn't want us to continue our sleuthing. I may be next. Louise, you go on to the infirmary. I'll look around and see if I can find any clues."

She turned and headed back toward the cabin. As she approached it, Jean caught sight of Barney. Perhaps he might be able to help her.

“Good morning, Barney!” she called. “My goodness, don’t you ever sleep?”

The watchman grinned briefly. Then, as he walked over, he said soberly, “I might as well be sleepin’ day and night both for all the help I am at this camp. People stealin’ things, burglar alarms goin’ off—why, I ain’t no good at all!”

Jean felt sorry for the man. To cheer him up, she said, “Perhaps you can help me. Have you been around here long?”

“Fifteen or twenty minutes,” Barney replied. “Why?”

Jean told him what had happened to Louise and asked the watchman if he had seen anyone near the cabin. He scratched his head thoughtfully, then replied, “Yes, I did see somebody. Not very plain though, because I was carryin’ a trash can up the hill way over there. Whoever it was had a cap on and a sweater. I don’t know if it was a man or a woman. Might even have been one of the campers.”

Jean was excited. Here, perhaps, was an excellent clue to the stone thrower! She asked Barney if he had noticed what this person was doing.

“Yep,” he answered, “tossin’ something in the air.”

“A stone?” Jean prodded.

“Could have been.”

Jean asked him if he could describe the cap and sweater. “Well,” he said, “the cap was white and the sweater sure was crazy like. Big diamonds in lots of different colors.”

This certainly was a good description, Jean told him. She would look around camp and see if anyone owned such articles of clothing.

Suddenly Barney pointed. “There they are—under the bush!”

Jean went to get them. The sizes and styles of the cap and sweater indicated that they definitely belonged to a woman. Jean looked for a name or initials inside, but there was nothing on either article to identify the owner. She decided to take the cap and sweater to Mrs. Crandall’s office. On the way she realized that there was a strong perfume on the sweater. Here was evidence!

“If nobody claims these,” she said to herself, “I’ll search the camp and try to find who uses this scent.”

Then a completely new thought occurred to the young sleuth. Recalling that a woman in high heels had tried to enter the greenhouse, the girl deduced that possibly it was she who owned the sweater and cap. The woman might have stayed in hiding, still hoping for a chance to get into the greenhouse. “And threw the cap and sweater away when she knew Barney had seen her.”

After leaving the articles with Mrs. Crandall and explaining what had happened to Louise, Jean went to the infirmary to see her sister. Dr. Abbey was busy

massaging the patient's arm with a special liniment. The physician said that she would also use a heat lamp on the sore muscles.

"How long will it be before Louise can play tennis again?" Jean asked her with an anxious look.

The doctor smiled. "Louise and I are going to work together on this arm, so that she can play this afternoon."

"Isn't that wonderful?" Louise cried happily.

Jean, who could hardly believe the good news, was thrilled. During the morning she completed her various tasks as well as those assigned to Louise. Then, since no one claimed the sweater, she did some sleuthing around the camp to see if anyone used the perfume which had scented the article. But she met with no success.

"Louise's attacker *must* have come from outside camp," she decided.

When it was time for the tennis match, Jean took her sister's short white suit and racket to the infirmary.

"Are you sure that you're all right to play, Sis?" she asked.

Louise assured Jean that she was. Her arm felt as strong as it ever had. "We'll beat Carol and Debbie!" she said with a hopeful grin.

"I'd like to, of course," said Jean. "But, Louise, let me take care of the hard return shots."

In high hopes the two girls reached the court. As usual, all of the counselors were on hand to watch the game and they applauded loudly as the four players walked out.

At first Louise's arm felt stiff, but as the game progressed, it gradually limbered up. Although the Danas lost the first set, they did win the second one by a narrow margin.

"This is our last chance," Louise remarked quietly to her sister just before the third set began.

"I know," said Jean. "If we don't win this one we're out of the tournament."

Their opponents took the first two games and Jean realized that this was due to the fact that Louise was not up to her usual good form. She had missed shot after shot. But luckily the Danas won the next two games.

By this time Louise's arm was aching badly, and she wondered if she could hold out until the end.

The set went four-all. Suddenly Jean noticed that her sister's face was very pale. "Can you make it?" she asked worriedly.

"Of course," Louise replied casually. She did not add that she herself fervently hoped so.

Doris and Evelyn were tense with excitement. Jean was playing brilliantly and it was evident that she was returning many of the shots intended for Louise. Several times she ran

across the court and picked up balls that it seemed impossible to return. The cheers were deafening.

The Danas took the following game, then brought the next one up to deuce. This went to add first for one side, then the other. Finally, with the Danas ahead, Jean smashed a lightninglike ball just inside the left-back corner of the opponent's court. Debbie missed it.

The Danas had won the tournament!

The defeated girls came forward to congratulate the sisters, but Louise did not step toward them. Instead, she crumpled to the court!

“Oh!” came worried cries from all sides as Jean, Mrs. Crandall, and Dr. Abbey rushed to the stricken girl's side.

The physician, blaming herself for Louise's condition, was murmuring, “I shouldn't have let Louise play! But she insisted that her arm was all right.”

A hush fell over the campers. As Bob Muncie carried Louise, still unconscious, to the infirmary, they followed and stood around outside until Jean came with word about her sister.

Standing in the doorway, Jean announced, “Louise will be all right. She's conscious now and said it was the dreadful pain in her arm that made her faint. She just wouldn't give up.”

The relieved girls gave a shout of delight and several called out, “Three cheers for Louise!” Others took it up, giving the

Dana girl a resounding compliment for her good sportsmanship.

While Louise was recuperating, Jean continued her detective work. Not having heard from the police about Ramon Alvaro she telephoned Captain Rolley the next morning. He said that he had just received some important news and would be out to talk to Jean about it.

When the captain arrived, Jean took him to the lodge. No one was there and they could talk freely.

“I’m dying with curiosity,” she said to the officer. “What’s happened?”

“I’m sorry I can’t report that Ramon Alvaro has been captured,” he replied. “But the authorities seem pretty sure now that he is mixed up in a smuggling racket. Some kind of contraband is being shipped into the United States—”

“In artificial black orchids?” Jean broke in excitedly.

“The government T-men think so,” the officer answered. “We’re trying to find one of the suspected orchids to examine. But so far we haven’t succeeded in locating any. Your friend Mrs. Andrew has been most helpful. Two other black orchids she bought in Barranquilla have been taken apart. There was no contraband in them. So we think that if your flower had contraband in it, the orchid may have looked somewhat different.”

From a large Manila envelope the officer took Mrs. Andrew’s two mutilated black flowers. “Can you recall, Miss

Dana, how the orchid which Jack Andrew sent you differed from these two?” he asked.

Jean scrutinized the flowers. They seemed to be identical with Louise’s gift. Excusing herself, she went to the infirmary to show them to Louise, but her sister could detect no variation.

When Jean reported this to Captain Rolley, he sighed. “There must have been some mark on your sister’s original orchid to identify it for the smugglers as holding contraband. Well, we’ll continue looking for suspected black orchids.”

Jean asked him about the shop in Colombia where Mrs. Andrew had purchased the orchid.

“The owner has been cleared,” he replied. “A strange woman came into the shop one day to sell a box of artificial black orchids. The owner bought them and all were eventually sold to tourists from the United States. That probably accounts for Ramon Alvaro being up here to trace them.”

“I see,” said Jean. “Well, I hope you catch him and all the rest of the gang before they skip out.”

The officer laughed. “I don’t think they’ll skip until they reclaim the orchids. In any case, that’s what we’re counting on.”

Before Captain Rolley left, Jean asked if Mrs. Andrew knew all this and he said the T-men had questioned her. After the officer left, Jean went to the greenhouse to see Mrs. Sterling. She found the woman excited.

“Jean,” she cried, “one of these rare plants is going to flower soon! Oh, I wish Hans could be here to see it, but,” she added with a sigh, “he won’t dare leave our big greenhouses unguarded.”

“Is it one of the plants that takes so many years to bloom?” Jean asked her.

“Yes. We have waited nearly five years for these plants to develop from seedlings.”

“What a thrill for you at last!” Jean commented. Then she sobered, recalling how worried Mr. Sterling had been that the stolen plants might not be recovered before they bloomed. Would they too come into flower now?

Since Mrs. Sterling did not mention this, Jean decided not to remind her of it. Instead, she asked, “What kind of soil are these plants in?”

Mrs. Sterling told her that it was called osmundine. She said it was the horticultural name for the fibrous aerial roots of several large wood ferns. “They are shredded,” she explained, and added, “Of course this is just used when growing orchids in pots. When they grow wild, as they do in the Amazonian jungle, the plants usually grow on trees.”

“You’ve been to that jungle?” Jean asked, interested at once.

A look of fear crossed Mrs. Sterling’s face. She did not answer the question directly but replied tensely, “That awful place! Don’t ask me to talk about it!”

CHAPTER XVI

The Daring Ruse

Jean waited eagerly for Mrs. Sterling to explain her strange outburst about the Amazonian jungle. But the woman, still visibly upset, said no more about it. Instead, as if trying to erase some unpleasant memory from her mind, she changed the subject abruptly.

“My children are having a wonderful time here at camp,” she said. “And I do hope they’re not causing you people too much trouble.”

As Jean assured their mother that the girls loved the youngsters and enjoyed having them around, she continued to wonder why the Sterlings were so evasive at times. Meeting Mrs. Crandall a little later, she repeated her recent conversation with Mrs. Sterling.

“It is strange that she wouldn’t answer you directly,” the director conceded. “But it’s possible that she was in the jungle and once had a bad fright. If so, Mrs. Sterling might not want to be reminded of it. On the other hand, she may never have been there, but knows some very unpleasant story in connection with the jungle, which she prefers not to discuss.”

Jean did not comment but she still thought that the Sterlings were unduly secretive. She put them out of her mind temporarily, however, because she was busy every second of the next two days while Louise's arm was mending. When she was not busy with the Sterling children, who by this time were afraid of Lettie and her continuous scolding, Jean was attending classes for the young counselors.

Louise, coming down to the dock during swim period the third morning, declared that her arm felt as good as new. "And I recovered just in time," she said gaily. "Have you girls heard about the wonderful invitation to the Sunset Yacht Club dance?"

"No," said Jean. "Tell us about it!"

Louise said that she had just come from the office. While there, a telephone call had been received by Mrs. Crandall. The club was arranging a preseason dance two nights later for all the young counselors at the lake camps. Winona had been invited to attend.

"Will we attend!" cried Jean jubilantly. Then her eyes lighted up. "Does this mean Ken and Chris will be there with the Eagle Rock Camp group?"

"I suppose so," replied Louise, grinning.

Ken Scott was a tall, slim youth with blond hair, whom Louise frequently dated. Chris Barton, dark-haired and full of fun, was a friend of Jean's. The boys attended a prep school a little distance from Starhurst and

escorted the girls to various parties at the two schools. Both Ken and Chris had helped the Danas solve their previous mystery.

Suddenly Jean gave her sister a searching look. “You know something that you’re not telling. Out with it!” she demanded.

Her eyes twinkling, Louise divulged that on the heels of the invitation from the yacht club a telephone call had come from Ken—he and Chris wanted to take the Danas to the dance.

“Wonderful!” Jean exclaimed. “I can hardly wait!”

