

THE SIX FINGERED GLOVE MYSTERY

KAY TRACEY MYSTERY

STORIES



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own." Mrs. Tracey re-
about that." Kay said big
and Bill.
voice told the little group
important discovery. They
do, and were described as
a word was said. A peculiar
you certainly. Cousin Bill was
"papers!" he muttered in con-
satisfaction. "Never in my life
a thing so that. A glass with an

by Frances K. Judd

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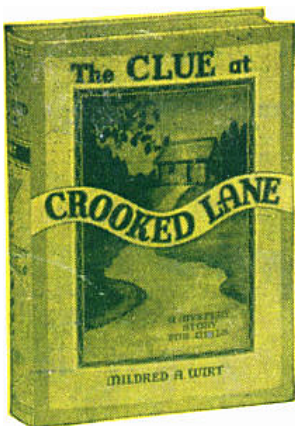
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(See [page 114](#))

KAY THRUST HER HEAD THROUGH THE OPENING.

KAY TRACEY MYSTERY STORIES

THE SIX FINGERED GLOVE MYSTERY

By

FRANCES K. JUDD

Author of

THE SECRET OF THE RED SCARF

THE STRANGE ECHO

THE MYSTERY OF THE SWAYING CURTAINS

THE SHADOW ON THE DOOR

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

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The Six Fingered Glove Mystery

MADE IN THE U. S. A.

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CHAPTER I

THE BLACK GLOVE

"It's beginning to snow, Mother," Kay Tracey said, as she glanced out of the window into the night.

Mrs. Tracey, a sweet-faced woman in her early forties, looked up from the suitcase she was packing. Kay and her mother were going to spend Thanksgiving with Aunt Jane.

"I fear this change in weather will make the roads icy," Mrs. Tracey declared uneasily. "I dislike riding in a car on slippery pavements."

"It would be fun to go by sleigh instead of by car——"

Kay's words trailed off as the doorbell rang several times. Mother and daughter looked at each other, slightly startled, for the commotion indicated that the visitor was impatient to be admitted.

"I'll answer it," Kay said quickly.

She hurried downstairs, but before she could reach the door it was flung open, and a girl in a muddy coat, her hat awry and silk stockings torn, stumbled into the room. Kay stared at her in amazement and horror.

"Betty Worth!" she exclaimed, grasping her friend by the arm. "Whatever has happened to you?"

"I—I was hit!" the girl sobbed.

Mrs. Tracey had followed her daughter. Together she and Kay half carried Betty to a sofa in the living room, where they pulled off the girl's torn stockings and bathed her cruel bruises with hot water. She had deep scratches on her face but appeared otherwise unhurt. Even so, the accident had so shocked her that it was some time before she could give a coherent account of what had happened to her.

"What was it that struck you?" Mrs. Tracey probed gently.

"An automobile. I was on my way to see Kay and was crossing the street at Rockwell and Fulton. I saw a big tan sedan coming at me at a terrific rate of speed. The driver slammed on his brakes and I tried to dodge it. His fender struck me a glancing blow."

"You might have been killed!" Mrs. Tracey said, shuddering.

“The driver wouldn’t have cared if I had been,” Betty returned bitterly. “He didn’t even stop the car.”

“Why, that’s a criminal offense!” Kay cried indignantly. “Did you get the license number?”

“I didn’t get anything except a lot of bruises. By the time I realized just exactly what had happened to me, the machine was half a block away.”

“You said it was a tan sedan that struck you,” Kay reminded her.

“Yes, I noticed that much about it.”

“How many were in the car?”

“I could see only the driver. I caught a fleeting glance of his face as the car bore down on me. He was a mean looking fellow.”

“Can you describe him at all?” Kay asked.

Betty shook her head. “Everything happened too quickly. But I did notice that the curtains at the back of the sedan were drawn halfway.”

“The car must have been traveling at a dreadful speed,” Mrs. Tracey stated.

“Yes, if I hadn’t jumped backwards I’m sure I should have been killed. That driver ought to be arrested!”

“I’m afraid there’s not much chance of our putting him in jail,” Kay commented regretfully. “If you only had been able to note even a few numbers of the license, we might locate him.”

“At any rate I’m still alive, and that’s something,” Betty declared with a rueful smile. “My clothes are a mess, though. Oh, where is my purse?” she cried, looking around her.

“I’m sure you didn’t have it when you came in,” Kay told her.

“I suppose it’s lying somewhere in the road, although I didn’t think about it when I picked myself up.”

“We’ll go and search for it as soon as you feel able,” Kay proposed.

Betty leaned back wearily against the pillows. At the moment she was not greatly concerned over her loss.

“The pocketbook isn’t worth bothering about. There was only ten cents in it.”

“Nothing else?” Mrs. Tracey questioned.

“Three theatre tickets. I almost forgot about them.”

“Then the purse is worth looking for,” Kay announced firmly. “I’m going out and try to find it right now.”

Despite Betty's protests, Kay donned her coat and hat and hastened to the corner of Rockwell and Fulton Streets. By studying the automobile tracks in the new snow she was able to tell exactly where the accident had occurred. Though she searched carefully everywhere, she could find no trace of the missing pocketbook.

"It doesn't matter," Betty insisted when Kay returned to the house. "Someone coming along must have picked it up right after the accident."

"Was there any form of identification in the purse?" Mrs. Tracey inquired.

"I think so. Even at that it would surprise me if the pocketbook were returned."

"You'll probably never see it again," Kay agreed pessimistically. "But I think I know how you can find out who picked it up!"

"How?" Betty asked quickly.

"Do you remember what seats were indicated on the theatre tickets?"

"Yes. They were in the first row of the balcony—aisle seats."

"Then all you need to do is to watch those three places at the play on that night. If they're occupied, you'll know who found your bag."

"That's so," Betty admitted. "You're clever at thinking of things, Kay."

"I wish I knew how to capture that reckless driver. I'd get a lot of satisfaction in tracking him down and sending him to jail!"

As Betty would be in no condition to return home for some time, Kay telephoned to the Worth residence. Mr. and Mrs. Worth were out for the evening, but she spoke to Wilma, Betty's sister, who became greatly excited when she was told of the misfortune that had befallen her twin. Kay had to tell her several times that Betty's condition was not serious before she believed it.

"I'll be right over," Wilma said brokenly.

As Kay hung up the receiver, she heard a door open and close. Returning to the living room she saw that her Cousin Bill Tracey had come home after working late in his law office. He was a bachelor, and for many years had resided with Kay and her widowed mother.

"Well, well, what's all this?" the young man boomed in his hearty voice as he looked down at Betty, who was still pale and somewhat shaken.

Kay and Mrs. Tracey told their genial relative the details of the accident.

"Has anyone notified the police?"

"Not yet," Kay admitted.

Cousin Bill went to the telephone and called headquarters. He repeated all the information which Betty had been able to give him. However, this was so meager, that many of the questions put to him by the officer could not be answered.

“I am afraid the police won’t be able to be of much help,” he said doubtfully. “We haven’t furnished them with any very useful clue.”

At that moment footsteps were heard on the veranda. Kay ran to the door to admit Wilma, who was almost breathless from running. Without pausing to brush the snow from her coat, the dark-haired girl rushed into the living room to see her twin.

“Oh, Betty, are you badly hurt?” she cried, tears filling her eyes at the sight of her sister’s pale, drawn face.

“I feel pretty good now, thanks to Mrs. Tracey and Kay. But I lost my purse, and our theatre tickets that were in it are gone.”

“Oh, I don’t care about the tickets. Tell me exactly what happened, Betty.”

The story was repeated for the third time. Wilma became highly indignant when she heard it, and was declaring, perhaps a trifle too forcibly, that something should be done about such drivers, when the doorbell rang again.

“The bell will wear out if this keeps on!” Kay exclaimed. “I wonder who it is this time?”

As she opened the door, she found herself face to face with a policeman and a beautiful woman in a sable coat. Kay was slightly startled when she saw them, but recovered herself sufficiently to ask them to come in.

“Are you the young lady who was struck by a car at Rockwell and Fulton?” the man queried, addressing Betty. The girl had roused herself and was now sitting on a sofa.

“Yes, Officer,” she replied weakly.

She thought the policeman would ask her to repeat her story, but instead he turned to the young woman at his side.

“Have you seen this lady before?” he questioned Betty.

“Why, no, I can’t say that I have. Yet her face is somewhat familiar _____”

“I am Miss Ball,” the young woman said, introducing herself. “Beatrice Ball.”

“The famous actress,” the policeman interposed.

The visitor smiled. "I am not sure about the 'famous' part, but I am on the stage and in motion pictures."

The policeman brought the conversation back to the matter at hand by again turning to Betty.

"Did you see Miss Ball riding in the car which struck you?"

"Oh, no," Betty assured him hastily. "I saw only one person—the driver."

"You need not fear that you will implicate me in the crime," the actress said quickly. "Even though you did not see me, I am certain that I was riding in the tan sedan which struck you. You probably failed to notice me because I was in the back seat, my hands tied."

"Your hands tied!" Kay gasped. "Had you been kidnaped?"

"Yes, shortly after I left the hotel on the outskirts of Carmont where I had been staying, I had my chauffeur park the car. I sent him into a store. Suddenly this tan sedan drove alongside. At the point of a gun I was ordered into the other automobile."

"Did you see the driver's face?" Bill Tracey interrupted.

"No. He wore a mask. Later on, as we drove through a lighted street, he removed it, but his back was then toward me. He drove at a reckless pace to this town. Suddenly I heard the brakes screech. Then we struck something."

"That something was I," Betty commented ruefully.

"The accident appeared to frighten the man, for he dodged down one street and up another. He paid less attention to me than he had before, so I was able to work my hands free. As he slowed down for a corner, I attempted to jump out."

"That was a brave thing to do, lady," the policeman said admiringly, "but mighty dangerous. You could have been killed." Then, turning toward the door, he added, "I'll be going now to check up with the Captain. See you later."

After the officer of the law had left, Miss Ball resumed her tale.

"I didn't stop to think of the risk I was taking. Just as I clutched the door handle, the kidnaper swung the car to the curb and grabbed my wrist. We struggled, and I succeeded in freeing myself."

The actress paused in her narrative as she suddenly recalled something. She opened her purse and drew out a black object.

"When I got away I found I had this in my hand," she added excitedly. "It ought to help locate the driver."

She held out a man's black glove. As the group looked at it, Betty said wearily:

"I don't see how."

"It's not much good except maybe to show the size of the driver's hand," Wilma commented.

The actress looked disappointed. She firmly believed that the article would serve as a valuable clue to the man who had kidnaped her and hit Betty.

"May I see the glove, please?" Kay suddenly asked.

Miss Ball obligingly handed it to the girl, who placed it on a table.

"It's just an ordinary glove," Mrs. Tracey remarked as she glanced at it.

"I should call it anything but that," Kay said significantly. "Look at it, Cousin Bill."

The excitement in her voice told the little group that she had made an important discovery. They gathered about the table, and were electrified at what they saw.

For a moment not a word was said. A peculiar hush seemed to fall upon everyone. Cousin Bill was the first to speak.

"A glove with *six fingers!*" he muttered in awe, his eyes wide with amazement. "Never in my life have I seen such a thing as that. A glove with six fingers!"

CHAPTER II

A DIAMOND RING

“YOU have keen eyes, Kay,” Cousin Bill boomed. “We all looked at that glove, and not one of us noticed the extra finger until you pointed it out to us.”

“It must belong to someone with five fingers and a thumb on his hand,” Mrs. Tracey declared. “But who ever heard of anyone like that?”

“There must be such cases on record,” Kay declared.

“It seems to me I’ve *heard* of them,” Miss Ball answered, “but they certainly must be extremely rare.”

“How horrible it would be to have six fingers,” Wilma shuddered, glancing down at her own shapely hands. “I couldn’t stand it.”

“You’d have to if you were born that way,” her twin told her.

“A man with six fingers should be easy to identify,” Mrs. Tracey commented, picking up the glove and then tossing it on the table again.

“If he can be located,” Cousin Bill added.

“Oh, now that we have some evidence Kay’ll find him all right!” Wilma declared confidently.

Kay paid but little attention to the compliment. She lifted the glove from the table and carefully inspected it. Miss Ball, who was watching her, shuddered. To her it was a sinister and evil token. She actually was horrified when the girl deliberately put it on her hand, leaving the empty finger to dangle.

“Oh, take that awful thing off,” Betty pleaded. “It gives me the creeps.”

Kay was slow to remove the glove. When she did withdraw her hand, she held a tiny object between her thumb and forefinger. With an expression of surprised delight she held it up for the others to see.

“A ring!” Betty gasped. “And it’s a diamond!”

“Clue number two!” Kay announced. “It was wedged in the tip of the third finger,” Kay informed them. “When Mother tossed the glove on the table a moment ago I heard it clink against the wood.”

“You ought to be on the police force, Miss Tracey,” said the actress admiringly. “I’ll never forget this exciting evening. It would make a

wonderful stage play. And now I must go.”

Miss Ball was on the point of leaving, when suddenly she showed signs of great fatigue. Mrs. Tracey urged her to remain. The screen star sank wearily into a comfortable chair and closed her eyes.

“You had a horrible experience this evening,” Betty said sympathetically.

“Yes, we both did. My nerves are pretty well shaken. For a time the excitement kept me keyed up, but now I feel very weary.”

“You must stay here for the night,” Mrs. Tracey urged.

“Oh, no thank you, I cannot do that. I really must go soon. I wonder if I may use your telephone for a long distance call?”

“Certainly. Kay will show you where it is.”

“I wish to get in touch with my manager, Clarence Minton, who is in New York,” Miss Ball explained. “I think he should be told of the attempt to kidnap me.”

“Do you suppose the kidnaper could be anyone from New York who knows you or Mr. Minton?” Kay asked.

“That thought occurred to me,” the actress admitted. “Yet to my knowledge I have never known a man with six fingers on one hand.”

“Mr. Minton might help to identify him; if not by a description of him, then by means of the ring,” the young detective admitted. “I suppose your manager has a wide acquaintance among people connected with the stage.”

“Yes, Mr. Minton meets a great many actors and actresses.”

“You might speak of the ring and the glove to him.”

“I shall do so. It’s possible that he will decide to come here. I am sure that he could assist us if he can make the trip.”

Kay showed Miss Ball where the telephone was, and then discreetly returned to the living room. During the short while she had spent in the Tracey home the actress had made herself popular with everyone. They liked her soft, musical voice. Her manners were charming, yet unaffected.

“After this, I’m never going to miss a single one of Miss Ball’s pictures,” Wilma declared in a whisper. “She is so lovely she reminds me of Lord Byron’s poem:

“She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.”

Although Betty and Wilma were twins, no one would ever suspect it from either their appearance or their dispositions. The only feature they had alike was their attractive blue eyes. Wilma was dark-haired and serious-minded, while her sister was blond and slightly inclined to be a tease. She was not as studious as Wilma, and did not have the love for poetry which her sister harbored. Wilma not only read poems, but composed them as well.

Recently she had won the admiration of her friends by gaining high honors in a poetry contest sponsored by a national magazine. Kay had achieved distinction also with a prize short story she had written. As a result of these achievements, the girls found themselves involved in a strange mystery about a shadow on a door. This concerned a society woman and an unscrupulous man who hoped to win a fortune for himself by deceiving the wealthy matron.

The queer happenings at the home of this lady were among many of the adventures that were to engage Kay's attention. She had amazed her friends by solving a mystery about swaying curtains, and before that had interested herself in the meaning of a strange echo. Her initial experience as an amateur detective is recounted in the story of the secret of a red scarf.

Kay did not think of herself as a detective in any sense of the word. Her only fascination for a mystery lay in its adventure. At sixteen she was tall and slim, with brownish-gold hair and deep brown eyes. Her face was expressive, though at times it masked her thoughts. Even the hostile Ethel Eaton was forced to admit that the Tracey girl had an alert, active mind.

Kay attended Carmont High School. Together with Wilma and Betty Worth she traveled the distance each day from Brantwood, their home town, which was only a few miles away. They had made many friends among their classmates, but Ethel Eaton was not one of them. This young person endeavored in every possible way to make trouble, particularly for the popular Kay. However, the Tracey girl paid little attention, and spent much of her time trying to be helpful to persons who were in trouble. This she was now trying to do for Miss Ball.

"I have news," the actress reported as she returned to the living room after making her phone call. "Mr. Minton was dreadfully upset about the kidnaping attempt, and is coming here immediately to see if he can help us to identify the man!"

"Good!" Kay cried. "When will he arrive?"

"He's leaving in ten minutes to take a plane. If he finds his pilot he should get here late tonight."

"Then you must remain with us until he comes," Mrs. Tracey insisted.

Miss Ball hesitated, fearing that she would inconvenience her new acquaintances. However, when Kay and Cousin Bill joined in the invitation she finally agreed to stay. Since several hours would elapse before the plane would reach the airport, the actress was persuaded to lie down and get some rest.

After Miss Ball had retired to one of the bedrooms Betty declared that she felt able to walk to her own house. Bill Tracey would not hear of this, however. He went to the garage for his car, while Wilma and Mrs. Tracey carefully bundled the girl into a warm coat.

Kay went with her cousin to take the twins to their home. The snow was still falling. As the Traceys started to return to their own street, Kay made a request.

“Let’s go by way of Rockwell and Fulton,” she suggested. “I’d like to take one more look and maybe I’ll see Betty’s purse lying there some place.”

“All right,” her relative agreed, turning down a side street. “I have to make a phone call and I’ll run into that drug store down the block while you go up and look around at the cross streets.”

Cousin Bill parked the auto, and Kay jumped out.

“I’ll not be gone long,” she told her companion, as she hurried up the street.

She darted around the corner, then stopped short in her tracks. A tan sedan was parked not far from the place where her chum had been struck!

“I wonder if that is the same car that hit Betty?” Kay thought tensely.

She glanced at the rear license plate, but it was too muddy to be legible. Since there had been no rain in the vicinity of Brantwood for several weeks it occurred to her that the owner of the car had deliberately smeared it with dirt in order to conceal the numbers.

The engine of the automobile was running, but the driver’s seat was empty. Kay’s eyes traveled swiftly up the street. She started as she saw a man examining the spot where Betty had had to jump aside.

The girl shivered. Even from a distance she could see that there was something about the man which inspired fear. He was tall and thin, and moved with a jerky stride as he looked about in the snow for some object. His black hat was pulled low over his eyes, so Kay could not see his face.

Her glance turned to his hands, which were large and clumsy. He wore only one glove.

“He must be the man who struck Betty!” Kay thought excitedly.

For an instant she hesitated. Then, as a brilliant idea occurred to her, she turned and ran back toward Cousin Bill's car.

CHAPTER III

A RADIO WARNING

KAY was breathless with excitement as she reached Bill Tracey's automobile. Her relative was just coming out of the store, and seemed somewhat surprised at her unexpected return.

"I've just seen the man who struck Betty!" she told him tersely, sliding into the car seat. "At least, he answers that person's description. Drive slowly around the corner."

Cousin Bill did not waste any time in asking questions, instantly gathering that Kay meant to trap the hit-and-run driver. As they cautiously reached the intersection, they could see no car.

"There's not a soul in sight," the young man declared. "Maybe you were mistaken."

Kay shook her head. She knew that she had seen a tan sedan parked by the roadside. As evidence she pointed out a few drops of dark oil which marked the place where the automobile had stood only a few moments before. The machine was now gone, however, and the mysterious stranger with it.

As she looked down the street, Kay could see the dim tail-light of a retreating automobile far in the distance.

"That must be the car, Cousin Bill! Let's follow it!" she cried.

The young lawyer shifted gears, and the two took up the pursuit. They steadily gained on the machine ahead of them. As Kay peered anxiously through the snow-encrusted windshield, she was quite certain that they were approaching the tan sedan.

"We'll soon overtake that car, Cousin Bill! Can't you go a little faster?"

"It's pretty slippery traveling," he returned grimly, but stepped a trifle harder on the accelerator.

In spite of the increased speed, they did not seem to be able to draw any closer to the tan sedan. It was obvious that the driver was aware he was being followed, and was trying to elude his pursuers. Presently they reached Carmont, where he led them a precarious chase down several side streets. His actions convinced Kay and her companion that they were on the trail of the right man. They grimly determined he should not escape.

The tan sedan sped past red lights and other stop signs. Mr. Tracey refused to take such reckless chances, and began to lose distance. Yet he saw the car turn into a one-way street, and followed.

“Speed up, Cousin Bill, and we’ll catch him!” Kay cried.

The young man did so, and the car spurred ahead. The Traceys were now so close to the sedan that Kay strained her eyes to read the numbers on the grimy license plates.

Then an unlucky episode occurred. As they approached the end of the street, a large truck suddenly backed out from the rear exit of a garage, directly in the path of Bill Tracey’s car. He slammed on the brakes, swerving just in time to avoid a collision.

The startled truck driver climbed out from behind his wheel and hurried over to apologize for his carelessness.

“I’m sorry, sir. This street isn’t often used at night, and I get to backing out without looking.”

“That’s a bad habit,” Cousin Bill snapped, cutting him short. “Get your truck out of here as quickly as you can! We’re following another car!”

“Yes, sir.” The man ran back to his vehicle and moved it so that the Tracey auto could pass.

When they came to the corner, Kay and Cousin Bill peered in both directions. The street was deserted. There was no sign of an automobile of any kind.

“Now we’ve lost him,” the girl declared in disappointment. “If that truck hadn’t blocked the road we should have caught up with him.”

Cousin Bill drove several blocks north. Since streets branched off here and there at regular intervals, it was impossible for him to know which of them the driver of the tan sedan had taken.

“We’ll never find him now,” the young attorney admitted finally. “We may as well give up.”

“Let’s go to police headquarters and report that we’ve seen the tan car in this neighborhood,” Kay suggested. “Perhaps the cruiser might be able to locate it.”

“That’s a good idea. We’re not far from the police station now.”

When they arrived at the precinct they told the officials about their pursuit of the car. Almost as soon as the words were out of their mouths the information was relayed to the radio cruiser.

When they felt convinced that they had done everything possible to bring about the capture of the reckless driver, Kay and her cousin returned

home. Mrs. Tracey met them at the door and suggested that they be as quiet as possible, for Miss Ball was asleep.

“There is no need to awaken her until it is time for her to go to the airport,” she declared. “The young woman is completely exhausted by her experience.”

“She should have a little of Kay’s iron nerve,” Cousin Bill said, giving his cousin’s cheek a playful pinch.

“It’s long past regular bedtime, Kay,” Mrs. Tracey commented, as she glanced at the clock. “You have school tomorrow, you know.”

“Oh, Mother, I do so want to go to the airport with Miss Ball!”

“But the plane won’t arrive until such a late hour.”

“I’ll not be able to sleep a wink anyway, so you may as well let me go.”

“Yes, I know you, Kay,” her mother said, smiling.

“Kay’s the detective on the case,” spoke up Cousin Bill, “and we’ll need her around, should anything turn up.”

The girl gave each of them a grateful squeeze. Then she whirled her mother about the room at such a rate that Mrs. Tracey grew dizzy and fell onto the sofa.

“I declare, Kay, when you discover a new mystery you caper about like a two-year-old.”

“It’s just my way of working up steam for the big attack,” Kay laughed, but her face sobered as she said it. “I’m not really satisfied with the way this mystery is progressing.”

“What’s the matter?” Cousin Bill queried.

“Of course I’m glad I found the six-fingered glove,” Kay amended. “But I’m sorry that Betty and Miss Ball met with misfortune. You know very well I’d rather the affair had never occurred, than to have a mystery to solve, much as I like them.”

“You’ve made a good start already,” Bill praised his cousin, “getting two clues.”

“But it’s only a start,” the girl replied. “I have a feeling that the man who lost the six-fingered glove won’t be very easy to capture.”

Mrs. Tracey and Cousin Bill settled themselves with newspaper and book to await the hour to drive to the airport. Kay was too excited to sit quietly for any length of time. She kept jumping up and looking at the clock every few minutes.

“We may as well leave soon,” the lawyer finally suggested. “If we don’t, Kay will wear out the carpet, the way she prances about,” and he laughed

heartily at the exuberance of his young relative.

Miss Ball was awakened, and as soon as she was dressed they all left in Cousin Bill's car for the flying field. It had now stopped snowing, and a few stars were struggling through the clouds, but it was a bitterly cold night.

"Mr. Minton is courageous to undertake a flight at this time of year," Mrs. Tracey remarked to the actress as they approached the outskirts of the Carmont airport.

"Yes, Clarence is brave," replied Miss Ball, her voice a trifle husky as she said it. "I hope he gets here safe. I've been so worried about this trip."

Kay glanced quickly at the young woman, wondering whether her concern about her manager indicated an interest that was not purely along the lines of business. Then, too, she had called the man by his first name.

The flying field was practically deserted as they drove in. Cousin Bill parked his car near the runway and turned off the motor. As they sat there they could see several planes warming up, with long tongues of blue and red flame licking from the exhausts.

There still remained fifteen minutes before Mr. Minton's ship would arrive. Miss Ball shivered slightly as she saw great sheets of wind-driven snow blow across the runway.

"I've heard that there is great danger of engine failure in weather such as this," she murmured apprehensively.

"Yes," Cousin Bill agreed, "but planes are built stronger today than they were a few years ago. Mr. Minton will get in safely. Don't worry."

Miss Ball appeared to grow more and more nervous as the moments sped by. To relieve the tension, Cousin Bill suggested that they go inside to the communications room to learn if any news had been reported concerning the incoming plane. When they entered, the operator was busy over his dials, but presently he removed his ear-phones and turned to inquire what they wanted.

"Any news about Plane 417?" Mr. Tracey asked.

"She was running on schedule at the latest report. It's almost time for another check-in. If you'll wait——"

Cousin Bill nodded.

As the hands of the clock pointed to the even hour, the operator switched over from his headpiece and the loudspeaker blurred into sound.

There was a brief wait as the agent tuned in. Then came the indistinct call:

"4—1—7; 4—1—7."

Miss Ball listened tensely, twisting her handkerchief nervously in her hands. The pilot of Plane 417 then gave a routine report of course and altitude, adding in a voice that sounded strangely impersonal:

“Have just discovered we broke wheel in taking off—broke wheel in taking off. Stand by for a crash.”

“A crash!” Miss Ball exclaimed, the color draining from her face. “Was that what he said?”

The operator stiffened as he heard the message. He reached for a telephone, and gave the report to an airport official. This man in turn directed that ambulance and fire-extinguishing equipment be sent on the field at once.

Since there was nothing they could say or do that would be of help, Kay and her mother escorted Miss Ball into the waiting room. Cousin Bill walked outside.

“Clarence will be killed!” the actress whispered tensely. “It is all my fault, too. If I hadn’t asked him to come here, he would be safe now!”

“Try to keep calm,” Kay urged gently. “The plane hasn’t crashed yet. I am sure the pilot is skillful. The airport officials are doing everything in their power to be of assistance.”

“With a wheel gone, there’s nothing anyone can do to avert an accident,” the young woman insisted. She arose and began pacing the floor.

Mrs. Tracey and Kay exchanged knowing looks. It was clear to both of them that Miss Ball was in love with Clarence Minton. They did their best to comfort the young woman, but she was too worried even to hear what they were saying, or notice when Cousin Bill came in.

“It’s queer about the landing gear breaking,” Kay said in an undertone to the lawyer. “Of course, accidents like that sometimes do occur—only——”

“It seems to have happened at a strange time, to say the least,” Mr. Tracey finished grimly.

“Do you suppose anyone could have damaged the plane purposely? Perhaps some person who wanted to prevent Mr. Minton from coming here to aid in the search of the criminal driver?”

Cousin Bill eyed Kay admiringly.

“That may be a pretty shrewd guess. We have no way of knowing for sure, though.”

