

BEVERLY GRAY'S MYSTERY



CLAIR BLANK

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The Beverly Gray Mystery Series

**BEVERLY GRAY'S
MYSTERY**

By **CLAIR BLANK**



McLOUGHLIN BROS.

NEW YORK

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BEVERLY GRAY'S MYSTERY

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Beverly Gray's Mystery

CHAPTER I Visiting Royalty

The snow was making polka dots on the windshield as the tall towers of the city fell behind them, and the automobile settled down to a smooth run on the open highway. Storm clouds hung low, and darkness was rapidly descending. Here and there electric lights were beginning to blossom like tiny eyes peering through the falling flakes.

"I could bless Charlie Blaine for sending us on an assignment on a night like this," Lenora Whitehill grumbled.

Beverly Gray laughed. "He didn't know it would snow. Besides, we should be able to get back before the roads become dangerous."

"All I can say is that this visiting prince better be worth it and give us a good interview," Lenora continued darkly.

"Where is your adventurous spirit?" Beverly chided gaily. "It isn't every day we have a chance to interview royalty."

"Royalty!" Lenora sniffed. "I can't even pronounce his name. Will you know how to spell it for the paper?"

"I think so." Beverly chuckled.

"Why would an Indian prince visit Mr. Mengle anyway?" Lenora wanted to know.

"Mr. Mengle met the prince when he was on a visit to India," Beverly explained. "He's a very rich man, and while he was there he presented the prince with an American automobile. The prince, who was educated in England, is touring the States and he has brought Mr. Mengle a gift from his

country. Our report didn't say what the gift was, but it will all make interesting reading for the public."

Auburn-haired, blue-eyed Beverly Gray, a reporter for the *Tribune*, and her friend, blond, vivacious Lenora Whitehill, a photographer on the same newspaper, had become friends when both were attending Vernon College. After graduation they had come to New York in search of a career and now shared an apartment with Lois Mason, a magazine illustrator on the staff of *Modern Miss*, and Shirley Parker, a new young dramatic star known in the theater as Dale Arden. Each of the girls was happily finding success in her own chosen field, and their friendship had grown through many shared adventures.

"Remember when we were in India, Bev?" Lenora mused as the car purred along. "The Taj Mahal, the mystery and romance—"

"The monkeys and the snakes," added Beverly with a chuckle.

"I wish we could go back there," Lenora sighed. "It's true we haven't been back in New York very long, but I'm getting the wanderlust again."

"I'd like it myself," Beverly agreed. "But it's customary to do some work once in a while," she added teasingly.

"My camera is all ready and waiting," Lenora declared. "I hope the prince isn't camera shy."

No matter how much Lenora chattered, or how irresponsible she might seem, with a camera in her hands she was a capable, intelligent worker.

The weather was heralding the approach of Christmas with the first snowfall. The snow was becoming heavier, and the tires sang on the wet road. The headlights scarcely penetrated the curtain of falling flakes.

"Winter hath come!" Lenora commented. "Ordinarily I think the softly falling snow is a beautiful sight, but not tonight. I wish I were home by our cozy fireside."

"We'll soon be at Mr. Mengle's," comforted Beverly. "Could you read that road sign we just passed?"

"I didn't even see it," Lenora replied.

"I think it said ten miles to Redfern."

The girls fell silent, straining their eyes to see through the swirling snow. The section they were in was unfamiliar to them, and it would be easy to lose their way.

Eventually, a red neon sign, winking over a restaurant window, proclaimed the fact that they had reached the little town of Redfern.

“Mr. Blaine said it was the first turn past the drive-in restaurant, didn’t he?” Lenora asked. “Wait a moment, Bev! Look, isn’t that a road leading off from the highway?”

“I expected a more impressive driveway than that,” Beverly commented. “However, here goes!”

The car bounced as it left the highway and started up the narrow road winding between tall trees that looked like black skeletons in the advancing headlights. The trees acted as an umbrella, catching the snow before it hit the ground, and the visibility here was better than on the open highway.

“This can’t be right,” Lenora said after a while. “There isn’t a house in sight.”

“We might as well turn around and go back to the highway,” Beverly agreed.

As soon as they came to an open space large enough, Beverly began to swing the car around. It was then that their headlights fell upon a horse and rider. For a second the two were silhouetted against the trees. Then they plunged away and were swallowed up by the darkness.

“What a time to go riding!” Lenora commented, as Beverly completed the turn and headed the car back to the main road.

“Our lights seemed to startle the rider as well as the horse,” Beverly said. “I wonder where they came from?” she added.

“Perhaps there is a riding academy close by,” Lenora suggested. “But who would want to go riding on a night like this? Ah! There’s the highway.”

They turned into the main road and went a short way until they came to a huge iron gate, wide open and set between stone pillars. A small, brass plate on one of the pillars identified the place as the Mengle estate.

“I wonder if Mr. Mengle has a few extra guest rooms,” Lenora remarked. “We’re apt to be snowbound.”

“He has a stable of horses.” Beverly laughed. “Perhaps we could sleep in the hay.”

Beverly turned the car into the curved driveway, and they slowly approached a huge, brick house whose every window gleamed with light.

The trees and shrubbery were slowly assuming a mantle of white, and the whole setting was like a picture on a Christmas card.

“Something tells me I could like living in a place like this,” Lenora murmured.

“I’ll tell Terry and Mike,” Beverly offered, referring to two young men who were very much interested in Lenora’s future.

Beverly parked the car, and the girls walked toward the front door. They could hear faint strains of music as they approached.

“It sounds as though a party is in progress,” Lenora observed.

“Mr. Mengle suggested this hour for the appointment,” Beverly said, “so it’s his fault if we interrupt anything.”

“Perhaps he received unexpected guests,” Lenora commented. “Oh, wait a moment, Bev, I forgot the flash bulbs.”

Beverly obediently stopped and waited while her friend ran back to the car. As she stood facing the side of the house, she saw what looked like a shadow pass along a small veranda and disappear in the shrubbery. So quickly did it vanish that she was not even sure it was a person she had seen. It might have been the shadow of a waving tree branch.

“All set!” Lenora rejoined Beverly, and they proceeded to the front door.

There was a heavy, brass knocker on the door. Lenora lifted it, and in a moment the butler opened the door.

“Yes?” he inquired.

“We have an appointment—” Beverly started to say, when a man came running up the driveway. Abruptly he pushed past the girls and ran into the house.

“Mr. Mengle! Sahib!” The man’s voice was raised in anguish. “It is gone! My jewel! *My precious Star of the East is gone!*”

Lenora looked at Beverly in astonishment. Then she laughed.

“Here we go again! We come for a peaceful interview and what happens?”

“What indeed!” Beverly exclaimed. “Let’s go in and find out.”

CHAPTER II

Star of the East

Ushered into the reception hall by the butler, Beverly and Lenora found the stranger still crying his news in a frantic voice:

“It is gone! My beloved Star of the East has been stolen!”

The man was of slender build, with black hair and eyes, and dark skin. Without being told, the girls knew he must be the visiting prince. On his head he wore a high, white turban, on the front of which was displayed a gold emblem set with rubies.

Several people hurried in from a room opening off the hall on the right, all of them clearly showing their amazement at the actions of the prince.

“Prince Houssain!” a stocky, red-haired man cried. “What’s the matter? What has happened?”

“Oh, Sahib Mengle, my gift to you—the beautiful Star of the East—has been stolen!”

“Stolen!” The red-haired man, obviously the owner of the house and the man with whom the girls had their appointment, echoed in surprise. “Who would steal the Star?”

“I do not know,” the prince replied, his eyes flashing, “but ever since I have been in your country I have been afraid of this. I have seen many jealous eyes, many people who have offered to buy—”

“Wait!” Mr. Mengle interrupted. He had caught sight of Beverly and Lenora. “Who are you?”

“We are from the *Tribune*,” Beverly answered. “I am Miss Gray and this is Miss Whitehill. We have an appointment for an interview with the prince.”

“Interview!” the prince burst out. “No, no, I cannot! How can I talk to newspaper people when my lovely Star of the East—”

“But we drove all the way out here in a blizzard!” Lenora protested.

“Perhaps a little later,” Mr. Mengle told the girls, “if you don’t mind waiting.”

“Not at all,” Beverly assented. “We’d like to have the story of the theft, too,” she said.

“You can catch the thief, yes?” the prince inquired eagerly. “He must be caught and punished. I myself will cut him to little pieces—”

“Vicious character!” Lenora murmured.

“Suppose you come into the library, Prince Houssain, and tell me how you learned of the theft,” Mr. Mengle suggested hastily, taking the prince’s arm and drawing him away from the little group.

As Beverly and Lenora handed their coats to the butler, one of the guests approached them, hands outstretched.

“Miss Gray— Beverly! Lenora!”

For a moment the girls studied the sun-tanned face, and then both of them exclaimed delightedly:

“Mr. Anton!”

“Tony Anton!”

“I wasn’t sure at first that it was really you,” he said, smiling. “It’s been such a long time since we met.”

Anthony Anton, writer-explorer, whom Beverly had met for the first time when she and her friends had been on a world cruise, and who had developed into a gay friend of the group, led the girls to a sheltered window seat. It was a long time since the girls had seen him, and they were eager to hear about his latest travels. The articles he wrote for archaeological magazines and weekly periodicals were famous, and, knowing the man behind the printed words, the girls found them even more interesting.

“You don’t look a bit different than you did those days on the *Susabella*,” he declared. “You are both as lovely as ever.”

“You look as though you have been working too hard,” Lenora declared bluntly. “Where have you been?”

“The Sahara,” he explained. “We discovered a new tomb, of one of the ancient kings of Egypt, remarkably well preserved—” he broke off with a grin. “But I want to hear about you and your friends.”

“Is the desert still as beautiful at night under the stars?” Beverly asked, smiling.

“The desert is old and unchanging,” he acknowledged. “It is beautiful and cold by turns. It casts a spell on anyone who has been there as long as I have.”

“Did you come home to report on the new tomb?” Lenora asked.

“That is not my sole purpose in returning,” he answered. “I have two lectures to give, and then I will be on my way to visit my brother—the only living relative I have. Tell me, have you been cruising on the *Susabella* since the last time I saw you?”

“No, but only tonight Beverly and I were wishing we could make another journey to India,” Lenora replied. “Tell me, what sort of man is this Hindu prince?”

“A very excitable man.” Tony Anton laughed.

“I can see that.” Lenora giggled. “He’s planning to cut the thief into little pieces, personally!”

“If I want the story for the *Tribune*, I ought to go in and listen to his tale of woe,” Beverly declared.

“Come along,” Tony led the way into the library. “I came over with him, and on the boat we became quite friendly. Perhaps I can help you get your interview.”

The prince was standing before the huge fireplace. Mr. Mengle and a lovely young girl were seated, listening to him as he talked.

“When I arrived there—nothing!” the prince was saying dramatically. “We must do something—now—at once!”

“We will call the police,” Mr. Mengle agreed and rose to go to the telephone.

“This is Marcia Morrison,” Tony Anton introduced his companions.

“Marcia Morrison?” Lenora asked. “The Marcia Morrison who is in Shirley’s—I mean, Dale Arden’s play, *Spring Magic*?”

“Yes,” the girl replied coolly, and turned away from them to talk to the prince.

“Miss Morrison is more impressed with royalty than she is with us,” Beverly thought, laughing to herself.

Lenora, too, had noticed the girl’s rudeness.

“Hm,” she thought darkly. “She can’t afford to underestimate the power of the press. I hope Bev doesn’t mention her name in the story. That’ll show her!”

“My poor Star,” the prince sighed, pacing up and down. “We should never have made the long journey.”

“It is Mr. Mengle’s Star now,” Marcia Morrison reminded. “You presented it to him.”

The prince frowned at her. “Because I am no longer the owner does not mean I can no longer admire beauty!”

“Of course not,” Tony Anton interrupted in an attempt to calm him. “We can appreciate how you feel. However, I’m sure the police will do all they can to find the thief.”

“Then where are they? Why are they not here?”

“They will be here shortly,” Mr. Mengle said, returning at that moment. “In the meantime, suppose we go out and have a look around.”

“I’ll wait for you here,” Marcia said lazily. “It is so nasty out.”

“We’ll come if we may,” Beverly said.

“Yes,” Lenora agreed. “But where are we going?”

“To the barn,” Tony Anton answered, as they followed Mr. Mengle and the prince to get their coats.

“Barn!” Lenora echoed. “Does Mr. Mengle make his guests sleep in the barn?”

“Since the Star of the East is a horse, that is the best place for him, don’t you think?” Tony replied with a laugh.

CHAPTER III

The Unforeseen

“A horse!” Lenora echoed incredulously. “I thought the Star of the East was a fabulous jewel.”

“He is a fabulous horse,” Tony answered. “He can outrace anything else on four legs.”

“But a horse!” Lenora shook her head.

“Who would steal a horse?” Beverly wanted to know.

“A horse isn’t something you can put in your pocket,” added Lenora. “Maybe he just broke loose and is wandering around in the snow.”

“The Star couldn’t very well break loose,” Tony said, smiling. “They gave him a de luxe stall complete with all necessary horse comforts. If the Star is gone, someone must have taken him.”

In the wake of Prince Houssain and Max Mengle, the girls and Tony Anton hurried through the swirling snow to the barn. As if their entrance were a signal for attention, three horses thrust their heads over the gates to their stalls and stamped their hoofs impatiently. The group did not pause but hurried on to the farthest stall. Two men were already there, looking aimlessly at the straw in the empty box stall.