As the news of the event spread through camp, there was great excitement. Mrs. Crandall had accepted the invitation and the girls were being dated one by one. Fortunately, each of them had brought an appropriate dress to wear.

Despite the fact that the Danas were eager to attend the dance, they had not forgotten that they were trying to solve a mystery. Louise took her sister aside and said:

“We don’t seem to be making much headway. Jean, I’d like to attempt something—it’s kind of daring, though.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I’d like to try setting a trap for Ramon Alvaro or any of his friends who still may be in the neighborhood,” she said. “What do you think?”

“I’m all for it,” Jean replied. “What do you have in mind?”

Her sister explained that she had thought of using artificial black orchids as bait. With Blakesey’s help, they could make two of the flowers and wear them to the dance.

“I feel certain,” she said, “that the Sterlings and ourselves, as well as this camp, are still being watched. If we are seen wearing the artificial black orchids, I believe we’ll be followed. With the boys’ help, perhaps we can make one or more of the smugglers come into the open.”

“Louise,” said Jean, “it’s a brilliant idea. Let’s find Blakesey and tell her about it.”

“And we’ll have to get hold of Ken and Chris to brief them,” Louise added. “I know they’ll co-operate.”

She immediately telephoned the two boys, who had arrived at Eagle Rock Camp only the day before. At once they agreed to help carry out any plan which the girls devised.

It was arranged that Ken and Chris would come over that evening to discuss details. When they arrived by canoe around seven o’clock, the Danas greeted them at the dock and the four sat on wooden benches near the shore line. After an exchange of news, the young people began to talk about the proposed plan for baiting the orchid thief.

“After we get to the yacht club,” said Louise, “we’ll— Oh, Ken, have you heard that terrific new record ‘We’re Not Alone’?”

Ken looked at the girl in surprise. Then suddenly he realized that a short distance in back of them someone was walking slowly and softly. An eavesdropper!

Louise leaned close to Ken and whispered, "Lettie Briggs. I caught a glimpse of her."

The foursome remained silent until the prying girl finally moved on. Then Louise continued, "About half an hour after the dance has started, I suggest that the four of us walk outside and, as if by accident, become separated. If one of those thieves is watching us, I'm sure that he'll come forward and try to get the orchids away from Jean and me."

"You mean Ken and I will be hiding?" Chris asked. As Louise nodded, he said, "Do you think that these men may actually be guests at the— Yes, Mother always orders my socks in half-dozen lots."

The four young people burst into laughter. Lettie had returned to spy on them.

For nearly five minutes the conversation between the Danas and their dates was carefree and foolish. Then Lettie, apparently annoyed, walked off. This time she did not come back and the rest of the dance plans were made. If Mrs. Crandall gave permission, the boys would call for the sisters in a canoe.

On the day of the dance, late in the afternoon, Louise and Jean saw Lettie and Ina, wearing pretty blouses and skirts, stroll toward the main entrance of the camp. A

few minutes later they returned, and to the Danas' surprise, Jack Andrew and another boy from Oak Falls whom they knew, named Harry Clark, were with them. Lettie's face wore a look of triumph. Louise and Jean could almost hear her saying to herself, "You see, I got my man!"

They knew that Lettie would have preferred not to have the boys see the Danas. But she could not avoid having the young people speak to one another.

"Hello, Jack! Hello, Harry!" the sisters said, smiling.

"Louise! Jean!" the boys exclaimed. Lettie and Ina tried to steer their dates in another direction but their escorts held back.

"We're here for the big event," said Jack, grinning. "Save a few dances for us." As Lettie took his arm and dragged him off, Jack called over his shoulder, "See you at supper!"

Just as the four left, Evelyn Starr came up. The Danas explained who Lettie's and Ina's escorts were.

Evelyn began to laugh. "I don't mean to tell tales out of school," she said, "but I understood from Smitty, who has charge of the Winona acceptances to the dance, that Lettie and Ina weren't dated by any of the camp boys."

The Danas smiled and Louise said, "Well, they're dated now!"

As the Winona girls were walking into the dining hall that evening, Lettie became annoyed because Jack led her

directly to where Louise, Jean, and Evelyn were seated. “You don’t mind if we join you?” he asked Louise.

“Oh, not at all,” the amused girl replied pleasantly. Lettie’s face had turned scarlet and her lips were set in a grim line.

During the meal Jack was courteous to his date, but talked to Louise a good deal. It was obvious to the diners nearby that he was straining to catch every word she said.

The sprightly conversation between him and Louise about Mrs. Andrew’s part in the orchid mystery annoyed Lettie so much that she could hardly eat. She kept touching Jack’s arm and asking him questions to make him turn in her direction. After replying, Jack would turn back to Louise, trying to learn about another angle of the case.

“You were a wonderful help,” said Louise. “We hope that the police are going to solve the puzzle pretty soon.”

“Oh, I was hoping that you and Jean were going to,” said Jack. “There’s no one I admire more than you girls—you’re both so clever, I feel you should get the glory yourselves.”

This was too much for Lettie. Desperate to get her date alone, Lettie decided to ignore the custom of waiting until Mrs. Crandall left the room. Lettie arose and said, “Jack, we must go now or we’ll be late for the dance. I’ll show you an empty cabin where you and Harry can change your clothes.”

“We’ll come along, too,” said Ina instantly, tugging on Harry’s arm possessively, having noticed that her date was

gazing at Evelyn Starr admiringly.

Not knowing that Lettie and Ina were breaking a rule, Jack and Harry excused themselves to the others, got up, and followed their dates from the dining hall. Louise, Jean, and Evelyn smiled but made no comment. Ten minutes later the camp director, looking annoyed, left the table. The campers immediately got up and one by one followed her from the room.

Since all the girls at Winona were to be at the dance that evening, Blakesey had offered to take care of the Sterling children. She helped them get ready for bed while Louise and Jean started dressing.

Janet, with a bright, interested look in her eyes, propped her head on one elbow as she lay on her cot. “Wish I could go with you,” she said wistfully.

Louise chuckled and kissed the little girl. “What,” she said, “and have you steal my date away with those big eyes of yours!”

Janet giggled. “Honest I wouldn’t!” she promised.

When the sisters were ready to put on their dance dresses, she watched eagerly. Louise’s was pale yellow and had a graceful bouffant skirt. With her dark hair, and the large black orchid pinned to her left shoulder, she looked extremely striking.

Jean’s dress, also full-skirted, was red and white striped and showed off her blond hair to advantage. As Jean pinned the

black flower onto her shoulder, Janet said:

“Oh, you both look just *beautiful!* I’ll be so glad when I’m big ’nuff to go to dances.”

The girls thanked her for the compliment and kissed her good night. Louise remarked, “The time for you to go to dances will be here before you know it!” Then she and Jean picked up their evening bags and wraps, kissed the other two children, and went out the door.

They strolled down to the boat dock, where Ken and Chris, looking very handsome in light jackets and dark bow ties, hailed them. “Off to the races!” cried Ken.

“With two bombshells on our team!” joked Chris, after telling the girls how stunning they looked.

Jean and Louise stepped into the canoe and the merrymakers set off. The two couples chatted and laughed as they proceeded through the darkness to the yacht club. But behind their laughter they were tense and alert, in case Ramon Alvaro or one of his cohorts should be lurking nearby to waylay them.

CHAPTER XVII

The Trap That Backfired

“Well, Chris,” said Ken with a wink, as the two couples entered the yacht club, “we haven’t caught that crook yet!”

“No.” Chris grinned. “He hasn’t given us a chance to.”

“The night is just beginning,” Louise warned, smiling.

The boys tied the canoe to a dock and the four young people walked toward the clubhouse.

“Isn’t that music heavenly!” Jean exclaimed as the clear tones of a saxophone and the steady rhythm of a drum filled the night air.

During the next half hour, the two couples thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Many of the dancers commented on the Danas’ gorgeous black flowers. Once, when an older man spoke to Louise about hers, she thought something significant might follow his remarks, but nothing happened.

“Maybe my little scheme isn’t going to work after all,” she thought.

Lettie was very careful to keep her date away from the Danas. The sisters actually were glad of this. Though

they had not told Jack about using the orchids as bait, they feared he might make some query about the flowers which would give away their secret and spoil any chance of nabbing a member of the Black Orchid ring.

Finally, as had been prearranged, the Danas and their escorts strolled outside. “Would you like some lemonade?” Ken asked Louise in a loud voice.

“Oh, I’d love some,” she said. “I’ll meet you at the end of the dock,” she added as he turned to go back into the building.

Chris also left and Jean strolled slowly in the opposite direction from the one her sister had taken. Walking out onto one of the smaller wharves, she was startled by a muffled voice coming from a boat almost directly below her.

“I’m over here! Come a little closer!”

For a second Jean forgot that she was playing a part. But in a moment she realized that this might be Ramon Alvaro or one of his cohorts. Now was her chance to have him arrested!

Her heart beating wildly, Jean raised her left arm above her head. This was a signal which she and Chris had decided upon for him to hurry to her side. At the same time Jean leaned over to see who was in the boat.



Without warning, the couple grabbed Jean

Without warning, a man and a woman raised up together from the front seat of a large speedboat. Instead of grabbing the orchid, the man pulled Jean into the boat as the woman stuffed a gag into the girl's mouth. Then she was quickly blindfolded.

Chris was coming on a run, but before he was halfway along the wharf, the boat's motor started. The pilot gunned the engine and sped off with Jean a prisoner!

Struggling like a tigress to get free, Jean almost succeeded in heaving herself into the water. But her abductors soon had the girl's wrists and ankles bound.

Jean reproached herself for failing to get a look at the couple. But one thing she noticed immediately. The woman was wearing the same scent of perfume which had been on the mysterious sweater! So she, Jean deduced, was the person who had thrown the stone at Louise and probably the woman who had attempted to break into the greenhouse at camp!

“What an end to Louise's plan!” Jean said to herself angrily. “They turned the tables. I wonder where they're taking me and why?”

Jean knew that it would be impossible for Chris, using the canoe, to overtake the fast speedboat. She tried to console herself that somehow she would get loose and in the meantime she might learn who the man and woman were.

Presently the woman broke the silence. In a Spanish accent she said, “Young lady, we want to ask you a few questions. If you’ll promise not to scream, we’ll remove the gag from your mouth. If you do cry out, we’ll fix it so it’ll go hard with your sister!”

Jean gulped. She had no choice! Deciding to play along with her kidnapers but be wary in her answers, Jean managed to nod her head. The gag was removed.

“Now tell us,” the woman said, “where you got that black orchid you’re wearing.”

“I made it.”

“What!” the woman shrieked.

At once she tore the flower from Jean’s dress. Although the girl could not see a light, she assumed that her abductors had turned on a flashlight in the bottom of the boat and were examining the flower. A few minutes later the woman said, “There’s nothing here.”

Her companion made a hissing sound, then began to speak. Since the man had no accent, Jean knew that he was not Alvaro.

“So, Miss Dana,” he said sneeringly, “you and your sister used your orchids for a trap, eh? Well, you’ll be doubly sorry for that. Now you won’t get away from us until you tell everything you know about black artificial orchids.”

“I’ll be glad to,” said Jean.

But she decided to use strategy. Calling to mind one of Blakesey's lectures, Jean began talking about the tools used in fashioning the cloth flowers.