“If the plane had been damaged by someone in New York, it would bear out an idea that occurred to me right at the first,” Kay said reflectively.

“Do you think the kidnaper is in league with some person connected with the stage or movie industry?”

“Doesn’t it seem likely?”

“It’s a possibility, at least.”

Unknown to the Traceys, a newspaper reporter had observed them shortly after their arrival at the airport. Always on the alert for familiar faces, he had been quick to recognize Beatrice Ball, and had wondered what had brought her to the flying field. He accosted the young woman boldly, and asked for an interview.

“Oh, not now!” the actress protested. “I am too upset to say anything.”

The reporter, however, got her to tell of the mishap which had occurred to Mr. Minton’s plane. He jotted down some brief notes, then dashed away. He was back again in a few minutes to annoy her again. The news then spread about that a well-known actress was in the waiting room. Other news men flocked about her, and curious persons begging for her autograph began to intrude.

“We must get away from here,” Kay said in an undertone to her cousin.

Protecting Miss Ball as well as they could from the crowd, they reached the doorway and escaped into the night. Great was their amazement to find that while they had been inside, several automobiles had arrived at the airport. People were milling about near the runway, and field officials were trying to keep them back.

“The news has certainly spread rapidly,” Mrs. Tracey said.

Kay noticed that all of the lights bordering the flying field had been turned on; several brilliant emergency beams were playing over the frozen ground where the crippled airplane in all probability would land. When Miss Ball saw the fire engine and ambulance draw up near by, she shivered.

“If anything should happen to Clarence, I’ll never forgive myself. Never!” she said, her lips almost white.

“You must be brave, whatever happens,” Kay whispered.

She had been watching the dark sky for any sign of life, when suddenly her attention was drawn to a tiny red gleam. It appeared to be coming closer and closer.

“I think the plane is arriving,” she said quietly.

Shortly thereafter the group heard distinctly the roar of an engine overhead. The crowd became more and more dense, until Kay and her companions had difficulty in maintaining their position in the front line of the runway.

As the plane was sighted far up in the sky, a tense silence fell over the throng. All eyes were turned upward. A light beam played for an instant on the ship, and Kay saw in that single flash that one of the wheels was dangling at a useless angle.

Twice the machine circled the airport as the pilot seemed to gather courage to make the downward plunge. Then the ship slowly side-slipped in.

“Oh, I can’t bear to look!” cried Beatrice Ball.

Kay felt the actress grip her hand so tightly that it hurt. She was scarcely aware of the pain, for her eyes were riveted upon the plane. Would it crash? She held her breath, and waited.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

THE airplane glided slowly downward, hovering above the runway at stalling speed. There was a slight shock as it struck the ground on its two good wheels, the right front and the rear.

A cheer of relief went up from the crowd, but the danger was not over as yet. The plane rolled smoothly for a few yards, then skidded and flopped over on its left side.

“Oh! Oh!” Miss Ball cried. “I was afraid that would happen.”

Policemen and field attendants held back the crowd. Upon learning that the actress and her friends were especially privileged to go out on the field, the officials permitted them to pass through the line.

Kay and Miss Ball reached the wreckage just as the pilot and Clarence Minton stepped out of the cockpit, unhurt save for a few minor scratches. Both were smiling, though somewhat grimly.

Miss Ball rushed over to Clarence Minton, and eagerly caught his hand. “Oh, I’m so thankful you aren’t hurt. When I heard over the radio that the undercarriage of your plane had been damaged I feared the worst!” the actress cried.

“We had a narrow escape,” the man admitted. “But thanks to one of the best of pilots, we came through safe.”

“That was a skillful landing,” Miss Ball declared, “even though you did crash.”

“We were lucky that it was no worse.”

The young woman chatted excitedly with her manager for several minutes, forgetting to introduce Kay, her mother, and Cousin Bill. She became very apologetic when she realized her thoughtlessness.

Kay studied Clarence Minton with interest. She admired the nonchalant way in which he spoke of the accident. Although he was about forty years of age, he looked much younger. His face was nevertheless slightly furrowed, for he was a man who had shouldered many grave responsibilities. Kay noticed that his brown eyes softened as they rested upon Beatrice Ball. She guessed that his interest in the actress was not purely a professional one.

“Tell us how the wheel became loose,” the beautiful woman urged. “What caused it?”

The manager looked out over the dense crowd that was closing in upon them. Policemen were having difficulty in keeping back the people.

“We can’t talk here,” he returned quietly.

“You must both come with us,” Mrs. Tracey insisted. “It is only a short drive to our home.”

The little group, aided by a policeman, pushed their way through the unruly throng, glad to escape a number of reporters who had gathered to question the pilot of the ill-fated plane. As they were hurrying toward the parked automobile, Kay, unobserved by the others, suddenly halted.

Was it her imagination, or had she really seen a familiar figure among the people? The man who had attracted her attention wore a dark overcoat and a black hat pulled low over his eyes. He was watching Miss Ball intently.

Unexpectedly his gaze shifted, and his eyes met those of Kay. In that instant the girl felt an unpleasant chill pass over her. She had not been mistaken. He was the same sinister looking stranger who had driven the tan sedan, which had probably struck Betty. Abruptly the man wheeled about and disappeared into the crowd.

“Cousin Bill!” Kay called sharply.

Then she saw that he was too far away to hear her. She waited only an instant before plunging into the crowd in pursuit of the stranger. She feared she had lost him completely, but a little later she noticed him far ahead of her, elbowing his way roughly toward one of the hangars.

The man turned around and saw that Kay was following him. As he reached the edge of the crowd he broke into a run, and darted toward a tiny blue monoplane which had been warming up.

“Stop that man!” Kay cried frantically. “Stop him!”

Those who might have helped her seemed paralyzed for the moment. As the stranger flung himself into the cockpit, a mechanic raced toward him, but got there too late to prevent him from taking off.

The tail of the ship swung around, narrowly missing Kay and the mechanic. Both were sprayed with a fine slush of ice and snow, churned up behind the wheels.

As he opened the throttle wide, the fugitive waved his hand mockingly and taxied across the field. He took off at a reckless angle, and ascended into a dark sky.

“Who was that man?” Kay tensely inquired of the mechanic.

“Never saw him before. But he’s stolen one of our best machines!”

Then he hurried away to report the theft to the airport authorities. Kay went to the Tracey car and quickly related to her family what had occurred.

“You’re certain he was the man?” Cousin Bill questioned.

“Yes, I’m sure of it. I caught only a glimpse of his face, but from his general appearance I easily recognized him.”

“Was he a tall person?” Miss Ball asked.

“Yes, taller than the average, and quite thin. He walked with a jerky stride.”

“Then he was the one who kidnaped me!”

“When you phoned to me you spoke of a glove and a ring,” Mr. Minton said to the actress. “I came here hoping to aid in identifying them.”

During the ride back to Brantwood Mr. Minton related briefly his experiences since he had left New York. At the take-off he and the pilot had felt a slight jar, but had not suspected anything to be amiss until they had received a radio warning from an official of the home airport. Since the message had not been given until they were well on their way, it had seemed to them wiser to continue on their course than to turn back.

“Do you think that the broken wheel was the result of a natural accident?” Kay asked.

Mr. Minton hesitated before replying. Then he said tersely:

“The pilot thought the accident was premeditated. Tomorrow he intends to make a thorough examination of the machine to see what he can find.”

“Did anyone know you were coming on this trip?” Kay next inquired.

“I’ve suspected for some weeks that something strange has been going on at my office. In several instances important information has leaked out.”

“Then you believe that someone may have tried to prevent you from reaching here tonight?”

“That thought occurred to me. But I can’t imagine anyone having sufficient reason for plotting against my life. That’s what it comes to, of course. If it hadn’t been for the skill of my pilot, I shouldn’t be here now to tell the tale.”

“Don’t talk about it,” Miss Ball pleaded.

Clarence Minton squeezed the young woman’s arm comfortingly, but said with determination:

“I intend to get to the bottom of this matter! I’ll be more cautious in the future, but no one can intimidate me! If the plane was tampered with, I think it was done by someone who knew of Miss Ball’s kidnaping. I’ll spend any sum to learn his identity.”

When they reached the Tracey home Kay brought out the ring and the glove for Mr. Minton’s inspection.

“Have you ever seen either of them before?” Kay questioned.

“Not to my recollection. The ring is certainly an unusual one.”

“You don’t recall any man with six fingers on his right hand?” Kay asked hopefully.

Minton shook his head regretfully.

Since the hour was late, the matter was permitted to rest. Kay was disappointed at the manager’s failure to be of assistance, yet neither of them was willing to admit defeat.

“We’ll talk over the case again in the morning,” Mr. Minton promised. “My mind will be fresh then, and I may be able to dig up some clue which will be useful.”

Miss Ball and her manager gratefully accepted Mrs. Tracey’s offer of hospitality. They were both so exhausted from their harrowing experiences that in the morning Mrs. Tracey did not call them to breakfast. They were still sleeping at eleven o’clock.

“What are we to do about visiting Aunt Jane?” Kay asked her mother anxiously.

Since the arrival of the two guests no attempt had been made to finish the packing. Kay did not want to hurry them away, nor did she care to miss the holidays at the home of her mother’s favorite aunt. There would be good coasting in the country, and deep, crusty drifts assured her of an opportunity to enjoy skiing. A bountiful Thanksgiving dinner at her relative’s home was to mark the high point of a week of glorious fun.

Kay knew only too well that when she said good-bye to the actress and her manager she would very likely be saying good-bye to the mystery of the six-fingered glove. This was something to be considered, for such a baffling piece of evidence did not come into one’s life every day.

“I wish Miss Ball and Mr. Minton could go with us to the country Thanksgiving,” Kay declared impulsively to her mother. “Do you think Aunt Jane would mind?”

“Probably not, Kay, for she enjoys having guests. But I imagine Miss Ball and her manager have other plans for the holidays.”

“I suppose so,” Kay sighed.

She was still turning over the matter in her mind at luncheon time. The actress and her manager had both arisen, looking greatly refreshed after their long rest. They enjoyed Mrs. Tracey’s excellent cooking, but Miss Ball appeared troubled because she felt she had imposed upon the Traceys’ hospitality.

“You have all been so good to me,” she said gratefully. “But I shall have to leave directly after luncheon.”

“I want Miss Ball to go into hiding for a few days until we shall have been able to trace this man who attempted to kidnap her,” Clarence Minton declared.

“And I know just the place!” Kay exclaimed.

She then told them of the proposed trip to Aunt Jane’s, explaining that the elderly lady had a number of servants and a large house in a secluded neighborhood.

“You will be perfectly safe with Auntie,” Kay insisted. “No one would ever think of searching for you there.”

“Why not go?” Mr. Minton urged. “It would be a nice change for you.”

“I’d love to,” Miss Ball said softly. “I haven’t had an old fashioned Thanksgiving in years. But I am afraid I would be intruding.”

“Aunt Jane would like to have you come,” Kay stated.

Then the girl ran to the telephone and called her aunt’s number. Hearing a familiar, quavering voice at the other end of the line, she explained the situation to her as best she could. Aunt Jane was slightly deaf, and could not make out all that Kay said. She was particularly bewildered by the girl’s mention of a six-fingered glove.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she declared. “When you come to see me I want you to leave your mysteries at home.”

“Then you don’t want me to bring any guests?” Kay chuckled.

“Guests!” Aunt Jane snapped. “Who was talking about guests? Of course I want you to bring them.”

“How many?”

“The more the better,” Aunt Jane assured her with reckless hospitality. “Bring Miss Ball and Mr. Mint.”

“Minton,” Kay corrected.

“Well, whatever his name is, bring him,” Aunt Jane invited. “And the Worth twins.”

“Oh, that’s wonderfully nice of you!” Kay exclaimed in delight. “I’m sure they’ll come.”

She heard a strange sound at the other end of the line, which might have been either a sniff or a chuckle.

“There’s just one condition,” Aunt Jane announced. “If you want any turkey dinner at *my* house, leave that six-fingered glove at home!”

CHAPTER V

ETHEL EATON'S HOAX

KAY ran back to the dining room to assure Miss Ball and Clarence Minton that Aunt Jane had extended a cordial invitation to them to spend the Thanksgiving holidays at her home. The manager was highly pleased that he had been included in the party and accepted eagerly, as did also the actress.

"I am afraid I shall have nothing to wear," Miss Ball mentioned, glancing ruefully at the dress she had on. "My clothes were in suitcases in my car."

"By the way," asked Kay, "where do you suppose your chauffeur and the auto are now?"

Miss Ball shrugged her shoulders. She had tried to locate the man, and realized he was probably attempting to find her. She was not worried about him, knowing that eventually he would return to New York, where she lived.

"I might have some street clothes sent on by my maid," said the actress, "but what I need are sports costumes. I should like to go coasting and skating and do all the things I've never had time for since I began my career."

"You'll have time to buy anything you want before we start. Unfortunately, I have another day of school before the holiday vacation."

"Do you consider it wise for Miss Ball to appear on the street?" Clarence Minton asked doubtfully. "For a few days at least it seems to me she should remain hidden. That fiend might not have traveled far in his stolen airplane, and may return and watch for an opportunity to accost her again."

"That's quite true," Kay instantly agreed. She glanced appraisingly at the actress. "We're about the same height and weight, Miss Ball. I believe I could buy whatever you need, and if it fits me it ought to fit you."

"It's nice of you to go to so much trouble for me," the actress said gratefully. "I'll make out a list of things I want."

While the stage star was doing this, Kay hurried to the Worth home to tell the twins of plans for the holidays. She was delighted to find that Betty was quite her usual self, and that she had suffered no serious reaction from the accident. Before she could broach the subject of Thanksgiving, Wilma startled her by exclaiming:

“Kay, do you know that it’s all over town you’re entertaining Miss Ball at your house?”

Kay was slightly taken aback. She had never thought that news could travel so swiftly.

“Who told the story, do you suppose?”

“I have no idea, but it was going the rounds at school this morning. Why weren’t you there?”

“Because I was at the airport half the night, and Mother thought a good rest would be better for me than a day of study.”

“I wish my mother felt that way about me!” Betty sighed.

Kay told the girls of Aunt Jane’s invitation for them to spend the holidays at her country home. Betty and Wilma were eager to make the trip, and asked their mother to grant permission, which she was quite willing to do. As Kay turned to leave the house, Betty called after her:

“Have any reporters tried to interview you?”

“Not as yet,” Kay answered. “I guess they haven’t found us.”

In this opinion she was quite mistaken, however. At that very moment a group of newspapermen had gathered in Cousin Bill’s office, and were trying to learn from him details of the airplane crash and the reason for Miss Ball’s stay in the city. The young lawyer countered their attack skillfully, convincing them in the end that he had nothing of importance to reveal.

“It’s just as well that you are all leaving town tomorrow,” he remarked to those gathered that night around the Tracey dinner table. “I hardly believe I’ll be able to keep this pack of newspaper wolves at bay much longer.”

“I wish you could go with us out to Aunt Jane’s,” Kay said wistfully.

“So do I, but I have several important legal matters which will keep me here. I hope to be able to run out there in a day or two, and I’ll certainly be on hand for Thanksgiving.”

According to the plan which had been worked out, the little group was to leave by automobile for Aunt Jane’s home as soon as school should be dismissed the following day. The next afternoon Kay, Wilma and Betty found it difficult to keep their attention upon their classroom work.

“I’d love to take the glove and ring with me to Aunt Jane’s,” Kay thought mischievously. “I wonder if I should?”

She had carefully placed the objects in a bureau drawer, and then hurried off to school. She intended to speak of the matter to the actress when she returned that evening.

Kay had been so engrossed with the many baffling events which had been crowding into her life the past forty-eight hours, that she had paid scant heed to Ethel Eaton, who was sitting only a few seats away from her in the schoolroom.

It was a surprise to her when the haughty girl appeared more friendly than usual. During recess she came over to Kay and offered her a helping of choice chocolates, which she promptly refused.

“I wonder what has got into Ethel today?” Kay mused. “I’m certain it isn’t the holiday spirit!”

Shortly afterward Ethel Eaton revealed her motive by asking a few pertinent questions concerning Miss Ball.

“Is it true that she is really staying at your house?” she queried.

“She was our guest for the night,” Kay evaded neatly.

She hastily walked away before the Eaton girl could ask another question. As Wilma and Betty drew near, she said to them in an undertone:

“Ethel has found out about Miss Ball. Whatever you do, don’t let her suspect that the actress is still at my house.”

“Sh!” Wilma hissed. “She’ll hear you!”

Kay wheeled about, to find the unpleasant girl standing but a short distance away. It was obvious that she had listened deliberately to every word of the conversation.

“I hope she didn’t hear us,” Kay said uneasily.

“I’m afraid she did,” Betty returned. “I saw her smiling to herself as she walked away.”

Unaware that the malicious Ethel was hatching a plot, Kay returned to the classroom. The moment school was dismissed she hurried over to Bresham’s Department Store, where she had arranged to meet her mother. Miss Ball’s shopping list was not a long one, and they were able to purchase everything in less than an hour.

“I hope our guest hasn’t been lonesome during our absence,” Kay commented as the two left the store.

“Mr. Minton is with her,” her mother smiled. “He should make a far better companion than I.”

Neither of them had the slightest suspicion that Miss Ball was at the moment alone in the house. Shortly after Mrs. Tracey’s departure Mr. Minton had gone to the airport to speak to the pilot who had flown him to Carmont.

Miss Ball was comfortably ensconced in a chair and reading a magazine, when the telephone rang. At first she did not answer it, but as it continued jingling insistently she took down the receiver. As she did so, a feminine voice called out:

“Hello. May I speak to Miss Ball?”

The actress hesitated slightly before admitting who she was. After she had done so, the person calling said:

“This is Miss Eaton—Miss Ethel Eaton.”

“I don’t believe I know who you are. I don’t seem to recall your name.”

“I am a very dear friend of Kay Tracey. She asked me to phone you.”

“Oh,” Miss Ball murmured in relief. “Has Kay a message for me?”

“Yes, she wants you to come to my home as soon as you can.”

“But I don’t understand——”

The actress was bewildered at the request. Kay Tracey knew that Miss Ball was not to leave the house without an escort. It seemed strange to her, then, that the girl should request her to come to the Eaton home without offering an explanation. She wondered if an emergency of some kind had arisen.

“I suppose I could take a taxi——” she began doubtfully.

“Yes, do,” Ethel purred. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

“I’ll call back in a few minutes,” Miss Ball said hastily, and hung up the receiver.

For an instant she stood by the telephone, wondering just what to do. She wished Clarence Minton were there. If she waited a little while longer he might return. Meanwhile she searched the telephone directory to confirm the Eaton address, underscoring it with a pencil so that she would not forget it.

Several minutes elapsed, but Clarence Minton did not return. Finally, when she thought she could wait no longer, the actress called a cab. Then she opened the telephone book at Ethel’s address, with the intention of phoning to the girl, as she had promised. Before she had attended to it, however, her conveyance arrived and she hastened away.

Ten minutes after the actress had departed, Kay and her mother returned home, carrying several packages. They were mystified to find the house deserted.

“It’s very strange. I wonder what became of her?” she commented uneasily.

“It worries me,” Mrs. Tracey confessed. “I’d like to know where she went to.”

Kay’s eye suddenly fell upon the open telephone book. She looked at it and instantly saw that Ethel Eaton’s address had been underlined. She recalled that girl’s interest in the actress and suspected that she had perpetrated a hoax.

“I think I have a clue!” she cried indignantly, showing her mother the book. “I’m going over to the Eaton house this very minute!”

She ran outside, where the automobile had been left parked on the driveway.

“If Ethel has inveigled Miss Ball into coming to her house by some underhanded ruse, I’ll say it’s the meanest thing I have ever heard of!” she stormed inwardly.

Kay came within view of her destination, and instantly her fears were confirmed. A yellow taxi was standing at the curb. Two persons were conversing on the front steps, and as she drew closer, the Tracey girl recognized her unpleasant classmate and the actress. They were engaged in a heated argument.

“You called me here on the pretext that Kay Tracey wanted to see me!” Miss Ball exclaimed. “It was nothing but a hoax!”

Ethel Eaton looked embarrassed. She had confidently expected that when the stage star reached her house it would be an easy matter to secure the young woman’s autograph. Then she figured she might induce her to leave the Tracey home and be her guest, thereby bringing social prestige to the family.

“All I know is that Kay told me to tell you to come here,” she muttered.

“I don’t believe she ever made such a request.”

Ethel was about to break down and admit the trick she had played, when she glanced up and saw Kay Tracey’s car at the curb. She was momentarily confused. Then she decided to make another attempt to squirm out of the situation.

“Yes, Kay did ask me to make the call,” she insisted. “And here she comes now, just as I told you she would!”

CHAPTER VI

DUPLICITY EXPOSED

“THAT isn’t true, Ethel Eaton!” Kay exclaimed, hurrying up the walk. “I couldn’t help but hear what you just said.”

Ethel’s face flushed painfully. Then she wheeled upon the Tracey girl furiously.

“You always come nosing in where you’re not wanted!” she snapped. “Why don’t you mind your own affairs?”

“This is very much my affair, Ethel. You had no right to ask Miss Ball to come here and then say that I had requested you to do it!”

“Oh, you make me tired, always trying to tell folks what they should do and what they shouldn’t! You want to keep Miss Ball to yourself so that it will bring you a lot of publicity.”

The actress spoke up.

“I think Miss Eaton has just given her *own* reason for inviting me here,” she said coldly. “Come, Kay, let us go.”

Arm in arm the two turned their backs upon the crestfallen Ethel and walked to Kay’s car.

“I should have known it was a hoax,” the actress declared ruefully as they drove away. “What a strange girl! She must be slightly demented.”

“She’s just suffering from an inflated ego,” Kay corrected. “And she’s always had too much money to spend.”

“I shouldn’t have left your house, yet I honestly didn’t know what to do. I was afraid some emergency had arisen and that you really wanted me to come.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Miss Ball.”

“I hope no harm has been done. I was so determined to keep people from learning where I was staying.”

“I fear the news will travel fast, now that Ethel knows where you are. It’s lucky we’re leaving soon for Aunt Jane’s.”

The departure for the country had already been delayed, due to the spurious telephone call. Kay drove as quickly as she could to her home. Clarence Minton had returned in the meantime, and was deeply distressed

over Miss Ball's absence. He, too, became indignant when he learned of the trick that had been played on her.

The hour was late, and Mrs. Tracey wanted to start the journey before nightfall. While she attended to some last-minute packing, Miss Ball tried on the garments which Kay had purchased for her, and found everything to be satisfactory.

"You have excellent taste," she said. Kay was delighted, for she feared that the actress might not like the things which she and her mother had picked out.

Finally, when all the bags were stored in the rear of the car, Mrs. Tracey gave some instructions to Cousin Bill.

"Watch carefully that the water pipes don't freeze," she said, as her nephew tucked a blanket around her feet. "The weatherman predicts a cold wave for next week."

"I'll keep tabs on everything," he promised.

"I really hate to leave you here alone."

"I don't mind batching it for a day or two."

The travelers stopped at the Worth residence to pick up Wilma and Betty. The new sedan was a bit crowded, but the occupants only laughed about the situation. Mr. Minton drove. Miss Ball and Kay sat in the front seat with him.

"By the way," Kay asked the manager as they reached the open country, "have you learned anything more about the airplane accident?"

"I was talking with my pilot this afternoon," the man answered soberly. "He says he has definite proof that someone deliberately removed a cotter pin from one of the wheels and otherwise tampered with the undercarriage."

"Then you're convinced that it was an actual attempt to wreck the ship?"

"Yes, I am. But I still have no idea who it could have been."

Now that they were out in the fresh, country air and away from the city, Miss Ball grew more talkative. It was obvious that she was relaxing after her recent unpleasant experiences.

"I shall love an old fashioned Thanksgiving," she murmured dreamily. "Everything is so beautiful, with the snow and icicles shining on the trees."

Wilma, overhearing the remark, nodded and quoted softly:

“ ‘Let us walk in the white snow
In a soundless space;
With footsteps quiet and slow,
At a tranquil pace,
Under veils of white lace.’ ”

“I was born on a farm,” Miss Ball said reminiscently. “This visit will seem like going home again.”

“I always think of you as a person coming from the city,” Kay interposed, as the young woman lapsed into thoughtful silence.

“I had never visited a city before I was sixteen,” the actress went on. “My parents did not have much money, and we all had to work very hard. Yet even as a child I knew that I was destined to go on the stage, for I loved to take part in all kinds of dramatics.

“I was determined to get an education. Before I entered High School I saved every penny I possibly could. I sewed and I cooked. Finally I had enough money to take me to college, where I studied elocution.”

“Did you find it difficult to secure parts on the legitimate stage?” Betty questioned.

“No, it happened that in my senior year I was one of the cast in a show that attracted the attention of a professional. He offered me a small salary to be his partner, and I accepted it. Later I had cause to regret my hasty action, for Harry Purcell was a morbid, wild fellow.”

“Was that the name of your partner?” Kay inquired, making a mental note of it.

“Yes. I gained a little experience in acting by touring with him, but that was all. He was not dependable in the least. One night he would perform marvelously, the next he would ruin the show with his lack of interest and his wild antics. We were called down frequently by the theatre managers. Once I almost lost my position because of him. Finally I could stand it no longer, and severed my connection with Mr. Purcell.”

“Did he try to make trouble for you after that?” Kay asked.

“Oh, he often threatened me, but I paid no attention to him. I have not seen him since the day we parted several years ago in a little town way out in Nebraska.”

Kay had been listening to the story with growing interest. When Miss Ball had concluded, the girl ventured to suggest the possibility that perhaps Harry Purcell had been responsible for the kidnaping.

“I doubt it,” the actress responded. “While Harry was unquestionably a weak character, I do not believe that he would have the courage to attempt anything like that. Besides, there were five fingers on each of his hands.”

“Then I suppose he couldn’t have been the man,” Kay acknowledged.

The story had impressed her, however, and she determined not to forget Harry Purcell’s name.

“After I left his show, I had a hard time getting something to do,” Miss Ball continued. “Finally Mr. Minton took an interest and agreed to take charge of my bookings. Ever since I have been steadily climbing upward. I feel that I owe everything to my manager.”

“Nonsense!” Mr. Minton broke in quickly. “It’s merely that I recognize great talent when I see it. You still have the heights before you, Beatrice.”

“I hope we’ll reach them together,” she returned simply.

The car wound its way through pleasant, snow-blanketed valleys and over low hills. Occasionally it would pass an old fashioned sleigh dashing by with a merry jingle of bells. It was growing dark, when Kay suddenly noticed a small boy trudging along the road carrying a large object in his arms.

“Let’s offer the little fellow a ride,” she suggested. “Night will soon come on, and he may be a long way from home.”

They stopped the car, and were surprised to see that the lad was carrying a live turkey. As he turned his face questioningly toward them, they saw tears trickling down his cheeks.

“Why, what is the matter?” Kay cried, getting out of the auto and hurrying to his side. “Are you cold?”

The boy shook his head, but gave no answer.

“What is wrong? Wouldn’t you like a ride to your home?”

“I’m not going home. I’m on my way to town.”

“Then we’ll take you there,” Kay offered. She glanced with interest at the fat fowl. “I suppose this is your Thanksgiving dinner?”

Her words threw the boy into a flood of fresh tears. He began to stroke the turkey’s head affectionately.

“I wouldn’t eat old Gobbler if I starved to death!” he proclaimed. “I wouldn’t sell him, either, only my mother and sisters haven’t enough food in the house.”

“Where do you live?” Kay asked gently.

The lad told her, and she recalled that they had passed the place only a short distance back. It was an old farmhouse, very much run-down and

badly in need of repairs. She learned that the boy's name was Jimmie, and that besides his parents he had three sisters and a baby brother. For many days there had been very little to eat in the house. In desperation the family had decided that Jimmie's pet turkey must be sold that they might buy other food to fill the larder.