One of the men was a Hindu, dressed in a long, black frock coat and white, close-fitting trousers.

“He is Ram, the prince’s servant,” Tony explained in a low voice to the girls. “The other man is Thurston, Mr. Mengle’s groom.”

“What happened?” Mr. Mengle demanded excitedly.

“This man,” the groom said, indicating the Hindu with a jerk of his head, “wanted to see if the Star was all right for the night. I came back with him. We found the stall empty.”

“And then I came,” the prince added.

“Do you have any idea what happened?” Mr. Mengle appealed to his groom.

“No, sir. The horse was here when I was in the barn at four-thirty.”

“Have you seen any strangers about the place? Any suspicious characters?”

“No, sir.”

“The horse didn’t just walk out of here,” Mr. Mengle exclaimed irritably.

“He is stolen!” the prince moaned. “My beautiful Star—”

“My beautiful Star,” Mr. Mengle corrected glumly. “Well, the police may be able to find something.”

“The snow will hide any trace outside,” Tony Anton said slowly.

“It’s a shame the other horses can’t talk and tell you,” Lenora declared. “Did anyone else yearn to possess the Star?”

“Many people,” the prince replied.

“That’s a big help!” Tony exclaimed.

“The thief can’t have gotten very far,” Beverly said. “A horse would be rather difficult to hide.”

“A van could whisk him away in scarcely any time.” Mr. Mengle frowned. “Or he could be led into the woods. Where are the police? Why don’t they come?”

As if in answer to his demand there came the faint, thin wail of a siren. The group hurried from the barn and met the police in the driveway. They returned to the empty stall and watched the routine examination. Then they all went into the house.

Inspector Baker, sandy-haired, ruddy-complexioned, with keen gray eyes, listened to the prince’s description of the Star of the East while an assistant carefully made notes.

“We will start a search at once,” the inspector promised.

“Formalities are not enough,” the prince exclaimed. “You must find the Star of the East.”

“We’ll do our best, sir,” Inspector Baker assured him. “Ordinarily, a case of this sort would be handled by the local authorities. I happened to be out here tonight on another matter, but I’ll supervise this investigation personally. We’ll find the Star, sir.”

“I will post a generous reward,” Mr. Mengle added.

“Have you any idea who might have taken him?” Inspector Baker asked.

“Certainly not,” Mr. Mengle retorted. “I wouldn’t have called you if I knew who took him.”

“As I waited for my friend in the driveway, on our way to the house,” Beverly volunteered, “I thought I saw someone on the veranda. But he was gone so swiftly I thought I might have been mistaken.”

The inspector dispatched one of his men to search outside the house. In a short time the officer returned with the information that there were faint footprints near the veranda where snow had drifted.

“The footprints may have been made by my butler,” Mr. Mengle suggested. “I’ll call Collins.”

The butler, however, had no information to give.

“I didn’t leave the house tonight, sir,” was his firm statement.

“If you will give us the names of the individuals you know who would like to possess the Star, Mr. Mengle, we will investigate,” the inspector promised.

“None of the people I know would be likely to steal the horse,” Mr. Mengle protested. “They each offered to buy him.”

“Since you wouldn’t sell, this may have been someone’s way of getting him,” the inspector answered. “The names, please?”

“The most persistent bidder was Vera Moore, the animal trainer in Hunt’s Circus. There were others, of course—”

“There are also many in India who covet the Star,” the prince interrupted. “It might be that one of them has followed me here.”

“Have you noticed any suspicious characters around here?”

“No,” Prince Houssain admitted.

“If you do, let me know,” the inspector advised. “I’ll return in the morning, Mr. Mengle, and take a look around in daylight.” At the doorway he hesitated and turned back. “By the way, Prince Houssain, have you ever heard of the Maharajah of Rukhsden?”

“Yes,” the prince acknowledged. “We are very good friends. I visited him on my way to this country.”

“Did you ever see the famous pink diamond he has—or had?” the inspector corrected himself.

“Yes,” the prince said again. “He showed the diamond to me on my last visit.”

“It was stolen from him recently, and it is believed someone may try to smuggle it into this country. We have been warned to be on the lookout for it.”

Beverly happened to glance at the prince’s manservant, Ram, when the inspector made his announcement. The man was standing quietly by the door, his eyes on the prince, his face immobile. When Inspector Baker spoke about the diamond, Ram’s dark eyes darted swiftly about the room, as if he were trying to detect some knowledge of the diamond in the faces of those present.

“A pink diamond?” Marcia Morrison murmured. “I’ve never seen one of those.”

“There are several famous colored diamonds in the world,” Max Mengle explained. “There is a pale-yellow diamond in the Austrian crown jewels, and a fine, apple-green diamond in the Saxon crown jewels.”

“Well, there is nothing further to be done here tonight, so I’ll be on my way. Good night!” The inspector and his men departed as swiftly as they had come.

“We must be going, too,” Beverly said. “Come, Lenora.”

Tony Anton accompanied the girls to the door.

“Don’t you want your interview?” he asked Beverly.

“We’ll be back tomorrow,” Beverly said, smiling. “I’m going to the office to write the story of the stolen horse.”

“I won’t be here tomorrow,” Tony Anton said. “I’m off to Boston to give two lectures. I’ll see you when I return to New York.”

“Come to our Christmas party,” Lenora invited. “We want to hear all about your new explorations. You can tell us about them then.”

“And we can talk about the possibility of another cruise,” Tony added.

“Of all things to steal!” Lenora shook her head as she sat beside Beverly on the ride back to town. “What do you make of it, Bev?”

“It fascinates me!” Beverly exclaimed. “Who took him, and what did the thief do with him?”

“It sounds like the jack-pot question in a radio contest,” Lenora said, laughing. “Do I win an airplane or a new car if I guess the right answer?”

“You’ll win Mr. Mengle’s reward,” Beverly returned.

“You don’t suppose the man on horseback we saw on our way to the Mengle estate might have had anything to do with it?” Lenora asked next.

“We got a good look at him,” Beverly said. “We should be able to recognize him if we ever see him again. I’ll mention it to Inspector Baker.”

When Beverly gave Charlie Blaine, her editor, the story of the missing horse, he said, “It’s your mystery, Beverly, stay with it. Mr. Mengle is well known in sporting circles, as well as the theatrical and financial world. This should make interesting reading for a lot of people.”

Beverly and Lenora went home at last, to find Shirley Parker and Lois Mason wrapping Christmas presents.

“The snow put us in the mood,” Lois declared. “After all, the holidays are getting nearer.”

“It can’t be Christmas yet,” Lenora moaned. “I haven’t done my shopping.”

“I’ll help you,” Lois offered generously. “I love to spend other people’s money.”

“Where have you been?” Shirley asked. “This isn’t the sort of night to go gallivanting around town.”

“We have a riddle for you,” Lenora said brightly. “If you stole a horse, where would you hide him?”

“I’d hide him in the bathtub,” Lois answered promptly. “Then when I wanted to get rid of him, all I’d have to do would be to pull out the plug.”

“I don’t get it,” Lenora said owlshly, deliberately keeping her face sober.

“A horse is sometimes called a plug—oh!” Lois broke off to hurl a pillow at her friend when she saw that Lenora was teasing her.

“In the bathtub!” Lenora giggled. “I never thought of that. We didn’t look in Mr. Mengle’s bathtub, Bev.”

“Whose bathtub?” Shirley demanded.

“Mr. Max Mengle,” Lenora supplied. “He is well known as a millionaire, sportsman—”

“He is also known as a theatrical angel,” Shirley informed them. “It is his money which is producing *Spring Magic*.”

“We met Marcia Morrison,” added Lenora. “The girl who is in your play.”

“She has a bit part,” Shirley nodded.

“What kind of role do you have this time?” Lenora asked. “Is it as good as your last one?”

“This is the best part I ever had,” Shirley sighed. “It is very dramatic. I love it. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything. It will be my best performance— I hope,” she finished with a modest laugh.

“I’m sure it will,” Beverly declared loyally.

“And who else do you suppose we met tonight?” Lenora demanded. “Tony Anton! Remember him?”

Lois and Shirley remembered the explorer-writer very well, and the discussion immediately turned to memories of their world cruise.

“It was wonderful to see all those different things, all the new places. And there are so many other exciting places—” Shirley broke off with a sigh.

“I thought I was the only one who got lonesome for places I’ve never seen,” Beverly said, smiling.

“Yes,” Lenora nodded thoughtfully. “It is like a loneliness for something you’ve never had. I feel that way lots of times. I want to go somewhere— anywhere new and exciting.”

“Do you remember, we once promised ourselves we would return to San Francisco and stand again at the top of Telegraph Hill to look at the harbor —” Shirley murmured dreamily.

“I remember,” Beverly nodded. “So many of those promises are made and so few are kept.”

“Let’s keep ours, Bev,” Shirley said eagerly. “Don’t let it be one of the forgotten ones.”

“Go back to San Francisco?” Beverly’s eyes began to shine with expectancy.

“Whoa!” Lenora shouted. “Shirley is starring in a play, remember? And, Bev, you have to find a horse!”

“Ah, yes.” Beverly laughed. “My mystery—a stolen horse. Maybe I’ll find the solution in my dreams tonight.”

“In that event, I’ll help you collect the reward,” Lenora declared brightly.

“And we’ll all help you spend it,” added Lois.

The following morning found them still puzzling over the disappearance of the Star of the East.

“I dreamed about horses all night,” Lenora complained. “White ones, brown ones, fat ones, lean ones—”

“You must have been on a carousel,” Lois giggled. “Were there any horses that went up and down?”

“One looked exactly like you,” Lenora retorted, making a face at her friend.

Lois’s reply was cut short when the telephone rang and Beverly picked it up. “It’s for Shirley,” she reported.

The girls at the breakfast table could not help overhearing Shirley’s part of the conversation.

“What?” Shirley sounded amazed and stunned. “I don’t believe it. Very well, I’ll meet you. Good-bye.”

Shirley did not return to the breakfast table, but went into the bedroom. When she reappeared she was donning her hat and coat.

“Off to the theater so soon?” Lenora asked.

“No, this is something else,” Shirley replied. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

“She looked to be on the verge of tears,” Lois commented when the door closed behind their friend.

“Not Shirley,” Lenora declared. “She doesn’t cry easily. Besides, if it had been anything serious she would have told us.”

“I suppose so,” Lois agreed.

After breakfast the three girls drove downtown together. They dropped Lois at the *Modern Miss* office, and Lenora and Beverly went on to the *Tribune* building. From there they drove out to Mr. Mengle’s house.

“If Inspector Baker can look around in the daylight, so can we,” Lenora remarked.

The winter sun was doing its best to dispense with the previous night's snowfall, but progress was slow because of the bitter cold.

"What do we do first?" Lenora asked as they climbed from Beverly's car.

"I think I'll go to the house and see if I can talk to the prince, first of all," Beverly answered. "Why don't you come along and get his picture?"

They had started up the driveway toward the front door when they saw that the French doors leading into the library were open.

"On a morning like this!" Lenora exclaimed. "Mr. Mengle must certainly have a roaring fire in the fireplace. Well," she shrugged, "I suppose we might as well go in that way."

The girls walked along the veranda, knocked tentatively on the glass, and stepped into the room. It was the same room they had been in the night before, but they scarcely recognized it. Books had been pulled from their shelves; a portrait on the wall was pushed aside, revealing an open wall safe; the large mahogany desk at the far end of the room was littered with papers, and its drawers were open, their contents spilled recklessly onto the floor.

"Goodness, it looks as if a cyclone hit the place." Lenora gasped, gazing around in amazement. "What do you suppose happened?"

"I don't like it," Beverly said with a frown. "It certainly looks like robbery."

"I wonder what the thief was after," Lenora murmured. "We may get a bigger story than we anticipated." She crossed the room toward the fireplace and stopped. "Beverly!" she whispered weakly, stepping hastily back. "B-Beverly, look!"

Beverly moved quickly to see what had made her friend suddenly turn pale. As she rounded the corner of the sofa she stopped suddenly. On the floor lay Max Mengle, a tiny pool of blood forming under his head.

CHAPTER IV

Allen Explains

“Let’s get out of here, Bev!” Lenora turned away from the huddled figure on the floor and started toward the door.

“We can’t run away,” Beverly answered, her trained reporter’s eyes going hastily over the scene.

One of the brass andirons from the fireplace lay close to Max Mengle, its shining surface spotted with blood.

“See if you can find the butler, Lenora. Tell him to call a doctor. He—” Beverly broke off as the faint sound of a door closing came to them.

In an instant the girls were in the hall and had the front door open. No one was in sight, but they heard the sound of a motor. Beverly ran out to the driveway. As she did, a car roared around the corner of the house. The driver, a dark figure bent low over the steering wheel, ignored Beverly’s signal to stop, and the car bore down upon her. Beverly leaped aside just in time.

“Bev, are you all right?” Lenora was at her friend’s side. “The driver almost ran you down!”

“I’m all right,” Beverly said breathlessly.

“Did you see who it was?”

Beverly shook her head, and they started back to the house. In the hall Beverly paused and looked at her friend.

“Do you smell it, Lenora?”

“Perfume,” Lenora nodded. “Rather an exotic scent, too.”

“Do you recognize it?”

Lenora thought for a moment. “I believe it is Summer Lilac. Shirley got a bottle for her birthday. It is too overpowering for my taste.”

The girls turned to the library, and as they entered the room a man straightened up to face them. It was Ram, the prince’s servant. He had been bending over Mr. Mengle.