The man cut her short. "Very clever," he said sarcastically. "That's not what we want to hear and you know it! Tell the truth, Jean Dana, or it may be a long time before you see your family or anyone else again!"

"But there's so much to tell—" Jean protested. Again she stalled for time, explaining her love of flowers, real and artificial ones. "Orchids intrigue me more than any other flower. And black ones—I understand an Indian prince is offering a fabulous prize to anyone who can bring him a living black flower."

As Jean talked, she kept wondering what had happened to Chris, Louise, and Ken. Had they been abducted too? She had hoped that somehow Chris would have figured out a way to rescue her. But now it looked as if he too were in trouble.

"If any harm comes to him, I'll never forgive myself," she thought.

The speedboat suddenly swerved and a few minutes later the engine was turned off. From the strong scent of pine Jean knew that she was close to a grove of trees. Perhaps this was the cove which was halfway between Pine Grove Camp and the Sunset Lake Greenhouses.

"Now listen, young lady," the man said harshly, "we don't want any more nonsense. We know that you and your sister

have been in touch with the police because an artificial black orchid disappeared from your camp. There are certain friends of ours who don't like it."

"Yes," the woman said. "We've been ordered to bring you and your sister to them unless you give us the information we wish."

Jean was battling with herself. Would she dare suggest that she would not talk except to the couple's friends? Perhaps in this way she might learn who the head of the smugglers was!

But a moment later she discarded the idea. They would probably keep her blindfolded, and if the ringleader did not talk, her daring efforts might go unrewarded.

"We're waiting, but we won't wait much longer," said the man irritably.

Jean was desperate. What could she say to stall for time? "Really," she began, "I'm sure that you know the answers to this puzzle better than I do."

"Don't be fresh!" the woman spoke up. "Remember, you haven't much choice in the matter. Now talk!"

Jean tried to think of something to say which would not give away what the police were doing but might satisfy her questioners. At the same time, she kept wishing that she could learn something more about her abductors. Perhaps their hands would hold some clue to their identity!

“You have me at a disadvantage,” she said finally. “It’s hard just talking to voices.”

To her delight, the woman angrily took hold of Jean’s two hands and shook her. Jean grabbed the other’s fingers and quickly felt them. On the woman’s right forefinger was a good-sized wart. A clue!

Furious, the woman pulled her hands away and commanded Jean to talk.

Before Jean had a chance to retort, the group heard a motorboat coming in their direction. Jean’s heart leaped! This must be the rescue party!

But her elation was short-lived, as a sobering thought came to her mind. The oncoming boat might also contain prisoners. Louise, Ken, and Chris!

A second later the woman said, “What’ll we do? They’re after us!”

Jean’s heart leaped with joy. She *was* going to be rescued!

The man replied quickly, “We’d better get out of here!”

The gag was pushed back into Jean’s mouth. Then she was lifted up by the couple and carried out of the boat.

They started running with her. Where were they going? Jean kicked and struggled, but it was useless. They were getting farther and farther away from her rescuers!

CHAPTER XVIII

A Worrisome Search

At the yacht club half an hour before, there had been a scene of confusion and alarm. Chris, too late to save Jean from her abductors, had cried out to Louise and Ken what had happened.

Several of the guests, hearing his shouted alarm, had come running to his side. One of the young men, upon hearing the story, said, "Take my motorboat over there and go after them!"

Louise and the two boys needed no further urging. As they climbed in, another man rushed up, saying that his boat had been stolen. Louise realized instantly that it must be the one her sister was in and asked the name of it.

"The *Dove*," the owner replied. "I'll alert the police!" He turned back and hurried inside the clubhouse.

By this time, Chris had the engine of the motorboat going. He pulled away from the dock and tore off in pursuit of the fleeing *Dove*. But the stolen speedboat was so much faster, and had such a head start, that the three young people could not even see its lights.

“Have you any idea where it might be going?” Ken asked Louise. “Do these crooks have a hide-out around here?”

“We don’t know,” Louise answered. “Oh, I only hope they don’t pull in some place and carry Jean away!”

The boys, though worried, tried to cheer Louise by telling her that kidnaping was a federal crime. “Those smugglers wouldn’t take a chance on a long prison term,” Ken added. “Probably all they’ll do is take the orchid away from Jean and quiz her. Then they’ll drop her off some place.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Louise. Secretly she kept berating herself for having used the black orchid as bait to lure the smugglers into a trap. Her scheme had certainly backfired!

The three young people surmised that the *Dove*, to avoid capture, would go some distance up the lake before docking. Chris headed their own boat, the *Rover*, nearly a mile upstream, then turned right toward the shore. Getting as close to the bank as possible, he told the others to look carefully for the stolen boat.

Cove after cove was investigated for half a mile. Then Chris crossed the lake and they made a similar search of the other shore. Still there was no sign of the *Dove*.

“Shall we go farther up the lake or turn back?” he asked Louise.

“I don’t know what to say,” Louise replied. “We haven’t a single clue to the smugglers’ intentions.”

Ken had a suggestion. Feeling that their search was aimless, he proposed that they find the police launch and work with its pilot. “I’m sure that the owner of the *Dove* has alerted the police by now.”

Ken’s plan was accepted and the *Rover* was turned back toward the yacht club. But Chris decided to hug the shore, in case the *Dove* might be in one of the coves in which they had not looked.

Suddenly Louise stiffened. “Slow down!” she commanded in a whisper. “I thought I heard voices coming from that cove!” She asked Chris to turn in and investigate.

“This is the cove that’s halfway between Pine Grove Camp and the Sterlings’ place,” she told the boys.

Chris cut the engine to half speed and the *Rover* slowly glided up the cove. Louise and Ken, who had found flashlights in a compartment, beamed them ahead. At first the search revealed nothing, then Louise cried out excitedly:

“I see it! There’s the *Dove*!”

Chris lost no time in coming alongside. To everyone’s intense disappointment, no one was in the speedboat.

Louise, her voice trembling, wailed, “They *have* taken Jean away!” But a moment later Louise’s courage returned and she was ready for action. “We must go after them!” she said.

There was no dock at this point, so Chris rammed the prow of the *Rover* into the sand, took out the ignition

key, and put it in his pocket. The three young people jumped out and played their flashlights around. A moment later Ken pointed out some fresh footprints. There were two sets—one made by a man and another by a woman with a large foot and wearing high-heeled shoes.

“That’s not Jean’s footprint,” said Louise at once.

“The couple must have carried her out of the boat,” Ken deduced.

“I guess you’re right,” said Louise. “Let’s see where these prints go.”

The trail led through the pine grove. About halfway to the end of it, Louise, who was in the lead, made a discovery.

“They set Jean down here,” she said, “and dragged her the rest of the way!” Noticing how close together the marks were, she added, “Jean’s ankles must have been bound.”

The new marks led directly to a shack near the edge of the grove. As Louise and the boys approached it, they became tense. Were the smugglers lying in wait there, ready to seize them as well?

“We’d better not all go forward at once,” Chris advised. “Suppose you two stay here and I’ll take a look. If I’m captured, you can go for help.”

This seemed to be a sensible procedure, so the others agreed to wait. Chris cautiously approached the shack and looked through the open doorway. No one tried to grab

him. He stepped inside and flashed his light around. The youth gave a startled cry.

On the floor lay Jean Dana, bound, gagged, and blindfolded!

Chris whipped the gag from Jean's mouth with one hand and pulled the blindfold from her face with the other. "Jean!" he cried. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, Chris, it's you!" Jean exclaimed. "Yes, I'm all right, but Hans Sterling and his son aren't! You must go and rescue them at once. Don't bother about me!"

But Chris finished freeing the girl of her bonds, then called to Louise and Ken that it was safe to enter the shack. By the time they arrived, Jean was standing up.

Joyfully the sisters hugged each other. Then Jean said, "Now we must help the Sterlings. There's not a minute to lose! Those people who carried me off are going to make a search at their home and greenhouses. I heard the man and woman talking about it when they left me here."

With Jean in the lead, the two couples hurried from the shack. Beaming their flashlights ahead, they made their way through stubble, patches of trees, and cornfields until the Sunset Lake Greenhouses came into view. These were in darkness but the house was well lighted.

The four young people raced across the lawn, but suddenly they stopped short. Clearly outlined in a downstairs window was a frightening scene. Young John, trussed up and gagged, was standing in a corner. A man, his

back to the window, was tying up Mr. Sterling! A gag was already in the orchid grower's mouth.

“We're just in time!” Ken said in a hoarse whisper.

At that moment there was a long, piercing whistle from somewhere ahead of them. Then they heard running footsteps.

“There goes a woman!” Louise cried.

Without a second's pause, she and Jean sped after the fugitive who was heading toward the Sterlings' dock.

Meanwhile, Ken and Chris raced to the front of the house. Just as they reached the door, it burst open and a man dashed outside. The two boys quickly overpowered him.

“Let me go!” he snarled. “Who do you think you are?”

Before the boys could answer, two policemen rushed up. They had been driving by, heard the whistle, and left their car to investigate.

“Hold onto this man! He's a crook!” Ken said to them. “I think that his companion is down by the dock. We'll go after her.”

“Right.”



Inside was a frightening scene

The two boys hurried off in the direction the Dana girls had taken. They met the sisters on their way back from the waterfront.

“The woman got away,” Jean announced in disappointment. “She took off in the Sterlings’ rowboat, and since there wasn’t any other boat around, we couldn’t follow her.”

“But we’ll report her to the police,” Louise added. “Boys, what happened at the house?”

The youths grinned. “We nabbed the fellow and two policemen have him now,” Ken reported.

“Wonderful!” said Jean. Hooking her arm into Louise’s, she added, “Your idea of using the orchid as bait turned out to be a good one after all.”

Back at the house, they found the prisoner subdued but arguing with the policemen. Jean at once declared that the man’s voice was the same as her abductor’s. After she told about the escape of the woman, whom she suspected of being one of the kidnapers, the older policeman said that he would radio headquarters to start a search. “If she has a large wart on her right forefinger,” Jean added, “that’ll prove she’s the right person.”

The officer went to his car to alert headquarters. The others went inside the house, where Mr. Sterling and John were quickly freed. The orchid grower told of the sudden entry and attack. John had been made prisoner first, while Mr.

Sterling was in the cellar. Then, as he came upstairs to see what was going on, he had been grabbed. Now he pointed to his captor.

“That man has muscles like iron,” he said. “He must have been the strong man in a circus.”

“Well, his muscles won’t do him any good now,” said the policeman. Turning to the prisoner, he barked, “Now it’s your turn to talk! Who are you?”

CHAPTER XIX

Two Arrests

Instead of telling who he was, the prisoner glared in sullen silence. No amount of urging would induce him to talk.

Meanwhile, Chris Barton suggested that they call the yacht club and inform the *Dove's* owner where the stolen boat was. But the policeman, who said his name was Riley, offered to call headquarters first. "The police launch may have found the boat already and is towing it back to the club."

Phoning Captain Rolley, he learned that the craft had not been located yet, so he gave the information on where the boat was tied up. The captain promised to radio the police launch immediately, then added that a search for the woman who escaped was under way.

Officer Riley rejoined the group as Jean was saying to the prisoner, "You may as well confess. You've already given yourself away. We know you belong to the Black Orchid ring."

The stranger shifted uncomfortably, visibly worried. But he still refused to speak.