"Wait here just a minute," Kay requested.

She darted back to the car and told of the situation. As she had anticipated, everyone immediately grew sympathetic.

"Can't we do something for the lad?" Miss Ball asked.

"I was thinking it would be nice if we could take him to town and buy the family a real Thanksgiving basket. Then Jimmie won't have to sell old Gobbler."

"A fine idea!" Mr. Minton declared heartily. "I'll gladly pay for the foodstuffs."

"We all must have a share in it," Mrs. Tracey insisted.

The surprised Jimmie was bundled into the automobile along with his turkey. At the next town the travelers drew up in front of a butcher-grocery store. There, with the little boy watching in bewilderment, they purchased not one basket, but three of them, all heavily laden with holiday foods. As a crowning gesture Mr. Minton presented the boy with a twenty-pound dressed turkey.

"Now Mr. Gobbler can live to a ripe old age, Jimmie," he chuckled. "Jump into the car, and we'll drive you home."

The excursion had taken considerable time, but no one regretted the delay. Kay and her friends were amply repaid when they saw the happy faces of Jimmie's mother and her little children. The house resounded with shouts of delight.

"This will be our nicest Thanksgiving in years," the woman told them gratefully. "Bless you all for your kindness."

It was well after seven o'clock when the group sighted Aunt Jane's rambling old white house perched upon a distant hilltop. Presently they turned into the lane. As the car halted in front of the door, a short, gray-haired little lady in black silk flung open the door.

"Well, well, I thought you would never arrive!" she laughed. "Come in, all of you."

"You shouldn't be outdoors wearing only a shawl, Aunt Jane," Kay chided her relative, giving her an affectionate squeeze. "Anything to eat in the house?"

“Oh, perhaps a few bones,” the little old lady chuckled.

She greeted Miss Ball and Mr. Minton with a cordiality which put them at ease at once, and bestowed upon each of the Worth twins a warm handclasp.

“Where is Bill?” she inquired indignantly. “If that scalawag has disappointed me—”

“He’ll be here to Thanksgiving dinner,” Kay told her. “Nothing in the world could make him miss that.”

“Well, he’d better come!” Aunt Jane said, leading the way to the living room, where a fire blazed in the hearth.

A servant took the bags of the newcomers and led the guests to their rooms. Half an hour later a sumptuous supper was served in the colonial dining room.

“I can’t give you much tonight,” Aunt Jane apologized. “I want to starve you all so you’ll do justice to our big turkey! I bought a forty-pound one this year. Had to scour two counties to get it.”

“You don’t expect us to eat forty pounds of turkey!” Kay gasped.

“That’s only five pounds apiece, not counting any for the servants,” Aunt Jane retorted.

“If I should eat five pounds of turkey I’d have to buy a new wardrobe,” Wilma predicted.

After supper the girls went to their rooms to unpack. As Betty was shaking the wrinkles out of her wool skating suit, she saw Kay lift a small black object from her handbag, and slip it under a pillow on her bed.

“What was that?” Betty asked alertly.

Kay had not intended that either of the twins should see what she had hidden.

“Oh, just a little souvenir,” she answered evasively.

Betty pounced upon the pillow, and before Kay could prevent her, had drawn forth the mysterious object. She stared at it closely; then, with a gesture of abhorrence, she threw it from her.

“That horrid old six-fingered glove!” she exclaimed accusingly. “Why didn’t you leave it at home?”

Kay smiled as she picked up the article and carefully put it away, together with the mysterious diamond ring she had found inside it.

“I’m sorry that it makes you shudder,” she apologized. “But it’s possible that I’ll find some use during my visit for my little trinkets!”

CHAPTER VII

A VALUABLE CLUE

“KAY, you may as well show it to me,” Aunt Jane commented shrewdly, as she and her niece sat chatting in the living room after everyone else in the house had retired.

“Show you what, Aunt Jane?” Kay inquired innocently.

“Fiddlesticks! You needn’t pretend you don’t know what I mean. The glove, of course!”

“But you told me to leave it at home.”

“I knew very well you wouldn’t obey,” the elderly lady chuckled. “What’s that you were telling me about it having six fingers?”

“I’ll show you, Aunt Jane.”

Kay ran to her room to get the glove and the ring. She laid them both in her relative’s hand, then briefly outlined the story connected with them.

“Well, well,” her relative commented with interest, “this is an odd case, to say the least.”

“Did you ever hear of anyone with six fingers?” Kay questioned.

“No, I can’t say I ever did. But I suppose there are such persons.”

She turned the black glove inside out to search for the maker’s name.

“It isn’t there,” Kay said. “I’ve already looked for it.”

“You seem to think of everything,” her Aunt Jane declared, a twinkle in her eyes.

“I only wish I did. I’d like to find a way to track down that kidnaper!”

“You won’t locate him here, I’m sure. I don’t keep kidnapers on my premises.”

“You may be surprised yet at what I’ll find before I go home!” Kay threatened.

Aunt Jane glanced at the clock, and arose. It was long past her usual bedtime. She returned the glove and the ring to Kay and together they climbed the stairs.

“We’ll talk about the strange affair tomorrow,” she promised as they parted at Kay’s door. “Pleasant dreams.”

Aunt Jane was far too busy the following day supervising the preparations for Thanksgiving to speak about the mystery. Kay and her friends discovered that the hills were in fine condition for coasting, and had a glorious time out-of-doors. Beatrice Ball insisted that she had not enjoyed herself as much in years. She looked stunning in the sports clothes Kay had purchased for her, and the young people noticed that Clarence Minton cast many admiring glances in her direction.

Late the next afternoon Cousin Bill arrived from Brantwood, to be welcomed heartily by everyone. Aunt Jane scurried about attending to last-minute details. The house was filled with the tantalizing aroma of mince pie baking.

“Isn’t Thanksgiving ever coming?” Kay complained good-naturedly. “I can hardly wait, with all these cooking odors floating around.”

The holiday dawned clear and crisp, the ground covered with two feet of snow. Cousin Bill spent the morning shoveling a path around the house and out to the garage. He said he wanted to work up an appetite, which was not necessary, for he always had a good one.

At one o’clock Aunt Jane summoned her guests to the great feast. She had chosen to serve it in the old fashioned way. The table was laden with good things to eat. The huge turkey, crisp and brown, rested on a platter in front of Cousin Bill’s place. He carved swiftly and deftly, bestowing generous helpings upon everyone, until he came to Kay. To tease her, he pretended he was going to give her the neck, a piece she heartily disliked. So concerned did she look that her cousin made amends by filling her plate with slices of choice white meat.

In the midst of the meal the doorbell rang. Presently a servant came to inform Aunt Jane that a group of reporters had arrived from the city.

“Reporters?” the lady repeated in annoyance. “Why must they bother us now? Tell them to go away and permit us to eat our dinner in peace.”

“Now, Aunt Jane, you can’t do that even if you feel like it,” Cousin Bill declared. “Sometimes it’s useful to have a reporter for a friend instead of an enemy. Whom do they wish to see?”

“Miss Ball, sir,” the servant reported.

“It’s an outrage!” Mr. Minton said in an undertone. “They have followed her here. If it gets generally known where she is staying, all our plans will be ruined.”

“Leave the fellows to me,” Cousin Bill smiled. Turning to the servant, he said, “I will see them as soon as I finish my dinner.”

Although everyone tried to be cheerful and act as if nothing had happened, the interruption detracted from the gaiety of the occasion. Miss Ball looked slightly worried; Clarence Minton's scowl showed that he was still annoyed; Cousin Bill lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

"If I had my way I'd send those reporters packing!" Aunt Jane announced crossly.

Without meaning to do so, everyone hurried through his dessert. Cousin Bill then excused himself and went to talk with the waiting men, leaving the others to linger at the table. Later, as Kay started for the second floor, she noticed that the reporters were about to leave. One of them spied her.

"Look here," he said unexpectedly, "I heard that a girl picked up a glove at the scene of the automobile accident." He glanced curiously at Kay. "Was it you?"

"I'm sure I didn't pick up anything," she replied truthfully. "By the way, did you ever hear of a man with six fingers?"

"What do you mean? Is it a joke?"

"I'm quite serious. I heard of such a case not long ago, and it just occurred to me that you reporters see a great many curious people. I thought possibly you might have met such a person."

"Not I!"

"Why, I once knew a man with six fingers," another newspaperman spoke up. "He was a queer sort of fellow—kept a fruit store in Collston."

"In Collston?" Kay repeated eagerly. "Do you know his name?"

"It's Cortez, or something similar. Yes, I'm pretty sure it's Felix Cortez."

The man was on the verge of asking a sharp question, when Cousin Bill interposed smoothly:

"It's quite possible I'll have a really good story for you boys one of these days. If anything breaks, I'll remember you."

He escorted the reporters to the door. After it had closed behind them he turned to Kay with a smile of admiration.

"Nice work!"

"You disposed of them perfectly," Kay laughed. "How far is Collston from here?"

"I should judge about forty miles."

"I could make it easily in a morning. Tomorrow I think I'll drive over there and take a look at that six-fingered man. It's quite possible we've found the person we're after."

“Don’t you want me to go along?” Cousin Bill offered.

“No, it might arouse Felix Cortez’s suspicions if he is the guilty party. I’ll take Wilma and Betty with me.”

Kay told her chums of the adventure which was in prospect, and they were eager to accompany her. They wanted to make the trip that very day, but realized that probably the fruit store would not be open.

Shortly after breakfast the next morning Kay and the twins started for Collston. Although Cousin Bill had said that the distance was only forty miles, they soon discovered that they would have to take a detour, which would make the journey a great deal longer. They were growing very tired of the narrow, twisting road, when it finally emerged into a quaint little village.

“I wonder what place this can be?” Wilma speculated. “It reminds me of a town I once saw in a moving picture.”

Kay’s attention had been attracted to the left hand side of the highway. She pointed out a number of unusual looking objects which slightly resembled signboards, yet obviously were not.

“What can they be?” Betty asked in wonder.

Kay stopped the car, and she and her companions walked across the street to get a closer view.

“Why, they’re movie props!” Kay suddenly exclaimed. “See! That one seems to be the wall of a house; another represents an interior!”

“But what are they doing here?” Wilma wondered.

An elderly man came down the street wheeling a cart of potatoes. Kay spoke to him politely, and questioned him concerning the queer assortment of scenery.

“Lots of folks ask about this place,” the old fellow chuckled. “But you guessed right. These things belong to a moving picture company that worked here last summer.”

After he had moved on the girls went over to the lot and satisfied their curiosity by looking around. They had just discovered a complete set-up of a cottage, when they heard a heavy step directly behind them. Wheeling about, they found themselves facing the watchman of the grounds.

“You can’t p-p-play around here!” he stuttered, picking up a big stick. “G-go away! Be gone!”

“We’re not doing any harm,” Kay protested.

“You h-h-heard me. This is p-p-private property and no one is allowed to trespass. Hurry up, g-g-get moving!”

The three chums hastily retreated to the car, grumbling a little at such rude treatment. However, they had seen all they cared to, and were ready to continue their journey.

A little later they drove into Collston and inquired for Felix Cortez's store. They were directed to a side street.

"It's a dreadful looking place," Wilma shuddered, viewing the shop. "I'd be afraid to eat any of the fruit sold in there."

"Look!" Kay directed.

She indicated an auto which stood parked in front of the shop.

"A tan sedan!" Betty gasped. "It looks exactly like the one that struck me."

"Maybe we've located our man," Kay declared with satisfaction. "We'll go inside and buy some fruit."

"First let's walk up and down in front of the store and look in the window," Wilma suggested.

Unaware that their actions would arouse suspicion, the girls slowly sauntered down the street. When they reached the Cortez store they paused and looked through the window at the fruit offered for sale. All the while they cast furtive glances at the foreigner in a dirty white apron who was counting a dozen oranges for a customer.

"He's a repulsive looking man," Wilma whispered.

"And see, he *does* have an extra finger on one of his hands," Betty whispered, with growing excitement.

The twins had seen enough to convince them that they had located the person whom they were seeking.

"He's the one we want," Betty declared firmly. "Let's go in and question him."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPIDER

THE three girls entered the fruit store, pretending to be interested in a box of strawberries. Without appearing to do so, they scrutinized the man in the white apron and did not notice that he in turn was regarding them suspiciously.

Felix Cortez was a man of dark complexion, more repulsive looking at close range than when viewed through a plate glass window. His face was deeply scarred, and his nose was misshapen, apparently from some injury early in life.

“How much are your strawberries?” Kay asked, as the fellow came slowly toward her.

“Strawberries, Miss? Zey are high at zis time of year. Zirty-five cent a pint.”

“And the avocado pears?”

“Twenty-five cent.” The dealer gave the information reluctantly, all the while staring at the three girls closely. “Here are banana,” he offered. “Zey are much cheap-air.”

“And nearly spoiled, too,” Betty added under her breath.

“You young ladies not from Collston?” the man queried abruptly.

“No, we were just driving through and noticed your fruit store,” Wilma declared. “We live in Brantwood.”

“Oh! Brantwood, eh?”

“Yes. Do you know where it is?” Kay questioned.

“I drive zere few time—once try to collect bill.”

“I suppose this is your car outside?” Betty led him on. “The tan sedan?”

“Yes, eet ees mine,” the man acknowledged. “Why you travel so far from home?”

“Oh, we’re just out on a little holiday jaunt,” Kay returned airily.

“You very fond of high-price fruit,” the man said significantly. “Perhaps you like zees fancy grape. Zey cost more zan anyzing in my store.”

He reached up and lifted the fruit from a shelf. It was then that the girls confirmed their suspicion the man had six fingers on one hand. Betty and

Wilma grew excited and found it difficult to keep from accusing the dealer point-blank of the kidnaping. Kay began to notice the strange way Felix Cortez was acting, and his last statement struck her as odd. Why should he care if they were interested in expensive fruit? Certainly it would be to his advantage to sell the highest priced items in his store.

Since the grapes were in fairly good condition, the chums said that they would take a small bunch. The dealer carefully weighed it and told them the price, which was even higher than they had expected. Kay looked in her pocketbook, but was dismayed to see that she had no change.

“Why, I haven’t a cent!” she exclaimed. “Betty, have you any money?”

“Perhaps you would like to charge it!” Felix Cortez said with a curl of his lip.

“Why, that’s very nice of you,” Kay thanked him. “Especially when you don’t know us.”

“You make mistake,” the dealer retorted unexpectedly. “I know you very well. Excuse a moment, please.”

He disappeared into a room in the rear of the store.

“Now what did he mean by that?” Betty demanded, staring after him. “Do you think he suspects why we came here?”

“It’s possible,” Kay agreed. “Still, we haven’t said a word about the accident or the kidnaping.”

“Let’s leave this dirty fruit and get away from here,” Wilma proposed. “He’s the man we’re after, all right. We can get the police and have him arrested.”

“I think we should not be hasty,” Kay returned. “We want to be absolutely certain he is the right person.”

After a few minutes Cortez returned. In the meantime, Wilma and Betty had found enough money in their purses to pay the bill, but for some reason Felix Cortez seemed far from eager to accept the sum. He kept searching for a better bunch of grapes than the one he had selected first, and weighed it several times. Then he found it necessary to rummage around for a bag. It became obvious to Kay that the man was sparring for time.

She asked several leading questions which the fruit dealer carefully evaded. He would not admit that he had been in Brantwood the night of the kidnaping, nor did a casual mention of Miss Ball’s name produce the slightest flicker of interest in him. He tried to learn by various means the names of the girls and their street addresses, until finally it became apparent to Kay that matters had come to a ridiculous state.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to go,” she remarked, picking up the bag of grapes.

Felix Cortez darted ahead of her, and barred the door.

“Oh, no you won’t!” he sneered. “You going to stay right here!”

“Let us pass!” Kay ordered sharply. “You have no right to do this.”

“I keep you ’til you pay bill you owe me!”

“You must be crazy!” Wilma cried indignantly. “We just paid you an exorbitant price for your grapes. They’re not fresh, either.”

“How about all zat fruit I send you? Last week I send crate of oranges to three young lady in Brantwood. Two day ago you tell me send box of apple. Not one cent I get in pay.”

“You certainly didn’t send any fruit to us,” Kay insisted.

“No, and what’s more, I don’t believe you delivered fruit to anyone!” Betty cried indignantly. “You were the man with the tan sedan who struck me and drove off without even stopping to see if I had been injured!”

“You kidnaped Miss Ball!” Wilma accused.

The fruit dealer began to wring his hands in distress and anger. He lapsed into his native tongue as he grew excited, pouring out a torrent of bitter words. In the midst of the commotion a policeman entered the store.

“What’s going on here?” the officer demanded. “Are these the young women you reported to me, Cortez?”

“Yes, yes,” the man nodded eagerly. “Arrest zem! Zey cheat me of more zan fifteen dollar.”

“That isn’t true,” Kay refuted.

She now knew why Felix Cortez had spent so much time weighing the fruit and making the sale. Under the pretext of finding a bag he had gone to the rear of the store to telephone to the police, and had tried to kill time so that the girls would not leave before the officer should arrive.

“This person is the one who should be arrested!” Betty told the policeman furiously. “He is a hit-and-run driver.”

“It’s a case of mistaken identity, I think,” Kay said, speaking calmly. “I doubt that Mr. Cortez even knows our names.”

“Oh, don’t I?” the man retorted. “You are ze Winton sisters.”

“The what sisters?” Wilma cried. “We have never even heard of them. What do they do? Sing on the radio?”

“You won’t be so funny when you go to ze jail,” Cortez snarled. “Arrest zese young lady, officer.”

The policeman made no move to do so. Kay's quiet manner had impressed him. He did not want to make a mistake.

"Not so fast, Cortez," he said. "We must get to the bottom of this."

A crowd of pedestrians had gathered outside the door, aware that something unusual was happening inside the fruit store. Many of them were endangering the plate glass window by leaning heavily against it.

"We'll go back into the storage room and talk this over," the officer directed.

Kay and her friends were willing to comply, confident that they could establish their true identity. Wilma and Betty firmly believed that Felix Cortez had made the false accusation in order to prevent them from arresting him on the kidnaping charge. Kay, however, was inclined to think that the fruit dealer actually had been swindled by three unscrupulous young women.

"Someone played a joke on you," Kay declared. "We are not the Winton sisters. My friends are Betty and Wilma Worth. My name is Kay Tracey."

"Any relation to Bill Tracey?" the officer inquired instantly.

"He is my cousin."

"You don't say? Well, Cortez, you've made a bad mistake, all right. This young lady is known in three counties as an amateur detective. She's done work that would be a credit to a professional!"

"It was a mystery that brought her here today!" Betty said before Kay could speak. "We think this man is involved in a kidnaping!"

"What proof have you?" the fruit dealer demanded hoarsely.

"Your hand! You have an extra finger on it. The night of the kidnaping Miss Ball snatched a glove with six fingers from you."

"Just a minute," Kay interposed, placing a quieting hand on the agitated Betty's arm. "Mr. Cortez may be right after all."

"He may be right! How can you say that, Kay Tracey?"

Wilma and Betty eyed Kay in utter bewilderment, until she explained what she had in mind.

"Isn't it true that Miss Ball snatched a right-handed glove from the kidnaper?"

"Yes," Betty acknowledged.

"Mr. Cortez's extra finger is on his *left* hand."

"Zat ees true," the fruit dealer affirmed, extending the extra digit for the girls' inspection. After one hasty glance they averted their eyes.

“It looks as if I’m not needed here any longer,” the policeman declared. “These young ladies didn’t steal the fruit and Cortez couldn’t have been responsible for the kidnaping. It was just a little misunderstanding all around, nothing more.”

The officer turned to leave. As he moved toward the door he accidentally touched a bunch of bananas that had been uncrated partially. As it toppled toward the floor, he reached out a hand to check the fall.

“Look out!” Kay screamed.

The warning came too late. Unnoticed by the policeman, a dark, hairy, spider-like creature had been lurking in the bunch of fruit. It now hurled itself upward in one quick spring, striking the officer’s hand. The man gave a low cry of pain as he brushed the bug to the floor.

“A tarantula!” Kay cried in horror, crushing it beneath her foot. “Its bite is poisonous!”

As the others stood by, dazed, and not knowing what to do, Kay hurried the policeman to her automobile. The Worths followed, and the three girls drove as rapidly as they could to the nearest hospital, the officer himself directing them. Although his face was pale he made no complaint, but sat holding his wrist tightly with his uninjured hand.

They rushed with the man to the emergency room of the institution. Then the chums waited in a corridor until a white clad attendant came to tell them that due to their quick work in securing medical attention for the policeman, he had escaped serious complications.

“Well, I’m glad we were able to do some good, even if this trip failed as far as our main purpose was concerned,” Kay remarked. “I suppose we may as well be getting back to Aunt Jane’s.”

They walked to the hospital lobby, where they came face to face with three policemen. The girls would have passed them with scarcely a second glance, had not one of them caught Kay firmly by the shoulder.

“Not so fast, girlie,” he snapped. “You won’t find it so easy to escape us this time!”

CHAPTER IX

TIMELY ASSISTANCE

KAY and her chums could not understand why they were being detained.

“What is the matter?” they asked.

It developed that Felix Cortez’s telephone call to police headquarters was the cause of all the trouble. When the officer who had been sent to the fruit store failed to make a routine check-in, other policemen were dispatched to the scene. A street urchin had informed them that he had seen the three girls drive off in the direction of the city hospital.

The law enforcers had trailed the car to the institution, assuming that Kay and her chums in some manner had eluded the officer who had been sent to arrest them. As the girls were trying to make their position clear, the policeman they had aided emerged from the adjoining room, his hand neatly bandaged.

“Hello, boys,” he greeted his fellow officers with a smile. “I just had a little accident. Thanks to these girls, I’m still alive.”

He explained how Kay and her friends had rushed him to the hospital, and completely exonerated them from the original charge which had been made against them by Felix Cortez. While the policemen were discussing the matter, perhaps a trifle loudly, they were joined by the doctor who had dressed the man’s wound.

“I must ask you to lower your voices,” he requested politely. “Sound carries very clearly in the corridors.”

The officers hastily apologized and departed. The Tracey girl and her friends likewise turned away, but the physician detained them.

“Aren’t you the young lady who brought Officer Phillips to the hospital?” he inquired, addressing Kay.

“Yes,” she acknowledged. “I hope the tarantula bite won’t prove to be serious.”

“I expect no disastrous results. If the poison had spread through the man’s system, it might have been a different matter.”

They chatted a few minutes longer. The doctor praised Kay highly for the excellent judgment she had shown in rushing the policeman to the

hospital. It seemed to Betty and Wilma that their chum prolonged the conversation longer than was necessary. However, Kay was adroitly leading up to a subject in which she was intensely interested.

“Doctor, have you ever heard of cases where persons were born with six fingers on one hand?” she inquired.

“Why, yes,” he answered readily. “We have an example of it right here in our city; a fruit dealer.”

“I’ve already met him,” Kay smiled. “Have you heard of any other instances?”

“Several of them. One was reported in my medical journal only last month. Here at the clinic such cases occasionally come my way, although I’ll admit they are rare. Why are you so deeply interested in such a subject, may I ask?”

“I guess it’s just my curiosity,” the girl answered. “I found a six-fingered glove, and it started me thinking.”

“Perhaps you read a great many mystery stories,” the doctor observed, a twinkle in his eye.

“I do.”

“I’ll let you into a little secret. I write them myself.”

“How interesting!” Kay exclaimed. “I should think your medical background would be of great assistance to you.”

“It is. Of course, writing is only a hobby of mine. After a nerve-racking day at the clinic I find it relaxing to jot down the idle thoughts that come to my mind. But my chief interest is in mystery stories.”

“Do you find it difficult to develop plots?” Kay inquired curiously.

“Not particularly. Usually I choose something with a scientific background. When you spoke of a six-fingered glove it made me think of my latest story.”

“Did you write one on such a subject?” Kay questioned eagerly.

“Well, not exactly, but one of the characters in my story did have an extra finger on one of his hands. I sold the manuscript to a moving picture company to be made into a scenario.”

“Has it been filmed?” Wilma interposed. She was a faithful devotee of the movies and attended them regularly.

“Yes,” the doctor returned, a note of pride in his voice. “The Eagle Film Company made the picture during the past summer. Many of the scenes were shot at a little village only a few miles from here. I had the privilege of watching some of the work.”

Before the girls could ask the name of the picture, a nurse came to tell the doctor that he was wanted immediately in the children's ward. He excused himself and hurried away.

"I guess we have seen the place where the doctor's movie was filmed," Kay declared, as she and her chums turned to leave the hospital. "It must have been on the very lot where the stuttering watchman drove us away."

"I wish we had learned the name of the picture," Wilma commented regretfully. "I certainly want to see it when it is released."

As they emerged from the institution, the girls were surprised and slightly dismayed to discover that it was snowing again. Big flakes were driven against their faces by a strong north wind, and the temperature had dropped.

"We must start back at once," Kay said uneasily. "If this storm keeps up it will be hard to see the road."

She had good reason to be wary about the drive back. The cold weather had followed a thaw, and the pavement was now covered with ice. The windshield of the car soon became encrusted with snow, and the wiper could not remove it.

When they arrived on the outskirts of the city Kay stepped from the car and cleaned the glass with a salt solution, but it soon coated over again.

"This is dreadful," Betty said nervously. "It will take us hours to get back to your Aunt Jane's."

"If we ever get there," Kay added grimly.

It required all her ability and alertness to keep the car on the highway. The wind, which was steadily rising, had caused the snow to drift; in many places it was difficult to tell where the road left off and the ditch began. In other spots the pavement was frozen over with a dangerous coating of ice. Kay used her brake sparingly, knowing that a sudden pressure might cause the car to skid.

They passed the village where they had halted previously to inspect the property of the moving picture company, but were so intent upon trying to follow the road that they gave the grounds on either side little more than a casual glance.

Kay proceeded at a slow pace for several miles. Then, noticing a steep hill directly ahead of her, she gathered speed for the climb. As they rounded the summit another automobile loomed up directly in their path. To save a crash Kay slammed on the brakes. Her car skidded sideways in the road and slid into the ditch.

“Now we’ve done it,” she said, when she had made sure that neither Wilma nor Betty had been hurt in the jar.

They climbed from the auto, to find that the wheels and running-board were buried in deep snow. The driver of the other machine, aware of their misfortune, had halted a little farther up the road and now came to offer aid.

“I think I’ll need help,” Kay admitted ruefully. “I doubt very much that I can get out of this myself.”

After looking over the situation carefully, she climbed back into the car and started the motor. However, the wheels merely spun around in the snow without propelling the automobile.

“I’ll give you a tow,” the stranger offered. “I have a rope with me.”

He hitched on, and after two unsuccessful attempts finally pulled the Tracey car back onto the road. Kay thanked the man and offered to pay him for his trouble, but he would accept nothing.

“The accident was partly my fault,” he stated. “The snow blinded me and I took up too much of the road.”

The girls continued toward their destination at a more cautious pace than they had before, though there was very little traffic. It seemed to them that the storm was growing worse each minute. As far as the eye could reach, the landscape was covered by a deep blanket of snow; the body of the automobile looked as if it had been dipped in fluffy white icing.

“Mother will be worrying about us, and so will Aunt Jane,” Kay declared regretfully. “I’d hurry, only it wouldn’t be safe.”

“How can you keep to the road?” Wilma asked apprehensively. “My side of the windshield is completely encrusted with ice.”

Kay switched on the headlights, but the beam made only a slight impression against the cloud of descending snowflakes.

“This is a real old fashioned blizzard,” Betty commented. “It’s getting worse every minute, too.”

“We’ll be at Aunt Jane’s soon,” Kay cheered her. “It seems to me we’ve traveled a hundred miles since we left Collston.”

As the car went round a bend in the road, the young driver suddenly eased on the brake.