“He still lives,” Ram murmured.

“Yes,” Beverly answered. “We must not delay any longer. I’m going to telephone for a doctor.” She went into the hall to the telephone. As she picked up the receiver Collins entered the house. “Who is Mr. Mengle’s personal physician?” she asked hastily. “There has been an accident. Please call him at once.”

“Yes, miss,” the butler said promptly.

Beverly left him at the telephone and went back to the library.

“It is cold in here,” Lenora complained. “Do you think it’s all right to close the doors, Bev, or shouldn’t we touch anything?”

“It might be better to leave them as they are,” Beverly nodded. “Lenora, when Collins has finished telephoning will you call Inspector Baker and tell him what has happened? Then call Charlie Blaine and tell him.”

“Right!” Lenora departed promptly.

Beverly moved farther into the room and looked around, seeking some clue to the person who had created such havoc in the library and who might be guilty of attacking Mr. Mengle. Had the visitor succeeded in opening the safe, or had Mr. Mengle done that before he was injured? What had the visitor been looking for in the desk when he dumped the contents of all the drawers upon the floor?

Beverly slowly approached the mahogany desk. Every drawer had been searched. Not even the wastebasket beside the desk had escaped. It lay on its side, the contents spilling out onto the rug.

Beverly turned around to see Ram watching her from the doorway. His black eyes never left her, and his face was dark and filled with foreboding.

“There is a curse upon this house,” he said darkly. “We have had nothing but misfortune since we entered it.”

“Have you any idea who did this?” Beverly asked.

“No, mem-sahib.”

“Where is the prince?”

“In his room. He was not feeling well this morning,” Ram replied.

“Tell me about the Star of the East,” Beverly suggested.

“Words are inadequate to describe the beauty of such an animal. There are none like him,” Ram answered gravely. “It is unfortunate that he was

given to Sahib Mengle.”

“You do not like Mr. Mengle?” Beverly murmured.

“No, mem-sahib,” was the quiet answer. Ram bowed and moved away, disappearing up the stairway toward his master’s room.

“And he doesn’t care what I make of that,” Beverly thought. At least Ram was honest enough to disclose his real feelings. Was he the one who had struck Mr. Mengle down with the andiron? Somehow Beverly doubted it.

At that moment Collins brought the doctor into the library. The doctor made a hasty examination of the injured man.

“It is a good thing you did not try to move him,” he announced. “It looks like a skull fracture and a severe neck injury.”

The doctor telephoned for an ambulance, and a little later the whine of a siren could be heard, growing in volume as the ambulance approached. Lenora appeared as Mr. Mengle was being taken from the house.

“Mr. Blaine said to stay here and telephone as soon as we learn anything more.”

Inspector Baker arrived after the ambulance was gone, and plunged right into an investigation.

“Who found Mr. Mengle?” he wanted to know.

“I guess we did,” Lenora answered. “That is, I guess we were the first ones to find him. The French doors were open so we came in that way—”

One of the uniformed policemen who had accompanied the inspector to the house entered the library and handed something to his chief.

“We found it in the room across the hall—behind the door,” he said.

The inspector turned to Beverly, holding aloft a black glove.

“Does this belong to you?”

“No,” Beverly answered.

Lenora shook her head hastily as he turned to her.

“A woman’s black glove,” the inspector murmured. “Perhaps it belongs to the mysterious person who escaped in the automobile.”

Beverly examined the glove more closely.

“I never saw it before,” she said, “but perhaps it was lost by one of Mr. Mengle’s dinner guests last night.”

“Miss Morrison was the only young woman here last night—until Miss Gray and Miss Whitehill came,” Collins replied. “I am sure the glove was not in the room when I tidied up this morning.”

“Tell me, Collins,” the inspector said, “did Mr. Mengle keep much money in his safe?”

“I don’t believe so. He paid most of his accounts by check.”

“Did Mr. Mengle have any enemies that you know of?” the inspector pursued.

The butler shifted uneasily. “I really wouldn’t know.”

“Did he have any callers this morning?”

“Miss Arden and Miss Morrison were here.”

Beverly and Lenora started in surprise. Miss Arden? Did he mean Shirley? She might have used her stage name. She had said Mr. Mengle was supplying the financial backing for her new play, but why should she come here instead of going to rehearsal?

“Did you see them in the house?”

“Yes, sir. They were here when I went on an errand for Mr. Mengle.”

“What did they come to see Mr. Mengle about?”

“I wouldn’t know, sir,” Collins replied loftily, with the implication that he did not pry into his employer’s business.

“We will have to talk with Miss Arden and Miss Morrison,” Inspector Baker murmured.

“Is that all, sir?” Collins wanted to know.

When the butler left the library Beverly followed him.

“What time did Miss Morrison and Miss Arden leave?” Beverly asked.

“I wouldn’t know, miss. I had just returned when you asked me to call Mr. Mengle’s physician.”

“Has Mr. Mengle received any word about the Star of the East?” Beverly inquired.

“No, miss.” The butler bowed and moved away.

Shirley had been here this morning—with Marcia. Had either of the girls been here when Mr. Mengle was attacked? That glove—was it Shirley's? Beverly did not remember seeing any like it in Shirley's possession. Perhaps it belonged to Marcia. Beverly had a sudden desire to talk to Shirley and decided to drive back to town immediately.

Returning to the library, Beverly secured the inspector's permission to leave. She suggested, however, that Lenora stay and listen to the inquiry. As she left the house and started down the drive, Beverly turned to glance back at the building and stopped. A man was crouching outside the French doors of the library, listening. His back was toward Beverly and he did not see her moving toward him.

Beverly stopped at the edge of the veranda and spoke.

"If the inspector knew you were so interested I'm sure he would have invited you in."

The man whirled about. His green eyes, set in a tan, rugged face, swept over her, and then he smiled disarmingly.

"It does look bad for me, doesn't it?" he admitted.

"In the light of what has happened—yes," Beverly agreed.

"Just what *has* happened?" the young man asked. "That is what I'm trying to find out." He indicated the police car in the driveway. "I thought I would reconnoiter a bit before stepping into the lion's den."

"Mr. Mengle has been hurt," Beverly answered. "Didn't you know?"

He gave her a sharp look. "No, I didn't know about it. When did it happen?"

"Just a short time ago."

"How was he hurt? What's wrong with him?"

"The doctor diagnosed it as a skull fracture and has taken him to the hospital," Beverly replied. "He is in a very grave condition."

"Are you a friend of Mr. Mengle's?" Beverly wanted to know.

"You ask a lot of questions." The young man grinned.

"I'm a reporter." Beverly grinned back. "It's my business to ask questions."

"I refuse to be quoted," he said firmly.

“Who are you?” Beverly asked.

“Yes,” Inspector Baker added, opening the French doors at that point to investigate the sound of voices. “Who are you?”

“I’m Allen Mengle,” the stranger said pleasantly.

“Max’s brother?”

“I am Max’s foster brother. His father adopted me when I was just a kid. We were raised as brothers, though, of course, Max is quite a bit older than I am. He comes to see me now and then, and I come up to see him, but we aren’t really close.”

“I suppose you hope to inherit his estate,” Inspector Baker interrupted shrewdly.

“I had nothing to do with whatever happened to Max, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Allen Mengle said quietly.

“Come inside,” the inspector invited.

Beverly followed the men inside and watched as Allen looked about the disheveled room.

“Who do you think might have attacked your brother?” Inspector Baker asked.

“To me it appears as though he surprised a thief robbing his safe and was slugged before he could call for help,” the young man declared.

“His butler says he didn’t keep much money in the safe. Do you know of any other valuables the thief might have been after?”

“No, I don’t. Max didn’t confide the contents of his safe to me.”

“Where do you live, Mr. Mengle?”

“I have a horse farm in Maryland.”

“You said you and your brother aren’t very close. Why not?” Inspector Baker asked.

“When we were youngsters we got along fairly well,” Allen said, “but lately we disagreed on my future. I want to train horses on my farm, and Max wants me to take over his investment business here in New York. All my life, especially after our father died, Max has told me what to do—what school to attend, what studies to take, what to do on my vacations—” the young man’s voice grew bitter as he spoke. “I rebelled at last, and it made him furious. He said a lot of nasty things, among them that I would never

amount to anything and that I would never make any money. Max thinks a great deal about money. Well, I'm satisfied. I have a good housekeeper, a fine trainer, and I am making a success of my farm—but it doesn't please Max."

"What brought you here today?"

"I came to see the horse the Hindu prince presented to Max," Allen said. "Horses are my chief interest."

"Did you know the horse was stolen last night?"

"No, I did not."

"You dislike your brother because he dominated you and tried to choose your career for you," Inspector Baker murmured. "Is that all?"

"He also thought he could dictate the girl I was to marry," Allen answered with a frown. "He never has liked the girl I chose, and he did everything he could to part us. Well, at last he has succeeded."

"What is the girl's name?" Inspector Baker asked.

"Marcia Morrison."

CHAPTER V

The Search

When Beverly got back to town, she was unable to locate Shirley, so she decided to talk to Marcia. She got Marcia's address from the telephone directory, and drove to the swank apartment house where Marcia lived. The lobby of the building was empty, except for the uniformed elevator boy. He took Beverly up to the second floor and pointed out the door to Marcia's apartment.

Beverly rang the doorbell. After a few moments a maid opened the door.

"I'd like to see Miss Morrison," Beverly said.

"Miss Morrison is out."

"When will she return?" Beverly asked.

"That is hard to say. She is at the theater. Do you want to leave a message?"

"I just came from the theater and she hasn't been there this morning," Beverly said.

"She may be shopping," the maid commented. "I do not know when she will return."

Beverly turned away. It might be hours before Marcia appeared. There was nothing Beverly cared to say in a message. The only thing to do was to come back later.

When Beverly returned to the *Tribune* office she found a message on her desk.

"Allen Mengle called. Wants you to have lunch with him at the Drake at 1:00 P.M."

Why should Allen Mengle want to see her? Well, there was only one way to find out. Promptly at the appointed hour Beverly entered the Drake. Allen Mengle hurried to meet her.

"I was afraid you might not come," he confessed. "I'm glad you did."

The headwaiter led them to a table for two, and while Allen consulted the menu and ordered lunch Beverly studied him. His eyes were clear and his smile was wide and disarming. He seemed to be a frank and sincere person, and yet he was a suspect for the attack upon his brother.

“I suppose you are wondering why I asked you to meet me here,” Allen said, as if he had read her thoughts. “The butler told me you questioned him about Marcia.”

“She may have been there when your brother was attacked,” Beverly said.

Allen regarded her silently for a moment.

“I am afraid she might have quarreled with Max,” he confessed slowly. “They are both impulsive and quick-tempered. However, I won’t believe Marcia did anything wrong.”

“You have a great deal of confidence in her,” Beverly said with a smile.

“I want to marry her,” Allen said simply. “She wanted to marry me, too, until Max discovered she was interested in a stage career.”

They were silent as the waiter brought their lunch.

“What do you mean?” Beverly asked.

“When Max found out about her theatrical ambitions, he used the knowledge to part us by offering her a role in a play in which he has a large financial interest. He has evidently convinced her there is no future with me. She sent me a note saying she didn’t want to see me again.”

“Did she say why?”

“All she said was that she had thought it over carefully and decided that it was better for both of us if we didn’t see each other again.”

“Does Mr. Mengle have many enemies?” Beverly asked.

“Max is a hardheaded businessman. He can be ruthless and cruel,” Allen said unhappily. “I’m afraid he has more enemies than friends.”

“Tell me about your farm in Maryland,” Beverly suggested, changing the subject abruptly.

Allen launched into an enthusiastic description of the old farm he had bought and modernized. When he spoke of his horses his eyes glowed with the love he had for his work.

“Doesn’t Marcia like horses?” Beverly asked.

“Oh, yes,” Allen said quickly. “We planned great things together, but Max never liked Marcia. He was always pointing out her bad qualities. I know she was spoiled as a child, and has always managed to get everything she wanted without considering other people. In a way, she and Max are a lot alike.”

“Does your brother have a fancy for horses, too?” Beverly asked.

“He has three fine hunters,” Allen nodded. “He leaves them to his groom most of the time, though. I’d certainly like to see the one Prince Houssain has given him. Max has another horse, Dancer, that I am very fond of. I didn’t get a chance to go out to the barn. I hope Kenny is treating him well.”

“Kenny?” Beverly asked.

“The groom.”

“I thought Thurston was the groom,” Beverly commented.

“Thurston!” Allen exclaimed. “You must be mistaken.”

“If Thurston has small, black, shoe-button eyes and a broken nose, he is the groom. I saw him there last night,” Beverly informed him. “What’s wrong with Thurston?”

“He is cruel and hard on the horses. He worked for me for two weeks. I value my horses too much to let him handle them for me. I discharged him last week.” He shrugged. “Perhaps Max will have better luck with him.”

“He had better be gentle with the Star of the East,” Beverly said with a smile, “or the Hindu will haunt him. I wonder what happened to the Star?”

“I don’t believe you will find him at the Drake,” a laughing voice declared, and Lenora stopped at their table. “I saw your note at the office, Bev, and came over.”

Allen invited Lenora to join them for lunch and the waiter brought another chair.

“I rode back to town with Inspector Baker. He is going to question both Shirley and Marcia,” Lenora announced. “He believes they must have been there when Mr. Mengle was attacked.”

“Because of the glove?” Beverly asked.