While Jean was quizzing the man, her sister had been watching Mr. Sterling. The orchid grower seemed to be as

uncomfortable as the prisoner and Louise tried to figure out why. Was it just a reaction from his frightening experience, or was his present nervousness the result of the conversation about black orchids?

“There must be some tie-in between the real and the artificial orchids,” Louise told herself, and wondered again what it was that the prisoner and the woman were going to search for in the Sterlings’ home.

Looking straight at him, Louise asked, “After you got what you wanted from the house here, what were you going to do with it?”

She apparently took the man off guard, because he answered, “Give it to—” Then he caught himself just in time and glared at the girl.

At that moment there was a ring at the front door. Mr. Sterling answered it and admitted the other police officer, who had remained outside to make a check of the Sterling grounds. He, too, tried to get an admission from the stranger, but to no avail.

“All right, then, we’ll take you along and book you on a charge of entering and assault,” the officer said. “Maybe by morning you’ll decide to talk.”

As the prisoner was being led toward the front door, the telephone rang. Mr. Sterling picked it up, then told Officer Riley that Captain Rolley wanted to speak to one of them.

The policeman listened for a couple of minutes, then said, "I'll bring her along, Captain Rolley." After he hung up, the officer announced that the woman suspected of being the prisoner's accomplice had been found and was now at headquarters. "The captain wants Jean Dana to come there and identify her," he concluded.

Hearing this, the prisoner's sullen attitude changed to violence. His fist shot out in a lightning left jab, staggering Officer Riley backward. With his right fist he sent a hard blow to the second officer's midriff, bowling him over. Then, jumping past the stunned men, the prisoner made a dive for the front door, opened it, and rushed outside.

Ken dashed after him, with Chris at his heels.

Outdoors, they spotted the fugitive making a beeline for the road. But both Ken and Chris were fast track men and quickly overtook him.

"You can't stop me!" the man raged, flailing his arms.

The boys dodged the blows, then pinned the man's arms behind him. By this time the two officers had recovered from the sudden attack and now arrived to take charge. One of them pulled a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

"I should have put these on you before," he said ruefully, snapping them on the prisoner's wrists.

Although the police car was not large, the group crowded in. The Danas waved good-by to Mr. Sterling

and John, both of whom thanked the sisters and their escorts for rescuing them and preventing another robbery.

“I’m glad that we arrived in time,” said Louise, smiling, and to herself added, “But now we may never find out what the burglar planned to steal.”

When the police car reached headquarters, the group went directly to Captain Rolley. In a chair near him sat a woman flanked by two guards. Noting her touseled hair, the Danas were at once reminded of the couple in the boat which had nearly rammed into their canoes the night the orchid plants were being transferred to Winona. They noted, too, that the prisoner wore large-sized, high-heeled shoes. The sisters surmised that upon seeing the cartons in the canoe, she had guessed their contents and later had tried to steal the plants from the portable greenhouse.

“Can you identify this woman, Miss Dana?” Captain Rolley asked Jean.

The girl walked over and looked at the woman’s right forefinger. It had a large wart!

“I’m sure this is the woman who helped to kidnap me!” she stated.

“I am not!” the woman shrilled. “You’re just a busybody making trouble for an innocent person!”

Jean smiled. “It’s the same voice, too, Captain Rolley,” she said.

All this time Louise had been watching the prisoner closely. The woman looked very familiar and yet Louise was puzzled.

“It’s not because of the glimpse we had of her in the speedboat that night, either,” the girl mused. “There’s something about her that reminds—” Suddenly Louise had the answer.

“Captain Rolley,” she spoke up. “This woman may be Ramon Alvaro’s sister. She looks very much like him.”

“Yes,” Jean agreed, also recognizing the close resemblance. “It’s my guess that she’s not only Alvaro’s sister, but probably is this man’s wife,” she added, looking at the handcuffed prisoner.

Her face livid, the woman sprang from her chair and clutched Jean. “You beast!” she cried, starting to pommel the girl. But she was promptly stopped by her guards and forced to sit down.

Both prisoners remained adamant in refusing to admit to any of the crimes for which they were booked. They would not even give their names, and insisted they knew nothing about Jean’s kidnaping. The man declared that Hans Sterling had something valuable which belonged to him and which the orchid grower would not give up.

“The only way I could get it back was to take it,” said the prisoner. “If you were in my place, you’d have tried the same thing.”

Although the police gave no credence to what they considered a false accusation, Louise and Jean began to wonder whether there could be any truth in the man's statement. The Sterlings had been so evasive on several occasions that it was just possible they had a secret other than the one connected with their rare orchid plants.

As the prisoners were led to cells, Captain Rolley called the Danas to his desk. "That was a very clever deduction of yours, figuring out that this woman may be Alvaro's sister," he remarked. The officer chuckled. "When Alvaro finds out that she has been jailed, it may bring him out into the open and we can nab him!"

He thanked the young people for all their help, then offered to drive them wherever they wanted to go. Because of the evening's harrowing excitement and the fact that Jean's dress was torn and soiled, the two couples decided not to return to the dance.

"But if you'll drop us at the yacht club, we'll pick up our canoe," Ken said. "Could the police bring back the motorboat we borrowed?"

"Yes, indeed," the captain replied, and by radio phone gave the order to the police launch.

Captain Rolley, who was going off duty, drove the Danas and their dates to the yacht club. There they got into the canoe and set off for Winona, discussing the latest angle in the black-flower case all the way to camp. Weary, the girls said good night to the boys, promising to see them soon.

“We’ll make up for the dancing we missed,” Jean said.

As the sisters climbed the hill from the dock, Louise suggested that they go past the greenhouse and speak to Mrs. Sterling. A low light was burning inside and the woman, seated on the edge of her cot, was reading.

“You’re home early,” she commented, admitting them.

“Yes,” said Louise, and launched into the story of the evening’s happenings.

Mrs. Sterling’s face took on a grim look. Several times she asked if her husband and son really were safe, as if fearing the girls were just trying to prepare her for worse news. Finally they convinced her of the truth, then Jean asked:

“What do you think the thief was going to steal from your house?”

“I have no idea,” the woman answered. This time there was nothing evasive about her reply.

Mrs. Sterling said that everything at camp had been very quiet during the evening and she was going to bed presently. The girls bade her good night and went to their cabin. Blakesey greeted them, saying the children had been sleeping peacefully for hours. After she left, the sisters, exhausted, crawled into bed and were sound asleep a few minutes later. They did not even hear Lettie and Ina come in.

Before breakfast the next morning, Evelyn hurried into the cabin to see her friends. “Goodness, what

happened to you girls last night?” she asked. “There’s a story going around that you and the boys helped yourselves to somebody’s motorboat and ended up in jail!”

The Danas burst into laughter and Louise said, “Actually it was much more exciting than that.”

Before she could go on, Lettie and Ina sidled over. From the smirk on Lettie’s face, Louise and Jean felt sure that she had spread the story about them. At once they decided not to give Lettie the satisfaction of hearing what really took place.

“Let’s go to breakfast!” Jean said to Evelyn. “The bell will ring in a minute.”

To Lettie’s obvious disappointment, the three girls left the cabin and it was not until they were out of earshot that Evelyn was given a full account.

“This mystery is getting mighty dangerous. *Please* watch your step from now on,” she pleaded.

The sisters promised to do so. “In fact,” said Louise, “we’ll have to forget all about it for a while. Jean, do you realize this is the day we have our tennis match with Pine Grove Camp?”

“That’s right,” said Evelyn, and wished the Danas luck.

Secretly she wondered whether their experiences of the night before might have unsteadied them to such a point that they would not be able to play well today.

CHAPTER XX

A Bold Theory

Despite Evelyn Starr's worry, Louise and Jean Dana played exceedingly good tennis that afternoon. But their opponents were hard-hitting, clever players who were giving them a stiff battle.

There was a large crowd of rooters from Winona who had paddled across the lake to watch, and seated on benches across the court was the local cheering section.

*“Pine Grove! Pine Grove!
Play the game!
Pile up a score,
And bring her fame!”*

the girls of Pine Grove sang lustily. They were happy, because their singles star had won her set.

Betty Ann and Ellie, the Danas' opponents, smiled broadly. They were playing very well indeed. The first two sets had gone to 7-5, with each side claiming one of them.

As the final set began, the audience on both sides of the court became tense. Two-all, four-all, the score climbed. During a pause, Evelyn, who was acting as

cheerleader for her camp, jumped up and led Winona in its own chant:

*“Rah, rah, rah!
Cha, cha, cha!
Win, Winona!
La-de-da!
Danas! Danas!”*

The rousing cheer inspired the sisters and they smiled in appreciation. Both realized they had become tense, a bad situation for any athlete. Now they relaxed.

“Make it a love game!” Jean challenged her sister, as Louise got ready to serve.

“If you’ll help me, I’ll do it!” Louise replied, chuckling.

During the game, the two girls darted back and forth across the court without missing a shot. Betty Ann and Ellie were not so fortunate and the game ended 40-love.

The Danas’ winning streak held out. The next game seesawed in score until it reached deuce. Then Jean put it to “ad” and Louise finished with a brilliant back-line smash which Ellie missed.

“Winona wins!” cried the visiting rooters. “Hurrah for Louise and Jean!”

The Danas, happy and smiling over their victory, were mobbed and their pictures snapped again and again.

The Pine Grove counselors felt a little gloomy, but being good sports, came forward to congratulate the sisters.

“How about a return match?” Betty Ann suggested. “Maybe we can redeem ourselves!”

“Any time,” Louise replied. “And let’s play it at Winona.”

The Danas’ buoyant mood lasted all evening and into the next morning. As Louise and Jean walked to breakfast with the Sterling children, Louise whispered, “Sis, I have an idea. Just two letters might solve the mystery of the black flower.”

Jean was interested at once and wanted to know from whom the letters were coming. To her complete astonishment, Louise answered, “They’re coming from the bottom of the lake!”

“What—?”

Louise explained that she meant letters from the name on the rowboat which they had salvaged. “I know it sounds crazy, but I’ve never had a stronger hunch in my life.”

She could not explain further, because the girls had reached the dining hall. “I’ll tell you later,” Louise said.

But she was not alone again with Jean before the swim period began. Now she asked the divers if they would mind trying to find the missing brass letters from the old rowboat.

Lettie, curious about Louise’s request, stayed close to them, giving the sisters no chance for a private

conversation. Although she was wearing a bathing suit, Lettie said she was not going in the water.

“See you later, then,” said Jean, diving in.

Blakesey had joined the others in the search for the missing letters. A few minutes later she came to the surface triumphantly waving an L.

At once all the swimmers began to speculate on the boat’s name. It could still be *Black Orchid*, they concluded, and Evelyn suggested that it might be Alvaro.

“Do you think that the diary could have belonged to *him*?” Doris asked in amazement.

“His wife, maybe,” Evelyn retorted.

After the divers had searched for nearly half an hour more without finding another letter, all of them except Louise and Jean decided to give up. The sisters, however, persisted and chose to hunt along the shore line, thinking that currents might have carried the letters some distance away from the sunken boat.

When they were a distance from the others, Jean turned to her sister. “I think I’ve guessed what your hunch is, Louise,” she said. “You think Hans Sterling found the fisherman’s boat after the storm. When it wasn’t claimed, Mr. Sterling put his own name on it.”