“What’s the matter?” Wilma demanded.

“I heard something just then that sounded like the whistle of a train.”

“I didn’t hear anything. Did you, Betty?”

“No, but I can see the railroad crossing signal straight ahead.”

Kay brought the automobile to a stop a short distance from the tracks.

“The light doesn’t seem to be flashing,” she reported. “Perhaps I only imagined I heard a train coming.”

“Why, I remember this place,” Wilma cried. “It doesn’t have a flasher.”

“That’s true,” Betty agreed. “It has a tower and a watchman, who operates the gates.”

“Well, they’re apparently up now, so I guess it will be all right for us to drive across,” Wilma observed. “I feel sure you can make it, Kay.”

As she spoke, they heard the long, shrill blast of an approaching train.

“That must be the late afternoon flier,” Betty murmured. “It’s lucky you stopped, Kay. The gates must not be working.”

Realizing that they were very fortunate indeed not to have attempted to cross the tracks ahead of the onrushing express, the girls settled themselves to wait until it had passed.

At that moment they saw the old watchman abandon his tower and run frantically toward the safety gates. An automobile was slowly approaching on the opposite side of the tracks. The old man tugged desperately at the barriers, trying to draw them into position.

“We must help him!” Kay cried, flinging herself from the car. “Unless the gates are down those motorists will be killed!”

CHAPTER X

AN ALARMING DISCOVERY

THE three girls raced through the blinding snow to the railroad tracks. Betty used her red scarf to flag the oncoming automobile, while Kay and Wilma helped the aged watchman pull the barriers into place.

At first the bars would not budge, but the girls applied all their strength to the task. The gates swung down just as the express thundered by, its windows agleam with lights.

The approaching machine had halted abruptly. Another car coming from the opposite direction, which the girls had failed to observe, also came to a standstill.

“That’s the first time them gates ever jammed,” the old watchman gasped. “If you girls hadn’t ’a helped me I never could ’a got the bars down in time!”

When the train had disappeared in the distance, the chums assisted the man to raise the barriers so that the automobiles could continue on their way.

“I’ll have to send for help,” the old gate tender announced. “With these bars out o’ order the crossin’ won’t be safe.”

As the girls stood shivering in the cold, wondering whether they should offer to remain with the watchman until someone should come, a youth of perhaps twenty appeared with a tin dinner pail.

“Here’s your supper, Pop,” he said, holding out the bucket. “Mother sent an extra cup of hot coffee tonight because it’s so cold.”

“This is my son Albert,” the old man said, relieved. “He can help me with the bars until the machinery’s fixed. The next train ain’t due for an hour, anyway.”

The girls’ timely deed was explained to the young man.

“They saved at least four lives tonight,” the father stated, his voice quivering with emotion. “That automobile never would ’a stopped if the bars hadn’t ’a come down when they did.”

The girls hastily took leave of the old gateman and his son, and hurried back to their car at the side of the road. They still had many miles to travel, and it was growing darker steadily.

“It’s only a little after five,” Betty said, looking at her wrist watch, “but it seems much later.”

They managed to cover the remaining distance without mishap. Great was their joy and relief when they saw Aunt Jane’s house looming up on the hilltop. As they drove into the grounds, Cousin Bill came out to meet them.

“I’ll put the car away,” he offered. “Run into the house and warm up. Kay, your mother has been dreadfully worried, thinking you met with an accident.”

“We had several of them,” the girl laughed. “But fortunately nothing really disastrous happened.”

Mrs. Tracey and Aunt Jane were waiting for them in the hall. They helped the girls remove their wraps, and made them warm themselves by the fire. While Kay restored the circulation to her almost half-frozen hands, she told of all that had occurred since they had started away.

“I’m afraid you’re almost too kind-hearted for your own good, Kay,” Mrs. Tracey chided. “Some day you may find yourself in a serious predicament.”

“Well, as long as she knows how to get out of it, she’ll be all right,” Aunt Jane chuckled.

The old lady gave Kay’s cheek an affectionate pinch as she went to the kitchen to order an especially good supper for the girls.

“Where are Miss Ball and Clarence Minton?” Kay asked her mother when they were alone in the living room.

“Oh, they went for a little walk.”

“A walk! In this blizzard?”

“Well, love doesn’t pay attention to weather!” laughed Mrs. Tracey.

“Do you think they really are in love, Mother?”

“Clarence Minton worships Beatrice, Kay. It is very apparent.”

“But I wonder if she feels the same way about him?”

“I haven’t made up my mind as to that,” Mrs. Tracey admitted. “Sometimes I doubt if Beatrice really knows herself how she regards him.”

“They make a charming couple,” Kay said with a sigh. “I think they should become engaged.”

“Well, don’t try to arrange that,” Mrs. Tracey said, laughing. “You must not interest yourself in their love affairs.”

“Oh, I’ll be discreet, Mother. But it won’t do any harm to do a little wishing, will it?”

Late that evening, after everyone save Kay and Miss Ball had retired, the young woman spoke somewhat hesitantly of Clarence Minton.

“Do you really like him?” she asked Kay timidly.

“Very much,” the girl returned sincerely.

“Some months ago Clarence asked me to marry him,” Miss Ball confessed, “but I refused.”

Kay offered no comment, but tried to hide her disappointment.

“I consider Clarence one of my dearest friends, and at times I feel sure that I love him. However, when he asked me to be his wife I said that I could not give my promise until he had fulfilled a certain ideal of mine.”

Kay longed to inquire what that might be, but tactfully refrained from doing so.

“Now he has done that, and I must give him my answer,” the actress went on. “I don’t know what to tell him.”

“I am afraid I cannot advise you,” Kay smiled. “It seems to me that Mr. Minton is a fine man, but I don’t know him as well as you do.”

“He *is* fine, Kay. I have never met anyone more honest or kind. He has always been devoted and loyal to me and my interests.”

“But you are afraid you don’t love him? Is that it?”

“I think I do love him,” Miss Ball answered. “Until we came here together I wasn’t sure. But being with him at this place against a free and natural background has changed my whole outlook. I really believe that my answer will be ‘yes.’”

“I hope you both will be happy,” Kay declared fervently.

The next day Mr. Minton and Miss Ball were together almost constantly. They went for a long tramp in the woods and spent the afternoon skating on a nearby pond. Knowing they wanted to be by themselves, Kay and the twins discreetly kept at a distance. As the evening wore on it became evident from Mr. Minton’s tense attitude that he had not yet received an answer to his proposal of marriage.

“Why doesn’t she hurry up and say ‘yes’ if she’s going to?” Kay commented in secret to her chums. “If I ever get married, I’ll certainly make up my mind about it without so much delay.”

“I’m sure Ronald Earle will be delighted to hear that!” Betty teased.

“Ronald Earle!” Kay retorted, blushing. “He’s just a friend, nothing more!”

“His status may change in later years,” Betty giggled.

Wilma began to compose dreamily:

“They say that love is Cupid
With his little bow and arrow——”

As she hesitated for a thought, Betty finished mischievously:

“But love could also be a bird,
A woodchuck or a sparrow.
And that’s the reason truly,
For the gossip I have heard—
I got it confidentially
From a cunning little bird!”

“That’s the worst poetry I have ever heard in all my life!” Wilma declared scornfully.

“And I say the same,” Kay added. “Let’s not talk about love any more. I’ve heard enough of it for one day.”

That evening both Mr. Minton and Miss Ball were strangely quiet at dinner; yet a warm light shone in the actress’s eyes, and everyone surmised that she intended to give Mr. Minton her promise very soon. When the meal was over Aunt Jane retired to her own quarters. Mrs. Tracey followed a little later. Cousin Bill pretended to be unusually weary, and left the young people to their own devices. Kay, Wilma, and Betty soon found an excuse for leaving the living room.

“Well, if Miss Ball doesn’t say ‘yes’ now, it isn’t because she hasn’t had a chance!” Betty chuckled. “What shall we do with ourselves all evening?”

“I have a book of poems I intend to read,” Wilma announced, taking the volume from her bag.

Betty decided to do some knitting. She wanted to make a sweater for her mother as a Christmas gift, but during the past few weeks had not accomplished very much. Kay glanced over the evening newspaper which she had brought to the room, then tossed it aside.

“I guess I’ll take another look at my six-fingered glove,” she said, a twinkle in her eyes.

“I wish you had left that thing at home!” Wilma said, looking up from her book. “It’s too spooky.”

Kay went to her suitcase and found the black article. As she ran her hand down into it she uttered a faint cry.

“The diamond ring! It’s gone!” she gasped.

“Gone?” Betty exclaimed. “Where did you keep it?”

“Why, right where I found it—in a finger of the glove.”

“Then it must be there.”

“It isn’t. It’s gone!”

“Perhaps the ring dropped down into your suitcase,” Wilma said, getting up to help search for it. “I’ll find it for you.”

She shook out all the garments in the bag, but the piece of jewelry was not there. Finally Betty and Wilma were forced to admit that indeed it was gone.

“You’re certain you hid the ring in the glove?” Betty asked.

“Yes, I distinctly remember doing so,” Kay cried in distress. “Oh, what shall I do? That diamond wasn’t really mine, and now it’s lost.”

“I wonder what could have become of it,” Betty said in bewilderment.

“Someone must have stolen it!”

Thoroughly excited, the girls hastened to tell Mrs. Tracey and Aunt Jane of the loss. The latter was greatly perplexed by the strange disappearance, and immediately called her housekeeper. However, that woman could shed no light on the mystery, insisting that all her servants were strictly honest.

“I’ve had them with me for years,” Aunt Jane stated. “I don’t believe anyone in my house would steal anything.”

“I’m going to tell Miss Ball!” Kay cried. “The ring was as much hers as it was mine.”

Completely forgetting the little *tête-à-tête* going on below, the three girls rushed down to the living room. They burst in upon Clarence Minton and the actress just as the man was placing a beautiful diamond engagement ring on the young woman’s finger. Betty, who was the last to enter, did not comprehend the situation at once.

“The ring has been stolen!” she cried impulsively.

Miss Ball sprang to her feet. She gazed in bewilderment at the glittering diamond on her own finger. Her face turned white.

“Stolen!” she gasped. “This ring stolen?”

Then she fainted.

CHAPTER XI

AN EMBARRASSING MISTAKE

CLARENCE MINTON caught the actress as she crumpled to the floor, thus easing her fall. With the aid of Kay he lifted her to a sofa. His face was white with anger; he would not look at Betty, who had thoughtlessly cried out that the diamond ring had been stolen.

"I'm terribly sorry," the blond Worth twin murmured. "I didn't mean to startle Miss Ball so. I had no idea——"

"You have ruined everything for me," the manager said shortly. "But let's not talk about it."

Anxiously he worked over the unconscious actress. Kay ran to the kitchen for a glass of water, but when she returned the young woman had opened her eyes.

"My ring—stolen," she whispered brokenly. "I can't believe it."

"It was all a mistake," Kay comforted her. "Betty didn't mean your engagement ring—she meant the diamond we found in the six-fingered glove."

"Oh! When you girls came running into the room crying that the ring had been stolen, I thought it was the one Clarence had just placed on my finger."

"We were thoughtless and rude to break in upon you the way we did," Kay apologized. "We were upset over losing the diamond, and didn't stop to think about what we said or did."

"I can't tell you how very sorry I am," Betty said earnestly. "I do hope you'll forgive me, Miss Ball."

The actress smiled wanly.

"Of course, Betty, there's really nothing to forgive."

Nevertheless, she gazed ruefully at the ring on her finger. The girls realized that their thoughtlessness had destroyed the young woman's pleasure in receiving it. They could not blame Clarence Minton for being provoked at them.

"I am sorry I spoke so sharply to you," he told Betty regretfully. "I was fairly beside myself, otherwise I shouldn't have lost my temper."

“I deserved anything you might have said, and more,” Betty returned gloomily.

The girls hastily retreated. Scarcely had they reached their own room, when they heard Miss Ball mounting the steps.

“I guess we have broken up a beautiful love affair,” Wilma remarked unhappily.

There was a light tap on the door. Kay quickly went to answer it.

“May I speak to you for a moment outside?” Miss Ball asked.

Kay nodded, and stepped into the hall, closing the door behind her. She noticed at once that the diamond was no longer on the actress’s finger.

“It’s about Clarence that I wish to speak,” Miss Ball said hurriedly. “He’s leaving.”

“Leaving? Not tonight?”

“Yes, I gave back his ring, and it hurt him dreadfully. He’s in his room now, packing.”

“You don’t want him to go?” Kay asked.

“No, I care about him more than I realized.”

Kay considered the actress somewhat flighty in her affection, but she wisely refrained from saying so. Instead, she asked with directness, “If you love him, why don’t you keep the ring?”

“I don’t know,” Beatrice Ball confessed miserably. “I was so upset. I wish now that I had accepted it, but it’s too late. Clarence is going away.”

“I’ll soon remedy that,” Kay promised with a smile. “You go back to the living room and wait there.”

The actress had just vanished down the stairway when Mr. Minton’s bedroom door opened. He stepped out into the hall, carrying a suitcase in one hand.

“I must ask you to give my regrets to your mother,” he said, addressing Kay stiffly. “I find that it is necessary for me to return to the city at once.”

“If you do so, it will be the greatest mistake of your life.”

“What do you mean, Miss Tracey?”

“Beatrice Ball is deeply in love with you.”

The man laughed bitterly, and took from his vest pocket the diamond ring which had been returned to him. “This doesn’t look much like it!”

“Miss Ball has been under a terrific nervous strain the past week—ever since the kidnaping,” Kay said quietly. “Tonight she was greatly upset by what Betty said. I suspect she’s regretting this very minute that she didn’t

accept the ring. Why don't you go down to the living room and talk to her again?"

"Do you think it would do any good?" he asked eagerly.

"I am sure it would."

Clarence Minton dropped his suitcase and grasped Kay's hand. "Thank you, thank you," he murmured. "If she does accept it, I'll be eternally grateful to you."

He hurried down the stairway, his face alight with new hope.

"Well, that's fixed up," Kay sighed in relief. "Now I can start thinking about my own ring. But it's so late I guess nothing more can be done until morning."

Before she retired she spoke again to her mother and Aunt Jane. Both were distressed over the loss, and promised that a thorough search for the missing jewel would be made in the morning.

"I'll have the bedroom carefully swept," Aunt Jane declared. "Perhaps we'll find it."

At breakfast the next day Miss Ball's happy face drew attention to Clarence Minton's ring, which she was again wearing.

"You're the most wonderful person I have ever known," she whispered to Kay. "I want you to be maid of honor at my wedding."

"I'd love to," Kay replied fervently.

She made no further mention of the lost diamond, but after breakfast quietly instituted a thorough search for the missing ring. Although the floor of the bedroom was carefully swept and gone over a second time, the piece of jewelry could not be found.

"I hate to say it," Kay declared to Aunt Jane, "but I fear someone in this house has stolen the ring."

"I've been trying to figure out who that might be," the old lady returned. "All my servants have been with me so many years that I trust them implicitly. Last night after I went to bed it occurred to me that I do have one new employee working for me. However, he seldom comes into the house."

"What is his name, Aunt Jane?"

"Ike Stone. He looks after the horses and tends to the garden during the summer. I hired him a few months ago but have been considering letting him go because he is so lazy."

"May I speak with him?"

"Yes, of course. I mean to do so myself. I'll call him into the house."

“Perhaps it would be wiser if we were to go outside,” Kay suggested. “The less Miss Ball and Clarence Minton hear of the matter, the better.”

Aunt Jane donned a heavy wrap and the two went out to the barn in search of the farmhand.

“Ike!” Aunt Jane called impatiently. “Where are you?”

A roughly dressed man with round shoulders and a slightly insolent face came down from the hayloft. Aunt Jane sniffed the air suspiciously.

“You’ve been smoking again!” she said accusingly.

“Well, maybe just a pull or so,” the man admitted.

“I’ve told you time and again I’ll not have you smoking in the barn! Ike Stone, if you disobey my orders again you’ll be discharged.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What were you doing yesterday?” the old lady probed sharply. “Did you fill up the woodbox in the kitchen as I told you to?”

“Sure, I did. While you and the others were out sleigh-riding.”

“That must have been at the time my chums and I were at Collston,” Kay commented. “Was the house deserted then, Aunt Jane?”

“Yes, except for the servants. Ike, did you enter any of the rooms except the kitchen?”

“Of course I didn’t,” the man refuted angrily. “I know my place.”

“Well, I guess that will be all,” Aunt Jane said, realizing that the farmhand would admit nothing that would be to his disadvantage. “Miss Tracey and her friends will want the sleigh this afternoon. Curry the horses and hitch them up right after dinner.”

“I was intending to go to town myself, ma’am.”

“You heard my orders, Stone! I don’t keep a stable for your convenience. Do as you’re told.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ike muttered, but he cast a resentful glance at his mistress.

“I dislike that man more each day,” Aunt Jane announced, as she and Kay walked back to the house. “As soon as I can find a suitable person to take his place the man will have to go.”

“It would be a very wise move to get rid of him,” Kay agreed. “He is very insolent and lazy.”

Though there was no evidence to support a belief that the farmhand had stolen the diamond, Kay could not help but feel that he had had the

opportunity and he might have been responsible for its mysterious disappearance. She determined to watch him closely the next few days.

At one o'clock the sleigh was brought to the door. Ike hitched the team to a post, and then vanished.

"I guess we'll have to drive it ourselves," Kay said, as she and the Worth twins came outdoors, wearing their warmest clothes. "Who wants the job?"

"Not I," Betty sang out. "I'm afraid of horses."

"You'll have to do it, Kay," Wilma added.

The Tracey girl did not mind driving, for Aunt Jane's horses, though spirited, were not vicious. She had handled the team before.

"Where are we going?" Betty inquired, as they dashed out of the yard, accompanied by a gay jingle of sleigh bells.

"I thought we might turn this into a business trip instead of a pleasure jaunt," Kay smiled. "How would you like to pay a return visit to that moving picture village?"

"That would be fun," Betty instantly agreed. "But why do you want to go there again?"

Kay explained that she hoped to learn more about the activities of the Eagle Film Company. The doctor at Collston had provided her with interesting information when he had referred to his play, which had featured a man with six fingers on one hand.

"Surely you don't expect to find that actor still there?" Wilma commented.

"No, but we may learn where he is now."

It was a long ride to the moving picture village, but the girls did not mind it. The air was exhilarating, and they found it a delightful experience gliding smoothly over the hard-packed snow.

At length, on arriving at their destination, Kay and her chums found out definitely that the moving picture organization that had spent the past summer in the vicinity really was known as the Eagle Film Company. They inquired about it at a filling station and the man there assured them that the watchman in charge of the grounds was not as belligerent as he appeared to be.

"Let's question him," Kay proposed. "He can't do anything worse than tell us to leave, as he did the last time."

They hitched the team to a tree and then returned to the moving picture lot. After a slight delay they located the watchman in a shack not far from the road. He appeared annoyed at being disturbed, but grew more friendly

when Kay explained to him that they sought information and needed his assistance. However, the fellow stuttered badly, which made it difficult for him to carry on a conversation.

“Can you give me the present address of the Eagle Film Company?” Kay requested.

“Yes, the co-co-company moo-moo-mooved to New York.”

“And the street address?” Kay questioned eagerly.

“S-six, one, one, s-six, one, one, four. Gra-gra——”

“Six, one, one, four?” Kay asked doubtfully, writing the number on an envelope.

“No, s-six, o-one, s-six one f-four.”

“He never says it the same twice,” Betty whispered to Wilma.

“Here, write it on this envelope,” Kay said, offering the man a pencil. “Then I’ll be sure to get it right.”

After she had obtained the address, her next question concerned the players who had worked on the moving picture lot the previous summer. She asked the watchman if he remembered an actor with six fingers on one of his hands.

“S-sure, he was a t-ta—tall, dark fellow,” the man stated. “But he was a p-p-poor excuse as an actor.”

“Can you tell us his name?”

“His s-s-stage name was S-S-Shad B-Bealing.”

“Shad Bealing?” Kay repeated, writing it down on the envelope. “Do you know where he went after he left here?”

The watchman was unable to furnish any further information, save that the moving picture company had left considerable of its equipment in storage in a local barn. A few days before a representative of the firm had ordered the material to be shipped by freight to New York. The girls thanked the man for answering their questions and then went back to the sleigh.

“That watchman wasn’t so stupid after all,” Kay commented, as they turned the horses homeward. “He gave us several valuable clues. I intend to write to the Eagle Film Company and find out if Shad Bealing’s present address is available.”

The trip back to Aunt Jane’s house consumed more time than the girls had anticipated. The horses were tired, and Kay disliked pressing them. Twilight was coming on when the sleigh approached a railroad crossing.

“Stop, look, and listen!” Betty ordered. “We don’t want to have another narrow escape.”

The track was clear in either direction, and the block signals were up. However, several freight cars were standing on an adjoining siding. Glancing carelessly in that direction, Kay was startled to see two men stealthily approaching one of the cars.

“Girls, isn’t that Ike Stone?” she whispered.

“Why, I believe it is!” Wilma agreed, looking closely. “What is he doing so far from home?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Kay said grimly, halting the team some distance from the tracks so that the jingling sleighbells would not betray their arrival.

The girls tied the horses and crept quietly toward the siding, taking care to keep themselves well hidden by a dense growth of timber which bordered the road. They saw the two men look carefully around to make certain that their actions were not being observed. Then Ike Stone started tampering with the seal on one of the box-cars.

“I do believe he means to steal some railroad merchandise!” Kay exclaimed. “Let’s try to get closer so that we can catch him in the act!”

CHAPTER XII

IKE STONE'S SHACK

THE girls moved forward cautiously until they were close enough to the railroad siding to hear what the two men were saying.

“This is dangerous business,” Ike Stone declared to his companion. “Once we break these metal seals on the car doors, it’ll be a dead give-away that someone has been after the stuff inside. The railroad company will have a detective here within a day.”

“No one will know who did it,” the stranger retorted. “Of course, if you’re afraid——”

“I’m not,” Ike retorted in a boastful tone. “Here goes!”

He broke the seal and opened the door. The two men leaped into the car, looking about them with obvious satisfaction.

“This will make a good haul,” the stranger announced. “But we’ll have to work fast.”

Scarcely had they begun to move the heavy merchandise when there came an unexpected disturbance. The team which Kay and her friends had left tied to a tree began to get restless. The horses jerked at their bridles, and one of the animals gave a loud neigh.

The two men in the box-car heard the sound and darted toward the door. Before Kay and her chums could retreat into the woods, they were detected by the two scoundrels.

“Pretend that we’re not spying,” Kay whispered warningly to her chums.

She moved toward the box-car just as the two men leaped quickly to the ground.

“Why, Ike, I’m surprised to see you here so far from Aunt Jane’s,” Kay said innocently.

The farmhand flushed slightly and hastily tried to close the door. However, Kay was near enough to catch a glimpse of the interior. She saw stored inside several powerful and expensive lights such as are used by moving picture companies, an array of sound equipment, and numerous large boxes that undoubtedly contained much valuable property. It instantly

dawned upon her that Ike and his companion had intended to steal this material from the Eagle Film Company.

“I live not far from here,” Ike Stone muttered uncomfortably. “I have a shack in the woods.”

“And in your spare moments you amuse yourself by breaking into box-cars!” Kay said sharply.

“We weren’t breaking in,” Ike replied, growing even more confused. “You see, I do a little extra work now and then for the railroad. It helps out on my salary.”

“I should imagine it would!” Kay retorted. “And your friend, I suppose, is engaged in a similar occupation.”

“This is Nathan Blick,” Ike said, turning to the other man. Kay noticed that he hesitated before giving the name. “Nathan is a railroad official—an inspector.”

“That’s right,” the stranger agreed. “An inspector.”

As Kay gazed steadily at him, his green eyes shifted uneasily. He wore a cap, and tried to keep his face averted so that in the twilight the girls could not get a clear view of his features.

“Just what are your duties for the railroad company?” Kay inquired.

“Well, I inspect box-cars.”

“Sealed ones?”

“All kinds,” the man returned vaguely. “Come on, Ike, we got to be moving along.”

“Just a minute,” Kay said firmly. “I’m not very well satisfied with your answers to my questions.”

Ike whirled furiously upon her.

“Oh, go on home and mind your own business,” he ordered gruffly. “I’m sick of your snooping. You and the old woman are always asking questions!”

“Don’t you dare speak of Aunt Jane in such terms!” Kay cried indignantly. “Why she has tolerated your services I’m sure I can’t understand.”

Ike started to retort, but his companion stopped him. “Don’t talk so much,” he ordered. The two walked hurriedly away from the tracks, and disappeared into the woods.

“Do you think they actually intended to steal something?” Wilma asked.

“I’m almost sure of it,” Kay answered. “I didn’t believe that story about their being railroad employees. If we hadn’t arrived on the scene when we did, I’m sure they would have stolen some of the film company’s equipment.”

“Let’s look inside the car and find out what they were after,” Betty proposed.

Kay shook her head. “No, if we touch the seal we may be accused of breaking it ourselves. After this car is switched onto a freight train the railroad men will discover that the door has been opened. Then the trouble will begin.”

“I guess you’re right,” Betty agreed. “The best thing for us to do will be to go home and report what we’ve seen.”

The girls returned to the sleigh, and in a few minutes were dashing over the hard-packed road toward Aunt Jane’s farm. Supper was awaiting them when they arrived. As they partook of a delicious repast they told of their adventure.

“Is Ike Stone employed by the railroad company, Aunt Jane?” Kay inquired.

“Not to my knowledge,” the elderly lady answered. “Of course, he may be working for the concern without my knowing it. Stone is so close-mouthed. He’s away about half the time, too.”

“We had to unhitch the horses ourselves tonight,” Kay stated. “I suppose your stableman is at his cabin.”

“When he does come back, he’ll be discharged,” Aunt Jane announced firmly. “I’ve had quite enough of that shiftless, insolent man!”

After the meal Kay went to the kitchen to talk to Mrs. Kemp, the housekeeper. The woman could tell her little regarding Ike Stone, though she did confirm the fact that the farmhand lived alone in a shack near the tracks.

“Perhaps he is employed by the railroad,” the woman said. “But I have never heard him speak of it. I can’t imagine Ike holding down two jobs. He hates anything that smacks of work!”

“Has he lived in this community long, Mrs. Kemp?”

“No, he came here only a short while ago.”

Kay was convinced now that she and the twins had caught the farmhand in the act of stealing goods from the railroad car. She believed, too, that he could shed some light upon the mysterious disappearance of the diamond ring. However, she was not yet prepared to make a direct accusation.

Meanwhile, Kay was planning a definite course of action in trying to solve the kidnaping case. Her first move was to write a letter to the Eagle Film Company, requesting the officials for information regarding Shad Bealing. Among other things she wanted to know if the actor had worn gloves in the picture, and if she might obtain a description of them.

"I'd like very much to mail this letter tonight," she remarked to her aunt as she stamped it.

"I fear it will be impossible, unless you drive to town," her relative commented. "Mail won't be picked up here until nearly noon tomorrow."

"It's a beautiful moonlight night," Betty observed, glancing out of the window. "I shouldn't mind a sleigh-ride to town."

Mrs. Tracey was about to say that she did not like the idea of the girls going out alone after dark, when Clarence Minton offered to escort them. Miss Ball was asked to accompany the group, but she preferred to spend the evening reading. The manager hitched up the team and drove Kay and the Worth twins to the nearby town of Alton, where they mailed the letter.

"I wish we could look for Ike Stone's shack," Kay remarked as they started homeward.

"We have time enough," the manager assured her. "I'm rather curious to see the place myself."

He hitched the team to a tree not far from the railroad tracks, and the girls indicated the path which they had seen the two men take. The box-car containing the moving picture equipment was still standing on the siding.

By following the trail through the woods the four presently came to a cabin which was half hidden in a dense growth of trees. A dim light gleamed from the windows.