“That and the fact that there are a woman’s fingerprints on the andiron,” Lenora answered.

“Are you sure?” Allen asked tensely.

“I waited at police headquarters for word of what they found,” Lenora continued. “It rather looks as though a girl is the culprit. Therefore, the inspector wants to see Shirley and Marcia.”

“I’d like to talk to Marcia, too,” Allen declared, “but first I’m going to the hospital to see Max.”

“The last report Inspector Baker had was that your brother is in a coma and they cannot question him. It may be days before he can tell them what happened.”

“If he dies it will be murder,” Allen said grimly, “and I don’t want Marcia suspected of that.”

He took his departure and the girls looked after him as he walked away.

“He seems nice,” Lenora declared, “and so handsome!”

“Handsome is as handsome does,” Beverly reminded her friend lightly. “Come along, my pet. We have things to do.”

“Where are we going?” Lenora wanted to know.

“I also want to talk to Marcia,” Beverly replied. “I’d like to know why she and Shirley went to Max Mengle’s this morning.”

“We could ask Shirley that,” Lenora suggested.

“I can’t locate her,” Beverly answered. “Neither she nor Marcia appeared for rehearsal today.”

“Something must be wrong,” Lenora frowned. “The plot thickens!”

They drove to the apartment house where Marcia lived and took the elevator to the second floor. The maid Beverly had talked to earlier opened Marcia’s door. Her words were the same as last time.

“Miss Morrison isn’t home.”

It was useless to question her further, so the girls turned away. They left the apartment house and started back to the car, which Beverly had parked across the street. As they stood on the corner waiting for the traffic light to change, Beverly looked back and up at the windows of Marcia’s apartment. For just an instant she caught a glimpse of a white face, and then the curtain dropped across the window. Had the maid been watching them? Or had it been Marcia herself? Had she instructed her maid to lie about her presence in the apartment?

“Wait, Lenora, we’re going back,” Beverly decided.

“Do you think she is hiding there?”

“Someone was watching us from the window,” Beverly said. “If she is there I am going to see her.”

They had to wait several minutes before the maid opened the door.

“I’d like to leave a note for Miss Morrison after all,” Beverly said.

“Very well.”

“I’ll have to borrow pen and paper,” Beverly continued.

The maid hesitated. “I’ll get them.”

“You could use the desk there, Bev,” Lenora said brightly, indicating the desk visible through the open door.

“Of course,” Beverly agreed.

“But—” the maid protested weakly as the girls walked past her.

“Miss Morrison won’t mind,” Lenora said airily.

The room was furnished simply and in excellent taste. A hasty glance revealed there was no one there.

Beverly walked toward the desk at a loss to know what her next move should be. She really had no message to leave for Marcia. Out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw a door at the far end of the room move ever so slightly.

Lenora had seen it too.

“May I have a drink of water?” the blond girl asked the maid.

The servant threw a helpless glance toward the door that had moved, and departed kitchenward.

“Quickly, Bev!” Lenora whispered and followed the maid from the room.

Beverly ran to the bedroom door and pushed it open. The room was empty. It must have been a draft that moved the door. She was about to return to the living room when her eyes fell on a black glove lying on the dressing table. She picked it up and studied it. The same style, same size, and the same rhinestone design on the back. This glove was the mate to the glove the police had found in Max Mengle’s house! Marcia must have dropped it. On the dressing table, too, was a bottle of Summer Lilac, the

same perfume Beverly and Lenora had noticed immediately after the mysterious person had escaped in the car.

After another glance around the room, Beverly thrust the glove into her coat pocket and went back to the living room just as Lenora and the maid were coming out of the kitchen.

“Let’s go, Lenora.”

“The note?” the maid asked.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Beverly said. “I’d rather talk to Miss Morrison in person. I’ll return later, and I hope she will be here.”

“Now what?” Lenora asked as they emerged from the apartment house.

“To see Inspector Baker,” Beverly said determinedly. “I have something I think he will be interested in.”

When the girls arrived at police headquarters, the inspector motioned them into a small, private office and followed. Beverly pulled Marcia’s glove from her pocket. The inspector studied it carefully.

“Where did you get this?”

“In Marcia Morrison’s apartment,” Beverly replied, and went on to tell the inspector about the perfume.

“If she was the one who drove off in the car, then she very definitely was in the house at the time Max Mengle was attacked.” The inspector picked up his hat. “I think I’ll call on Miss Morrison now.”

“She wasn’t there when we left about fifteen minutes ago,” Beverly volunteered.

“Perhaps she has returned,” he replied. “If not, we will send out an alarm for her.”

Beverly and Lenora accompanied the policeman back to Marcia’s apartment. They found the apartment in a state of confusion, and the maid trying to restore order. All appearances pointed to the fact that the occupant had made a hasty departure.

Questioning the maid proved fruitless. She insisted that she did not know where Marcia had gone.

“We’ll find her,” the inspector said confidently and went to the telephone. “We’ll send out an alarm for her and Dale Arden, alias Shirley Parker. They may still be together.”

“Shirley had nothing to do with it, I am sure,” Beverly stated.

“Is she a friend of yours?” the inspector asked.

“Yes, a very good friend.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

“You didn’t ask,” Lenora flung back. “Shirley would no more hit Mr. Mengle with an andiron than she would fly over the moon.”

“The fact remains,” Inspector Baker said patiently, “that she was at the house this morning, and the fingerprints on the andiron belong to a woman. If you will bring your friend in and let me check her fingerprints—”

Beverly and Lenora exchanged uncomfortable glances.

“We don’t know where she is,” Lenora confessed. “We haven’t seen her since this morning.”

“Then you can’t say positively that she wasn’t at the Mengle house at the time Mr. Mengle was attacked.”

“Well—ah—no,” Lenora admitted.

The inspector nodded. “I’ll go ahead with my search for her.”

CHAPTER VI

Found—and Lost Again

“I don’t like it,” Lenora announced, pacing up and down the room. “Where is she?”

“I wish I knew,” Beverly sighed.

The December dusk was creeping into the room, making it heavy with shadows. Beverly and Lenora had returned home in the hope that Shirley would be there, but as yet their friend had not appeared.

“I don’t understand her missing rehearsal today,” Lenora continued. “This role means a lot to her, and she seems to enjoy working hard to perfect it.”

“Marcia is absent too, and it certainly handicaps the rest of the cast,” Beverly added.

“It isn’t like Shirley,” Lenora insisted. “Do you suppose something has happened to her?”

“I’ve been worried about that,” Beverly acknowledged. “What do you think could have happened?”

“I don’t know.” Lenora frowned. “But it must be something drastic to keep her away from rehearsal.”

“I wonder if she and Marcia are together,” mused Beverly. “Inspector Baker is going on the assumption that since they went to the Mengle house together this morning they are still together.”

“Why would Shirley run away?” Lenora wanted to know.

Beverly did not answer. At that moment there was the sound of slow footsteps in the hall and the door opened. Shirley moved listlessly into the room.

“Well!” Lenora exploded. “Where’ve you been? We’ve been hunting high and low—”

“Lenora!” Beverly admonished. She turned to Shirley. “What’s the matter, dear? Are you ill?”

“No,” Shirley said wearily and sank into a chair.

“Why didn’t you go to rehearsal?” Lenora asked. “What have you been doing since morning?”

“I’ve been walking about town,” Shirley said. “I thought it might help.”

“Help what?” Lenora probed. “For goodness’ sake!” she exclaimed. “Tell us what’s wrong.”

“Marcia Morrison has been given my role in the play,” Shirley announced. “I am no longer the lead in *Spring Magic*.”

“Marcia!” Beverly and Lenora echoed in unison.

“It’s true,” Shirley nodded. “Marcia can’t act and everybody knows it, but I’m out and she’s in.”

“Why, that’s ridiculous!” Lenora said indignantly.

“Don’t you know what has happened?” Beverly asked. “Haven’t you seen a newspaper?”

“I wasn’t interested in reading the paper,” Shirley replied. “I just want to dig a hole and crawl into it,” she added dejectedly.

“Snap out of it,” Lenora counseled. “By tomorrow you will be back in the lead again, especially if the police can prove Marcia did it.”

“Police?” Shirley looked puzzled. “Marcia did what?”

“Max Mengle was attacked this morning,” Beverly explained. “Someone apparently hit him with one of the brass andirons. The butler told the police that both you and Marcia were at the house this morning.”

“To make matters worse,” Lenora put in, “a woman’s fingerprints were found on the andiron.”

“Who—why—” Shirley broke off to look from one girl to the other. “I was there this morning. I went out with Marcia, and I *was* angry enough to do something desperate, but I didn’t. I left Marcia and Mr. Mengle in the library together and came back to town.”

“Did anyone see you leave the house?” Beverly asked.

“In the driveway I passed a funny-looking man in white trousers and a black frock coat—”

“Ram!” Lenora interrupted. “The prince’s servant,” she explained to Shirley.

“Was Mr. Mengle hurt seriously?” Shirley asked.

“Yes,” Beverly replied. “The hospital isn’t too optimistic about his recovery. He hasn’t yet rallied sufficiently to tell the police who did it.”

“As much as I dislike Marcia, I can’t believe she would do anything like that.” Shirley added, frowning, “And to Mr. Mengle, of all people!”

“Why ‘of all people’?” Lenora inquired.

Shirley explained. “It was Mr. Mengle’s request that she be given the leading role, and since it is his money that is making the play possible, his word is law. She telephoned me about it this morning and said Mr. Mengle wanted to tell me himself. I went out to the house with her. Mr. Mengle was going to pay me six months’ salary—to ease the blow, but I wouldn’t accept it. Marcia has been trying to get the part for weeks, and at last she succeeded.”

“It isn’t fair!” Lenora protested. “I hope the police catch her and put her in jail for months!”

“Lenora!” Beverly rebuked.

“Well, at least until after Shirley has a chance to open in the play,” Lenora said, grinning.

“Do the police have any clues?” Shirley wanted to know.

“Only Marcia’s glove,” Beverly answered, “and the unknown’s fingerprints. Marcia has run away.”

“That’s odd,” Shirley declared. “Where would she go?”

“We thought you might be able to help us on that,” Beverly replied.

“Incidentally,” Lenora put in, “the police are also looking for you, my friend.”

“Me?” Shirley exclaimed. “Oh, yes, the fingerprints. They could be mine, but they aren’t. I’ll be glad to tell the police all I know.”

“Let’s go and see Inspector Baker now,” Beverly proposed.

“And get it over with,” added Lenora. “Then we can have dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” Shirley said. “You two go out to dinner, and I’ll go and see the inspector.”

“We’ll go with you,” Beverly said firmly, “and then you’re coming with us.”

After the short interview with Inspector Baker, during which Shirley's fingerprints were compared with those on the andiron and found to be dissimilar, Beverly and Lenora, recognizing Shirley's need to be cheered and shaken from her mood of despondency, insisted that she accompany them to a new steak house they had discovered. The dinner was excellent, and when they returned home Shirley seemed in much better spirits.

"I'm going to bed," Lenora announced with a yawn. "It is early, but I feel in need of a few extra dreams."

"I'm going to shampoo my hair," Shirley decided.

"I want to write a letter," Beverly added.

Shirley followed Lenora into the bedroom, and for a while Beverly could hear their voices. Then silence settled over the apartment. She finished the letter to her parents and walked restlessly to the window. The stars were clear and far away. The wind shook the bare branches of trees on the street below and snatched at the hats of unwary pedestrians.

The thought of Marcia Morrison was uppermost in her mind. Where could the girl have gone? She could not return to her apartment without meeting the police. She would not dare to go to any of her friends, for fear the police would contact them also.

There were many hotels where she could take a room under another name; and yet, with the police making a city-wide search for her, she would be bound to be discovered. And at night, she could not simply lose herself in the crowd as she might in the daytime. She must have a place to go. Where?

In the distance a neon light flashed the name of a theater. The theater! Her dressing room! It might be an ideal hiding place for Marcia. Beverly doubted if the police would bother with the theater now that they had talked to everyone in the play's cast and the place was closed. The more Beverly thought of it, the more convinced she became that Marcia had gone there.

Beverly glanced at her watch. It was late, but not too late. It would not take long to go to the theater and settle the question. Besides, she would not sleep now even if she went to bed. There was too much on her mind. She would go down to the theater and see for herself if Marcia were hiding there.

Beverly hurried into her coat and went for her car. Saturday night traffic was heavy on the way downtown, but she succeeded in finding a parking space close to the stage door, and approached the theater with hope high in her heart. But the doorman on duty, though he smiled and spoke to her, refused to let her go backstage.

“You can come with me to see that I don’t steal anything,” Beverly suggested, smiling.

“Sorry, miss. I have my orders not to let anyone backstage.”

He was adamant, and Beverly could not persuade him. She went out into the cold night air, disappointed. Why should he be so immovable about letting her inside? He knew she was Shirley’s friend. He had often seen her backstage. To her mind his refusal seemed suspicious, and she was more determined than ever to enter the theater.

Beverly moved along the alley from the stage door, and as she looked up at the fire escape she saw that one of the exit doors from the balcony was ajar. It was a chance made to order for her, and she swung onto the fire escape, climbing rapidly lest someone see her from the street. Once inside the theater she leaned breathlessly against the wall, waiting until her eyes became accustomed to the darkness. One obstacle was past, but now she must reach the dressing rooms without stumbling or falling over something which would bring the watchman to investigate.