Louise smiled. “That’s right,” she admitted. “I’m positive that Mr. and Mrs. Sterling are involved in some kind of a

mystery. If we could find letters that would spell part of Hans Sterling's name, we'd have something definite to work on."

"Louise, you're a genius," said Jean. "Do you suppose that Mr. Sterling let the person who owned the diary take the boat and that person was in an accident which the Sterlings didn't dare report?"

Her sister gave a little shiver at such a thought. "Oh, I can't believe it. They are such lovely people. I'm inclined to think that their mystery involves black orchids—real ones. They probably hope that their rare plants will produce black flowers and win them the prize offered by that Indian prince. Maybe they found the orchid seeds in the Amazonian jungle!"

There was one objection to this, Jean pointed out. If there were black orchids in the jungle, why hadn't the Sterlings brought them back rather than just the seeds?

Louise had an answer. "It's possible that they didn't dare. The Sterlings may have heard the horrible story about the Wilsons being killed down there and fled for their own lives."

"And what about the twins?"

"They may have been killed too. On the other hand, the Sterlings may never have heard of them."

An amazing thought struck Jean. "Why, they may even know where the twins are in the jungle!" she exclaimed.

Louise said she doubted it. Surely such fine people would never have abandoned two orphaned babies in the jungle. It was very evident from their actions that they loved all children.

“Well, let’s go on with our search,” Louise suggested.

Some time later, as Jean dug her hands deep into the sand, she felt something metallic and excitedly pulled it out. The metal object was another brass letter!

“I’ve found an I!” she shouted to Louise, who quickly waded to her sister’s side.

She praised Jean for her find, but it was evident to both girls that they could not yet pinpoint the second ownership of the rowboat to Hans Sterling. A moment later the camp bell sounded, indicating that the swim period was over.

As the sisters walked back to the cabin, they discussed whether or not they should mention any of their suspicions to Mrs. Sterling. But they decided against it, at least temporarily, because of the strain the woman had been under.

“At the first feasible opportunity,” Jean declared, “I want to ask her many questions.”

When the girls were dressed, they started for the craft shop. As they passed the greenhouse, Mrs. Sterling called to them.

“Any news about the stolen plants?” she asked.

Louise offered to call the police for the latest information. Captain Rolley reported that the plants had not been located, nor had there been any sign of the suspect Alvaro. The couple in jail still refused to talk.

When Louise reported this to Mrs. Sterling, the woman said:

“Oh, dear, that’s dreadfully discouraging.”

Before she could say more, Lettie Briggs came dashing up to the group. It was evident from her smug expression that she was very much excited about something. Planting herself in front of the Danas and Mrs. Sterling, her feet wide apart and her hands on her hips, she said importantly:

“I just came to tell you all that I’ve solved the mystery!”

CHAPTER XXI

A Startling Revelation

While Mrs. Sterling stared at Lettie Briggs, Jean added impishly, “Which mystery?”

Lettie flung her head back. “I know, you think it’s something unimportant,” she said. “Well, I’ll have you know I’m working with the United States Government!”

A look of utter astonishment came over Mrs. Sterling’s face, but the Danas were not quite ready to believe Lettie Briggs’ statement. She had cried “Wolf! Wolf!” so many times in the past that they were never sure when she was serious.

“Are you going to tell us what the mystery is?” Louise asked her pleasantly. “We’re very much interested.”

“Well—” Lettie stared into space as if she couldn’t make up her mind.

Finally, holding her chin high in the air, she revealed that in a highly confidential correspondence with Jack Andrew she had given him several valuable suggestions on how to solve the mystery of the black orchid.

“*What black orchid?*” Mrs. Sterling asked quickly, and the Danas noted a look of concern in her eyes.

“The artificial black orchids from Barranquilla,” Lettie stated grandly. “What else?”

“Oh, I see,” murmured Mrs. Sterling. She seemed relieved and wiped her perspiring forehead with a handkerchief.

Lettie went on to say that she had written Jack to get in touch with the United States Customs Department. “I expect an important arrest very soon,” she concluded. “They’ll inform me!”

“That’s splendid,” said Louise, trying to conceal a smile. If Jack Andrew were going to carry through Lettie’s suggestion, she knew that the police would have heard about it. They in turn would have told the Danas.

“I wish I could reveal more of the plans,” Lettie said smugly, “but I’m pledged to secrecy until the case breaks. You know how it is—”

The Danas had difficulty stifling a laugh. Jean said, “Well, Lettie, if you have the mystery of the artificial orchid solved, that leaves only two mysteries for Louise and me to take care of.”

“What do you mean?” Lettie asked immediately.

There was a twinkle in Jean’s eyes as she replied, “Sorry, Lettie, but we’d rather not talk about them. You might solve all the mysteries and then we’d be disappointed after all our work.”

The needling was entirely lost on Lettie. Taking Jean's remark seriously, she replied, "I might solve them all at that!" With this retort, she turned on her heel and walked off.

"She's a strange girl," Mrs. Sterling said, a frown creasing her forehead.

"Don't let her worry you," Louise advised. "Only a small percentage of what Lettie says she'll do ever really happens."

The Danas now said good-bye to Mrs. Sterling. As they walked off, Jean turned to her sister. "It would be a good joke on us if Lettie solved the mystery of the black flower. Maybe we'd better concentrate on figuring out some of the other angles of the mystery."

"Where shall we start?" Louise asked, then added that she was still intrigued by the old diary that had been found in the sunken rowboat. "Why don't we examine it again? There's a strong magnifying glass in the crafts shop. Let's use it on every page and see if we can decipher any more of the writing."

"Good idea. Let's go!" Jean urged.

Louise hurried off to get the diary, then joined her sister at the crafts shop. No one else was there.

Holding the magnifying glass over page after page, the girls could dimly make out a word or a sentence here and there, but found nothing that was a clue to the writer, or to a place or date.

“It looks hopeless,” said Jean with a sigh.

But suddenly Louise, turning to a page on which there were several lines, found them to be legible.

“Listen to this!” she cried excitedly and began to read:

““My precious babies—perfect except for the little brown birthmark on one’s lower back. It looks like a *Phaius Grandifolius*.””

“What in the world is *Phaius Grandifolius*?” asked Jean. “It sounds like a disease!”

Louise agreed, saying she had never heard the term before. Putting down the microscope and the diary, she looked through the bookshelves of the crafts shop for a dictionary. The first one she consulted did not contain the term. She came across a larger one high on a shelf, but this did not list the words either.

“Here’s an encyclopedia,” Jean called from the other end of the room. She pulled out one of the volumes and quickly leafed through it until she came to *Phaius Grandifolius*. The next moment she laughed. “It’s not a disease, but an orchid,” she announced.

“Let me see!” Louise rushed across the room and looked at the open book.

With the article on *Phaius Grandifolius* was a picture of the beautiful flower. From the center of five thick petals arose a

lovely graceful trumpet of silver, lined with a darker ribbed tan.

“So this was the shape of the little brown birthmark on the unknown baby,” said Louise. “Well, it tells us one thing. The child’s mother knew something about orchids.”

Jean went back to the diary and scrutinized several more pages with the magnifying glass. But nothing else of importance showed up.

“Well, our efforts yielded one clue,” she remarked. “Louise, if some of our other surmises are right, that diary might mean that one of the Sterling children has a birthmark that looks like an orchid!”

Louise nodded thoughtfully. “If so, it must be John, because his brother and sisters don’t have it.”

The sisters agreed that it was too delicate a subject to be broached to Mrs. Sterling. Once more they would keep their suspicions to themselves!

“I’d better hide the diary in your suitcase again,” Jean told Louise as she tucked the book under her arm and started for the door.

“I’ll come along,” her sister said. “I’m scheduled to go horseback riding in a little while. I’ll change my clothes now.”

When the girls reached the cabin, they found Janet Sterling putting away a sweater she had worn early that morning.

“Where are Toby and Honey?” Louise asked.

“Oh, I think they’re out in a boat,” Janet replied.

“Is one of the counselors giving them a ride?”

The little girl said she did not know. Toby had said he was going out in a boat and she had assumed of course that he meant with a counselor.

The Danas became uneasy and decided to look for the children at once. As Jean returned the diary to Louise’s suitcase, which was under her cot, Louise looked out the window toward the lake. To her horror, she saw the two small Sterling children some distance from shore in a rowboat. Little Toby had the oars and was endeavoring to row.

“They’re alone!” Louise murmured.

Knowing that the children could not swim, Louise dashed out of the cabin and hurried down the hillside toward the waterfront.

Suddenly Honey stood up and leaned over the edge of the rowboat. “Lookie, a fish!” Louise heard the child cry out to her brother.

“Sit down!” Louise screamed at the top of her voice.

But she was too late! The child lost her balance and tumbled into deep water!

Louise made a flying leap to the bank, kicked off her shoes, and plunged in. She hoped fervently that she would be able to reach Honey before it was too late!

CHAPTER XXII

The Watchman's Story

Jean, meanwhile, had closed the suitcase. Straightening up, she happened to glance out the cabin window and was just in time to see Honey topple head over heels from the rowboat. At once her excited brother leaned over the side and tried to grab his baby sister.

“Oh!” cried Jean and dashed from the cabin.

As she ran down the hill, Jean could see Louise swimming with fast, strong strokes toward Honey. The little girl's head had just come to the surface several feet from the boat.

Toby, terrified, began to scream and jump up and down. The boat rocked precariously.

“Sit down!” Jean yelled at him, as she reached the shore and pulled off her moccasins.

The little boy, hearing the command, sat down in the drifting boat. But he continued to scream and look anxiously at the spot where his sister had gone down a second time.

Suddenly her head bobbed above the water again, this time close to him. Once more he tried to reach out for his sister. Leaning out too far, he too, tumbled into the water!

Louise was now only a few feet from the children and Jean was swimming at top speed toward them. A moment later Louise dived under, caught hold of Honey, and cleaved her way quickly to the surface with the little girl. As she waited for Toby to reappear, Jean reached their side.

“I’ll get him!” she gasped quickly.

“Good!” Louise replied, and with swift strokes set out for shore with Honey. The little girl, who had swallowed a great deal of water, was only half conscious.

Reaching the beach, Louise found that half the camp had assembled. As she laid her small burden on the sand, willing hands came to assist her. Dr. Abbey pushed her way through and began to give Honey artificial respiration.

“Will she be all right?” asked several girls at once, and the doctor nodded reassuringly.

Louise now turned and looked out over the water. To her relief, she saw that Jean had rescued Toby and was lifting him over the side of the rowboat. Then she climbed in herself and rowed quickly to shore.

Jean put the little boy into Evelyn’s outstretched arms. “I—I’m all right,” he stammered, but the child was shivering.

Honey soon revived, but she was deathly pale and began to cry, “Mama! I want my mama!”

Evelyn hurried off to get Mrs. Sterling. Assuring her that the children were all right, she offered to stay at

the greenhouse while the concerned mother was gone.

Upon reaching the beach, Mrs. Sterling hugged her two children and cried over them hysterically. “You’re sure that they’re all right, Doctor?” she asked.

Dr. Abbey assured her that they were, but said both children should be taken to the infirmary. Honey would have to be put to bed.

“Mama, don’t leave me!” the little girl wailed.

“No, I shan’t,” said her mother, “not even if the orchids—” She stopped short.