"Ike Stone must be at home," Clarence Minton observed. "Shall we knock?"

"Not just yet," Kay said. "I think I see someone with him. I want to make certain who it is."

She stole to the window and cautiously peered into the cabin. The farmhand and his companion, Nathan Blick, were seated at a table, deep in conversation. Their faces, illuminated by the glow of the lamp, were hard and cruel.

"We'll have to turn the trick tonight," Kay heard Blick say. "Those girls were probably too dumb to know what we were doing, but the seal on the car has been broken, and if a railroad official should happen along he'd get suspicious."

“You’re right,” Ike agreed. “That Tracey girl is nobody’s fool. Let’s finish the job right away. It’s dark enough now so we won’t be seen.”

Kay hastily ducked back from the window and hurried to warn her friends that they must hide. Scarcely had the four retreated behind some bushes, when Ike and Blick emerged from the shack.

“They intend to rob the box-car,” Kay whispered. “We must watch them, and then call the police.”

When the two men were a safe distance ahead, Kay and her friends crept after them cautiously. From the shelter of the woods they watched Ike and his companion slide back the freight car door and disappear inside. After a few minutes the thieves came out, bearing heavy crates on their backs. They staggered under them down the trail toward the shack.

The four watchers followed noiselessly, remaining in hiding behind trees while the two men bore the crates inside the cabin. Ike and Blick soon emerged again and returned to the box-car for a second load. Once more Minton and the girls hurried after them.

“I’d like to take a look inside the freight car and see what they’re stealing,” commented the manager.

He and the Worths climbed inside. Meanwhile, Kay trailed the men back to the shack. So quietly did she slip away, that for some moments Clarence Minton and the twins were unaware that she had gone. Then they, too, returned to the cabin, greatly surprised to find it deserted.

“Maybe Kay went back to the sleigh,” Wilma suggested.

“Yes, she probably did,” Clarence Minton agreed. “No doubt she’s waiting for us there. Now we can all go after the authorities.”

The three hurried to the road, never once dreaming that at that very moment Kay was inside the shack, engaged in a most dangerous enterprise. In the absence of Ike Stone and Nathan Blick, the daring girl had determined to discover just what the two men were doing with the film company’s stolen property.

Quietly she had let herself into the shack. As she gazed about her, there was no sign of any boxes or crates.

“They must be hidden here somewhere,” she told herself. “I saw Stone and Blick carry them in.”

She moved across the floor, and as she did so her shoe struck a hard metal object. It was the ring of a trap-door. Kay lifted it and peered down into a dark cellar. She saw a room filled with numerous packing cases, far more loot than could have been removed from the box-car in one night.

“I’d like to find out what those crates contain,” she thought.

She darted to the window and looked out. The trail leading down to the railroad right-of-way appeared deserted. In all probability it would be several minutes before Blick and Ike would return with another load of loot. Kay decided to take a chance.

Lifting the trap-door again, she swiftly descended the stairs into the dark cellar.

CHAPTER XIII

BENEATH THE TRAP-DOOR

KAY left the trap-door slightly raised so that the light from the lamp might shine down and brighten the cellar. As she descended the ladder she studied with keen interest the boxes and crates piled high in the room.

“I wonder if all this is moving picture equipment?” she mused.

She was investigating a curiously shaped box, when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. A door opened. Ike Stone and Nathan Blick had returned!

There was no opportunity for Kay to close the trap-door. She had barely time in which to squeeze herself flat against the wall between two wooden crates, when the thieves descended into the basement, carrying several heavy electric motors.

“Say, I told you not to leave the trap-door unlocked,” Blick growled. “It’s dangerous.”

“I did close it,” Ike retorted. “Look here! What’s this?”

Kay caught her breath as she saw the farmhand point to something lying on the floor. It was a button from her dress.

“Take a look around!” Blick ordered tersely. “Someone has been spying.”

Kay’s hiding place was discovered at once. Eluding Ike Stone’s grasp, she tried to reach the ladder leading upward, but Blick caught her by the arm and pulled her roughly back into the cellar.

“Not so fast, Miss Tracey,” he leered. “So you decided to turn detective, did you?”

Kay made no response, thinking that the men would be less harsh with her if she were to refrain from a retort. However, her silence merely infuriated them.

“So you won’t talk?” Ike cried angrily. “All right, I’ll fix you so you can’t!”

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and made it into a gag. Then he tied Kay’s hands behind her back, taking cruel delight in drawing the bonds

more tightly than was necessary. She clenched her fists together as he fastened the knot, hoping thereby to gain a little slack.

“What shall we do with her?” Ike asked his companion. “Leave her here?”

The other man thought a moment, then shook his head. “No, we can’t do that. Her friends might come back and look for her. We’ll have to get rid of her.”

Kay’s heart sank as she watched the thieves drag forth a large, empty packing case. Despite her struggles to free herself, she was lifted into it. Ike nailed down the cover, leaving only a small crack for air to come through.

“Maybe they intend to dump me into the lake,” Kay thought in terror. “Oh, why did I ever get myself into a fix like this? Mother warned me that I might get in trouble!”

She could hear the two men discussing her in hoarse whispers, but was unable to make out what they were saying. Presently they lifted the crate on their shoulders and bore it down the trail toward the railroad tracks.

From a far distance there came the shrill blast of a train. The sound sent a chill racing down Kay’s spine. Did the heartless brutes intend to place the crate on the tracks in the path of the approaching locomotive?

Ike and his companion had planned a less cruel fate for their victim, however. They set the box down in the snow and awaited the coming of the train. It was a long freight. When the engine stopped beside the water tank, the box-cars extended far beyond the siding.

“Here’s an empty one,” Blick announced, opening the door of one of them. “Shove her in.”

Kay felt them lift the crate. She was tumbled over and over roughly as the box was rolled into the car. The two men fastened the door tight and slipped back into the shadow of the trees.

A couple of minutes later the train began moving. Trapped inside the box, Kay Tracey was embarking for an unknown destination.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Clarence Minton and the Worth twins had returned to the sleigh. They grew alarmed when they found that Kay was not there.

“Something has happened to her,” Wilma announced anxiously.

Just as she spoke, an automobile drove past, rattling over the railroad tracks.

“Why, that was Ronald Earle!” Betty cried, waving frantically.

The boy failed to see the little group by the roadside, and his car disappeared around a bend.

“I wonder what he’s doing so far from Brantwood?” Wilma queried. “He must have come to see Kay.”

“Maybe he took her home,” Betty added. “That would explain why she disappeared so mysteriously.”

“But he was alone in the automobile,” Mr. Minton pointed out.

“I suppose Ronald took her to the farmhouse while we were searching at the cabin,” Betty declared with conviction. “Probably Kay then sent him back here to tell us where she was, and he failed to see us.”

The explanation seemed so plausible that it did not occur to anyone until later that hardly enough time had elapsed in which Ronald could have made two trips. It did strike Minton as strange, though, that the boy had been seen traveling toward the farmhouse instead of away from it. He mentioned that fact as the Worth girls climbed into the sleigh.

“But where else can Kay be unless she has gone to see the authorities?” Betty demanded.

“I guess she is at the house,” Minton acknowledged. “Yet it seems odd she left without telling us where she was going.”

After a brief discussion it was agreed that they should all return to Aunt Jane’s. In the event that Kay had not as yet notified the authorities of the box-car theft, they could do so by telephone.

Minton flicked the horses with his whip, and they dashed off smartly, only to be checked by a stiff pull of the reins as they drew near the railroad crossing. A freight train was slowly moving by.

“I wish it would hurry!” Betty complained. “If we hope to bring along the authorities before those men get away, we have no time to waste.”

Never once dreaming that Kay was being held a prisoner in one of the cars, the three waited impatiently for the freight to pass. At length the caboose clattered by and the road was clear again.

“I see Ronald came here all right,” Wilma observed, as the sleigh swung into the familiar lane. “His auto is standing in front of the house.”

Minton tied the horses to the hitching post, and Betty and Wilma ran into the house.

“Hello, Ronald,” they greeted the tall youth who was warming his hands by the fire.

“Hello!” he returned gaily. “Where’s Kay?”

“Didn’t you bring her home?” Betty gasped.

“Home from where?”

The twins seated themselves weakly on a sofa. They feared that some grave misfortune had befallen their chum. Hurriedly they told Ronald where they had last seen her.

“We must start after her at once!” Ronald exclaimed. “I know Kay well enough to be sure that she would go right back to that shack in the woods. She never could keep her fingers out of a mystery.”

“But we did look for her there,” Wilma protested. “We couldn’t find her.”

“Did you search inside?”

“Well, no, I thought Kay wouldn’t have ventured within. Those men were going back and forth so often from the shack to the railroad tracks that she must have realized she might run into them any minute.”

“Kay wouldn’t be afraid to take a little risk,” Ronald replied. “We all know she is far too brave to flinch.”

“You’re right,” Betty agreed suddenly. “We must get back to the house in the woods as fast as we can. But first we’ll have to notify the authorities about the situation.”

She hurried to the telephone and called the sheriff. Then she joined her sister and Ronald, who had hurried outside to talk to Clarence Minton.

“Does Mrs. Tracey know about her daughter’s disappearance?” the manager asked quickly.

“No,” Wilma told him. “Mrs. Kemp just told me that after we left some friends came and insisted upon taking everyone to a little party at a neighbor’s house.”

“It’s just as well Mrs. Tracey isn’t here to learn the distressing news,” Minton said. “After all, it may be nothing at all. Kay is no doubt safe.”

“Of course she is,” Wilma agreed firmly, but she really did not believe her own words. “We’ll locate her before her mother gets home.”

Ronald urged everyone into his car, and in a short while the party reached the woods which adjoined the tracks. Abandoning the automobile, the four took the trail leading to the shack. They were relieved to see a light shining in one of the windows.

“Those two thieves are still working there!” Wilma exclaimed. “Oh, I do hope the police get here in time to catch them with the loot.”

“So do I,” Minton agreed tersely. “But to find Kay will be our first job. I am going to talk to those men and ask them if they have seen her.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ronald offered.

“No, you better stay here with Wilma and Betty. If both of us go it might look suspicious. I’ll drop no hint that I suspect anything has been going on in that house tonight.”

“Do be careful,” Wilma urged anxiously. “Those men are dangerous.”

While his friends waited in the shadow of the trees, Clarence Minton walked to the shack and boldly rapped on the door. Instantly the light was extinguished.

“Who is it?” Ike Stone demanded gruffly.

“Clarence Minton. Is that you, Ike?”

The door opened slowly, and the farmhand looked out at the manager, eyeing him suspiciously.

“What do you want?”

“Kay Tracey has disappeared,” Minton stated.

“She hasn’t been this way,” Ike replied, relaxing slightly as he decided that his questioner could not possibly know about the boxes and crates stored in the cellar. “Maybe she’s lost in the woods.”

“That’s what we fear. You’re sure she hasn’t been this way?”

“Of course I’m sure. If you want to search for her, I’ll let you use my lantern.”

Ike handed one to the manager, and then closed the door in the caller’s face. Minton went back to Ronald and the Worth twins, who were anxiously awaiting him.

“Kay’s not at the shack,” he reported. “I saw the entire room from the doorway. Ike says he hasn’t seen her, either.”

“Then I’m terribly afraid she’s lost somewhere in the woods,” Wilma said on the verge of tears. “It’s so cold tonight. She’ll be frozen before we find her.”

“Don’t worry,” Betty comforted, trying not to show her own concern. “Kay was dressed warmly. She can’t be far away. We’ll locate her.”

“Of course we will,” Ronald said firmly.

He ran back to the automobile to get a flashlight. They separated into two groups, Wilma and Clarence Minton taking the lantern, Ronald and Betty using the electric torch. After mapping out a strip of territory near the shack, they began a systematic search of it, calling out Kay’s name at intervals.

For a long time Betty kept close to Ronald. Thinking that she heard an answer to one of her cries, she dropped back a few paces to listen. Then she saw the guiding light had disappeared.

“Ronald!” Betty cried.

Fearful that she would lose sight of him, she ran forward quickly and suddenly stumbled over a buried log. She plunged headfirst into a huge snowdrift.

“Oh! Oh!” she shivered, struggling to her feet.

Then she uttered a terrified scream. From the nearby bushes she saw a pair of eyes that glowed like two balls of fire.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GIRL IN THE BOX-CAR

BETTY fled in terror. In her haste she forgot about the hidden log and stumbled over it a second time. As she fell face downward into the wet snow, a small animal scurried past, vanishing into the woods.

By this time Ronald Earle had discovered that his companion was missing, and had come back to search for her. He quickened his steps as he heard her scream, and arrived just as she was picking herself up from the ground.

“Oh, Ronald,” Betty wailed, clinging to his arm, “I thought you were lost. I was attacked by a wild animal!”

The boy helped her brush the flakes from her clothing, doing his best to reassure her. He flashed his light over the snow, and revealed small animal tracks leading into the thicket.

“I think your attacker must have been a fox!” Ronald chuckled. “It was probably even more frightened than you were!”

“A fox!” Betty exclaimed. “Only a fox! I was sure it was a wolf.”

“There aren’t any wolves in this part of the country, Betty.”

A minute later Ronald’s smile faded. The girl’s foolish fright did not seem amusing to him when he thought about Kay. Grimly the two renewed their search, though with a steadily growing fear that they would not locate the missing one that night.

It had been agreed that after an hour’s time the two searching parties should meet at Ike Stone’s shack to report their findings. When Betty and Ronald returned, weary and discouraged, they found Wilma and Clarence Minton awaiting them.

“Any luck?” the lad called out.

The manager shook his head. “It’s beginning to look pretty serious.”

“We’ll have to notify the police and organize regular searching parties,” Ronald urged.

“The authorities are here now,” Minton stated, nodding toward the shack. “They have promised to help us as soon as they shall have completed their examination of the cabin.”

“Have Ike and Nathan Blick been arrested?” Betty questioned eagerly.

“No,” Minton said in deep disgust. “Before the police arrived the two fellers skipped off, taking most of the loot with them.”

The four went to the cabin together to discuss the situation with the authorities. There they laid plans for following the trail of the two thieves and thoroughly searching the woods for the missing girl. At that very moment Kay Tracey was many miles from the scene, imprisoned inside the crate, and being transported to New York on a through-freight.

“If I don’t get out of this box I’ll suffocate before anyone discovers me,” was the terrible thought that flashed through her mind. “I must break loose somehow.”

She struggled and squirmed, but succeeded only in tiring herself. The crate had grown suffocatingly warm, and her limbs were growing numb from being held in a cramped position so long. At times she felt as if she could not breathe at all.

As she lay struggling, Kay thought she heard a faint movement of some kind in the box-car. She tried to work down her gag, but it held securely and would not budge.

“Oh, dear, if I could get one deep breath of fresh air again!” she thought desperately.

As Kay shifted her position, her dress caught on a sharp object. She could not see it, but it felt like a piece of metal. With reviving hope she squirmed about until her hands were directly over the rough place on the corner of the crate. Then she sawed her bonds laboriously up and down.

She was forced to rest many times, but finally her patience was rewarded. The thong was severed and her hands were free. Kay jerked off her gag, and applied herself to the task of getting out of the box. Fortunately Stone and Blick had not nailed the top boards very securely, for they had never once imagined that the girl would be able to cut her bonds.

Kay located the weakest board, and pried up against it with all her strength. She was on the verge of despair when the nails, with a sudden squeak and groan, suddenly gave way. The board shot upward, and like a jack-in-the-box Kay thrust her head through the opening.

The silence of the box-car was shattered by a terrified scream. Kay became tense; her heart pounded wildly. Who was in the car with her? She saw the dim outline of a figure crouching in a corner.

After a few minutes Kay gathered fresh courage and emerged from the crate. Her movement was the signal for another frightened cry from the object huddled in the darkness.

“Don’t be afraid,” Kay said quickly. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Kay Tracey. And you?”

“Barbara Fountain.”

Kay groped her way to the opposite end of the car, but it was too dark for her to see the face of the mysterious occupant, who had not yet fully recovered from the shock of seeing a human being emerge from the crate.

“How did you ever get inside that box?” the other girl demanded nervously.

Kay related her unfortunate experience. It was bitterly cold in the car, and the two huddled together to keep warm.

“You’re very brave,” Barbara said admiringly. “If I were a little more courageous I shouldn’t be here now.”

“Are you running away from home?” Kay questioned.

“I really haven’t any home,” the girl confessed. “But I am running away from Collston.”

“Oh! You must have had a good reason for leaving.”

“The best ever,” Barbara returned, a defiant note in her voice. “If I had stayed in Collston I’d have had to go to jail.”

Kay tried to avoid letting the girl see that she was startled by her admission.

“What did you do?” she asked, “or rather, what were you accused of doing?”

“Oh, I was guilty, all right—that’s why I left.”

“I hope your offense wasn’t very serious.”

“I stole some fruit,” Barbara said quietly.

Kay remained silent, not as an expression of disapproval of Barbara’s act, but because she was thinking deeply. Could it be that the girl had stolen the food from Felix Cortez? She voiced the question.

“Yes, he was the man,” Barbara admitted. “I didn’t do the job alone, though. Two other girls helped me. They planned it all out and I just bought the fruit. I guess I shouldn’t have listened to them, but I needed food and it seemed like an easy way to make a little money.”

“You’re about my age, aren’t you?” Kay asked.

“Sixteen.”

In reply to Kay’s sympathetic questions, the girl poured forth her unhappy story. Her mother was dead. Her father was an actor, but he seldom

came to Collston to see her because he was more or less indifferent to her; then, too, he did not often have sufficient funds to make the trip. In recent months he had not even sent her money for food and lodging.

She had been turned out of her rooming house and was in a desperate situation, when two older girls offered to share their quarters with her. They had given her food and clothing. Not until later did Barbara suspect that her roommates had any ulterior motive behind their apparent generosity. Slyly they suggested that she might make some money for herself and at the same time repay them for their trouble, if she would lend herself to their scheme.

“The way they explained it made the work sound perfectly honest,” Barbara said. “I would buy the goods and have them shipped to a friend of one of the girls who lived in Brantwood. We dealt mostly in crates of oranges, but we also bought other fruits.”

“And you then sold the fruit to private parties?” Kay inquired.

“The other girls did. But they gave me very little money—only enough to buy food. A week ago the girls said something about the racket playing out and they just left me flat. When they disappeared they owed their room rent. Cortez, the fruit dealer, saw me on the street one day and called the police.”

“You weren’t arrested?”

“No, I ran away. I dashed through an alley and escaped to the railroad tracks. This freight train was just pulling in. My father is in New York, and I thought that if I could get to him he might look after me. I had this basket of fruit and these sandwiches with me, so I just climbed into an empty box-car, and here I am!”

“I guess we’re both on our way to New York,” Kay sighed. She arose and went to the door. It would not budge when she tried to open it.

“Locked!” Barbara announced gloomily. “At Collston a trainman fastened it shut from the outside.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to stay here until someone comes to unbolt it,” Kay said, sitting down again.

She tried to speak cheerfully, but the prospect of remaining in the cold box-car for many hours or even days was not pleasant. Barbara’s story had deeply impressed her. While she did not approve of the girl’s actions she did feel very sorry for her.

“Maybe I can help her when we reach New York,” she reflected. Then she smiled ruefully as it occurred to her that without funds she would be in need of aid herself.

The train rattled and bumped along until the steady rumble of the wheels finally lulled Kay to sleep. When she awoke several hours later she felt very hungry.

“Have some of my sandwiches and fruit,” Barbara said. “It was lucky that I had this basket of food with me. When my landlady put me out of the rooming house I had presence of mind to take it along.”

Kay gratefully accepted something, but both she and the other girl ate sparingly, realizing that should they be imprisoned in the box-car for several days they would need some of the food later.

They soon lost all track of time, sleeping as much as they could, and at intervals talking and eating. Although the train made frequent stops no one came to open the car door.

Kay meanwhile had an opportunity to lay her plans. If she could somehow raise the money she would send a wire to her mother when she reached New York. Then, while waiting for instructions from home, she would explore the city and perhaps visit the officials of the Eagle Film Company.

Several hours later Kay was aroused from sleep by hearing someone at the entrance. She quickly nudged Barbara and the girls scrambled to their feet. Suddenly rays of light flooded the interior of the car. A burly brakeman peered in at the two girls.

“A couple o’ lady tramps, eh?” he demanded. Then, as Kay and Barbara tried to escape through the door, he said, “Oh, no, you don’t!”

“Let us go!” Kay cried. “We entered this car by mistake.”

“It was a mistake, all right,” the trainman agreed with grim satisfaction. “I’ll have to turn you over to the police.”

“Oh, please let us go!” Barbara pleaded.

“I’ve had my orders to arrest anyone caught stealing rides.”

“But it was all a mistake,” Kay insisted. She told him how she had been imprisoned in the box, and showed him the broken crate to prove her words.

“Sounds like nonsense to me,” the brakeman said doubtfully. “But I’ll call an official and hear what he says.”

However, the girls had no intention of awaiting the verdict. The instant the trainman turned his back Kay motioned to Barbara to follow her, and they leaped down from the car. As a hand truck loaded with boxes and crates was wheeled along the platform, they jumped aboard.

“This is what I call riding in style,” Kay chuckled, crouching with Barbara behind a large wardrobe trunk.

Her high spirits were of short duration, however. The brakeman, finding that the girls had escaped, caught a glimpse of Barbara's red beret sticking up above the luggage.

"Hey, you!" he shouted furiously, running after them. "Get down from that truck!"

CHAPTER XV

A CHASE

KAY and Barbara obeyed, though not in the way the brakeman had expected them to. They leaped from the truck and darted down the tracks.

“Stop them!” the trainman shouted.

Two yard guards took up the pursuit. The girls, with a good start, dodged this way and that between freight trains, finally reaching the street, breathless but happy.

“Well, here we are in New York,” Kay declared wearily. “We look as if our clothes hadn’t been pressed in a month. And we’re hungry and penniless.”

“I’m not broke,” Barbara stated. “I have a dollar.”

“A dollar! Why, you’re rich!”

“It won’t do me much good, but you can use the money to telephone your friends, Kay.”

“I couldn’t take it from you, Barbara, when it’s all you have.”

“I have my father to look after me. Later you can pay me back if you like.”

“I certainly shall,” Kay promised heartily. “And with interest! This dollar is a life saver to me, Barbara.”

The girls stopped at the first drug store along the busy street, grateful for the warmth which it afforded. They noted that the clerk in charge eyed them askance, but he said nothing when Kay went into a telephone booth. She put a nickel in the slot, and requested the operator to reverse the charges on a call to Aunt Jane’s residence. After a tedious wait she was connected, and asked to speak with her mother. Mrs. Tracey was overjoyed that her daughter was safe, yet it dismayed her to hear that the girl was so many miles away.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re all right!” she exclaimed in relief. “You have no idea how worried we’ve all been. Searching parties are even now scouring the countryside for you.”

Kay related the adventure which had befallen her. After receiving much valuable advice from her mother Kay talked to Cousin Bill, who assured her

that he would wire funds without delay. Finally she spoke with Miss Ball, who insisted that she and Barbara both make use of her luxurious apartment while in New York.

“I’ll phone my maid Jeanne to expect you,” Miss Ball promised. “After such a harrowing trip I know you’ll welcome a place where you can rest.”

Kay thanked her for the offer, and carefully took down the address of her friend’s apartment. Then she hastily hung up, for the conversation had lasted fully fifteen minutes.

Kay saw Barbara standing near the lunch counter, gazing hungrily at a bowl of hot soup which a clerk had ladled out to a customer.

“Let’s have something warm,” Kay urged. “I still have the dollar you lent me, and in an hour or two I’ll get some money.”

She ordered two bowls of tomato puree, conserving the remainder of her dollar for cab fare to Miss Ball’s apartment. Kay and Barbara could not help but laugh as they saw their reflections in the mirror above the soda fountain. The garments they wore were wrinkled and covered with bits of straw and lint; their faces were pinched and drawn; yet they did not mind the stares which were bestowed upon them for presently the soup brought a glow of warmth to their pale cheeks.

Kay bargained with a taxi driver, who agreed to take her and Barbara to Miss Ball’s apartment for eighty cents.

“Now we’re completely penniless,” Kay smiled as they entered the cab. “Yet we’re riding in more style now than we were an hour ago!”

As they rang the bell of the apartment house a few minutes later, the girls were assailed with their first misgivings. What if Miss Ball’s maid were not at home? They were greatly relieved, therefore, when a petite French girl in white apron and cap admitted them.

“Miss Tracey?” she inquired, pronouncing the name with a slight accent. “And her friend, Miss Fountain? You are both to come in. Miss Ball telephoned a few minutes ago.”

She led the girls into an attractive suite furnished in modernistic style. While Kay and Barbara were removing their wraps, the servant went to draw water for their baths.

“This is the most wonderful place I have ever been in,” Barbara breathed in awe when the travelers were alone. “It looks like rooms I’ve seen in the movies!”

“And Miss Ball is just as nice,” Kay declared. “It was kind of her to let us come here.”

After the girls had completed their toilets the maid insisted that they both lie down and rest. While they leisurely ate breakfast served on silver trays, Jeanne searched her mistress's wardrobe for clean garments that would fit them.

"I never thought a boiled egg could taste so delicious," Kay sighed blissfully, casting an appreciative eye upon the dainty little china cup in which it had been served.

"I will bring you more," the maid said.

Kay shook her head. "I've had quite enough, thank you."

She leaned back against the pillows and turned her head to gaze at Barbara. During the long ride in the box-car she had tried to imagine how the girl looked, but her appearance did not seem to match her voice. Barbara was very thin, with deep shadows beneath her eyes which suggested undernourishment. She had regular features, but her mouth was a trifle too large for the rest of her face. Yet on those rare occasions when she smiled, some might have called her pretty.

After a time Kay dropped off to sleep. She was awakened by the jangling of the telephone. As she grew dimly aware of her surroundings, she heard Jeanne Prix's excited voice.

"No, Monsieur Purcell, Miss Ball is not here. No, Monsieur, I cannot tell you when she will return. You will call again? *Très bien.*"

A moment later the maid came into the bedroom looking worried and disturbed.

"That man—he has telephoned for three days! I do not know if I should give him Miss Ball's address. She did not leave instructions."

"Did I hear you say the man's name is Purcell?" Kay inquired alertly.

"*Oui*, he is an old partner of Miss Ball. But I think she does not wish to see him again."

"You did quite right to refuse to give her present address," Kay praised. "I'm sure your mistress wouldn't care to renew her friendship with him."

"He will call again," Jeanne frowned. "I do not know how to discourage him."

Kay and Barbara dressed themselves smartly in the clothes which the maid provided, and spent the greater part of the day reading and listening to the radio. Several times Barbara mentioned that she must make an attempt to locate her father.

"I'll help you tomorrow," Kay promised. "By that time my money will be here."

Cousin Bill did not fail to keep his promise. Late in the afternoon a messenger from the bank delivered ample funds into her hands. Kay's first act was to repay Barbara the dollar she had borrowed. She tried to give her extra cash but the girl refused to accept more than the amount she had lent.

"I won't need any money after I join my father. He'll take care of me. Oh, I can hardly wait until I see him again!"

As she looked at the girl's happy face, Kay hoped that circumstances would not thwart a reunion. Early the next morning the two friends set forth in a cab to locate Mr. Fountain's boarding house. Barbara had preserved the address on one of her father's old letters. They found the place, which was in a squalid section of the city. When Kay inquired of the landlady if the man lived there, the woman glared at the two girls somewhat insolently.

"No, he don't live here any more, I'm glad to say! He was quarrelsome and slow with his rent. I was glad when he packed up and left!"

"Can you tell us where he lives now?" Kay asked.

"No, I can't. He didn't leave no forwardin' address."