Since Marcia had the lead in the show now, her things probably had been moved downstairs to the star’s dressing room just off the stage. Summoning up from memory what she could remember of the theater floor plan, she moved toward the stairs and descended noiselessly. She was grateful for the carpet on the stairs and in the aisles. It muffled her footsteps. She stumbled once as she mounted the steps to the stage, and waited, her heart pounding, but there was no other sound. The silence of the theater pressed heavily upon her. It smelled musty, and it was as if a thousand eyes and ears were trained upon her. These walls had echoed with music and voices and laughter, and they would again, but at the moment they were ominous in their silence. She had the uncanny feeling that she was not alone in the darkness. She thrust the thought away and moved across the stage. Suddenly she stopped. There was a faint, thin line of light coming from under the door of one of the dressing rooms. Her heart leaped, and she almost ran to the door. The room was empty. Then she got a faint whiff of perfume and whirled about so suddenly that she dropped her handbag, its contents scattering on the floor. Marcia stood behind her.

Without speaking, Marcia bent to pick up the articles that had spilled from Beverly’s bag. Automatically Beverly knelt to help her. Marcia handed the contents she had retrieved to Beverly and went into the dressing room.

“How did you get in?” Marcia asked. “The doorman promised me he would let no one come back here.”

“I came in one of the doors from the fire escape,” Beverly answered. “Why are you hiding here, Marcia?”

“It was the best place I could think of.”

“But why hide at all?” Beverly probed.

“Because I don’t want to talk to the police—about the glove or the fingerprints.”

“Did you see me take the other glove this morning?” Beverly asked.

“Yes. I was hiding in the closet.” Marcia smiled. “I knew then I couldn’t face the police. I suppose they have it all figured out that I hit Max with the andiron.”

“Did you?” Beverly asked, watching the other girl closely.

“No. Why should I?”

“Then why are you running away?”

“Because I can’t prove that I didn’t,” Marcia said. “Shirley has probably told you I was still talking to Max when she left. You found him wounded, and my fingerprints are on the andiron. Everything added together makes me the chief suspect.”

“How did your fingerprints get on the andiron?” Beverly wanted to know.

“When I saw Max on the floor I knelt beside him. Without thinking, I touched the andiron. I did not hit Max with it.”

“Why don’t you come with me and tell your story to the inspector?” Beverly said. “It will save a lot of heartache. You can’t hide indefinitely. The police are sure to find you soon. By hiding you only make your position more suspicious.”

Marcia shook her head stubbornly. “I didn’t do it and I won’t be treated like a criminal!” She picked up a jar of cold cream and stared at it for a moment. “No,” she said slowly. “I am not going to see the inspector—not until the question of who attacked Max is solved.”

“You might as well come with me,” Beverly insisted. “The police are watching all trains and buses—”

“I’ll drive.”

“They are watching the highways, too,” Beverly told her.

“Yes,” Marcia admitted. “They are watching for my car, but I’ll drive yours, Beverly!”

Marcia hurled the jar of cold cream at Beverly and leaped for the door. Beverly dodged and the jar crashed against the wall, but by the time Beverly reached the door Marcia had it safely closed and locked.

Furious with herself for having been taken unaware, Beverly pounded on the door until her hand hurt. A brief search through her handbag revealed the fact that her car keys were gone. When Marcia helped her pick up the spilled contents a short while ago she had had an excellent opportunity to keep the keys, and she must have done so.

There was a small, high window, and by standing on a chair Beverly could just reach it. However, no amount of effort on her part succeeded in raising it. She went back to the door and pounded it, but no one came. Marcia must have persuaded the doorman to leave his post for a time. At last, in desperation, Beverly hurled a stool at the window. She carefully removed the jagged pieces of broken glass and pulled herself up and through the window. For an instant she hung from the window sill and then let herself drop to the ground. She ran to the spot where she had parked her car. It was gone. Marcia had made good her escape.

Beverly took a taxi to police headquarters and told Inspector Baker what had happened. He immediately broadcast a description of Beverly’s car.

“We’ll hear something about it soon,” he assured her.

“If only she hadn’t run away!” Beverly sighed. “It makes her appear more guilty.”

“It certainly does,” the inspector agreed.

“Yet I believe she told me the truth,” Beverly insisted. “I think it is fear that is making her hide.”

The inspector looked skeptical. “Innocent people aren’t usually so afraid.”

CHAPTER VII

The First Clue

Sunday was gray and dreary. Beverly felt depressed, and the weather did not help to lighten her spirits. She looked about at each of her friends. Lenora had settled down to mounting snapshots in her album. Lois was sorting stamps for her collection, and Shirley was frowning over a book.

Beverly's glance lingered longest on Shirley. She wondered if the young actress was still despondent about losing the lead in *Spring Magic*. As things stood now, the part was empty. Shirley was out of it, but Marcia was too.

Poor Marcia! The girl was still hiding somewhere. If only Max Mengle were sufficiently recovered to talk to the police. As it was, he still hovered between life and death, unconscious of the world.

The telephone rang, and Beverly stood up.

"I'll answer it. I'm expecting a call from Inspector Baker about my car."

A familiar voice came over the wire to her, and suddenly the day was no longer gray and depressing.

"Larry!" she exclaimed. "Larry, where are you?"

"In Grand Central Station," her fiancé answered.

Gay, irrepressible Larry Owens, with his dark hair and blue eyes, was just the tonic she needed. She had missed him during the weeks he had been with his sister in Maine recuperating from an operation on his leg.

"Why didn't you let me know you were coming?" she demanded. "I would have met you."

"I wanted to surprise you," Larry chuckled. "It sounds as though I succeeded. What are you doing this gloomy day?"

"Waiting for a telephone call from Inspector Baker," she replied.

"The police?" he demanded. "What have you been up to now?"

"It's a long story." Beverly laughed. "Come over and I'll tell you all about it."

“Better still,” he said. “Meet me for lunch at Smitty’s. I’ll take my bags to my apartment and meet you in half an hour.”

As Beverly replaced the telephone Lenora winked to the other girls.

“Ah, love! What power it doth possess! Stars in her eyes, roses in her cheeks, and diamonds on her finger. Would that it should happen to me.”

“Oh?” Beverly said teasingly. “I thought it had. Do you mean that Mike and Terry have not laid their hearts at your feet?”

“We-l-l,” Lenora drawled, blushing.

Her affection for Terry Cartwright, dashing young Englishman, was a fact known to all the girls and they had believed she would one day marry Terry, until Michael McKay, with wit and humor to match her own, had declared his intention to share her future. At present Lenora, who could not make up her mind, was not bestowing any more favors on one than on the other.

Beverly went off happily to dress. She chose a new, navy-blue wool dress, with a frilly white collar. Her hat was a mere wisp of fur to match her coat, and she perched it at a jaunty angle to emphasize her happy feeling.

Larry was waiting when Beverly entered their favorite restaurant. He still limped a little, but he looked rested and well. She told him so after they had eaten and exchanged the news they had for each other.

“I can’t say the same for you,” Larry declared bluntly, with a worried frown. “You look tired, Bev. You’ve been working too hard. What you need is a vacation.”

“I just returned from England and a treasure hunt in the Gulf of Mexico,” Beverly reminded him with a smile.

“Neither of those trips was for pleasure,” Larry returned. “You were under constant strain. You ought to go somewhere just for fun.”

“I would like to go away for a while to write my next book,” Beverly confessed. “The notes have been piling up, but I never have time to sit down and write.”

“That would still be work,” Larry said. “You need to play for a while. I’m going to plan something, young lady, and see that you do it.”

“Yes, Dr. Owens,” Beverly said, laughing.

“As a matter of fact,” Larry said, “I had a letter from Jim Stanton. He suggests that if he can’t get home for Christmas, we should all take a trip down to South America to see him.”

Jim had been a friend of Beverly’s since childhood. He had been a vital member of the group on their round-the-world cruise, and although at the present time he was working in South America he still kept in touch with them.

“Speaking of trips,” Beverly said, “Tony Anton is back in the States.” She proceeded to tell Larry about meeting their old friend at the Mengle house, about the stolen horse and the attack upon Max Mengle.

“I hate to break in on this reunion,” Lenora declared, appearing at their table, “but Inspector Baker telephoned the apartment, Bev. They have located your car. It was abandoned on the highway about thirty miles from New York.”

“What about Marcia?” Beverly asked.

“There is no trace of her. She must have boarded one of the buses that travel that road. The gasoline tank was empty and the police figure she was afraid to go into a gas station for fear of being identified, so she just went off and left the car.”

“Still running away!” Beverly shook her head.

“The inspector is having your car brought into town, and you can pick it up at headquarters in about an hour,” Lenora continued. “What are your plans for this afternoon, Bev?”

“I thought I would go and talk to Vera Moore, the animal trainer. Mr. Mengle said she was one of those most anxious to buy the Star of the East,” Beverly answered. “Want to come along, Larry?”

Larry shook his head. “I’ll unpack and talk to my boss,” he said. “My leave of absence isn’t over yet, but I’m getting restless. I’ll call you tonight.”

Beverly and Lenora went first to pick up Beverly’s car, and then drove to the home of Vera Moore in Redfern, only a short distance from the Mengle estate.

The one-story, whitewashed, rambling house was surrounded by wide fields, excellent grazing land for her horses. There was a huge, white barn, the largest the girls had ever seen. A neat gravel path led from the road to the house and on to the barn. Two gateposts, fashioned into horses’ heads, guarded the entrance to the driveway into which Beverly turned.

“Doesn’t everything look nice!” Lenora exclaimed. “It looks like a model farm.”

“From what I could learn about Vera Moore in the newspaper files,” Beverly said, “she has plenty of money. Training horses is a hobby with her. She travels with Hunt’s Circus for the pleasure it gives her to show off her fine horses. In fact, I believe she owns half the circus.”

“That must be an interesting life,” Lenora declared. “I think I would like to be a clown—or maybe a bareback rider. I wonder if Evelyn DeLong is still with the circus. We Alpha Deltas should have a reunion soon. We’ve lost touch with some of the girls.”

“Evelyn was with a different circus than Vera Moore,” Beverly reminded her friend. “But I think a reunion of the Alpha Deltas is a good idea. Let’s write to the girls.”

Beverly stopped the car before the house and, leaning out the window, inquired of a small boy whether Miss Moore was home.

“She’s in the barn,” he answered, waving them on.

Beverly parked beside a new station wagon and the girls walked toward the huge building. There was a small door set into the big barn door, and as they approached, a man opened it and came out. He nodded to them and held the door open. The girls stepped into an enormous room, the center of which was taken up by an arena about forty feet in diameter. In this circle were four white horses, and a slender, blond woman in a white riding habit and shiny black boots. The woman was equipped with a long whip which she cracked on the ground to guide the horses in their tricks. There were several spectators grouped about the arena. Evidently Miss Moore liked an audience when she rehearsed. In the distance could be seen the individual stalls of the horses.

“She has a miniature ‘big top’ right here,” Lenora exclaimed. “I’m going to get some pictures of this!”

The horses in the ring responded to their mistress’ commands with enthusiasm. They seemed to enjoy showing off. They jumped through an enormous hoop, turned and jogged in time to music played on a squeaky phonograph, stood on their hind legs, forefeet pawing the air while their mistress walked under them, and allowed a dog to ride upon their backs. When they were finished, the spectators broke into applause, and the horses made graceful bows, nodding their heads vigorously in agreement with the plaudits.

Vera Moore smiled and posed her charges directly in front of Lenora's camera, allowing the latter to get several good pictures.

"Thank you!" Lenora said as she clicked the shutter for the last one. "Your horses are beautiful."

"Yes, aren't they?" Vera Moore agreed, handing the reins to one of her employees and joining the girls. "What newspaper do you represent?"

"The *Tribune*," Beverly answered, "and we would like a story to go with the pictures."

"Come up to the house with me," their hostess invited and led the way from the barn.

Vera Moore was charming and informal. She chatted with the girls, answered all their questions, and entertained them with humorous stories of her horses.

"Max Mengle told us you wanted the Star of the East," Beverly told her.

"Yes," Miss Moore said enthusiastically. "I have heard such marvelous tales about him I would love to own him."

"Have you seen him?" Lenora asked. "I thought he just arrived in this country."

"I haven't seen him, but I understand he is a giant of a horse with a beautiful chestnut coat, swift and steady in a race."

"Did you know he was stolen night before last?" Beverly continued.

"No!" Miss Moore explained with a wave of the hand, "I haven't read a newspaper for a week. I'm too busy preparing for our new show. We are assembling a completely new show, and expect to leave on a tour of the South within a few days. Tell me what happened to the Star."

When the girls had explained, Beverly remarked casually, "I understand you made Mr. Mengle an offer for the Star."

"Yes," Miss Moore acknowledged. "I am always adding horses to my troupe. I bought one only yesterday. But, of course, to have the Star in my group would be a tremendous attraction for the show. The policeman who was here must have come about the Star. I wasn't here, so he talked to my secretary. She must have answered his questions satisfactorily because he hasn't come back."

Since apparently there was nothing more to be learned from Vera Moore, the girls left.

“Where to now?” Lenora asked as Beverly started the car.

“To the Mengle house,” Beverly answered. “Allen may have some news of his brother. I would also like to look at the Star’s stall.”

“And get our interview with the prince,” added Lenora. “We still haven’t completed our original assignment.”

When the girls arrived at the Mengle house the butler told them that Allen Mengle had departed less than an hour ago for his home in Maryland.

“Why did he go away down there when his brother may die at any moment?” Lenora wondered aloud.