Louise spoke up quickly. “Mrs. Sterling, Jean and I will be glad to guard the greenhouse until you get back.”

“Oh, thank you,” the woman said gratefully.

After she and the children had left for the infirmary, the Danas went to the study cabin to remove their wet clothes. They changed into dry shorts and cotton shirts and hurried to the greenhouse.

The sisters found Evelyn studying the thermometer and a sign above it:

“Temperature for these plants must be kept between 60 and 80°. Higher or lower is harmful for these orchids.”

Evelyn smiled. “You have to treat these plants like babies in a nursery. By the way, how are the Sterling children?”

“They’ll be all right,” Louise replied. “But their mother’s going to stay with them at the infirmary for a while, so Jean and I will take over here.”

“Righto,” said Evelyn. “I’m glad you came. I have a tennis date.”

After she had gone, the Danas looked at each plant, speculating on the buds which would open soon. “Jean, they look black!” Louise exclaimed excitedly. “Are the Sterlings going to produce something that no one thinks occurs in Nature?”

“It certainly looks so,” her sister conceded. “Let’s keep our fingers crossed!”

At suppertime Doris brought two trays for the sisters but by nightfall Mrs. Sterling returned. She thanked the girls profusely, not only for standing guard over the precious orchid plants, but for saving her children’s lives.

“I never can repay you for your many kindnesses,” she said. “It seems as if life for me the past few years has been a series of upsetting and fantastic events.”

The Danas waited eagerly for her to continue. Perhaps at last Ruth Sterling was going to divulge some of her secrets!

But to their disappointment, she let the matter rest there. Saying good night, the woman wished them pleasant dreams.

On the way to their cabin the girls met Barney, who smiled broadly. “You’re just the folks I’ve been

lookin' for," he said. "I've got something to tell you."

"Yes?" Jean replied with a twinkle in her eyes. "Did you catch the orchid thief?"

Barney grinned. "Nope. Wish I had. But listen to what happened to me. This afternoon I took a walk way up through the woods to the top of the mountain. Pretty soon I come to a little cabin. Before I can get near it, a feller comes outside and yells at me, 'Get out of here! It's dangerous!'"

"Please go on," Jean begged as the man paused.

Barney said that there was not much else to tell. He had not gone near the cabin, thinking perhaps the man had a vicious dog. But during the past hour it had occurred to him that the man might not have been telling the truth.

"He could just have been sayin' that to keep me away from somethin' he didn't want me to see," Barney went on. "I even figured he might be the feller you're lookin' for!"

"Barney, you may be right," said Louise excitedly. "We'll go up there tomorrow and investigate!"

Jean remarked, after Barney had left them, that perhaps they should notify the police. But Louise was of the opinion that the girls should check Barney's story before doing this. The man he had seen on the mountain might be just a recluse who did not want strangers around.

"I guess that's the best thing to do," Jean agreed.

First thing the following morning she went to Mrs. Crandall and asked permission to make the trip. At first the director was not inclined to allow it. But finally she agreed to let the Danas go. "But only if Evelyn, Doris, and Bob Muncie accompany you," Mrs. Crandall said. "There's safety in numbers."

At ten o'clock the group started out on horseback. Though it was windy, the breeze was hot and in the woods it was far from cool. Following Barney's directions, they rode as close to the secluded cabin as they dared. Then they hobbled their mounts and continued on foot.

"I see the cabin!" Evelyn whispered a few minutes later. She pointed ahead to an old, one-story building.

Bob advised that they proceed with caution. "Try not to step on dead twigs or anything that will give away our presence."

There was a small clearing around the cabin and the group stood at the edge of it, watching and listening. No one appeared and Bob finally decided to go ahead and see if anyone were at home.

"You wait here until I call you," he cautioned.

As he started across the clearing, a gust of wind blew the cabin door open. No one came to close it and Bob concluded that the owner was not at home. He peered inside the one-room building. No one was there.

"Come on, girls!" he called, and they all hurried into the house.

A few seconds later Jean said, "I'm sure orchids are growing here some place! I know their scent."

There were no plants in sight, but Louise pointed out some evidence that indicated orchids had been kept there. Standing on a bench was a watering can and under a table were several bits of osmundine.

"I guess the occupant of this cabin has taken the orchids away," Bob remarked.

Just then Jean spotted a trap door in the floor. It was hardly noticeable because a small throw rug partially covered it. Removing the rug, Jean lifted the trap-door handle and gave a gasp. On the steps leading to a cellar were several pots of orchids!

"I knew it! And I'll bet these were hidden on purpose!" Jean cried out. "I wonder—"

She picked up one of the pots and began to examine it. Tilting the pot a bit, she saw an imprint on the bottom.

"This says Sunset Lake Greenhouses!" she exclaimed exultantly.

CHAPTER XXIII

An Important Discovery

“The stolen orchid plants! And they haven’t flowered yet!” Louise cried joyfully. “The Sterlings’ secret is still safe!”

“We must take them away before the thief returns,” said Jean.

“And get them back to the greenhouse as fast as possible,” Evelyn spoke up.

One by one Jean handed the plants to her sister and the others. It was evident that whoever had been taking care of the orchids understood their culture—the plants looked very healthy.

“It’s going to be difficult carrying these orchids back,” Doris remarked.

“I suggest we find something to put them in,” said Bob, “and I’ll carry them.”

There was nothing in sight, but Doris, seeing a closet, opened the door. Inside was a flat wicker basket with a handle. As she brought it out, Jean stated:

“I bet the thief used this when he took the plants from the Sterlings’ greenhouse.”

As the girls carefully placed the plants in the basket, Louise suddenly realized how hot it was. Recalling the warning in the camp greenhouse that it was not healthy for the orchids to be in a temperature above 80 degrees, she frowned.

“We wouldn’t want anything to happen to these orchids,” she said, worried. “The long trip back to camp in a ninety-degree temperature won’t do them any good. It looks as if two are going to flower soon, and it would be a shame if the heat ruined them.”

The girls nodded and Evelyn asked, “Is it really ninety?”

“It was when I looked at the thermometer on the lodge porch just before we left,” Louise replied. “It may be higher now.”

“Then what will we do with these plants?” Doris asked. “We don’t dare leave them here.”

“Indeed we don’t,” said Louise. “And furthermore, I think we should report what we’ve learned to the police as soon as possible.”

“Right,” Jean agreed. “They’ll send some men up here, I’m sure, to capture the thief.”

Bob suggested that they try to find a good hiding place for the orchids where the temperature was lower. “We’ll ride back later and pick them up,” he said.

All of them expressed the hope that the police would arrive before the thief had a chance to skip out again. If he should return first and discover that the plants were gone, he would certainly leave and elude capture.

While Bob watched for the thief's return, the girls scouted the nearby woods, looking for a place to secrete the orchids. After a few minutes of searching, Jean located a small mountain brook a short distance from the cabin. Near the stream was an overhang of rocks with a ledge below it which would make an ideal hiding place for the plants. She led the others to it.

“Perfect!” said Louise. “Only we’ll have to protect the plants from any wild animals.”

After the orchid pots had been set in place, the four girls fashioned a screen of twigs, branches, and leaves at the opening. Then they set heavy stones in front of it, so no small animals would disturb the screen.

“It would take a strong beast to claw these stones away,” said Evelyn, admiring their work. “And that thief will never notice this, either.”

When the girls returned to the cabin, Bob reported that the suspect had not returned. The young man suggested that the girls ride back to camp without him and notify the police.

“I’ll stay here and tackle the fellow if he shows up,” he said.

The Danas were not sure that this was the best solution. If the thief were Alvaro, he might be armed

or be accompanied by one or more of his confederates. In this case, Bob, if alone, would not stand a chance. Louise pointed out that there was greater safety in numbers. If she and Jean stayed, there would be a better chance of three people capturing the thief or one of them going for help.

Bob chuckled. “Okay,” he conceded. “Suppose the Danas stay as reinforcements.”

After Evelyn and Doris had started back to camp, the sisters decided to do some further sleuthing in the cabin. As they started toward it, Jean said suddenly, “Oh, my goodness!” and a startled look crossed her face.

“What’s the matter?” her sister asked quickly.

Jean replied that it had just occurred to her that none of them had inspected the cellar of the cabin. “The thief might have been hiding down there all the time!” she exclaimed. “It was stupid of me not to think of that before.”

“If you’re right,” said Louise, “he might have escaped out a rear window as soon as our backs were turned.”

“And the police will come here for nothing,” Jean remarked with a sigh. But a moment later her optimism returned. “Oh, maybe my imagination is running wild and the thief wasn’t here after all. Come on. Let’s see what we can find out.”

Bob, hurrying after the girls, insisted upon taking a look in the cellar before they entered. A moment later he reported, “All’s clear!” and walked outside again to stand guard.

The cabin contained only a few pieces of furniture—a cot, a rickety old bureau, the table, one straight wooden chair, and a crude cookstove. “It won’t take long to search this place,” said Jean with a low laugh.

“No. The owner apparently doesn’t care for comfort,” agreed Louise.

To their disappointment, the sisters found no other clue and were about to give up their search when Louise thought of the mattress on the cot. It was such an obvious hiding place that she was amazed to find, after lifting it up, that her hunch had been correct.

“Jean, come over here! Look, I’ve found a book. It must have meant a lot to the owner or he wouldn’t have hidden it under the mattress.”

The girls eagerly examined their find. It was a book on orchids and their culture, entitled *Exotic Flowers*. Louise began thumbing through it for a clue to the owner. Some card or paper might have been slipped between the pages as a bookmark.

Louise did not find one, but as she opened the book in the center, the two girls looked at each other in amazement. Two words were underlined and a picture of an orchid had been ringed with a pen. The flower was *Phaius Grandifolius*.

“The same orchid that was mentioned in the diary in connection with a birthmark!” Louise cried. “Do you suppose this book and the diary belong to the same person?”

“And he’s the one who stole the plants? But we thought Alvaro took the plants,” Jean added.

Louise sighed. “This mystery gets more complicated all the time. If it is Alvaro, and he’s interested in black-orchid plants, why would he hide a book with a special notation about a tan-and-silver flower. I wonder if he knows the significance of *Phaius Grandifolius*.”

“Of course we’re only guessing that it’s Alvaro who is staying in this cabin,” Jean reminded her sister.

“And,” Louise added, “none of this explains two things: what does it all have to do with the theft of the artificial black orchid, and does it tie in with the jungle runner’s clue that a black orchid would lead to the missing Wilson twins?”

“It makes me dizzy!” Jean replied. “If the person who lives here would only return, your questions might be answered. I wish he’d come. This suspense is awful!”

Meanwhile, Evelyn and Doris had reached Winona and telephoned the girls’ discovery to Captain Rolley. The officer promised to send two men up to the cabin at once and arrest the thief.

“That was fine detective work,” he commented, before hanging up.

The girls now hurried to the greenhouse. Bursting in, Evelyn cried out, “Good news for you, Mrs. Sterling! We’ve found your stolen plants! They’re in fine condition and haven’t bloomed yet!”

Mrs. Sterling stared at the girls unbelievably. For several seconds she did not speak, then she hugged Evelyn and Doris, exclaiming:

“Oh, I’m so happy and Hans will be delighted! Tell me all about it. Where are they?”