Before Kay could ask any more questions, the woman closed the door. The disappointment was too great for Barbara, who burst into tears.

"Don't cry," Kay comforted her. "We'll find your father some way if he's still in New York."

As the girls walked back slowly to the waiting taxi, the door of the boarding house opened and a short, bareheaded man came running after them.

"Are you young ladies inquiring for a fellow by the name of Fountain?" he called. "I could not help but overhear what was said."

"Yes, we are," Barbara replied quickly, retracing her steps. "Can you tell me anything about him?"

"I roomed next door to him for three months. A few days ago Fountain got into a hot argument with a stranger—a tall, thin fellow who came to his room. They had a fight and this man Fountain was badly beaten up."

"Oh!" Barbara exclaimed in horror. "He wasn't seriously hurt, was he?"

"No, but he was in bed for a couple of days. When he was able to get up he packed his luggage and skipped out."

"Can you tell us where he went?" Kay asked.

The roomer shook his head. "Fountain didn't leave any address. I suspect he wasn't keen about having anyone know where he was going."

The information completely discouraged Barbara. During the ride back to Miss Ball's apartment she spoke scarcely a word.

"I'll start looking for a job tomorrow," she commented, when the two girls were again settled in the actress's luxurious quarters. "I can't stay here."

"We may be able to find your father yet," Kay encouraged. "Don't give up hope."

She was thinking over the problem of Barbara's future, when the electric buzzer rang. It was a signal that a visitor had entered the downstairs lobby.

"I'll answer it," Kay called to Jeanne, who was busy in the kitchen.

She went to the house telephone and asked, "Who is it, please?"

"Harry Purcell," came the indistinct reply. "May I come up?"

Kay hesitated. She did not believe that Beatrice Ball would care to have the man admitted to the apartment, yet she wanted very much to talk to him for a few minutes. She felt that he might be able to throw some light upon the mysterious attempt which had been made to kidnap the actress.

"I'll see you in the hall," she told him.

In a few moments she met the man in the corridor. She saw a dapper individual of middle age, whose face was disfigured by a black and blue spot under his right eye.

"Are you Mr. Purcell?" Kay inquired.

"Yes, and your name?"

"I am Miss Tracey. You don't know me, but I have heard Miss Ball speak of you."

"We were formerly associates," the man stated proudly. "Is Miss Ball here now?"

"No, that's what I wanted to talk about. A few days ago an attempt was made to kidnap her."

If Kay had expected that her announcement would startle the actor, she was mistaken. The expression on his face did not alter. She instantly became convinced that Purcell knew something about the matter.

"Perhaps you read of it in the newspapers," she questioned.

"Yes, I believe I did."

Kay eyed Purcell searchingly. She was convinced that he had not learned of the attempted kidnaping through the press, for Cousin Bill had succeeded in keeping Miss Ball's name from being mentioned in the papers. When she pointed out this fact to Purcell he did not appear disturbed.

"Well, I don't mind admitting, Miss Tracey, that I learned of the kidnaping from another source."

“Then perhaps you can tell me who was responsible.”

“Perhaps I can,” the actor agreed, smiling significantly. “Yes, if you make it worth my while, I might furnish you with an interesting clue!”

CHAPTER XVI

A REUNION

“PLEASE tell me how I am to make it worth your while,” Kay urged, watching the actor narrowly. “What is it you want?”

“I am very low in funds at present,” Purcell said with a smirk.

“You mean you want money before you give out your information. Is that it?”

“Yes, Miss Tracey. I must have at least three hundred dollars.”

Kay found it difficult to conceal her contempt for the man. Reports concerning his character had been far from good. Now she began to doubt that he had anything at all to tell her.

“I came here to see Miss Ball,” the man said hurriedly, observing that Kay was displeased. “She will be glad to give me money in exchange for a valuable clue which I am able to provide.”

“As an old friend of Miss Ball, I should think you would be glad of an opportunity to aid her—without being paid for the service.”

“I need money,” the actor returned lamely. “She has plenty of it.”

“I don’t believe you have anything worth selling,” Kay told him airily. “It’s no mystery who was responsible for the crime. The kidnaper left a clue behind, so it’s only a matter of time until he will be captured.”

Purcell looked decidedly crestfallen. His disappointment reassured Kay upon one point: the man actually did possess some information about the case, and he was not attempting to secure money under false pretenses. His response indicated that, though he was not a strong character, he was not a villain at heart.

“I might take a hundred dollars for my information,” said Purcell, lowering his demand.

Before Kay could reply, the door to Miss Ball’s apartment opened and Barbara emerged. When she saw the caller, she stopped short, then uttered a happy cry.

“Father!” She flung herself into the arms of the surprised man.

As Barbara and the actor began to talk excitedly, Kay urged them into the apartment and closed the door. She was utterly bewildered by the scene

she had just witnessed. It was evident from the girl's actions that the stranger was none other than the missing Mr. Fountain. But why did he call himself Harry Purcell? When she succeeded in breaking into the conversation, Kay asked the actor to explain himself. He did this somewhat sheepishly.

"Fountain is my real name. Miss Ball always knew me as Purcell, as that is what I use on the stage."

"Then is Barbara your daughter?"

"Yes, I guess I haven't looked after her the way I should." He turned to stare at the girl, amazed to find her looking so well.

"I have come all the way to New York to see you, Father," Barbara said eagerly. "At the rooming house they told me you had moved away."

"Oh, yes—yes. I transferred to more suitable quarters."

"I'm glad of that," his daughter declared in relief, "because I didn't like the place very much. I was afraid you might be having trouble again—about money."

Fountain's face flushed, and he avoided the girl's searching gaze.

"You have work now, haven't you?" she questioned.

"Well, not at the moment," he admitted reluctantly. "But I'll find something to do soon."

Kay sensed that Barbara wanted to be alone with her father, so she tactfully excused herself and went into a bedroom. She was afraid that the reunion was not destined to be a happy one. Barbara had begun to suspect that something was wrong; on the other hand, it was obvious that Mr. Fountain was worrying lest he would be unable to support his daughter.

"I'd like to help Barbara," Kay thought. "But I certainly don't feel like bribing her father to get any information from him."

From the living room there came voices rising higher and higher. Kay decided to leave the apartment at once.

Now would be an excellent time for her to visit the offices of the Eagle Film Company. She found the firm listed in the telephone directory. When she was connected with her party she had difficulty in making her identity clear.

"This is Miss Tracey," she explained. "I am calling from the apartment of Beatrice Ball."

Mention of the actress's name was misleading. Immediately the secretary to whom she was speaking jumped to the conclusion that Kay was none other than the famous actress herself. However, the girl from Brantwood did not realize this.

“We’ll be greatly honored to have you with us,” the young woman purred. “Mr. Toner will expect you at three o’clock.”

“I wonder what I might wear?” Kay reflected, as she hung up the receiver. “I ought to be well dressed if I am to meet the president of the company.”

She talked the matter over with Jeanne, asking if the frock she had worn on the train had been returned from the cleaner’s.

“No, Miss Tracey,” the maid smilingly returned. “But you may wear one of Miss Ball’s costumes.”

“I don’t feel that I should, Jeanne.”

“Miss Ball will not mind. She instructed me to provide you with everything you might need. I have a dress that will make you look stunning!”

The maid selected a blue velvet gown which the actress had worn in her latest picture. It fitted Kay perfectly, and was vastly becoming. However, she appeared much older than when she wore her own simple frocks.

“It is very *chic*,” Jeanne praised admiringly. “And my! You look enough like Miss Ball to be her sister! If Mademoiselle will permit, I will dress her hair!”

“Mademoiselle will gladly permit, all right,” Kay laughed. “Make me look as well as you can, Jeanne!”

When the little French maid had completed her work, Kay scarcely recognized herself. With her hair dressed as Miss Ball wore hers, the girl resembled the famous actress in a startling way.

Kay saw that it was almost time for the interview, and caught up her coat from a chair. Jeanne quickly relieved her of it, substituting a beautiful one from Miss Ball’s wardrobe. The garment gave just the touch necessary to complete the costume. While the maid telephoned for the car, Kay for amusement paraded back and forth before the full-length mirror, practicing Miss Ball’s manner of walking.

The door opened, and Barbara came in.

“How grand you look!” she praised. “I thought for a moment you were someone else.”

“Has your father gone?” Kay asked quickly.

The smile faded from the girl’s face. “Yes, he just left.”

Kay glanced searchingly at the girl but refrained from questioning her regarding her plans for the future. She could tell that Barbara was bitterly disappointed at the outcome of the meeting with the actor.

The Tracey girl was relieved when Jeanne announced that the car had arrived. She said good-bye to Barbara and left the apartment. The chauffeur politely doffed his cap as he swung open the auto door.

“I didn’t know you had returned, Miss Ball,” he said. Then he added, “Oh! You look so much like her!”

Kay was startled for an instant and could not recall the address of the Eagle Film Company. Finally it came to her, and she gave the number to her driver. When the car drew up before the main entrance to the building where the company’s offices were located, the doorman looked at Kay and said: “Will you take the private elevator, Miss Ball?”

Vastly amused, Kay permitted this deception to pass. She was totally unprepared for the attention which she received when she alighted from the elevator. Word of her arrival evidently had been given out, and attendants had been sent to welcome her. They flocked about her, bowing and smiling.

“Right this way,” she was invited politely. “The president will see you.”

All work ceased as Kay entered the inner office, where many men and women were busy at desks. Enjoying the attention, Kay mischievously adopted the walk of the well-known actress. She was very surprised when a young stenographer pushed a notebook toward her and asked her for her autograph. She laughed as she declined. Presently she found herself outside the office of the president.

“Will you please go in, Miss Ball?” she was told politely.

Kay now realized that it was a real case of wrong identity.

“I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake about my name,” she said innocently. “I am not Miss Ball!”

The president’s secretary turned slightly pale. “You’re not Miss Ball!”

“No, my name is Kay Tracey. I called this afternoon for an interview. Thank you very much for granting it.”

She moved as if to open the door of the private office, but the secretary neatly blocked her path.

“You must not go in!”

“But you just said I might see the president.”

“You’d never have been admitted this far if you hadn’t resorted to a trick!” the secretary retorted furiously. “You are an impostor! Leave this office at once!”

CHAPTER XVII

A DESERTED APARTMENT

KAY tried to explain that she was innocent of the charge, but the angry secretary would not listen. In the midst of it all the door to the private office opened, and Mr. Toner, the president of the Eagle Film Company, a bald-headed, portly gentleman of middle age, stepped out.

“What is this?” he inquired sternly. As his gaze fell upon Kay, he said, “Why, Miss Ball! This is indeed a pleasure!”

“She isn’t Miss Ball!” the secretary said tartly. “This girl is an impostor. She secured an appointment with you by posing as the actress.”

“That isn’t true,” Kay denied. “I did not say that I was Miss Ball. I can explain the mistake.”

“Tell your story,” the president said unexpectedly.

Kay launched into a complete account of the amusing events which had led up to her present predicament. She was pleased to see the tense expression on the official’s face gradually relax.

“Well, well, I cannot see that any actual harm has been done,” he declared genially. “As a rule I don’t grant interviews readily, but I might be induced to make an exception in your case, Miss Tracey. Why do you wish to see me?”

“I can’t very well tell you here,” Kay said, glancing significantly at the secretary, who was still looking at her with distrust. “However, the matter concerns a kidnaping.”

“Oh, now I remember!” the president exclaimed. “You wrote me about it, didn’t you?”

“Yes, several days ago.”

“Come in,” the man said cordially, standing aside for her to pass. “Your letter interested me very much.”

He offered Kay a chair and carefully closed the door.

“If I remember correctly, Miss Tracey, you mentioned a six-fingered glove in your communication.”

“Yes. It was worn by the man who attempted to kidnap Miss Ball.”

“You requested information concerning one of our actors—I have forgotten the man’s name.”

“Shad Bealing,” Kay supplied.

“Oh, yes. I had intended to look up the matter, but in the press of work it slipped my mind. What is it you want to know about him?”

“I should like to get his present address. Then, too, I am eager to find out if he has an extra finger on his right hand.”

The official regarded Kay shrewdly. “Am I to assume that you suspect one of our actors of attempted kidnaping?”

“I am not drawing any conclusions just yet. I am only trying to arrive at the truth.”

“I’ll do anything I can to be of assistance,” Mr. Toner promised.

He pressed a buzzer. When his secretary answered the call, he requested her to ask a Mr. Elberton, a director, to come to his office. While waiting for him, Kay asked the president about the moving picture which had been made near Collston.

“It has not yet been released nor titled,” the official explained. “One of the characters in the story was a man with six fingers, but that’s all I can remember about it. Mr. Elberton, who had charge of the picture, should be able to tell you more.”

The man in question was short and very nervous. His speech was as abbreviated as his body. However, he had considerable information at instant command and willingly answered all of Kay’s questions.

“Is there a man named Shad Bealing working for you?” the girl asked.

“There was, but we let him go when we had finished our last mystery picture.”

“Could you furnish me with his present address?”

“I may be able to get it for you, though I doubt it. Bealing was just an extra. We keep track of our regular actors only.”

“Do you remember anything about the man?” Kay questioned hopefully.

“Sure, he was a queer fellow—morose and bad tempered. He had an extra finger on one hand.”

“The right or the left?”

“It was the right.”

“So far the description fits a man I am looking for,” Kay declared with satisfaction. “If I could only see him I might be able to clear up the mystery surrounding the case.”

“We could show you a preview of the picture in which he appears,” the director offered. “Would that help?”

“It might. Thank you very much.”

Mr. Elberton escorted her to a nearby room, where he made arrangements for certain portions of the picture in question to be flashed upon the screen. The first glimpse of Shad Bealing’s face made Kay grip her chair. She recognized him instantly as the person she had seen driving the mysterious tan sedan near the street corner where Betty had been struck down. And probably he was also the kidnaper of Miss Ball!

The actor looked even more sinister and repulsive on the screen than he had in real life, for his face had been made up to inspire horror. Kay carefully noted him, and observed that an extra finger appeared on his right hand, as Mr. Elberton had stated.

The picture itself, though shown in unrelated sections, interested the girl deeply. It depicted the exciting story of a beautiful actress who had been kidnaped. Kay wondered if Shad Bealing might not have been influenced by the theme of the play. Probably the idea of absconding with Miss Ball and holding her for a large ransom had been inspired by the plot of the film.

The lights flashed on, and Mr. Elberton turned to ask Kay if she had recognized the actor.

“Yes, I feel confident he is the man who tried to kidnap Miss Ball. If you can give me his address I’ll be most grateful.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” the director promised. “Wait here.”

He was gone nearly half an hour. Kay had begun to think that he had forgotten her entirely, when finally he returned.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” he apologized. “And now I must disappoint you, too.”

“You couldn’t find the address?”

“No, it was never recorded. Bealing had only a small part in the picture. We used him because of his deformity, not for any acting ability. When he was dismissed he left the lot and no one has seen him since.”

“He has never applied for work since?”

“Apparently not.”

Kay was disappointed at her failure to trace Shad Bealing, yet she realized that the officials of the Eagle Film Company had done everything in their power to assist her. She was deeply grateful, and before leaving the offices thanked both the director and the president for their kind

cooperation. They in turn promised that if Shad Bealing could be traced, she would be notified immediately.

As Kay rode back to Miss Ball's apartment, she concluded that on the whole the day had been a successful one. Personally she was confident that Shad Bealing had been responsible for the kidnaping; yet she realized that the authorities would demand more substantial evidence from her before consenting to arrest the man. They would claim that Kay could have been mistaken in her identification of him.

She had seen the driver of the tan sedan from a distance, and the occasion had been a dark, stormy night when visibility was poor. Then, too, she did not have definite proof that the man who had kidnaped Miss Ball was the same person who had struck Betty Worth with his car, although the various clues pointed to such a conclusion.

"If I could only locate Bealing, Miss Ball should be able to identify him definitely," Kay mused. "She saw the kidnaper distinctly, and the police would believe her."

Kay did not know just how to go about tracing Shad Bealing. She doubted that the officials of the Eagle Film Company would be able to help her further. As soon as she had left the office, she thought of many questions she wished she had asked the men. It also occurred to her that she had failed to mention anything about the theft of moving picture equipment from the box-car on the siding near Collston.

"I'd like to find out if Ike Stone and Nathan Blick were stealing material from the Eagle Film Company," she reflected. "If I don't have the opportunity to talk again to the president, I'll write him a letter and tell him what I know."

Her thoughts went back to Shad Bealing, and she felt that she must try to locate him within the next few days.

"There's one clue I haven't investigated," she told herself. "Barbara's father hinted that he knew the identity of the kidnaper. It's possible he can tell me where to find Shad Bealing."

When she arrived at Miss Ball's apartment house Kay hurried up in the elevator and rang the buzzer to be admitted to the actress's suite. Her signal was not answered. Recalling that both Jeanne and Barbara were at home when she had left the place only a short while before, she grew slightly impatient.

"Either the buzzer is out of order or something has happened to Jeanne," she thought.

She tried the door, and found to her surprise that it was unlocked. As she entered, a cloud of dense smoke poured into the hall.

“Jeanne! Barbara!” she called loudly.

Her cries went unanswered. Also, she noticed at a glance that everything was in disorder. The furniture was not in its usual place, and as she groped her way toward the kitchenette she stumbled against an overturned chair.

“Jeanne! Jeanne!” Kay shouted.

She thought she heard a muffled groan, but could not tell where it came from, so she pushed on. Smoke was rolling out of the kitchenette in great black waves. The odor was overpowering. The girl’s eyes became blinded.

“Jeanne and Barbara are probably trapped behind the flames,” she thought desperately. “I must reach them before it is too late!”

CHAPTER XVIII

A RUDE VISITOR

GROPING her way toward the entrance to the kitchenette, Kay saw that the apartment was not in flames as she had feared. Instead, Jeanne had left the dinner cooking on the stove and it had burned to a crisp. Smoke was pouring out of several red hot kettles.

Coughing and choking, the girl fought her way to a window and opened it. Then she darted to the stove and snatched the blackened pots from the fire. Observing smoke seeping from the oven, she opened it and was nearly overcome by a great inky cloud which poured into the room. Recovering herself, she drew out a pan of charred biscuits and tossed them into the sink.

“Oh! This is awful!” Kay exclaimed. “Whatever could have happened to Jeanne?”

She ran from one room to another, opening windows and calling the maid’s name. The apartment appeared to be deserted, yet it seemed strange that Barbara and Jeanne both should go away and leave a dinner to burn on the stove.

As Kay approached a storage closet she heard a muffled groan. Quickly she jerked open the door. The French maid, gagged, with her hands tied behind her back, crumpled to the floor at Kay’s feet.

“Jeanne!” the girl cried in dismay.

She untied the gag, and severed the rope which had been used to bind the maid’s hands together. Jeanne was unable to talk until Kay had given her a glass of cold water.

“Tell me what happened!” she cried.

“I was preparing dinner in the kitchen when a strange man came in——”

Suddenly there was heard an excited murmur of voices in the hall. The maid’s story was interrupted by the arrival of several occupants who lived in an adjoining suite. They had seen smoke pouring into the corridor and thought the building was on fire. While Kay was explaining the situation to them, other residents joined the excited little group.

When the commotion was at its height they were startled to hear a fire engine clanging down the street. Kay ran to the window and looked out. The apparatus stopped in front of the apartment house.

“Did someone turn in an alarm?” she demanded.

“Yes, I did,” a man confessed sheepishly. “When I saw all that smoke I thought your place was ablaze.”

“Hurry down and tell the firemen that we don’t need them, please,” Kay urged. “If they shower us with water after all we’ve been through, it will be a calamity!”

The man hastened to follow out her suggestion. Kay and Jeanne, watching from the window, were relieved when they saw the big red engine slowly drive off. Gradually the air in the apartment cleared, and the last visitor was tactfully escorted to the door.

“Now tell me what happened,” Kay said to Jeanne.

“I was getting dinner,” the maid related, “when a strange man rang our buzzer. I couldn’t understand what he said, so I let him come upstairs. He wanted to speak to Miss Ball and I told him she wasn’t in.”

“Did he give his name?”

“No, I asked him what it was and he said, ‘None of your business.’ I tried to close the door but he blocked it with his foot. Before I could prevent him, he came right into the apartment.”

“It wasn’t Purcell?” Kay questioned. “Barbara’s father?”

“Oh, no, I would have recognized him at once; in fact, he was here only a few minutes before this stranger appeared.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your story, Jeanne. Please go on.”

“I tried to scream, but the stranger clapped a hand over my mouth. He bound me and locked me into the closet.”

“Then I suppose he searched the apartment.”

“Yes, I heard him moving about near the desk. Oh, dear, I don’t know what Miss Ball will say when she hears of it. Do you think she will discharge me?”

“I am sure she won’t,” Kay comforted. “It wasn’t your fault. Can you describe the fellow who locked you in the closet?”

“I was too scared really to look at him, Miss Tracey. He was of dark complexion, I think, though I can’t say for sure.”

“By the way, what became of Barbara?”

“Why, she left right after you went to the moving picture offices.”

“She left? You mean she went on an errand?”

“No, Miss Barbara said she was leaving for good. She gave me a note to hand to you.”

“Please get it.”

The maid went to the desk where she had deposited the message, but everything was in disorder. At first Kay was afraid that the message might be lost, but after straightening out the various papers Jeanne found it.

Kay read the note at a glance. It really explained very little. Barbara had written only three jerky short sentences which sounded impersonal and slightly disconnected.

“I am going away with my father. If you see Miss Ball I wish you would express my appreciation to her for the use of her lovely apartment. And thank you for your own kindness to me.”

Kay did not speak for a moment. She was sorry Barbara had left. She recollected that when they had parted only a few hours before, the girl had seemed strangely quiet.

“Barbara must have known then that she intended to leave,” Kay thought. “She was afraid to tell me for fear I might try to prevent her from going.”

After she had read the message a second time she folded it and put it in her purse.

“At what time did Barbara leave the apartment?” she inquired of the maid.

“Very soon after you did. Her father came for her and they went away together.”

“Did she say where they were going?”

“No, Mademoiselle. I noticed that she was crying when they went out the door.”

Kay sighed. She hoped that Barbara would be happy with her father, but the tears were not a favorable sign. Purcell had chosen to vanish at a most awkward time. Now it would be difficult for the Tracey girl to learn if the information he had tried to sell her concerned Shad Bealing.

As she stood looking out the window, she saw a taxi draw up to the door. A man and a young woman alighted. Kay looked at them disinterestedly, then aroused herself to alertness.

“Jeanne!” she called. “Miss Ball and Mr. Minton are here!”

The maid ran over to the window. Recognizing her mistress, she flew about the apartment in a futile attempt to restore it to some semblance of order.

“Never mind,” Kay said kindly. “I’ll explain everything to Miss Ball.”

She met the actress and her escort at the door and was joyfully greeted by the pair. When she entered the apartment, the young woman gazed about her critically and sniffed the air.

“Burnt food! And the place is all torn up! Jeanne, I hope you haven’t been shirking your duties while I’ve been away!”

“Indeed she hasn’t,” Kay answered warmly. “We’ve had a lot of excitement here the past hour.”

“Didn’t you have enough of that on your wild ride to New York?” Minton inquired with a chuckle.

“Apparently not. But this excitement wasn’t of my own making. I rather suspect that if Miss Ball had been here the adventure would have taken on a more serious aspect.”

She then recounted all that had befallen Jeanne. To this the maid added some details of her own, enlarging upon the incidents to impress her mistress.

“That stranger may have been the man who tried to kidnap you!” Minton exclaimed, turning to Miss Ball.

“That’s very likely,” Kay agreed. “And I firmly believe Shad Bealing is the one we should go after.”

She mentioned the evidence she had gathered that afternoon at the offices of the Eagle Film Company.

“You certainly haven’t wasted your time since you reached New York,” the manager commented admiringly. “So you think Bealing is the kidnaper?”

“Yes, I do. He seems to fit the description perfectly. The problem is, how are we to find him?”

Minton asked Jeanne for a description of the mysterious stranger, but the maid was unable to provide it; nor could she say if the man had an extra finger on his right hand. She had been too terrified to notice anything.

While Miss Ball was going through her desk to learn if anything of value had been taken, Minton delivered several messages to Kay from her home.

“Your mother has been worried about you. She was in a state of near collapse until you telephoned. Then she feared you would have trouble all alone in New York. She was greatly relieved when Miss Ball and I decided to cut our visit short and return to the city at once.”

“I wouldn’t have frightened Mother for anything in the world,” Kay said. “She’s such a dear. That ride in a box-car was not planned by me. I’ll always recall it as a most disagreeable experience.”

“I don’t wonder that you feel that way,” Minton returned. “You might have smothered to death in that crate. Jail is far too good a place for Ike Stone and Nathan Blick.”

“Haven’t they been captured yet?”

“No, but the police are hot on their trail. Your cousin is personally aiding in the search for them.”

Their conversation presently was interrupted by the whirring of the electric buzzer. Jeanne answered the call, and came to report that a Mr. Elberton was below.

“Why, he was the director with whom I talked this afternoon!” Kay exclaimed. “Did he ask to see me?”

“No. Miss Ball.”

“Oh!” A puzzled look came over Kay’s face, then she smiled. “I guess he’s here to check up on my story.”

In truth, that was the reason why the man had come. He was pleased, however, to find Kay at the apartment, for her presence there was proof that she had not given a false address. Also, she was able to mention that she had witnessed the theft of moving picture equipment from a railroad car on a siding near Collston. “Did it belong to your concern?” she asked.

“Yes, that was company equipment,” the director agreed instantly. “We have been trying to find out who stole the material.”

Kay mentioned the names of the two men who had broken into the box-car, and gave a description of each of them.

“I hope they will be captured,” she said. “I don’t mind saying that I have a personal reason for wanting to see them put in jail.”

“Don’t worry, that’s where they’ll be very soon,” the director promised. “We’ll have private detectives on the case in the morning.”

“If you do arrest Ike Stone I’d like to speak to him,” Kay said.

“Consider the request granted,” the director smiled as he picked up his hat. “Ike is the same as captured now.”

After Mr. Elberton had departed Clarence Minton likewise prepared to leave, saying that he intended to call at the Eagle Film Company offices. With his hand on the door knob he turned and looked quizzically at the Tracey girl.

“I suppose when you give Ike the third degree you’ll be able to get square with him for his meanness to you.”

Kay looked startled. “I have no such thought in mind. He deserves harsh treatment but I’d prefer having someone else give it to him. My sole object

in wanting to question Ike is to force him to tell what he did with Shad Bealing's diamond ring!"

CHAPTER XIX

A PACKAGE OF MONEY

“THEN you think Ike Stone was the one who stole the diamond?” Miss Ball inquired.

“I’m positive of it,” Kay affirmed. “Isn’t it logical that if he would steal material from the film company he would not hesitate to take valuables he found in Aunt Jane’s house?”

“Yes,” the actress agreed slowly.

“It’s one thing to believe Ike guilty and another to prove it,” Clarence Minton observed.

“Of course,” Kay admitted. “We’ll have to find some way to make him admit the truth. It won’t be an easy matter, though.”

“You’ll have to catch him first,” the manager said dryly.

The three friends discussed the situation for a few minutes longer, then Minton left the apartment to visit the offices of the film concern. After he had gone, Kay and Miss Ball assisted the maid in straightening the rooms as well as salvaging what they could for dinner. Jeanne was sent to a store for meat and vegetables. During her absence, Miss Ball again brought up the topic of Shad Bealing.

“I didn’t want Clarence to know this,” she confessed nervously, “but I haven’t had a peaceful moment since that man tried to kidnap me. I am afraid he will do me bodily harm.”

“Bealing is a dangerous character,” Kay agreed. “His treatment of Jeanne proves that—and I feel sure he is the one who was here.”

“Obviously he came expecting to find me. I am afraid he will return.”