“He received a telephone call and departed at once,” Collins told them. “You will find the prince in the library.”

The girls went into the quiet, book-lined room, and the prince rose courteously to greet them. He had been reading, and he handed the book to his servant who stood like a statue behind his master’s chair.

The interview went very well. The prince was in a jovial mood today, and since the girls had once visited his native land they were able to ask intelligent questions.

When the interview was over, the girls went out to the barn. There was no one in sight when they stepped inside and paused to stroke the velvet noses of the three horses which looked at them expectantly.

“Sorry, chums,” Lenora told them. “We have no sugar or apples, but I could stand and pet you for hours. You’re beauties.”

One of the horses made a furtive grab at the feather on Lenora’s hat and the blond girl retreated, joining Beverly in the stall once occupied by the Star of the East.

“What are you looking for?” Lenora asked curiously.

“I don’t know,” Beverly confessed. “I doubt if I can find anything when the police couldn’t. I just hoped there would be something—”

“Bev!” Lenora whispered, looking out a window. “Ram is coming toward the barn. Let’s see what he’s up to.”

“Why?” Beverly asked.

“I don’t trust him.” Lenora frowned. “The way he watches everyone and never says anything gives me the queerest feeling. Maybe he hid the horse so Mr. Mengle couldn’t have him. He admitted he didn’t like Max. Come on, Bev! Let’s hide and see what he does when he comes into the barn.”

“There isn’t any place to hide,” Beverly returned.

“We’ll climb up to the hayloft,” Lenora proposed.

Suiting action to her words, Lenora swung herself up the ladder which disappeared through a hole in the ceiling. Somewhat dubious about the wisdom of their actions, Beverly nevertheless followed her friend.

Bales of hay, bridles, saddles, blankets, and miscellaneous equipment crowded the room into which they climbed. They spread a blanket on the straw-strewn floor and lay down upon it so that they could look down into the stalls below.

The girls were no sooner settled than the barn door opened and Ram entered the building. The Hindu closed the door softly behind him and looked about, as if making sure he was alone. Then he moved noiselessly down the aisle to the Star’s stall. He opened the gate to the stall and stood looking at the empty straw bed. Suddenly he knelt and began to run his hands through the straw as if searching for something.

Lenora flashed a glance at Beverly—one that said, “See? I was right. He *is* up to something!”

The girls watched with interest as, bit by bit, Ram went through the straw on the floor of the Star’s stall. At last he got to his feet. He had something in his hand, but the girls could not see what it was.

Another figure appeared suddenly at the gate to the stall. So silently had Thurston entered the barn that neither the girls nor Ram had heard him.

“What are you doing here?” Thurston demanded. The girls could see that the groom’s face was cut and bruised.

Ram’s dark eyes studied the other man in silence. Then he held out his hand, a small, round object on his palm.

“Sahib has lost a button from his coat.”

Thurston’s hand went involuntarily to the empty spot on his jacket. He reached out for the button, and then he changed his mind.

“It isn’t mine,” he said in an unconvincing tone.

“It matches the others, sahib.”

“I don’t care if it does,” Thurston bellowed. “I haven’t been in this stall today.”

“The sahib’s coat was missing a button Friday night,” Ram continued softly.

“What if it was?” Thurston demanded. “Is that a crime?”

“No, sahib,” Ram bowed his head and Thurston stalked away.

Ram moved to a window and looked out. After several minutes he left the barn, and the girls emerged from their hiding place.

“What was that all about?” Lenora wondered aloud. “Ram attached a lot of significance to that button. What does it matter if Thurston did lose it?”

“It probably means that Thurston was in the Star’s stall the night he was stolen,” Beverly commented, “but why shouldn’t he be?”

“More visitors!” Lenora exclaimed as footsteps approached.

“Oh!” a little girl of about eight years, clad in a bright-red, woolen suit, paused at the entrance to the stall. She looked disappointed.

“Hello!” Lenora smiled. “Who are you?”

“I’m Irene. I thought the Star had come back.”

“Do you like the Star?” Beverly asked.

“Oh, yes!” the youngster sighed. “He is the most beautiful horse in the whole world! I saw him when they took him off the truck. He let me pet him, too.”

“What makes him so special?” Lenora asked. “What is there about him that makes him different from other horses?”

“He is so big and beautiful,” the little girl answered promptly. Then she frowned. “Maybe his shoes help to make him different.”

“His shoes?” Beverly asked. “How is that?”

“I saw the new groom and another man looking at some prints in the mud,” Irene explained. “They said he wears interfering shoes, and that anyone could pick him out of a hundred. What did they mean?”

“Interfering shoes?” Lenora echoed. “What in the world are they?”

“Where were the prints Mr. Thurston was looking at?” Beverly asked the little girl.

“At the end of the yard,” Irene answered. “Come, I’ll show you.” She skipped ahead of them. “The groom rubbed out most of the footprints but he missed one.”

As they came out of the barn they saw Ram leaving the garage, but he did not look in their direction.

Irene led the way to the rear of the barn and along the fence to the end of the exercise yard. The snow had disappeared under the tramping of the other horses, and the ground had frozen hard and full of ruts. Irene stopped and pointed to a clear hoof print in the ground.

“It *is* different from the others,” Lenora said in wonder.

“‘Out of the mouths of babes,’” Beverly quoted softly. “Thank you, Irene. Thank you very much!”

“You’re welcome,” the little girl said. “Do you like the Star, too?”

“We’ve never seen him, Irene, but we would like to,” Lenora declared. “What is it, Bev? Does this hoofprint mean anything to you?”

Before Beverly could answer, a man’s voice interrupted:

“Irene! I told you to stay away from here. Go home and don’t come back!”

Irene scampered away, and Beverly and Lenora turned to face Thurston, who was regarding them suspiciously.

“Irene’s the cook’s child,” he said and added in a surly tone, “She’s always hanging around the barn and I don’t like it. The horses are my responsibility, and I want to know it when anyone goes in there with them.”

“We may want to—later,” Beverly said calmly. “Come, Lenora.”

They were uncomfortably aware that Thurston watched them closely until they got into Beverly’s car and drove away.

“This is all very interesting, but would you mind letting me know where we are going?” Lenora demanded.

“We are going back to Vera Moore’s,” Beverly replied. “Lenora, I am positive I saw hoofprints in her arena identical to the one Irene just showed us!”

CHAPTER VIII

The House in the Woods

“Beverly!” Lenora cried excitedly, as they drove toward Vera Moore’s farm. “Do you think the Star is there? Has he been under our very noses all this time?”

“I am not making any accusations,” Beverly answered, “but I don’t believe there are many horses wearing those peculiar shoes.”

“If he is there and we find him,” Lenora beamed, “think of the nice reward we’ll get!”

“It would be easy to hide him among all the horses she has in that big barn,” Beverly mused. “At last the trail is getting warm.”

They drove up to the big white barn again and hurried inside. Vera Moore was talking with several men, but when she saw the girls she excused herself and joined them.

“Back so soon? Did you forget something?”

“Not exactly,” Lenora said, smiling, “although we did come here to find something.”

“Did you ever hear of a horse wearing interfering shoes?” Beverly asked.

“Yes,” Miss Moore replied. “As a matter of fact, there is a horse here which wears them on his front feet. Why?”

“We believe the Star of the East wears them, too,” Beverly said, “and I remembered seeing such a hoofprint in your arena.”

“That is quite possible,” Vera Moore nodded. “The horse in that stall over there wears them. He belongs to one of my employees. He has only been here a day and he seems quite shy. I believe my man intends to take him South to the races.” She explained further: “Interfering shoes are designed for a horse which strikes the inside of one leg with another while walking or running. The iron on the inner side of the shoe is trimmed so that the softer hook, projecting beyond it, hits the leg.”

“But that horse is white and the Star is brown,” Lenora said in disappointment.

“Yes.” Vera Moore smiled. “I’m sorry it isn’t the Star.”

“So are we,” Lenora sighed.

The girls returned to Beverly’s car and drove back to the Mengle house. They had another look at the Star’s hoofprint and then went into the house to use the telephone. When they entered they found Collins and Thurston involved in an argument.

“You should report it,” Collins was insisting.

“Nothing was taken,” Thurston replied.

“It was a crime nevertheless—” Collins broke off as he saw the girls from the *Tribune*.

“What’s up?” Lenora asked.

“Someone has been searching Thurston’s rooms in the garage,” Collins burst out, “but he doesn’t want to tell the police.”

“Nothing was taken,” Thurston repeated.

“Have you any idea who did it?” Beverly wanted to know.

Thurston shook his head.

“When did it happen?” Beverly pursued.

“Sometime this afternoon,” Thurston answered, “but nothing was stolen, and I don’t want to do anything about it.”

“Your face is cut. How did it happen?” Lenora asked.

“I fell down,” Thurston replied coolly, and strode out of the house. He might just as well have said, “None of your business!”

“I’d hate to have him as an enemy,” Lenora declared. “Woe to the one responsible for the damage to his face.”

“Why should anyone search Thurston’s things?” Beverly murmured. “Who could have done it?”

“It seems very strange,” the butler agreed and went off shaking his head.

“We saw Ram coming from the garage when we were with Irene,” Lenora reminded.

“Why would Ram do anything like that?” Beverly wondered. “What could he be looking for?”

“Maybe he went there for another button,” Lenora remarked, chuckling.

“It’s only circumstantial evidence,” Beverly said. “We don’t *know* that Ram was in Thurston’s room. We’re really only guessing.”

“He wouldn’t tell us if we asked him,” Lenora declared, “so that leaves us exactly nowhere.” She watched as Beverly walked to the window and stood staring out. “What’s cookin’, chum?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Beverly said.

“About Larry?” Lenora teased.

Beverly smiled and shook her head.

“I was thinking about the horseman we saw when we lost our way the first time we were coming here.”

“Do you think the horse was the Star of the East?” Lenora asked eagerly.

“It could have been,” Beverly conceded. “It was about the time he was stolen.”

“Is there any way we could make sure?” Lenora mused. “Yes!” she exclaimed, answering her own question. “We could go back to the spot and follow his tracks.”

“I was wondering about that,” Beverly agreed. “We have seen the peculiar hoofprint the Star makes. Do you suppose we could find the spot where we saw the horseman?”

“We can try,” Lenora returned. “Let’s go!”

They were off immediately, unaware that as they left the Mengle driveway another car swung onto the road behind them and followed at a discreet distance.

The girls went as far as the drive-in restaurant at the crossroads, and from there it was easy to find the narrow road which they had mistakenly taken the first time.

The car bumped and bounced as it left the highway and followed the narrow, winding road.

“‘A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go,’” Lenora chanted as she looked about. “This is about as far as we went that night, isn’t it, Bev?”

Beverly nodded. "I'll park in that open space and we can do our sleuthing on foot."

The girls climbed out of the car and set off for the spot where they had seen the mysterious horseman. There were a lot of hoofprints in the snow-covered ground, but none of them appeared to be the strange print made by the Star of the East.

"I feel just like an Indian," Lenora said, giggling, as she bent and studied the clear outline of a hoofprint. "Me heap big tracker of horses. Ugh!"

"You big Princess Stick-in-the-Mud," Beverly returned with a chuckle as Lenora's heel sank into an unexpectedly soft bit of earth.

"I'm sure this was the spot where we saw him," Lenora frowned. "He was between these two trees, then he turned and disappeared in that direction."

"This must be a popular bridle path," Beverly said. "There have been a number of horses over it lately."

"Perhaps Vera Moore exercises her horses in this neighborhood," Lenora suggested. "We aren't very far away from her farm."

The girls continued scanning the ground, seeking a clue to the mysterious horseman.

Suddenly Beverly stopped and beckoned to her friend.

"Lenora, look! Here it is! This print is identical to the one in the exercise yard at Max Mengle's."

"So it is!" Lenora agreed eagerly. "Oh, Bev, we must be on the right track!"

"One hoofprint doesn't mean much," Beverly said cautiously. "Let's see if there are any others."

"Here's one, Bev! And here!" Lenora was almost running ahead in her eagerness.

"We've found his trail now," Beverly agreed. "Let's follow it for a while."

"We couldn't drive a car in here, but I wish we were on horseback," Lenora grumbled as she stumbled over the uneven ground. "I suppose he chose to go through the woods so no one would see him, but I wish he had stayed in the open." She looked about at the heavy shadows cast by the thick

growth of trees and underbrush. "It is cold in here where the sun doesn't penetrate."

"We won't be here long," Beverly comforted. "There aren't so many different hoofprints here. His trail is easier to follow."

"I hope he doesn't suddenly jump out at us," Lenora said uncomfortably. "Perhaps we shouldn't have come alone."

"We'll go back and telephone Inspector Baker," Beverly replied, "after we find something definite."

"Aren't the hoofprints definite enough?" Lenora demanded.

"Not when there is a white horse at Vera Moore's which makes the same print," Beverly returned.

"Oh, gosh," Lenora sighed. "Let's hurry and find something so we can go home. I don't like it here."

At times the trail they were following was almost obliterated, and at other times it was clear. They found that following the trail of hoofprints was like trying to follow a straight path through a mirror maze. The horseman had evidently circled and doubled back on his trail several times to evade any pursuers. After a while the girls found themselves hopelessly confused.

"I am sure we were at this spot once before," Lenora declared, eyeing a tree whose trunk had been split by a bolt of lightning. "I distinctly remember passing this tree."

"We'll try it once more," Beverly proposed. "If we don't find something new, we'll give up and go home."