As Evelyn started the story, Barney walked in. At once she told him what a great help he had been, and he grinned expansively. Evelyn said nothing about the orchid plants, but told him that the occupant of the cabin probably was the man who had stolen the artificial black orchid from camp. The police were on their way to arrest him.

“If he really is the one,” said Evelyn, “you’ll get all the credit.”

Barney said with pride that he was glad to have been of help, and went off singing a merry tune. Evelyn then proceeded to tell Mrs. Sterling the full story of finding the plants and hiding them in a cool place.

When Evelyn finished, Mrs. Sterling said she would like to go up to the cabin and check the missing plants. “But I can’t leave the greenhouse,” she added, sighing.

“Maybe Mrs. Crandall will arrange for someone to stay here,” Doris spoke up. “I’ll ask her.”

The director said she herself would be happy to guard the greenhouse. She, too, was amazed that part of the mystery had been solved, and quickly gave permission for Doris and Evelyn to show Mrs. Sterling the way to the isolated cabin.

The girls procured a horse for Mrs. Sterling, then the three started off. Reaching the spot where the other horses were tethered, the riders dismounted and started through the woods toward the cabin.

As they approached it, Evelyn and Doris were surprised to see that no one was around. Thinking that their friends must be in the cabin, the group entered the rustic building. It was empty!

Mrs. Sterling and the girls looked at one another, puzzled. Then Evelyn said, "Maybe they're down at the stream where we took the plants."

The trio hurried to the brook, but Bob and the Danas were not there either. "I'm worried," said Doris. She and the others started back to the cabin.

As they neared the cabin, two state troopers on horseback emerged from the woods at the rear of the building. At once Evelyn ran to ask them if they had seen a man and two girls in the woods.

"No," replied one of the officers.

Doris and Evelyn were really alarmed now. Had the thief returned? Were Bob and the Danas in danger?

CHAPTER XXIV

Greenhouse Prisoners

Evelyn and Doris quickly told the two officers of their fears that Bob and the Danas might have been captured.

“Oh, I’m sure that the Black Orchid Society has carried them off!” Doris wailed.

“What’s the Black Orchid Society?” asked one of the officers, who said his name was Quigg.

“That’s what the Danas called the smugglers,” Evelyn explained. “The ones who were sending artificial black orchids into the United States with some kind of contraband in them.”

“I’ve heard about those smugglers,” said Trooper Quigg.

He suggested that since he and Trooper Hanley were on hand to watch for the suspect, the others might as well return to Camp Winona. “I’ll radio headquarters to be on the lookout for your friends,” he said, pulling a small portable transmitter from his pocket.

“Oh, tell them to search the whole mountain,” pleaded Doris, who could not throw off a feeling of alarm for the safety of the Danas and Bob.

“I’ll do that,” he promised.

As they started off, Mrs. Sterling reminded the girls of the hidden orchid plants. Evelyn led the way, and as they neared the spot, the woman grew excited. “Oh, I hope the plants are still here!” she said. “Maybe the thief came back—”

“I don’t think so,” Doris spoke up. “The screen we built of brush is still in place.”

Nevertheless, Mrs. Sterling rushed forward and tore it aside. Peering in among the rocks, she sighed in relief. “Yes, they’re still here in the basket.”

Evelyn had noticed that the temperature was considerably lower than it had been a few hours earlier. She asked Mrs. Sterling if it would be all right to take the plants along.

“Yes, indeed,” she replied, “and I’ll certainly feel safer having them with me.”

She lifted the basket from the ledge and once more the trio started off toward the tethered horses. A few minutes later they reached the spot and noted that the mounts which Louise, Jean, and Bob had been riding were still there.

“Oh, where *are* they?” Doris asked, her voice trembling.

“As soon as we get to camp,” said Evelyn, “I’ll call the police. If they haven’t found the Danas and Bob, I’m going to ask Mrs. Crandall to let the whole camp search for them!”

“Let’s hope that won’t be necessary,” Mrs. Sterling said, as she climbed into the saddle and Doris handed up the basket of orchids.

The riders made a quick trip to the camp. They went directly to the office and told Mrs. Crandall of their fears. Concerned, the director at once telephoned Captain Rolley who said he had received a similar message from Trooper Quigg. The captain tried to reassure the woman, by telling her that his men would find the campers in short order.

Mrs. Crandall put down the phone. “I wish I could share Captain Rolley’s optimism,” she said.

An hour went by without any word. Anxiety over the missing trio spread through camp and many of the counselors gathered at the office to await news. Just as Mrs. Crandall was about to organize a search party of her own, hoofbeats were heard on the trail. A moment later three riders appeared.

Evelyn hugged Doris. “They’re safe! They’re safe!” she cried. “Louise! Jean! Bob!”

As soon as the waiting group was sure that the Danas and Bob Muncie were unharmed, Mrs. Crandall dismissed all the campers except Evelyn and Doris. Then she asked Louise, Jean, and Bob to give a full report of where they had been.

Louise started. “Not long after Doris and Evelyn left,” she said, “we saw Alvaro coming. Apparently he

didn't suspect anyone was around, because he walked right out into the open without glancing about."

"And you captured him?" Doris asked excitedly.

Jean shook her head ruefully. "We had bad luck. Bob, Louise, and I had tried to hide, but unfortunately Alvaro spotted me in the bushes."

"Then what happened?" Evelyn asked eagerly.

Bob took up the story. "The man turned and ran like a streak of lightning. We dashed after him, of course, but we didn't catch up with him."

The athletic counselor said that they had pursued Alvaro for several miles. The man had been wearing woodsman's hobnailed boots which were easy to follow in the soft ground, Bob explained. "But we lost the prints on a main road," he added.

"And had a long walk back to get our horses," Louise spoke up.

Evelyn told Bob and the sisters how worried she, Doris, and Mrs. Sterling had been and that they had alerted the police.

Jean suddenly burst into laughter. "Louise, one might think you and Bob and I were trying to elude the police! We never saw one of them."

Mrs. Crandall said that she would notify Captain Rolley at once to call off the search for Bob and the Danas. She would

also tell him the direction Alvaro had taken. After talking to the officer for several minutes, she turned to the Danas and said, “Captain Rolley wants to speak to you.”

Louise picked up the phone and listened attentively. Her face showed such delight and her questions to the captain were so startling that Jean could hardly wait to hear what the conversation was about. Five minutes later Louise hung up and turned to the others.

“Has Alvaro been captured?” Evelyn asked quickly.

“No,” Louise replied, “but most of the smuggling ring has been caught.” Louise paused a moment, blushing a little. “Captain Rolley said that government agents using clues we furnished, together with some they picked up themselves, broke the case.”

“How marvelous!” Doris cried. “Do they know yet what the contraband was?”

Louise nodded. “Strips of platinum were wound around the stems of the artificial black orchids and smuggled into this country.”

“What!” Bob Muncie exclaimed excitedly. “Why, those smugglers could make a fortune that way!”

He explained that even one strip of platinum foil is very valuable. Tissue-paper thin, two feet long, quarter of an inch wide, and pliable, it would lend itself admirably for being wound around a flower stem. Concealed by the outer covering, it would not be detected.

“What an amazing story!” Mrs. Crandall exclaimed. “Please continue, Louise.”

“Captain Rolley said that apparently some of the smugglers’ artificial black orchids were taken to the shop in Barranquilla by mistake. The platinum in them was so valuable that it was worth a trip to the United States by Alvaro and some of the other members of the ring to locate the flowers. By the way, the couple in jail downtown are part of the ring. When they were confronted by government agents, they admitted this.”

“And is the woman Alvaro’s sister?” Jean asked.

“Yes, she is,” Louise replied. “But she still won’t admit her brother is one of the smugglers.”

Louise concluded her story by saying that the jailed couple insisted they knew nothing about the damaged rowboat or the diary, and Captain Rolley was inclined to believe that they were telling the truth on this score.

“But why did they tie up Mr. Sterling and John?” asked Jean.

“They planned to steal a manuscript on orchid growing which Mr. Sterling was writing. A friend, whose name they would not divulge, had asked them to do this.”

Both Louise and Jean agreed that the “friend” probably was Ramon Alvaro.

At this point Louise could not stifle a yawn of weariness and Mrs. Crandall said that she thought all four girls should relax

for the rest of the day.

“If the police call with any further report,” the director promised, “I’ll notify you at once.”

The young counselors needed no second invitation. They were exhausted and bedraggled. But after a nap and a swim, all the girls felt refreshed.

The Danas spent a quiet evening and expected to drop off asleep as soon as they got into bed. But this was not the case. They tossed and turned, wondering whether the police had had any luck in trailing Alvaro, and what the answers were to the still-unsolved angles of the mystery.

Louise, realizing that her sister was not asleep, finally said, “I’d love to go and talk with Mrs. Sterling. She never retires early. I’d like to ask her some questions.”

“I would, too,” Jean replied. “Let’s go!”

The girls put on robes and slippers, then went to the greenhouse. They found Mrs. Sterling standing at the foot of her cot and bending over one of the plants. As she admitted the Danas, her eyes showed excitement. “I believe one of these orchids will bloom tomorrow!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” said Louise. Then, a twinkle in her eye, she asked, “And you will take the flower to the Indian prince and receive the fabulous prize?”

Mrs. Sterling blinked but did not reply. She gave the girls a broad smile, however.

Jean changed the subject and asked, “Was a book on orchids stolen from you and your husband?”

For the first time Mrs. Sterling answered without being evasive. “I think so,” she replied. “It seems to me that Hans mentioned that one was gone.”

“Was there a special notation in it?” Jean pursued the subject.

“There may have been,” the woman replied. “I really don’t know.”

Louise now told Mrs. Sterling that the old, rammed rowboat which was lying on the Winona beach had been pulled out of the water by the girls a short distance from shore. “Did it belong to you and your husband?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Sterling replied after a pause.

“And do you own a diary that was in it?” Louise asked. “Or did the diary, perchance, belong to a Mrs. Wilson who was killed in South America?”

The woman stared at the two girls. When she did not reply at once, Louise went on, “Do you know where the missing Wilson twins are?”

At this every drop of blood seemed to drain from Mrs. Sterling’s face. She teetered uncertainly, then dropped onto her cot in a faint.

Instantly the sisters leaned over her. But before they could give first aid, the lights in the greenhouse went out!

The next second a man's voice commanded in a hoarse whisper, "Keep quiet or you'll regret it!"

Four figures stepped into the building. Louise and Jean started to scream, but were cut short. Rough hands were slapped over their mouths until gags could be put into them. Mrs. Sterling and the two girls were bound tightly onto the cot, side by side, and then it was shoved under one of the orchid benches.

The sisters watched helplessly as the orchid plants were scooped up and taken away in cartons by two of the men. Another man closed all the ventilators in the greenhouse, while the fourth moved the temperature gauge of the heating system.

"There," he said dramatically, "that will fix you meddlers! I have turned this up as high as it will go. By the time your rescuers come, you will be out of your minds from the heat!"

It was Alvaro's voice!

The thief, who was the last of the invaders to leave the greenhouse, snapped the padlock on the door. The Danas knew that the only key to it was in Mrs. Sterling's pocket!

Louise and Jean struggled furiously to free themselves. But it soon became evident that they had been well tied to the cot and escape was impossible. Mrs. Sterling was still in a faint.

The little enclosure was already unbearably hot and the temperature was rising fast.