“That is possible,” Kay admitted. “I wonder what the man is after. Probably money.”

“I’d be willing to pay him a large sum if I were sure he would never annoy me again,” Miss Ball declared earnestly. “The suspense of not knowing when he is going to strike is making a nervous wreck of me. I can’t stand the tension much longer.”

“We all hope Bealing will be caught soon,” Kay comforted. “Now that we know his identity, it should be fairly easy to trace him.”

“The fellow is cunning. I am afraid the police will be unable to capture him. In that case I’ll never have another comfortable moment. If I thought I could get rid of him by paying him some money I’d be glad to do it.”

Kay made no comment. She disapproved of anything of the kind, and moreover she felt that the scoundrel would pocket the money and later make other demands upon the actress.

Clarence Minton returned to the apartment at dinner time, reporting that his conference with the president of the Eagle Film Company had been highly satisfactory. The official, who was deeply interested in the case, had promised that no expense would be spared in tracking down the two men who had robbed the box-car.

Shortly after dinner Clarence Minton went to his hotel, which was several blocks away. Miss Ball and Kay were ready to retire when the telephone rang.

“Will you answer it for me?” the actress asked wearily.

Kay lifted the receiver from its hook.

“Is this Miss Ball?” a guttural voice demanded.

The girl hesitated a fraction of a second before answering, for she sensed that the man at the other end of the wire was not a friend of the actress.

“Is there any message I can take?” she requested.

“No,” the voice retorted shortly. “I must speak to Miss Ball and no one else.”

Kay placed her hand over the transmitter and called to her friend.

“I suspect it’s Shad Bealing,” she whispered. “Shall I have the call traced from another phone?”

“No, no,” Miss Ball said excitedly, taking the receiver. “Let me talk to him.”

“Don’t let him frighten you,” Kay warned.

The young woman did not heed Kay’s words. Her eyes widened with fear as she learned the identity of the caller. It was indeed Shad Bealing, the mysterious owner of the six-fingered glove.

“Yes, I’ll do as you say,” Kay heard the actress promise rashly. “If you’ll agree never to bother me again, I’ll give you the money. Yes, tomorrow night at nine o’clock, wherever you say. I promise not to call the police. You may trust me to keep my agreement.”

Miss Ball hung up the receiver. As she did so, she turned to face Kay, who regarded her somewhat reproachfully.

“I know I shouldn’t have done it,” the actress acknowledged. “But my peace of mind will be worth the price.”

“How much did you agree to give him?” Kay asked.

“Five thousand dollars.”

“And where is the money to be delivered?”

“I am to wrap it in a package and take it to Central Park tomorrow night at nine o’clock.”

“You’re not planning to take it there yourself!” Kay explained.

“I must. Bealing said that I alone should bring it there.”

“Mr. Minton will never approve, I feel sure,” Kay said.

“Oh, he isn’t to know about it until later,” Miss Ball declared hastily. “You must not tell anyone, Kay. Promise!”

“All right,” the girl agreed unwillingly. “However, I think you’re making a mistake not to call in the police. They could lie in wait and capture Bealing when he appears at the park.”

“No, I have given my word and I must not break it. You’ll help me, won’t you, Kay?”

“Yes, I’ll do anything I can.”

“I’ll have you go to the bank for me first thing in the morning. I told Clarence I would not leave the apartment without letting him know. He is so afraid some harm may befall me.”

“How are you to meet the blackmailer without breaking your promise to Mr. Minton?” Kay questioned.

“I never thought of that,” Miss Ball admitted.

“I have an idea! I will take your place.”

“You’ll deliver the money to Bealing?”

“Yes. Why not?” Kay demanded eagerly. “Everyone says I look something like you. If I were to dress in your clothes no one would ever suspect it was I and not you, especially at night.”

“I wouldn’t want you to take the risk.”

“It won’t be as risky for me as for you,” Kay insisted.

“I don’t know what to say,” Miss Ball answered slowly. “I’ll think it over during the night.”

By the time morning dawned she had reached no decision in regard to the matter. As soon as the bank was open Kay carried a special order to the institution signed by Miss Ball, receiving in return a neat package containing five thousand dollars in denominations of twenty-dollar bills.

Before returning to the apartment with the money Kay made another stop along the street, but was careful to make no mention of this.

“You’ll permit me to deliver the package, won’t you?” she urged Miss Ball as the day wore on.

“Only on one condition,” the actress consented. “You must allow my chauffeur to drive you there. If I told him to do so, I feel confident he would guard you with his life, should the need arise.”

“I’ll be glad to ride with your chauffeur,” Kay instantly agreed. “But don’t you think it would be better not to tell him that I am taking your place?”

The suggestion struck Miss Ball as excellent. She believed that since Kay had almost fooled the man once, she could really do so now with a little care. Moreover, if he could not guess the deception, then no one else would.

Although Jeanne prepared an excellent dinner, both Kay and the actress ate sparingly. They watched the clock nervously as the moments sped by.

“I may as well start dressing,” the girl announced when the gong struck seven. “I want plenty of time in which to get ready.”

Miss Ball and Jeanne assisted her. When they had finished, Kay was highly pleased with the result. She did not believe that Shad Bealing could possibly suspect her of being anyone but Miss Ball.

The first test came when she greeted the chauffeur, who had been ordered to bring the car to the entrance.

“To Central Park, please,” Kay directed, imitating the actress’s voice as best she could.

“Yes, Miss Ball,” the driver said politely.

They reached the appointed place at ten minutes before nine, but Kay had planned to arrive early. With the package of money carefully hidden under her coat, she walked rapidly toward a clump of trees which Bealing had designated as the meeting place.

“I only hope my plans turn out right,” she thought uneasily. “Perhaps I should have told Miss Ball what I intend to do, but she might not have agreed, so I guess it’s best that I didn’t.”

Kay glanced alertly in all directions, but could see no one.

“I hope Bealing appears,” she told herself. “If he doesn’t it will ruin everything.”

At ten minutes after the hour, Kay began to lose hope. She was chilled to the bone from the cold, biting wind. Suddenly she heard a step behind her. She whirled about, to face a uniformed messenger boy.

“You are Miss Ball?”

Kay murmured something the lad accepted for an assent.

“I will take the package,” he told her. “Return to your automobile and do not follow me. You understand the instructions?”

“Yes,” Kay acknowledged.

She held out the parcel. The boy took it and disappeared in the darkness, as Kay walked swiftly to the waiting automobile. Suspecting that she was being watched, she entered the car, but immediately stepped out on the opposite side. Simultaneously a taxi drew up and she entered it. Miss Ball’s chauffeur, according to clear instructions given him previously, promptly drove away.

“Everything worked out exactly right,” Kay chuckled to herself. To the driver she said tersely, “Follow that uniformed messenger boy and don’t let him get away. He took the left hand road leading out of the park.”

“I’ll keep him in sight, Miss,” the man promised.

Kay leaned forward in her seat, anxiously watching for the boy who had disappeared with the money. If she could only trail him, she felt sure that he would lead her directly to Shad Bealing. A moment later she was greatly relieved to glimpse the boy entering an automobile which had been parked on the main highway ready for a quick get-away.

“There he is!” she directed her driver. “Keep far enough back so that he won’t suspect he’s being followed.”

The cabman nodded, and applied himself to the task of keeping the mysterious car in sight. It wound in and out of side streets, coming presently to a railroad station. Kay alighted, asking the driver to wait for her, and followed the messenger into the building.

She saw him walk directly to the north side of the waiting room and hand the package of money to a tall, thin man. As Kay had anticipated, he turned out to be Shad Bealing. The blackmailer gave the boy a coin, and hurriedly made his way to a window, where he bought a ticket. Then he stepped out onto the platform to board a train.

The instant he had disappeared, Kay darted to the ticket office. She learned from the agent in charge that Bealing was enroute to a town named Shelbourne.

“Why, that’s not far from the place where Aunt Jane lives!” Kay thought excitedly.

The train had gone and there would not be another until morning.

“I must reach Shelbourne before he does,” Kay reasoned. “The only way to do it is by plane!”

The waiting taxi carried her to an airport. Thanks to Bill Tracey’s generosity, she was well supplied with money, and was able to charter a plane that could take off in ten minutes.

“I must telephone to Cousin Bill and Miss Ball,” Kay thought.

It took so long for the operator to connect her with her cousin, that she did not attempt to explain the real reason for her unexpected trip. Anyway, someone might overhear her. Instead she said tersely:

“I have decided to come home by plane tonight, Cousin Bill. I’m leaving soon. Will you meet me at the Shelbourne railroad station? Be sure to come, for it’s extremely important!”

Scarcely waiting to hear her relative’s hearty assurance that he would be on hand with the car, she hung up and then got Miss Ball on the wire.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re all right,” the actress declared. “I was beginning to worry. Did you deliver the package?”

“Yes,” Kay answered, “but I have only a moment to talk to you. I am leaving by plane for Shelbourne. I intend to head off that man.”

“Don’t attempt it,” Miss Ball pleaded. “I can afford to lose the five thousand dollars, but if anything should happen to you I’d never forgive myself.”

“I’ll be in no danger,” Kay reassured her. “Before I go I must tell you about the money. It is safe.”

“Safe?” the actress echoed blankly. “But I thought you gave the package to the blackmailer.”

“I did, but I played a little trick on him. I substituted a package of fake money, leaving only an outer covering of genuine bills.”

“You clever girl!” Miss Ball gasped. “What became of the five thousand dollars?”

“You’ll find the notes hidden in your apartment. Look in the big Chinese vase.”

While the actress was thanking Kay profusely for what she had done for her, an attendant came to the door to tell the girl that her plane was ready. She bade a hasty good-bye to Miss Ball.

Kay wrapped her coat more tightly about her as she stepped into the cockpit of the monoplane. The trip to Shelbourne would be a cold as well as a dangerous one. In high altitudes flying is always more risky, for ice

sometimes forms on the wings of a plane and sends it crashing to earth. But Kay was too busy with her thoughts to be afraid.

“All set?” the pilot grinned.

“All set,” Kay repeated, smiling.

The machine roared down the runway, nosing into the biting wind. It took off smoothly, and was soon lost in the enveloping night.

CHAPTER XX

THE TWINS' DISCOVERY

WHEN BILL TRACEY turned from the telephone after talking with Kay by long distance, he was besieged with questions from Mrs. Tracey and the Worth twins.

"I don't know what it's all about myself," he protested. "Kay is coming to Shelbourne by plane and she wants me to meet her at the railroad station."

"But why not at the airfield?" Mrs. Tracey inquired. "Are you sure you didn't misunderstand her?"

"No, she said the railroad station. She was excited and didn't have time to explain very much. But I suspect she's on the trail of that man who lost the six-fingered glove, or else she has a clue about Nathan Blick and Ike _____"

He broke off suddenly, realizing that one of the maids, Lucy Cupp, was standing in the doorway listening intently to the conversation.

"You'll not be needed here, Lucy," Aunt Jane said significantly.

"Yes, ma'am," the girl murmured, hastily retreating to the kitchen.

"That girl is a good worker, but she isn't overly bright in my estimation," said Aunt Jane.

"Have you noticed that whenever Ike Stone's name is mentioned Lucy always seems to be around?" Betty remarked when the maid was out of hearing.

"I wonder if she isn't a bit interested in Ike Stone?" Wilma asked thoughtfully.

Mrs. Tracey and Aunt Jane did not hear the remark, for they were talking to Cousin Bill about the trip to Shelbourne. However, Betty drew her sister into the hall.

"I think you struck the nail on the head that time," she praised Wilma. "I've suspected for two days that Lucy was infatuated with Ike. Whenever his name is mentioned she blushes and acts very silly."

"Maybe she knows where he is, Betty."

"That's exactly the thought I had! Before Kay gets back let's do a little detective work of our own."

“She’ll be here in a few hours. We’ll have to be quick.”

“Then let’s get to work on Lucy right now!” Betty proposed.

The twins found the maid sulking in the kitchen. She felt that she had been severely spoken to by Aunt Jane and was smarting under the reprimand. At first Lucy would not talk, but gradually Betty and Wilma put her into a better frame of mind. They discovered that the girl had a deep admiration for Kay. This explained in part why she always listened to everything that was said about her.

Betty and Wilma were correct in their surmise that Lucy knew nothing of their chum’s intention to bring about Ike Stone’s arrest. The twins introduced the farmhand’s name casually into the conversation. When they did so, Lucy smiled rather sheepishly, and blushed.

“Ike is a fine man,” she declared. “He has more class than the other farmers around here. He’s more like a city fellow.”

“It’s strange he left so suddenly, isn’t it?” Betty stated.

“Oh, I know where he went,” Lucy announced importantly.

“To New York?” Wilma prompted.

“California. Ike doesn’t like the climate here—he says it’s too unpleasant.”

“And very likely it will get more so,” Betty commented under her breath. Lucy did not catch the real meaning, however, for she had no suspicion that the twins deliberately were leading her on to reveal more information about Ike Stone.

“I suppose you hated to see him go,” Wilma remarked.

“Yes, I did,” Lucy confessed. “But before he left, Ike gave me something to remember him by.”

“A piece of jewelry?” Betty prompted alertly.

“Yes, a ring. I’ll show it to you if you won’t tell anyone he gave it to me.”

Betty and Wilma exchanged significant glances, but were careful to make no such promise as Lucy requested. Overlooking their silence, the girl removed a diamond ring from a black velvet ribbon around her neck.

“Isn’t it a dandy?” she asked proudly. “I’d wear it on my finger, only Ike told me I shouldn’t until he gets back from California. I imagine we’ll be married then.”

Betty and Wilma stared at the piece of jewelry in amazement. Although it had been cut down to fit Lucy’s finger, they immediately recognized it as

the diamond Kay had found tucked away in the six-fingered glove. Obviously Ike had stolen the ring from their chum's bedroom.

"Isn't it pretty?" Lucy demanded impatiently as the girls remained silent.

"Oh, yes, yes indeed," Betty answered hastily. "It must be very valuable."

"I think Ike's been saving up a long time to buy it. I wish he hadn't made me promise not to wear it on my finger."

Wilma was on the verge of blurting out the truth about the jewel, when Betty, divining what her sister intended to say, shot a warning glance at her. At that moment the housekeeper entered the kitchen and nothing more was said about the matter. When they were alone again the twins held an animated discussion.

"It won't do any good to tell Lucy the truth," Betty argued. "Let's wait until Kay arrives."

"Maybe that would be the best thing to do," Wilma agreed. Then she raised her eyes and quoted significantly:

"Maidens, like moths, are ever caught by glare."

The girls were determined to accompany Bill Tracey when he drove to Shelbourne to meet their chum. They located him in the garage, and pleaded for permission to make the trip with him.

"It will be a long, cold ride," the young lawyer pointed out. "We may get stuck in a snowdrift on the way."

"We'll help you dig out the car," Betty laughed.

"I'll remember that," the jolly fellow said. "If you're awake when it's time to start, you may come along."

"We'll be awake, all right," Wilma announced.

The plane was scheduled to reach Shelbourne at a very early hour in the morning. Bill Tracey and the twins planned to leave the house shortly before midnight. The girls were ready at the appointed time, but when they went to the garage they found Kay's cousin working over the engine of the car.

"The balky thing won't start," he complained. "Run back into the house where it's warm. I'll soon have it going."

An hour later he was still laboring in the garage. Betty and Wilma, watching from the kitchen window, grew more and more uneasy.

"We'll never reach Shelbourne on time now," the latter said. "Kay will think we have failed her."

Finally, when they had given up all hope of carrying out their plans, they saw a puff of black smoke spurt out from the open garage doors.

“Come on!” Betty shouted, catching her sister by the hand. “He has the car started.”

Cousin Bill coaxed the motor carefully, feeding it gasoline gradually until it was running smoothly. The Worth twins closed the garage doors and leaped into the seat beside him.

“How late are we?” the young lawyer inquired anxiously as they drove down the lane to the main road.

“Nearly an hour,” Betty told him. “If Kay’s plane is on time we’ll never make it.”

“I don’t know what made the car act up the way it did,” Bill Tracey said irritably. “I’ll drive as fast as I dare, but the roads are slippery.”

Unaware that her friends had been delayed, Kay was speeding onward in the plane. Although the trip was an uneventful one, headwinds were often encountered and the journey consumed more time than she had figured on. She nervously consulted her watch every few minutes. When at length the plane descended upon the Shelbourne airfield, it was over half an hour behind schedule.

“Cousin Bill will be waiting for me at the railroad station,” Kay thought. “I must hurry. And it doesn’t leave me such a lot of time to get ready for Mr. Bealing.”

The pilot insisted upon accompanying her in a taxi to the railroad station. When they reached it, Kay was disappointed that Cousin Bill was not there.

“Something must have delayed him,” she sighed.

“Perhaps he’s been and gone,” the aviator suggested.

Kay inquired of the agent if her relative had called, but the man assured her no one had been around for some time.

“When does the sleeper from New York arrive?” she inquired.

“It’s on time,” was the answer, “so it’ll be here in an hour. Expecting someone?” he asked. “Or do you want a ticket?”

“I’m—going to meet a passenger,” Kay replied. “If my cousin should come, will you ask him to wait, please? I should be back in half an hour.”

“All right, Miss,” the agent promised.

Kay held a whispered conversation with the pilot, and together the two left the station. They had asked the cab driver to wait, and now directed him to go to the police station.

“I had no idea you are a young detective,” the pilot remarked as they drove along. “If I had, I might have been nervous in the plane,” he laughed.

“But I’m glad you told me about this affair, and I’ll help you out until your cousin arrives.”

“Thank you,” said Kay. “I dislike delaying you. I’ll be perfectly safe as soon as I reach the police station.”

At headquarters Kay explained the situation, and was elated to learn that two men would be sent to meet the incoming New York train.

“If that blackmailer is aboard we’ll arrest him,” the chief promised her.

Kay asked if she might go back to the station with them, and they agreed. Accordingly the pilot said good-bye, wishing the girl success in her venture.

“We’ll leave here in fifteen minutes,” said the captain to Kay. “Make yourself comfortable in the meantime.”

On the way to the tracks, Kay gave the policemen with her a complete description of Bealing. When they arrived she was disappointed again to find that Cousin Bill was not on hand. However, she had only a few minutes in which to worry about him, for presently she could discern a tiny light far down the track.

“Oh, I hope everything will work out all right,” she thought excitedly as the beams grew larger.

Presently the train came puffing into the station, its cars covered with snow and icicles. Passengers began alighting. The officers eyed each person critically.

“Shad Bealing must be staying inside one of the sleepers,” Kay declared.

Her eye swept the long row of windows, nearly all of which were covered with frost. In the front part of one of the cars she saw a man reading a newspaper, his hat pulled low over his eyes. At first glance she thought it was Bealing, but she was not certain.

Kay did not guess that the blackmailer had been quick to observe the policemen. He immediately had suspected that they were waiting for him, and accordingly had shoved his baggage far under the seat and moved away from the window.

“It looks as if your man isn’t on this train,” one of the detectives remarked to Kay.

“I’m sure he is,” she maintained. “I think I caught a glimpse of him.”

“We’ll search the coach,” one of the men said.

The two operators swung aboard the train just as it began to pull slowly out of the station.

“I hope they’ll be able to recognize Bealing,” Kay murmured to herself.

She eyed the moving cars speculatively, half tempted to follow the officers aboard. However, at that moment her attention was distracted by the roar of an automobile which had driven up to the railroad platform. Instantly she saw Cousin Bill and the Worth twins.

“I’d better stay here,” she sighed. “I wouldn’t dare leave now.”

She cast a regretful glance after the departing train, and hastened to greet her friends.

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNFORTUNATE ESCAPE

SHAD BEALING, seated aboard the train, saw the two policemen enter the coach directly ahead of him. Becoming thoroughly frightened at this turn of events, he took his light handbag, which contained the package of fake money, and slipped into the vestibule.

By this time the engine had gathered considerable speed. Bealing opened the door of his coach and looked out. The thought of jumping paralyzed his muscles, and he could not move.

He stood on the lowest step, his bag in his hand, watching the telephone poles whiz by. Presently the train slowed down for a trestle. Bealing decided to seize this opportunity to make his escape.

Shortly before the train reached the bridge, he jumped. He struck the ground harder than he had expected to, and rolled over and over, crying:

“My leg! I’ve broken it!”

He lay in a ditch where he had fallen, moaning in pain. His limb had not been broken, but a muscle had been strained badly, and this hurt him severely. His left arm, too, was injured.

Just then two men came walking along the tracks. Bealing raised himself on his uninjured arm and hailed them. They reluctantly acknowledged his cries.

“What’s the matter?” one of them asked.

“Can’t you see?” Bealing snapped. “I fell off the train! Don’t stand there staring! Help me up!”

“Looks to me as if you jumped off,” the other man commented as he assisted Bealing to arise.

“Well, even if I did, it’s none of your business! Pick up my bag over there by the bushes. No, give it to me! I’ll carry it myself.”

The two men, who chanced to be Nathan Blick and Ike Stone, regarded the grip curiously, but the stranger’s hostile demeanor warned them not to be inquisitive. They noticed that he kept his face averted deliberately and that his left hand was covered with a black glove.

“I suppose we’ll have to take him to the cabin,” Blick commented in an undertone to his companion.

They half carried the injured Bealing along the tracks until they came to a trail which led at right angles through the woods. Although greatly encumbered by the bag, the blackmailer would not permit either Stone or Blick to assist him with it.

The shack was pleasantly warm. As the three men entered, a young girl was just putting on her coat and hat to leave.

“Are you going, Lucy?” Ike inquired.

The girl stared at Bealing before answering. During the absence of Bill Tracey and the Worth twins from the farmhouse she had slipped away to prepare some food for the two men. Although Lucy had led Betty and Wilma to believe that Ike had departed for California, she had known all the while that he was staying in a cabin in the woods. She did not realize that she was assisting a criminal, for the box-car theft had never been discussed in her hearing.

“Yes, I’ll have to get back,” the girl responded, her eyes still fastened upon the injured man. “While you were away I baked some beans and a couple of pies.”

“You’re a swell kid,” Ike praised. “When I get to California I’ll write you every other day. Be sure not to tell anyone I’m going.”

“Say, that food smells good,” Bealing commented gruffly.

“Are you hungry?” Lucy inquired timidly.

“Half starved. I was too busy today to do much eating.”

“I’ll get you a plate of beans,” the maid offered. “And I’ll wrap up your arm, too, if you’ll let me.”

“Go ahead,” Bealing growled.

Lucy heated water and bathed the injured member. She improvised a bandage which she put on in awkward fashion over the wound. The blackmailer eyed the girl intently as she worked. This made her so nervous that she spilled half a kettle of water on the floor. She noticed that he kept his right hand in his pocket.

“I’ll have to be going now,” Lucy repeated when she had finished her task.

“Here, wait,” Bealing commanded unexpectedly. “Bring over my bag from the table.”

Lucy obeyed. Bealing opened it and took out a small roll of bills. He peeled off two of them.

“Here is something for you,” he offered.

Lucy reached out to take the money. As her fingers closed over the bills, Bealing suddenly snatched them from her.

With a low exclamation of rage he examined the money under the lamplight. Then he flung it angrily to the floor.

“Cheated! Tricked!” he shouted furiously. “If I had that young woman here now I’d break every bone in her body!”

Terrified at such an outburst, Lucy fled from the cabin. She darted through the woods and did not slacken her pace until she reached the main road.

As she nervously waited for a bus, Bill Tracey and his party came along the highway by automobile, enroute to Aunt Jane’s.

“Maybe we ought to give that poor girl a ride,” Wilma said sympathetically. “It’s such a cold night and the bus may be late.”

“Why, it’s Lucy Cupp!” Kay cried. “Do stop, Cousin Bill.”

Mr. Tracey applied the brake and brought the car to a halt at the side of the road. The girls hailed the maid, who eagerly accepted an offer of a lift.

“You’re out pretty late tonight, aren’t you, Lucy?” Cousin Bill inquired dryly.

“I went to call on a friend of mine,” the girl answered. “I had such a dreadful experience! I ran all the way to the road!”

“I hope you didn’t see a wild animal in the woods,” Betty declared, shuddering as she recalled her own recent adventure.

“It was worse than that. While I was cooking some food for Ike and his friend they came to the cabin with a strange man.”

“Why, Lucy,” Wilma interrupted severely, “only this evening you told us that Ike had gone to California.”

“I meant to say he’s going there in a day or two,” the maid corrected, in confusion. “Oh, dear, I wasn’t to tell that, either.”

“And you say this stranger frightened you?” Kay questioned quickly.

“Yes, he had been injured in jumping off a train. His arm was hurt and I wrapped it up for him. Then he offered me two bills. I started to take them but he snatched them away, yelling something about being cheated and tricked. He acted so wildly, I ran off.”

Lucy was astonished when the twins burst into laughter.

“I don’t see anything funny about it,” the maid protested.

Kay instantly grew thoughtful.

“She must have encountered Bealing!” she decided excitedly. “He was enraged because he discovered that I had substituted fake money for the ransom cash.”

By this time the automobile had reached the farmhouse. Lucy was sent off to bed, whereupon Kay and her friends held a conference. The Tracey girl told of her suspicions regarding the stranger at the cabin.

“Do you think she told the truth about those three men being in the shack together?” Bill Tracey asked. “She’s such a scatter-brained person, she might have seen such a scene in a movie and told it to draw attention to herself.”

“Lucy’s story sounded straight enough to me,” Kay returned. “I imagine that Shad Bealing was hard pressed by the two policemen who boarded the train at Shelbourne. He probably jumped off and was injured.”

“I’d like to have seen his face when he discovered that you tricked him!” Betty chuckled. “No wonder Lucy was frightened by his display of temper.”

“Of course, it may all be a trumped up story,” Cousin Bill reasoned. “If Lucy told one lie she could easily tell another.”

“Her only untruth was that Ike had gone to California,” Wilma answered. “I suppose she said that because he had warned her not to reveal his hide-out.”

“Lucy has Bealing’s ring,” Betty informed Kay. “Ike gave it to her, but I think she doesn’t suspect it was stolen.”

“I always thought that Ike took it,” Kay said. “We must notify the police and have them surround the cabin. What a grand *coup* it would be if we could capture all three scoundrels at one time!”

Cousin Bill went quickly to the telephone to report to the authorities. During his absence, Wilma recalled that a letter had come that afternoon for Kay. She gave it to her at once.

“Aren’t you going to read it?” Betty inquired, as her chum thrust the envelope, unopened, into her pocket.

“Perhaps I should,” Kay admitted. “I really was thinking of something else.”

Absently she ripped open the flap and glanced at the message which had been written on cheap writing paper. Then she uttered a little cry of surprised delight.

“Girls!” she exclaimed triumphantly. “Just look at this! A letter from Barbara Fountain!”

CHAPTER XXII

NEWS FROM BARBARA

“How can we look at the letter when you’re waving it around like a flag?” Betty demanded good-naturedly. “And who is Barbara Fountain, anyway?”

“Oh, I forgot that you had never met her,” Kay laughed. “She was the girl I met in the box-car. She also went to New York, and while we were staying at Miss Ball’s apartment she ran away without saying where she was going.”

Eagerly Kay read the missive, which was very long.

“What does she say?” Wilma inquired curiously as her chum remained silent.

“This letter explains a great many things that have puzzled me. And it definitely establishes Shad Bealing’s guilt!”

“But what is the connection between him and the girl?” Betty asked.

Kay handed the note over to the twins. Its contents were amazing. Barbara had written that her father, known to Miss Ball as Purcell, had confessed to a part in the kidnaping of the actress.

“Gracious!” Betty exclaimed. “That possibility didn’t occur to anyone, did it?”

“I suspected that Fountain knew who the kidnaper was,” Kay said, “but I never once dreamed that he had helped to plot the affair. I guess that explains why Barbara was afraid to remain at Miss Ball’s apartment.”