"I've heard about the difficulty of locating a needle in a haystack," Lenora grumbled, "but I never thought a horse would be so hard to find."

They started off once more, following the hoofprints made by the horse they hoped was the Star of the East.

The trail was plain, and they thought they were making good progress until they looked up and saw the tree which had been struck by lightning.

"We've been walking in circles!" Lenora cried.

"We might as well give up and go home," Beverly sighed.

"Good!" Lenora declared. "It isn't the sort of weather to go tramping in the woods. Er—Bev—where did we leave the car?"

“We came from that direction, I think,” Beverly answered.

The girls walked for about five minutes, threading their way through the trees, seeking to find the path back to the car.

“I thought we came this way.” Beverly frowned, “But now I’m not so sure.”

“We’re lost!” Lenora exclaimed. “I was afraid of this! This was one time our brilliant idea to play detective didn’t work out so well. What’ll we do, Beverly?”

Beverly looked about uncertainly. The woods was a maze of trees, different sizes and shapes, but none distinct enough to be remembered as a landmark. Her car was nowhere in sight. They had wandered farther than they realized.

Lenora was looking to her for leadership, so Beverly tried to put confidence into her smile.

“It is hard to believe, isn’t it? We can’t be far from the main highway, and yet we can’t tell in which direction to go.”

“I was lost in the fun house at Coney Island once.” Lenora giggled. “That made me feel even sillier than this does.”

“Shall we separate and each take a different direction?” Beverly suggested.

“I’d rather we stayed together,” Lenora said uneasily. “Let’s get going—some way! It is cold standing still.”

They started off in determined cheerfulness, choosing a path which led directly away from the lightning-struck tree. They made no effort now to follow the hoofprints but concentrated on finding their way out of the forest.

“I wish I remembered more of my Girl Scout lore,” Lenora complained. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t make a good woodsman.”

“We’ve been lost before,” Beverly comforted. “Everything came out all right.”

“We’re probably on someone’s private property,” Lenora mused.

“I wish we would come to a house,” Beverly returned. “They could tell us how to get back to the highway and our car.”

They walked on in silence, and after several minutes Lenora gave an exclamation.

“Beverly! Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all your wishes came true that fast? Look—there’s a house!”

The girls immediately made for the building dimly visible through the trees, only to find it deserted and tumbling down in neglect. Beyond the house could be seen a ramshackle barn, gray and weather-beaten, its doorway a wide black hole.

The windows on the first floor of the house had been covered with boards, but on the second floor, with most of the glass gone, the windows stared at the forest like empty eyes, and the door, hanging unevenly, swung to and fro in the rising wind, its creaking noise like an eerie voice inviting them inside.

“I wonder if it is haunted,” Lenora said, giggling. “Let’s look inside, Bev.”

They picked their way carefully over the broken porch floor and stepped into the house. Dust lay like a heavy covering over everything, and cobwebs were draped in the corners of the room.

“I wonder what sort of ghosts live here,” Lenora mused, “and whether they are friendly or unfriendly.”

“Whichever they are, they’re pretty poor housekeepers,” Beverly returned, laughing. “If you want to explore, let’s get on with it. It’s getting late and we still have to find the car.”

“It will only take a moment,” Lenora assured her friend. “These old houses fascinate me. I always wonder what sort of people lived in them.”

“And if they left friendly or unfriendly ghosts behind,” Beverly teased her.

“You may laugh if you wish,” Lenora told her loftily. “I hope the ghosts that live here are the friendly type and won’t mind your remarks.”

The rooms were gloomy, only a faint glimmer of light came through the cracks of the boards which shuttered the windows. The girls wandered through what had once been the dining room and kitchen, and then Lenora insisted upon going upstairs. Here everything was equally dust laden and aged. It was while they were in the front bedroom that Lenora, passing the window, stopped to stare out at the woods.

“Beverly, I’m sure I saw something move out there,” she declared. “There aren’t any wild animals in this part of the country, are there?”

“It may have been a stray dog,” Beverly replied.

“Or a man,” Lenora said. “If it is a man, he may be able to tell us how to reach the highway.”

Further exploration was abruptly abandoned and the girls ran downstairs. At the bottom of the steps Lenora stopped short.

“Beverly!” she whispered. “When we went upstairs the front door was open. It is shut now!”

“The wind must have blown it shut,” Beverly said calmly.

Beverly put out her hand and tugged on the doorknob. It came off in her hand, and the door remained closed.

“Now what?” Lenora demanded.

“The back door,” Beverly suggested and turned away.

They found the kitchen door locked and the key missing.

“Everything happens to us!” Lenora grumbled. “How are we going to get out, Beverly?”

“We’ll try the front door again,” Beverly said.

The old door resisted all their efforts, and no matter how hard they pushed or pulled it remained securely closed.

“I’m sorry, Beverly,” Lenora murmured. “If I hadn’t wanted to explore we wouldn’t be in this predicament.” She glanced about uneasily.

“Worried about the ghosts?” Beverly wanted to know.

“No—bats,” Lenora answered. “Do you suppose there are any in here?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Beverly replied, and added thoughtfully, “it’s too much of a drop from the upstairs windows. I wonder if it would be easier to remove the boards from one of these windows than to break down the door.”

“There is a short, rusty piece of pipe lying on the kitchen floor,” Lenora volunteered. “Maybe we could use that as a hammer.”

Beverly secured the piece of iron pipe and they set to work on one of the windows.

“All we need is a space big enough for us to slide through,” Lenora said as the board they were working at moved a little. “There! It’s coming, Beverly. We’ll be out of here in no time!”

Using the pipe as a lever, Beverly pried the board from the window, leaving a space large enough for the girls to slip through.

“After you, mademoiselle!” Lenora made a sweeping bow.

“You’re letting me go first so I can dust the window sill.” Beverly chuckled. “I understand your politeness.”

“You misjudge me,” Lenora complained. “I merely—” She broke off and shrank back from the window. “Beverly!” she gasped. “Do you see what I see?”

CHAPTER IX

The Mysterious Horseman

Walking across the clearing between the house and the trees were two men. One man was scarcely more than four feet tall, while his companion towered close to eight feet. Their clothes were shabby, and they scowled at each other as if they were quarreling.

“Maybe it would be better to stay in here and take a chance on the bats than to go out and meet those two,” Lenora whispered. “I wonder if they live here.”

“I don’t think anyone lives here,” Beverly replied in a low voice. “They may just be exploring too.”

“They look positively ferocious!” Lenora exclaimed.

“Shh,” Beverly cautioned. “They may hear you. They are coming directly toward the house.”

“I don’t like it,” Lenora whispered tremulously. “I wish I were a hundred miles away!”

There were heavy footsteps on the porch, and a huge hand seized one of the remaining boards over the window and pulled it off. The girls waited in silence, and soon the head of the smallest man appeared at the opening.

“Look, Jo-Jo,” he squealed in a high voice. “I told you there was someone in here.”

The head and shoulders of the giant appeared at the window, crowding his companion aside. He gave the girls a friendly grin.

“Hello. You girls look frightened.”

“The door is stuck and we’re trying to get out,” Lenora replied, making no effort to use the window.

“I’ll fix that!”

The giant head was withdrawn from the window, and soon the whole building shook as the door was forced open. The giant and the dwarf stepped inside, the former stooping uncomfortably because of the low ceiling.

“What are you doing in here?” the dwarf demanded of the girls.

“We came exploring and the door blew shut,” Lenora explained.

“We are sorry if we invaded your house,” added Beverly. “We did no harm—”

“It isn’t our house, miss,” the giant replied. “We came to see why that fellow in the woods was watching this old place. He must have been waiting for you to come out.”

“Fellow?” Lenora asked. “What fellow? What did he look like?”

“He was queer-looking, wasn’t he, Luigi?” the giant consulted his little companion.

“Yeah,” the dwarf agreed. “What are you girls doing in the woods?”

“We’re lost,” Beverly answered. “We would appreciate it if you would direct us to the highway.”

“We will escort you there ourselves,” the giant declared.

“That isn’t necessary,” Lenora put in. “Just tell us what direction to take —”

The giant shook his head. “We’ll go with you.”

“We’ll go with you,” seconded Luigi.

“Where are you from?” Lenora could contain her curiosity no longer.

“We’re from Hunt’s Circus,” the dwarf told her with a laugh. “Did we startle you?”

“A little,” Lenora confessed.

“Miss Moore told us the show was forming,” Beverly added. “Is it close to here?”

“About a mile away,” Jo-Jo answered. “Would you like to come and meet some of the show people?”

“We really should get back to town,” Lenora said regretfully.

“Our camp is close to the highway and we’ll drive you to your car,” Luigi urged.

The girls agreed, and the giant and the dwarf started off, side by side, Luigi running to keep up with the long strides of his companion.

“I feel like Alice in Wonderland,” Lenora murmured to Beverly. “If we meet any more strange characters I’ll be sure this is a dream.”

“Mmm,” Beverly answered, pausing to look back the way they had come.

“What are you looking for?” Lenora wanted to know.

“Jo-Jo and Luigi said a man had been watching the house,” Beverly reminded her friend. “I was hoping to catch a glimpse of him.”

“I didn’t see anyone when we left the house.” Lenora frowned. “Do you suppose it was our mysterious horseman?”

They came to a break in the woods at that moment, and looked across a wide field to where several trucks and trailers were drawn up in a half circle.

“So this is what a circus looks like—behind the scenes,” Lenora commented.

“This is only a small part of the show,” Jo-Jo answered. “They are going to put up the tent today, and a lot more people will arrive tomorrow. Things will really start to hum tomorrow.”

“How long do you stay here and rehearse?” Lenora wanted to know.

“We will be here only a day or so,” Luigi put in. “Each act is perfect before it comes. This is just to mold us into one show.”

“Come and meet some of the clowns,” Jo-Jo invited.

Circus people crowded around to meet the giant and the dwarf’s companions. They were pleasant people, jolly and happy in their work. The trailers they lived in were houses in miniature, complete with all necessities and even a few luxuries. The girls were made welcome, and one of the lady acrobats brewed a pot of tea on a tiny portable stove in her trailer.

Just as the girls decided regretfully that they must be going, Lenora noticed a man in riding clothes talking to one of the entertainers.

“Beverly!” she whispered. “Isn’t that our mysterious horseman?”

“I believe it is,” Beverly agreed. She turned to Luigi. “Who is that man, do you know?”

“Everyone calls him Tools,” the dwarf replied. “He works for Miss Moore.”

“Was he the man who was watching the house in the woods?” Lenora put in eagerly.

“Oh, no,” Luigi answered. “The man in the woods was a foreigner. A Hindu, I think.”

“Hindu!” Beverly and Lenora chorused.

“Do you know of a Hindu around here?” Luigi asked curiously.

“We know one,” Beverly told him, “but we don’t know why he should spy upon us.”

“Does this man, Tools, own a brown horse?” Lenora asked the dwarf.

“I don’t think so,” was the answer. “He rides Miss Moore’s horses, but they are all white.”

“We saw him the other night on a brown one,” Beverly murmured.

Luigi shook his head. “You must be mistaken. The only horses in the show are those belonging to Miss Moore, and, as I said, they are white.”

The girls turned to look at the man as he walked past them. They were more confident than ever that he was the mysterious man they had seen. But where was the brown horse he had been riding that snowy night?

Jo-Jo, the giant, rode up in a small truck and called to the girls.

“Hop in, and I’ll take you back to your car.”

The girls climbed aboard the truck, waving good-bye to the circus performers, and they started down the highway. They had wandered a good distance away from their starting point, exactly how far they had not realized until now.

Of course, Beverly told herself, following the curving highway made the distance much greater than it had been overland and through the woods. It would have been a simple matter for a horseman to ride from the Mingle stable to the circus grounds, for instance. A simple matter, yes, but how was she to prove he had done so—and on a brown horse when all the circus horses were white.

“Thinking about the horses?” Lenora asked suddenly.

Beverly nodded. “I still maintain that the easiest place to hide a horse is among other horses.”

“But a brown one in the midst of a group of white ones would stand out like the Empire State Building in the middle of the desert,” Lenora replied. “If Tools did take the Star of the East he must have hidden him some place else.” She leaned over and tapped Jo-Jo on the shoulder. “This is the place.

You don't have to take the truck in on that narrow road. We can walk to the car from here."

The girls waved to the friendly giant until the truck disappeared, and then they turned to walk to the car.

"What do you think of Luigi's statement that it was a Hindu who was watching the house?" Lenora asked her friend. "It must have been Ram."

"Yes," Beverly agreed, and then she laughed. "If he followed us all the time we were lost in the woods we certainly gave him a merry time."

"Serves him right," Lenora declared. "I don't like the idea of him following us."

"Nor do I," Beverly said. "I don't understand why he should. You don't suppose he suspects *us* of stealing the Star of the East!"

Lenora giggled. "Maybe he thinks I've hidden the Star in my pocketbook."

The woods were silent, without the cheerful chirping of the birds which prevailed in the summer, the only sound being that of their footsteps and the gentle creaking of tree branches in the wind.

"It's a comfort to know that the past few hours weren't entirely wasted," Lenora sighed as they walked along. "We learned that the mysterious horseman works for Miss Moore."

"I don't understand how it would have been possible for him to enter the Mengle stable and take the Star of the East," Beverly said, frowning, "unless someone at the Mengle house helped him."

"Do you think that someone was Ram?" Lenora asked.

"Ram is a stranger in this country," Beverly said. "This is his first visit to the States. How would he have met Tools?"

"It's too much for me," Lenora confessed.