CHAPTER XXV

A Rare Reward

As the temperature in the greenhouse soared to over one hundred degrees, Louise and Jean began to gasp for breath. They fought overpowering sleep by working at the ropes which bound them. The exercise helped them to overcome their drowsiness.

The girls could hear Mrs. Sterling's heavy, labored breathing and were relieved that she was still alive. But how long would this be the case?

Suddenly the door of the greenhouse began to rattle. Then someone called, "Mother! Mother! Let me in!" It was John Sterling's voice!

Getting no response, the boy beamed a flashlight inside. When he saw the three prisoners tied to the cot, he shouted loudly. "Help! Help!"

Within a few moments the girls could hear voices and running footsteps.

John explained why he had yelled and the next second there was a crash of glass in the door. The light was snapped on. John climbed through the broken pane, followed

by Professor Crandall. Quickly the three prisoners were freed.

“Mother! Mother! What happened to you?” John cried, when Mrs. Sterling did not rise.

“She fainted, John,” Louise explained. “We must get Dr. Abbey at once.”

The message was relayed to Mrs. Crandall, who hurried off for the physician. In the meantime, Jean had found the key in the pocket of Mrs. Sterling’s smock. She gave it to the professor, who unlocked the door.

“That air is mighty welcome,” Jean said. “We’d better carry Mrs. Sterling outside.”

John was now kneeling by his mother’s side. As he bent over, his sweater ruffled up, exposing the lower part of his back.

“Oh!” Louise exclaimed. She had caught a glimpse of a mark on the boy. It looked like the picture of the *Phaius Grandifolius!*

There was no time for further speculation, then, because Dr. Abbey hurried into the greenhouse. After taking Mrs. Sterling’s pulse, she said there was nothing seriously wrong. Apparently the woman had had a shock but would revive soon.

“Oh, I’m glad!” said John. The Danas introduced him to the doctor, then asked how he happened to be at

camp. The boy, looking a little sheepish, replied, “Mother telephoned Dad this afternoon that the stolen plants had been found but not the bad man. He told Mother somebody ought to be with her but she said it wasn’t necessary.” John stared at the ground before going on. “After Dad was asleep, I came over in a canoe to be with Mother.”

“That was very thoughtful,” said Louise. “But your father is probably frantic by this time. I’ll call him immediately and tell him where you are. You’d better stay all night, John.”

As Professor Crandall and Dr. Abbey were about to carry Mrs. Sterling from the greenhouse to the infirmary, lights flashed up the hillside. A moment later two police officers came into view. *Between them was Alvaro!* And behind him was a third officer, carrying a large box in which were all the stolen orchid plants!

At that moment Mrs. Sterling came out of her faint. As soon as she realized that the prize plants were back, the woman cried with joy, declaring that she felt perfectly well now, and she gently scolded her son for worrying about her.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Sterling,” said Dr. Abbey, “but you must go to the infirmary at once. Everything will be taken care of here.”

“Yes, indeed,” Mrs. Crandall assured her. “And John may sleep there overnight, too.”

After the Sterlings had left, the Danas helped set the orchid plants, which were undamaged, onto the

benches in the greenhouse. Then they followed Mrs. Crandall and the others to the office where Alvaro made a full confession. He was not from Colombia but Brazil. While he was in the Amazonian jungle, acting as a guide to some botanists interested in orchids, he had learned a secret from a native runner named Mulu. The runner had said the chief of his tribe suspected that a couple from North America, named Sterling, had got hold of seeds from a black orchid flower. This variety grew in only one place and was sacred to Mulu's tribe. Anyone trying to take the plants or seeds was promptly killed by the chief. But the Sterlings had escaped.

"I knew about the Indian prince's prize," said Alvaro. "So when I entered this country, I looked up all the orchid growers named Sterling. That's how I happened to come here."

The thief went on to say that he knew about the deserted cabin in the woods and it was easy to hide the plants there. He went back and forth every day from an isolated farmhouse at which he was staying.

"That's where we nabbed him," one of the policemen spoke up. "We used bloodhounds on that road where you girls thought the boot marks ended. But we picked up the scent."

"Who were the other men with you when you tied us up?" Louise asked the prisoner.

"Just some friends of mine from Greenport," Alvaro answered. "I paid them for helping me with the robbery. It wasn't their idea." He refused to give the men's names.

Alvaro admitted being one of the smugglers. He had taken the Danas' "Black Orchid Society" note, which led him to believe they suspected the smuggling ring, and had tried to discourage them from learning more about it. The prisoner now explained that he had met a Colombian who was one of the ring. Alvaro and his sister had joined the racket. His sister had unwittingly sold the telltale cloth flowers containing the platinum, instead of plain flowers she had made, to a shop in Barranquilla.

Alvaro admitted taking the book on orchids from the Sunset Lake Greenhouse when he stole the plants from there. He also said Louise's artificial orchid contained platinum. There was a tiny mark on the stem to identify it.

"I had to get it back," the prisoner said, "so I followed your car to camp." Asked if he had lost the flower-making spade at the Sterlings' greenhouse, he nodded. "I helped make the artificial orchids holding platinum and carried the spade with me to dig off the covering of the stems I suspected."

The police officers said they must drive Alvaro to town now. As they took hold of their prisoner, the Brazilian turned and gave the Dana girls a long, searching look. "I should be most angry with you," he said, "but instead I find myself admiring you." He smiled in debonair fashion. "I did not know girls could be so clever at detective work."

The Danas were amazed. This was the first time in their lives that they had ever received praise from a prisoner for whose capture they had been largely responsible!

Within half an hour Winona Camp was quiet once more. “What a night!” Jean said as she tumbled into bed, and added, “I’m sure Mrs. Sterling knows about the missing Wilson twins.”

Early the next morning the Danas went to the infirmary to see Mrs. Sterling and try to learn the answer. To their surprise, they found her husband there and in the room were several of the orchid plants. One was in bloom.

The exquisite flower on it was pure black!

The Danas were speechless. It was true! The Sterlings had cultivated a jungle flower not yet known to the outside world!

“We’ve waited nearly six years for this,” Hans Sterling exclaimed happily.

“It’s simply marvelous!” Jean burst out. “You’ll win the prize!” Louise added her congratulations.

Mr. Sterling smiled and went on, “My wife has told me that last night you asked her an important question. She was so startled that she fainted. But today we want to hear everything. Please go ahead, Louise, and say whatever you have in mind.”

“Jean and I,” the girl began, “have thought for some time that you have knowledge which you picked up in the jungle about twins named Ralph and Beverly Wilson. We understand that there is money coming to these children from an insurance company which is trying to find them.”

Mr. Sterling now told an astounding story. He said that he and his wife had been in the Amazonian jungle five and a half years before, hunting for rare orchids. By accident they had wandered into an area inhabited by a hostile tribe who would permit no visitors.

“Suddenly we heard dreadful screaming,” Mrs. Sterling took up the story, although she shivered a little at the recollection. “Then a few minutes later a native runner, who said his name was Mulu, came racing toward us with two white babies in his arms.

“He thrust them at us and said, ‘Go!’ He could speak only a few words of English, but from what he said, we gathered that the babies’ parents had just been killed by his tribesmen. He kept pointing toward his village and saying, ‘Black Orchid!’ At the time we didn’t know what he meant.”

Mr. Sterling said he and his wife had fled from the territory as fast as they could with the children. They had no idea who they were and the only thing that might have been identification was the diary the Danas had found. This had been secreted under John’s clothes.

“But the flyleaf, as well as many other pages, were missing,” Mr. Sterling said, “and gave no clue to the owner or the fact that the children were twins. The first town we came to, we told our story and offered to adopt the children. The authorities seemed very glad to have us do this and signed the necessary papers. So we had no trouble taking the children out of the country.

“We suspected from some of the slang words in the diary that the parents might be from the United States and made many inquiries up here, but never learned anything to help identify the children.”

“This might have been because the twins were born in Brazil,” said Jean, “and the insurance company was trying to locate them down there.”

Mrs. Sterling, her voice trembling a little, said, “So our John and Janet are twins, and are really Ralph and Beverly Wilson. I’m glad to know who they are, but I suppose that now we’ll have to give them up to their relatives. The thought of that was what made me faint last night. I love them the same as my own.”

“I’m sure that you won’t have to give them up,” said Louise, smiling. “The children have no close blood relatives. By the way, do they know they’re adopted?”

“Yes, but we never told them the circumstances of their parents’ dreadful death, nor that we rescued them from the jungle. They merely know their own father and mother are not living. By the way, when we took the children, John was so sturdy and big we guessed he was about eighteen months old. Poor little Janet was so weak and sickly, we thought she was only about eight months old.”

Ruth Sterling explained that she had placed the diary in the bait box one day when she was sunning herself in the boat. Later, the boat had been rammed by a log while one of their

workmen was making a delivery. They had never bothered to retrieve it.

Their brass front-door key had been dropped into the boat by John. “I knew you girls had found a sunken boat but never looked at it and didn’t dream it was ours,” she said.

After a pause Louise said, “You haven’t told us where you got the seeds for the black orchids.”

“That’s right.” Mr. Sterling laughed. “Well, the first time we undressed little John, or should I say Ralph, we found the diary strapped to his body. Inside it was a tiny envelope containing orchid seeds. There was no notation on the envelope, but we guessed that they must be seeds from black flowers because of Mulu’s remark, ‘Black Orchid.’”

Jean told what Alvaro had said and suggested that Mulu probably meant the Wilsons had been killed because they had tried to take the sacred black orchid flowers. She doubted that Mulu knew about the seeds in the envelope.

“If it hadn’t been for the humanitarian jungle runner, Mulu,” said Mr. Sterling, “the twins might not be living today.”

“And the whole mystery of the real and the artificial orchids might never have been solved,” Jean added. “I’d like to go to Brazil and thank him!”

“I would too,” said Louise, then remarked that she wanted to telephone to Mr. Allen, the investigator for the insurance

company, and tell him the good news. The man answered her call at his home in the city.

“You’ve found the missing Wilson twins!” he exclaimed unbelievably. “I’ll take the first plane to Camp Winona!”

When the girls returned to their cabin, Jean said, “I wonder if we’ll ever solve another mystery as exciting as this one.”

“I certainly hope so,” remarked Louise, who had no way of knowing that their next adventure, **THE WINKING RUBY**, would be the most challenging they had ever encountered.

Mr. Allen arrived just before lunchtime. A special table had been set up in the dining hall, with the Danas acting as hostesses. With them were the whole Sterling family, smiling and happy. Evelyn and Doris, as well as Mr. Allen, were in the group.

In the center of the table stood the gorgeous black orchid plant. During a pause in the excited conversation, Mrs. Sterling said to the Danas, “We know you girls won’t take a reward for having figured out the clue of the black flower. But we want you to have something. Please take this plant as a gift.”

The Danas were overwhelmed by such generosity. “But you’ll need it to win the prize from the Indian prince!” Jean exclaimed.

Hans Sterling smiled. “Another blossom came into flower late this morning,” he said quietly. “And I believe we’ll have

many black orchid flowers.”

“We couldn’t have a more wonderful reward,” said Louise softly, and her face glowed.

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CAROLYN KEENE**

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- In the text versions, delimited italics text in underscores (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.

[The end of *The Clue of the Black Flower* by Carolyn Keene]