The girl had written that Purcell, angered at the way Miss Ball had treated him years before when they were partners, had suggested to his friend, Shad Bealing, that they attempt to extort money from her. Bealing immediately became interested in the idea and made plans to kidnap the actress.

Purcell, in the meantime, began to lose courage. Should the plot fail, he knew that both he and his fellow conspirator would be sentenced to long terms in prison. Fearful that some disaster might result, he tried to persuade his crony to abandon the idea. Bealing apparently agreed, but a few days later he decided to attempt the kidnaping alone.

“When Miss Ball eluded him, Bealing thought that Purcell had warned her of the plot,” Kay explained. “Later he went to Purcell’s room and severely beat him.”

“Then Barbara’s father really wasn’t guilty of the crime,” Wilma commented.

“Not of the kidnaping,” Kay agreed, “but he made a big mistake by trying to induce Miss Ball to pay out money for information regarding Bealing.”

“Barbara doesn’t attempt to excuse her parent,” Wilma observed, reading the final paragraphs of the letter. “She says here that both she and Mr. Purcell realize they have made grave mistakes, but they hope to start life anew in some community where they are unknown.”

“The girl has a job, too,” Betty added, glancing over her sister’s shoulder.

“I notice that she doesn’t state where it is, nor does she give her new address,” Kay said quietly. “Perhaps it is just as well. If we were to keep in touch with each other she might be reminded of her unfortunate past.”

After Wilma and Betty had finished reading the letter, Kay replaced it in the torn envelope and locked it away in Aunt Jane’s desk. The communication would serve as damaging evidence against Bealing, though the girl did not intend to use it unless she was forced to do so, for the message implicated Barbara’s father in the crime.

Cousin Bill came back after telephoning and reported that the police were on their way to the shack in the woods.

“I had a hard time convincing them that it wasn’t another false alarm,” he declared. “The shack has been searched again and again, but Stone and Blick have always managed to elude the officers. This time I think they’ll be caught.”

“I wish we could drive back there,” Kay said.

“It’s extremely late,” her cousin protested. “And there’s really little we can do, now that the police have been notified.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Kay acknowledged.

The day had been a strenuous one, and the girl detective was very tired. It was plain to her now that the net was gradually drawing around Shad Bealing. She could not help but wish to be present at his capture.

“Let’s all go to bed and get a good rest,” Cousin Bill said wearily. “Then in the morning we can drive to the police station and present our evidence against the three men.”

Kay and the twins trudged upstairs to their rooms, leaving the young lawyer to turn out the lights and bolt the doors. Soon the house was shrouded in darkness.

Kay did not prepare for bed immediately; instead, she sat by the window and watched the moon rise over the pine trees. She was thinking of Barbara Fountain, and hoped that wherever the girl might have chosen to make her new home, she would find happiness.

Presently her attention was drawn toward the trees which bordered the lane. She could see the shadowy figure of a man approaching the house. He was carrying a lantern. Some distance away he halted. Then he raised and lowered the light three times in swift succession.

“A signal!” Kay thought.

She tiptoed to the bedroom door and listened. Directly above her she could hear the sound of footsteps. Someone was leaving the servants’ quarters by the back stairs.

“I’m sure it is Lucy Cupp!” she told herself. “Very likely she’s going out to meet Ike Stone!”

Hastily awakening Betty and Wilma, Kay moved back to the window to watch. Her suspicions were soon confirmed. She saw the maid quietly let herself out of the house and hurry down the lane to meet the man with the lantern.

“We must follow!” Kay told her chums. “Hurry and dress.”

Leaving the house, the girls caught a glimpse of Lucy and Ike far ahead, walking toward the main road.

“I’m afraid the police failed to reach that man’s cabin in time to make an arrest,” Kay remarked in disappointment. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be here now.”

“I wonder why he wants to see Lucy at such a late hour?” Betty speculated.

“Perhaps to hatch up a new plot,” Kay said. “I wish we could listen to their conversation.”

The couple ahead had halted near a clump of bushes, and were speaking in low tones. Kay and her chums did not dare to approach any closer lest they be seen. They were too far away to hear what was being said, although now and then they caught a few words.

The girls were so intent upon watching the couple that they failed to observe an automobile parked in a clump of trees along the road. They had no suspicion that Bealing and Blick, now fast friends, had accompanied

Stone to the farmhouse and were waiting for him. However, the two men, hidden by the shadow of the trees, were eyeing the eavesdroppers intently.

It became clear to Kay and her friends that something Lucy had said had angered Ike. They heard him speak harshly to her, whereupon she promptly burst into tears. The farmhand paid no heed to her distress, but turned his back and walked away swiftly. The girl stood gazing after him, crying as if her heart would break.

“Poor thing!” Wilma said sympathetically. “Let’s see if we can comfort her.”

She and Betty ran over to the maid and tried to console her. Kay was about to join them when she heard a slight movement in the bushes behind her. She wheeled, but not quickly enough.

Shad Bealing and Nathan Blick sprang from out of the shadows. Before Kay could scream, one of them clapped a hand roughly over her mouth. Then they dragged her back from the road and out of sight among the trees.

CHAPTER XXIII

FIRE!

KAY struggled to free herself, but in the strong grasp of the two men she found herself powerless to move; nor could she cry out to Betty and Wilma, who were but a few yards away.

Bealing and Blick forced the Tracey girl into the parked automobile where Ike Stone sat waiting. Before the Worth twins were even aware that Kay was missing, the young detective was being spirited off toward a cabin in the woods, not the one where they had kept the stolen movie equipment.

When they arrived at the shack Bealing carefully locked the door. Then he removed the handkerchief which covered Kay's mouth.

"What have you brought me here for, Shad Bealing?" Kay asked, eyeing him defiantly all the while.

"So you know my name?" he sneered. "Yes, Kay Tracey, you are entirely too wise. I'll teach you to play tricks on me!"

With his uninjured hand he caught Kay roughly by the shoulder. She whirled away from him, countering with a verbal attack.

"Your glove!" she cried. "Why do you wear only one?"

The question served to distract Bealing for the moment. Involuntarily he jerked his right hand behind his back.

"I lost the other one somewhere," he muttered.

"Is this it?" Kay demanded, producing the six-fingered glove which was in the pocket of the coat she had grabbed up before leaving the house.

Bealing snatched it from her.

"Yes, it belongs to me." Then, realizing that the admission might be damaging to him, he amended his statement and said, "at least, it looks a little like mine."

As he spoke, Bealing deftly examined the fingers of the glove.

"You'll not find the diamond ring," Kay said. "It was removed long ago."

"You stole my ring!" Bealing accused.

"So you admit it was yours?" Kay smiled. "No, I didn't steal the diamond. It happened that Miss Ball snatched this glove from the hand of

the man who attempted to kidnap her.”

“It’s a lie!” Bealing snarled. “I have never heard of an actress by that name.”

“I don’t recall mentioning that she was an actress,” Kay smiled.

Bealing flushed angrily, and moved toward the girl menacingly.

“What have you done with the ring? Give it up, or I’ll——”

He left the threat unsaid, but Kay sensed from the expression on his face that he was not in a mood for arguing. She had goaded him along far enough.

“Ask Ike Stone what became of your ring!” she retorted.

“Say, you can’t hang it on me!” the farmhand shouted. “I don’t know anything about any ring!”

His voice had a frightened, insincere note which Bealing was quick to detect. He eyed Ike suspiciously.

“What about that big diamond you gave Lucy and asked her not to wear?” Kay reminded him.

“If she told you I gave her a ring, then she lied!”

“My friends saw it,” Kay retorted. “It was the very same one I found in Bealing’s glove. You stole it from my room at Aunt Jane’s.”

Ike began a vehement denial, but Bealing cut him short.

“You double-crosser! You pretended to be my pal, and all the while you had my ring!”

As Kay had anticipated, the three men argued violently. At the height of the commotion she slipped noiselessly toward the door. Bealing saw her, however, and with a yell of rage blocked her path.

“Get some rope!” he commanded sharply. “We’ll tie this young woman up until we’ve settled our differences.”

Kay was bound hand and foot. Ike Stone seemed to take a cruel delight in drawing the cords as tightly as possible.

“This time you won’t get away,” he sneered. “You were clever to escape from the box-car. I’d like to see you loosen *these* ropes!”

He drew them so firmly against Kay’s flesh that she winced with pain. Ike laughed.

“See here,” Nathan Blick commented when the farmhand had finished the task, “why quarrel any more about that diamond ring? This girl probably said what she did to cause trouble among us.”

“Sure,” Ike agreed. “I don’t know anything about the ring.”

Bealing, however, chose to believe Kay in preference to the two box-car thieves. He made a cutting reference to the robbery, which in a moment of weakness Ike had confessed to him.

“If you stole from the railroad Company, you probably took the ring, too!”

“Don’t you throw that in my face!” Stone hissed. “You’re no saint yourself! A blackmailer and a kidnaper!”

With a snarl of insane rage Bealing sprang upon Stone. Blick joined in the fray to help his friend. The chairs were overturned and one of the windows was broken by a hurled missile. Bealing, it was certain, was being severely beaten.

Suddenly Kay thought she heard a slight sound outside the door. She listened intently, hoping that the police had arrived upon the scene. Turning her eyes toward the window, she was startled to see Cousin Bill peering into the cabin. Her heart leaped. He had brought help!

She did not know that her kind relative was alone and unarmed. Wilma and Betty, when they had found that their chum was missing, had lost no time in calling Bill Tracey. He had noticed signs of a struggle in the snow, and had traced Kay and her kidnapers to the road where their car had been parked. While the Worth twins had been arousing the household, Cousin Bill had jumped into his car and attempted to pick up the trail.

The sight of Kay in her present condition caused him to lose all sense of caution. He flung open the door and burst in upon the struggling men. He fought his way to his cousin’s side, but before he could sever her bonds Bealing had sprung upon him. Then the two rolled over and over on the floor.

Kay tugged frantically at her ropes, but succeeded only in drawing them tighter about herself. She could not be of any help to Cousin Bill. Her relative was an unusually strong, athletic man, but he found himself no match for three opponents.

“Look out!” Kay screamed warningly, as Ike Stone raised a glass bottle to strike the lawyer.

Cousin Bill dodged, and dealt the farmhand a stunning blow which sent him reeling against the wall.

By this time the interior of the cabin was a complete wreck. All but one window had been broken, and the outside door was half battered down. A gust of snow blew against Kay’s cheek, but she was too terrified to notice or even care that the weather had suddenly assumed the proportions of a blizzard.

From the first the fight had not been evenly matched. Although Cousin Bill had blackened Bealing's left eye and imprinted a fist mark on Blick's face, he was finally overpowered by them and given a severe beating, the sight of which brought tears to Kay's eyes.

In vain did she plead with the men to spare her cousin further punishment. They ceased their cruelty eventually only because they, too, were weary.

Ike tied Cousin Bill's hands behind his back and fastened him securely to a wooden chair. Although blood streamed from a flesh wound in his face, the lawyer eyed his tormentor unflinchingly.

"Next time you'll think twice before you meddle," the man sneered.

"You win this trick," Bill Tracey said grimly, "but the deal isn't finished. Within forty-eight hours you'll all be behind bars!"

Ike laughed contemptuously.

"Come on," Bealing urged nervously. "We've got to move out of here! You waste too much time talking, Ike."

The three men hastily gathered together a few of their possessions. In his anxiety to quit the cabin, Blick accidentally brushed against a lantern on the table which miraculously had remained intact during the fight. He attempted to save it, but failed. It crashed to the floor, oil spilling in every direction.

"Now you've done it!" Bealing cried.

In an instant the floor was ablaze. The flames spread rapidly, fed by the brisk wind which came in through the open doorway.

"Come on!" Ike shouted. "Let's get out of here!"

Abandoning Cousin Bill and Kay to their fate, the three men fled from the cabin.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DESPERATE SITUATION

KAY and Cousin Bill watched the spreading circle of flame as it crept closer and closer. They were unable to free themselves, although they struggled frantically.

“Let’s scream for help!” Kay cried. “Someone may hear us and come in time!”

They shouted together, repeating their call over and over. The wind flung the sound back at them as if in cruel mockery.

“It’s no use,” Cousin Bill gasped. “We’re doomed. I don’t mind so much for myself—but you are young, Kay.”

In mingled horror and fascination they watched the leaping red tongues. Fanned by the breeze, the fire was spreading rapidly. The room had become unbearably hot, and in a few minutes everything would be ablaze. Cousin Bill was gasping for breath.

“Betty and Wilma may bring help,” Kay thought, but she knew that this was an idle hope. Escape, if it were to be accomplished, must be the result of their own efforts.

Cousin Bill tugged at his ropes until his flesh was raw and bleeding. Weakened and exhausted by the battle with the three criminals, his endurance suddenly gave way. His head slumped down on his chest, and he seemed to lapse into unconsciousness.

“Cousin Bill! Cousin Bill!” Kay cried, almost beside herself.

The lawyer did not move. A burning brand dropped at his feet. In a moment it would ignite.

In sheer desperation Kay tipped over the chair to which she had been tied, deliberately throwing herself toward the creeping line of flame. Rolling over, she held her hands above the fire, letting the flames lick against the ropes. She endured the pain, knowing that this was her only hope of freeing herself.

Kay’s sleeve caught fire, but at the same instant the rope severed and she was free. Quickly beating out the flames, she darted to her cousin’s side. The knots of his bond had been tied so tightly that she could not unfasten them.

Gasping for breath, she found a knife in a drawer of the table and cut the ropes.

She shook Cousin Bill, who slowly opened his eyes. Half dazed, he leaned heavily on her shoulder as she led him to the door. They staggered outside, drawing the fresh air deeply into their lungs.

“We were just in time,” Kay murmured as a wall of the cabin fell. “Another minute, and we would have been burned to death.”

As her relative made no response she gazed at him in alarm. His face was white as death.

“You’re hurt!”

“I’ll be all right,” the young man said with an effort. “I’m just a little battered up from the fight.”

They stood for a moment watching the blaze. The snow, which was falling steadily, tended to keep the flames under control so that there appeared to be no danger of the nearby trees catching fire. As the glare died down, the two cousins became conscious of the intense cold. Bill Tracey shivered.

“We must go,” Kay urged, taking her relative’s arm to steady him.

“I parked the car not far from the road.”

“Do you think you can make it all right?”

“Yes, I feel better than I look, Kay. I’ll make it.”

The lawyer spoke with a determination which belied his condition. The girl went ahead to break a trail through the drifts, but even then the attorney lagged farther and farther behind. At length they reached the place where his auto had been parked.

“Why, it’s gone!” Cousin Bill exclaimed. “And so is Ike Stone’s automobile, which was standing near mine.”

“The men have taken both cars,” Kay groaned. “This is terrible!”

The snow was falling so rapidly now that within a short while every trail leading from the woods would be obliterated. Cousin Bill scarcely had strength enough to fight his way through the deep drifts; yet Kay hesitated to leave him behind while she went for help. The attorney sensed the thought which was passing through her mind.

“We must reach the main road,” he said grimly. “I can make it.”

“Lean on me,” Kay pleaded.

“No, you’ll need all of your strength. But you may go ahead and break trail.”

In many places the drifts came almost to Kay's waist. She trudged through them, making as wide a path as she could. Although she walked slower and slower, her cousin lagged still farther behind. It was obvious that his strength was failing rapidly.

Kay paused and looked back. "Watch out for a boulder—" she warned, but her words were spoken too late.

Cousin Bill tripped over the hidden rock and fell face downward in the snow. Kay ran back and helped him to arise, but the man's feet crumpled under him.

"You're completely exhausted," Kay observed in alarm. "We'll rest a while."

They sat down on a log, huddling together for warmth. Cousin Bill's head wound had begun to bleed again, and Kay sopped the blood with a handkerchief. Soon they were both covered with a thin blanket of snow. Kay's feet and hands began to grow numb.

"It can't be far to the road," she said anxiously. "Do you think you can make it now, Cousin Bill?"

"I think so."

This time he offered no protest as she placed a supporting hand under his arm. Cousin Bill staggered a few feet, and then collapsed.

"It's no use, Kay. I can't make it."

"We'll rest again."

Cousin Bill shook his head, stifling a groan as he did so.

"You go for help," he urged. "I'll wait here."

Kay was afraid to leave the man alone, but she realized that it was up to her to go for help. Even though he should rest for some time, she doubted that he would be able to continue any farther. It was bitterly cold, and if they ceased being active they might soon be frozen to death. She became conscious of a pleasant feeling of drowsiness stealing over her.

"Go on, Kay," the attorney urged her. "You can bring help in about half the time it would take me to get to the road."

"I'll hurry as fast as I can, Cousin Bill. Keep in the shelter of this tree until I return."

Kay pressed his hand in parting and trudged away through the snow. The wind pulled and tore at her clothing, chilling her to the bone; sleet lashed against her face. It seemed to her that she would never get to the main highway. She kept thinking of Cousin Bill and wishing that she had not left him, yet she knew that she could not have done otherwise.

Just as she was beginning to fear that she had lost herself in the woods, Kay caught a glimpse of the road ahead. When she reached it she broke into a run. Her heart leaped with hope as she observed a farmhouse beyond the first bend.

Kay aroused the occupants by pounding on the door. The farmer and his wife had retired, but upon learning from the girl of Bill Tracey's predicament, they quickly came downstairs and let her in. Kay warmed herself by the stove as the man hitched up his sleigh.

He worked swiftly, but it seemed as if the task took him a long time. She was desperately afraid that Cousin Bill might freeze to death before help could reach him. At last they were off. The sleigh was well equipped with heavy lap robes and heated bricks which the farmer's wife had supplied.

"Which way?" the driver asked.

"To the left," Kay directed.

Now that they actually were on their way, she could not complain at lack of speed. The horse was a spirited one and gave his driver considerable trouble.

"Maud was trained for the race track," the farmer explained. "Sometimes she's a bit frisky and hard to handle."

"I think we're coming to the turn off," Kay said, watching the roadside intently. "Yes, I am sure this is the place."

The man pulled on the left rein, but scarcely had the sleigh entered the woods than Kay began to doubt that she had given the right directions.

"Now which way?" the farmer asked.

"To the right, I think," Kay said doubtfully. "Oh, dear, this doesn't look familiar, either."

Occasionally she would tell the driver which way to take, but as they progressed deeper into the woods she began to fear that she had made a mistake. The farmer halted the sleigh, surveying his surroundings.

"See here, Miss, this can't be right. We passed this spot five minutes ago."

"We've traveled in a circle!" Kay gasped in panic. "Oh, I'm all mixed up. I don't know where to look for my cousin now."

Unknowingly, the man had relaxed his grip on the reins, allowing them to rest loosely in his hand. As a rabbit darted across the path, the horse gave a frightened snort and bolted.

The sleigh tilted sharply sideways. Caught completely off guard, Kay and the farmer were hurled headforemost into a huge snowdrift.

CHAPTER XXV

CAPTURED

KAY emerged from the drift and shook the wet snow from her clothing. A short distance away the farmer likewise was getting to his feet.

“Drat that horse!” he muttered.

Maud and the sleigh had vanished into the woods. The situation was indeed serious.

Suddenly Kay began to laugh. Her companion stared at her in amazement.

“Maud tossed us out at exactly the right spot!” she chuckled. “Now I know where I am.”

She ran through the woods, calling Bill Tracey’s name. His answering cry directed her to the location. The attorney was sitting on the log where she had left him.

“Are you all right, Cousin Bill?” she cried, running to him.

“All except my feet. I’m afraid they’re frozen.”

“We’ll soon have you where it’s warm,” Kay assured him.

Then she remembered that the horse and sleigh were gone. She went back to search for the farmer, only to discover that he, too, had vanished. Kay was on the verge of despair, when she glimpsed the driver coming toward her, leading the animal.

“Maud really caught herself,” the farmer explained. “She ran the sleigh between two maple trees and it wedged fast.”

He helped Kay lift Cousin Bill into the vehicle. They wrapped him in warm robes and rushed him back to the farmhouse, where they bandaged his head. The warmth of the room soon restored his circulation to normal. Kay was relieved to discover that his feet were not frozen, and that he would not likely suffer any permanent ill effects from his experience.

In the emergency she had forgotten the three men who had escaped from the burning cabin. Now that she was assured that Cousin Bill was in no danger, she determined to do everything in her power to capture the criminals.

Her first move was to call the police station. She found that the officers, having made one futile trip that night were in no mood to answer a second summons. However, Kay persuaded them that she and her cousin had narrowly escaped death at the hands of the scoundrels.

“If you’ll meet me at Ike Stone’s cabin near the railroad siding, I think I can deliver the men into your hands,” she promised. It was Kay’s theory that the three would return to Stone and Blick’s original hide-out.

Although Cousin Bill was in no condition to accompany her to the cabin, he insisted upon doing so. The obliging farmer drove them to the place which Kay designated. They drew up some distance from the railroad siding and there awaited the arrival of the police.

“We’ve searched this cabin three times already,” one of the men complained. “This is probably another false alarm.”

The group cautiously approached the shack. It appeared deserted. One of the officers rapped sharply on the door, calling loudly:

“Open up, or we’ll shoot!”

The order went unheeded. A warning shot was fired, then the policemen pushed open the door. The cabin was empty!

“Just as I expected!” the captain of the squad said in disgust.

“Wait!” Kay commanded.

She moved swiftly to the trap-door and raised it. There was a sudden commotion below.

“I think we’ve found the men we are after,” the girl said in satisfaction.

The officer descended into the hidden basement and quickly discovered Bealing, Stone and Blick cowering behind a packing case. They were forced upstairs and handcuffed.

“You’re responsible for this!” Bealing snapped, glowering at Kay.

“Oh, no,” she returned serenely. “It was that six-fingered glove that resulted in your capture.”

The actor angrily tried to hide the offending hand but could not do so, for it was handcuffed to a policeman’s wrist.

“That extra finger!” he muttered savagely. “I knew it would some day prove to be my undoing. How I hate it! All my life I have been miserable because of it.”

Ike Stone had been looking at Kay with smoldering fury. When she directed the policemen to break open the one remaining packing case which had been stored in the basement, he could no longer control his anger.

“You meddler!” he hissed. “If it hadn’t been for you we would be free. You’re like a cat with nine lives. You get out of boxes and a blazing cabin _____”

“Shut up!” Nathan Blick ordered harshly. “Anything you say will be used as evidence against us.”

“I guess we’ll have enough, anyway,” one of the officers remarked dryly. “This packing box seems to be filled with moving picture equipment.”

“It belongs to the Eagle Film Company,” Kay said, “and was stolen from a railroad car on the siding. I suppose the other boxes have been sold.”

Stone and Blick emphatically denied their guilt. Nevertheless, they were taken to the police station with Shad Bealing and locked up. Cousin Bill and Kay then went home to a well-earned rest. Before retiring they were forced to relate to an excited household all that had happened. However, the details of the story they left until later.

Miss Ball and Clarence Minton arrived by airplane from New York to assist in the case against Shad Bealing. The actress readily identified him as the kidnaper who had driven the tan sedan. She helped to establish the fact that he was the same driver who had struck Betty.

During the taking of testimony at the trial, it was brought out that Bealing had applied some months before for a part in one of Miss Ball’s pictures, but there had been no opening for him. The actor had brooded over the rebuff and had fancied that Clarence Minton had been partly responsible for his present state.

Accordingly, he plotted revenge upon both the manager and the actress. He hired an airfield employee to tamper with Minton’s plane in the hope that a disastrous crash would result.

Kay found it necessary to produce the letter which Barbara Fountain had written, in order that the case against Bealing might be made complete. The Tracey girl was glad to learn later that the police had no intention of trying to locate her father. Under a new name he would be permitted to make a fresh start in life.

The police were able to identify Nathan Blick as a well-known thief who for many years had made his living by stealing goods from railroad cars. Ike Stone had been his willing tool. Lucy Cupp was greatly dismayed when she was told that her sweetheart had been arrested.

“I didn’t mean to shield him or to keep a stolen ring,” she sobbed to Kay. “And if I had dreamed that he had ever mistreated you, I’d have turned him over to the police myself.”

“We all make mistakes,” Kay told her kindly. “I’m sure you didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

“When will the police come to arrest me?” Lucy asked tearfully.

“Not at all, if you give up the ring.”

“I don’t want the old diamond!” the maid exclaimed bitterly. “I hate the sight of it.”

She removed it from the ribbon about her neck and handed it to Kay, who took the ring as well as the six-fingered glove to the police station.

“I’m so glad everything is being taken care of so promptly,” Miss Ball declared. “With Bealing in jail my mind will be relieved. I’ll be able to go back to work once again.”

“I have just the play for you,” Minton announced. “The part will make you a greater star than ever. But I warn you, this may be your last professional appearance.”

“My last?”

“I mean you are soon to become Mrs. Minton.”

Miss Ball blushed, but declared that she would never give up the stage even after marriage. Minton laughed good-naturedly, for he had anticipated such a decision on her part.

“Anyway,” he sighed, “you must concede the point that I’ll always be your manager.”

“Of course,” Miss Ball smiled, “and I couldn’t have a more wonderful one.”

The following morning the actress and her fiance departed for New York, but not until they had warmly expressed to Kay their appreciation for everything she had done for them. In token of esteem, Miss Ball pressed a small package into the girl’s hand as they parted.

“The gift is a most unpretentious one,” she told Kay, “but it may serve to remind you of your thrilling mystery.”

“It *was* thrilling,” Kay acknowledged, “but the nicest part of all has been my friendship with you.”

She thanked the actress for the gift, but did not open it until later. Wilma and Betty were eager to find out what Miss Ball had given their chum and they impatiently helped to unwrap the package.

“A pair of kid gloves!” Kay exclaimed.

“They’re beautiful!” Wilma agreed. “Keep them for dress. Don’t wear them to school!”

The mention of school threw a slight pall over Betty and Kay. The Thanksgiving holidays were at an end, and the following day would see them all back at Carmont High once more.

“Oh, well, Christmas will be coming soon,” Kay said cheerfully. “Who knows? Perhaps we can uncover another mystery by that time.”

“Well, if you do, don’t bring it to my house,” Aunt Jane interposed, coming up behind the girls so quietly that they did not hear her. “I’m expecting you all back for Christmas, but I’m not inviting any black gloves!”

“Not even my new ones?” Kay laughed, giving her aunt a tender squeeze.

All too soon it was time for them to say good-bye. Then Cousin Bill, Mrs. Tracey and the girls returned to Brantwood.

“Isn’t this the night of the play?” Kay asked her chums.

“What play?” Betty inquired absently.

“Why, the one you bought tickets for. You remember they were in the pocketbook you carried the night you were struck by Shad Bealing’s car. You never did find your purse.”

“I’d forgotten! I wouldn’t miss the show for the world. We must all go to the theatre and see if anyone uses my tickets.”

The three girls purposely arrived early at the performance. Betty was disappointed to see that the three seats in which she was interested were unoccupied. Presently, however, Kay drew her attention to two girls who were coming down the aisle. An usher escorted them to their seats.

“Ethel Eaton and one of her friends!” Betty exclaimed indignantly. “Why, the nerve of them! Ethel must have known those tickets belonged to me because my name was in the purse.”

“Let’s play a joke on her,” Kay proposed.

“I wish we could.”

The Tracey girl hastily scribbled a message which she gave to an attendant with instructions that he deliver it to Ethel Eaton. The girl received the note and immediately became confused after she read it. She spoke hastily to her companions. Then they both arose and departed sheepishly from the theatre.

Kay and her chums laughed so heartily that they could not give their full attention to the play which had just begun.

“What did you say in the message?” Betty demanded curiously. “It must have been full of fire!”

“It was a very nice little note,” Kay chuckled. “I merely wrote: ‘I hope you enjoy the show.’ But you see, I signed *your* name!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Six Fingered Glove Mystery* by Mildred A. Wirt Benson (as Frances K. Judd)]