They could see the car shining through the trees, and as they approached it a figure was visible leaning against the fender.

"It's Ram!" Lenora exclaimed.

When he heard them, the Hindu straightened up and stood waiting.

"Why have you been following us?" Lenora burst out indignantly.

"You are seeking the Star of the East, is it not so?" Ram inquired softly.

“Yes,” Beverly admitted.

“I, too, seek the horse. I thought I might be of assistance to you.”

“Why are you so interested in finding the Star of the East?” Lenora wanted to know. “He is no longer your responsibility.”

“I have deep feeling for him,” Ram replied. “He is a beautiful and intelligent animal.”

“Do you think Mr. Mengle’s groom had anything to do with the Star’s disappearance?” Beverly asked, remembering the button Ram had tried to return to Thurston.

“I do not know who is responsible,” Ram said quietly. “I want only to find the horse. The authorities may punish the thief.”

“Did you think we would lead you to him?” Beverly inquired.

“It is so, mem-sahib.”

“You would like to collect the reward Mr. Mengle has offered for him, wouldn’t you?” Lenora asked with a smile.

Ram smiled too. “It is true.”

“We are sorry we cannot help you collect it,” Beverly said. “We couldn’t find the Star of the East.”

“I, too, am sorry.” The Hindu bowed and walked away, disappearing among the trees.

“How do you like that?” Lenora demanded. “He followed us to be sure we didn’t find the horse without his knowledge of it. He certainly is a queer one.”

“I wonder if he could have any other motive than love for the horse,” Beverly murmured.

“He admitted he would like to collect the reward,” Lenora returned. “What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, it is probably too melodramatic to consider,” Beverly shrugged.

“Tell me what you were thinking,” Lenora urged.

“I was thinking of the diamond the inspector mentioned,” Beverly answered as she started the car. “Do you remember?”

“The one that was stolen from the maharajah?” Lenora nodded.

“Inspector Baker mentioned it to me again last night when I went to see him about my car,” Beverly continued. “The stone was missed shortly after Prince Houssain and Ram left the maharajah’s estate to come to America.”

“Does he suspect the prince or Ram of having stolen it?” Lenora asked eagerly.

“He didn’t say so,” Beverly told her. “He merely said that the police have been warned to watch for it in case someone tries to smuggle it into the country.”

“What a scoop it would be if we located the diamond as well as the Star of the East,” Lenora murmured. She thought for a moment. “But I don’t see how there could be any connection between the diamond and the Star of the East.”

“I told you it was probably all my imagination,” Beverly reminded her.

“Puzzle, puzzle, puzzle,” Lenora sighed. “We really walked into something this time, Bev.”

“Yes,” Beverly agreed. “Every hour the mystery gets deeper and deeper.”

CHAPTER X

Alarm in the Night

It was late afternoon when Beverly left the *Tribune* office on Monday to join Larry. She had turned in her account of the interview with Prince Houssain, and left Lenora deeply involved with a fellow photographer in a discussion of the merits of some new photographic equipment.

“Why so silent?” Larry asked as they walked along the avenue.

“I was thinking about Allen Mengle, the Star of the East, and Marcia,” Beverly said with a sigh. “It is all such a hopelessly mixed-up affair. I wonder where Marcia is?”

“She must be hiding with a friend,” Larry guessed.

Beverly stopped in her stride and stared at him.

“Allen received a telephone call from his home and he left at once, in spite of the fact that his brother is in a very critical condition. Larry! I’ve got an idea!”

“Good!” Larry smiled. “What is it?”

“If I were in trouble, to whom would I turn for help?”

“To me, I hope,” Larry answered promptly.

“Then why wouldn’t Marcia go to Allen?” Beverly said eagerly. “She has no one else. This affair might have made her realize how much Allen really means to her, and she knows she can rely upon his discretion. She abandoned my car on a road leading south—”

“The buses that run on that road go to Maryland,” Larry finished. “It is worth investigating. Let’s go to Maryland!”

“It would take hours to drive there,” Beverly protested. “Marcia could leave again before we arrived.”

“Let’s fly,” Larry proposed. “My *Red Bird* has been gathering dust in the hanger for the past several months.”

“Could we?” Beverly asked eagerly. “That would get us there in record time.”

Larry nodded. "I'll telephone the airport and tell them to have the plane fueled and ready for us."

While Larry called the airport, Beverly telephoned to Collins at the Mengle house and got Allen's address in Maryland. Then she telephoned Lenora and told her where they were going.

Larry's *Red Bird* was a sleek, low-winged, bright-red monoplane. He had taught Beverly to fly it, and on several occasions she had done so, but lately the plane had been standing idle. Now it seemed the plane was as eager to take to the clouds as they were. It responded perfectly to the lightest touch as the runway fell away from the wheels and they climbed into the sky.

As always when she was in a plane, Beverly felt free and exhilarated as she looked at the vast emptiness around her and the carpet of earth far below. The snow on the ground was like tiny white patches on a quilt of dull, sleepy brown. Moving vehicles appeared as tiny insects on narrow ribbonlike roads, and the buildings were like tiny, toy blocks.

The plane made excellent speed, in spite of strong head winds, and they were soon in sight of the airport not far from Allen's home.

"I wonder if we should have told Inspector Baker where we were going," Beverly murmured.

"It is merely a guess on our part that Marcia may be here," Larry answered. "We have no actual evidence for him."

Once on the ground they hired a taxi to drive them to Allen Mengle's farm. Early twilight was darkening the sky as they drew near their destination. Rolling meadows, with patterns of neat, white fences, and huge trees lifting bare, black limbs skyward, surrounded the white house and outbuildings of Justin Farm.

Larry asked the driver to wait for them, but the man refused.

"I'm the only one on duty at the airport. When you want me again telephone, and I'll come and get you."

They watched the taxi drive away and then turned toward the house. They followed the winding driveway up to the wide veranda which surrounded the house, and Larry lifted the heavy, old-fashioned brass knocker mounted on the door. They waited, but there was no response. After two more unacknowledged knocks, Beverly and Larry left the porch and looked uncertainly about.

“It is strange there isn’t someone here,” Beverly said with a frown. “Allen must have arrived by this time.”

Just then they heard the faint whinny of a horse.

“Let’s go around to the stables,” Larry suggested. “Perhaps we can find someone there.”

They followed a narrow path, which lay neatly between borders of stones guarding the sleeping flower beds, to the long, narrow, whitewashed stable. Larry opened the heavy door, and they stepped slowly into the hay-scented interior.

“Oh, Larry!” Beverly exclaimed, putting out a tentative hand to stroke the satin-soft nose of the first horse. “Aren’t they beauties? Now I can understand Allen’s enthusiasm for his horses.”

“Is anyone here?” Larry called.

The only reply was a soft whinny from the horse Beverly was petting.

“If Marcia is here, she’s probably hiding in the house,” Beverly sighed.

“Let’s go back and try again,” Larry suggested.

After they had admired each horse, they left the stable and started back toward the house. As they approached they saw a lean, tanned man in worn riding clothes standing on the veranda. When they drew near he moved down the steps to meet them.

“Are you folks lost?” he asked pleasantly.

“We are looking for Mr. Mengle,” Larry answered.

“Mr. Mengle’s in New York,” the man replied.

“Is Miss Morrison here?” Beverly interposed.

The man’s gray eyes studied Beverly for a moment before he answered.

“We aren’t expecting Miss Morrison.”

Beverly and Larry exchanged puzzled glances. The man’s attitude was watchful, and it made them suspicious.

“I’d like to telephone for a taxi,” Larry said. “May I use your telephone?”

“Sorry,” the man replied. “The telephone is out of order.”

“We have to call a taxi to get back to the airport,” Larry said, frowning.

The man was silent for a moment as if deliberating something within himself.

“I’ll drive you to the airport,” he said at last. “Wait here until I get the car.”

He disappeared around the corner of the big white house. As Beverly and Larry waited uncertainly on the porch steps, they saw a woman enter the driveway and walk toward the house. She was laden with packages, and Beverly and Larry went to meet her. As they neared the newcomer, one of her packages slipped to the ground and Larry retrieved it.

“Thank you,” the woman said with a smile. “I saw you at the door. Can I help you? I’m Mrs. Edwards, Mr. Mengle’s housekeeper.”

“Let me carry your packages,” Larry offered.

“We would like to see Mr. Mengle,” Beverly explained as some of the packages were transferred to Larry’s arms. “Has he returned from New York?”

“Yes, very unexpectedly. I had to rush out and do some marketing. Come into the house and I will tell him he has more company.”

She ushered them into a dark, cold sitting room and hurried down the hall toward the kitchen.

“She said *more* company!” Beverly murmured significantly.

Just then the front door opened and hurried footsteps sounded in the hall.

“It’s the man who was going to take us to the airport,” Larry reported after a quick glance into the hall.

The man paused at a room farther down the hall. There was the murmur of voices and then the sound of a door being shut.

“Come on!” Larry whispered.

They tiptoed to the door of the room from which came the murmur of voices. Larry seized the doorknob and flung open the door. Two men stopped talking and swung about to face the door.

“Mr. Mengle!” Beverly exclaimed.

Allen dismissed the other man with a shrug and turned to Beverly and Larry.

“I asked Tom, my trainer, to send you away,” he admitted with a smile. “I hadn’t counted on Mrs. Edwards returning so soon. Come in, now that

you have discovered me.”

Beverly introduced Larry and added:

“Why were you hiding from us?”

“It was at my request,” a feminine voice said softly, and a slender figure rose from a chair in the shadows at the far end of the room.

“Marcia!” Beverly exclaimed. “Our guess was right!”

“Sit down,” Allen invited, “and we will have a chat.”

“What made you follow me here?” Marcia demanded of Beverly. “I told you I had nothing to do with what happened to Max. Why don’t you leave me alone? I didn’t do any thing.”

“We want to know what went on in the house while you were there,” Beverly replied. “Did you see anyone else? Were you the one Lenora and I heard leaving the house?”

Marcia nodded.

“I was in the car that almost ran you down in the driveway.”

“Why did you do that?” Beverly demanded.

“It wasn’t my intention to run you down. All I could think of was to get away as quickly as possible.”

“Tell us about it,” Allen interrupted. “You were just about to tell me what happened when Miss Gray came.”

“I didn’t hurt Max,” Marcia said. “Although it may look as if I am guilty, I assure you I’m not.”

“You shouldn’t have run away,” Allen said gently. “You should have stayed and cleared yourself in the eyes of everyone. Tell us exactly what happened.”

Marcia went back to her chair in the shadows and began to speak slowly.

“After Shirley left Max and me in the library, we talked a while and then I went into the alcove in the hall to make a telephone call. I had to wait some time for the connection, and I heard someone in the library with Max. They seemed to be arguing. When I went back to the library the French doors were open wide, and Max lay on the floor. He was so still—” She shivered. “I knelt down and picked up the andiron. Then I heard voices—Beverly’s and Lenora’s. In a flash I realized how it would look if I were found bending

over Max with the andiron in my hand. I dropped the andiron and hid in the room across the hall. I ran out of the house the first chance I got.”

“Did you see the person who talked to Max?” Beverly asked.

“No, I didn’t see him,” Marcia replied.

“Did you recognize the voice?” Allen asked.

“I think I’ve heard it before.” Marcia frowned. “But I can’t place it. However, I am sure if I heard the voice again I would recognize it.”

“Why did you write Allen that you didn’t want to see him again?” Beverly asked.

“It was part of my bargain with Max,” Marcia explained. “Max said if I broke off my friendship with Allen he would see that I was given the lead in *Spring Magic*. I thought—” she added naïvely, “I thought Allen and I could make up again after opening night. It was a selfish thing to do, I admit,” she went on, “but the chance to be a star was all I could see. I suppose you would say I wanted to have my cake and eat it, too. Do you hate me for it, Allen?”

“Of course not!” Allen said softly.

“What do you think the attacker was looking for when he ransacked the library?” Larry put in.

“It might have been something that would identify him,” Allen suggested, moving closer to the fireplace.

In the light from the fire Beverly could see his face clearly for the first time. His eye was cut and bruised.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

“This?” Allen touched his eye and winced. “I had a little argument with Thurston.”

“What about?” Beverly asked.

“He is a very unpleasant character,” Allen assured her. “I ran into him up at Max’s, and he made some very offensive remarks. I told him I was going to tell Max exactly what kind of worker he was and that Max would probably discharge him. He has a terrible temper, and he swung his riding crop at me. However, I had the last word, or, you might say, the last blow.”

“We saw the evidence of it,” Beverly affirmed, smiling, “but he wouldn’t tell us what happened.”

Allen turned to the girl in the shadows.

“Have you decided to tell Inspector Baker your story, Marcia? It is the only thing to do.”

“If you think it best, Allen, I will,” Marcia sighed.

“It’s a long drive. Let’s get started right away and get it over with,” Allen proposed. “I’ll bring my car around to the front of the house.”

“We flew down,” Larry explained, “but the plane is only a two-seater so I’m afraid you couldn’t go back with us.”

“We’ll drop you at the airport and drive to New York,” Allen said cheerfully.

He was only out of the library for a moment.

“It is storming,” he reported. “You certainly couldn’t take off in this wind, and I wouldn’t care to drive any distance. Suppose we wait until morning and get an early start then. There is ample room for you to stay overnight. Marcia and Beverly can share a room, and Larry and I will bunk together. I’ll tell Mrs. Edwards we’ll be four for dinner.”

Beverly turned from the window where she had gone to look at the storm. Rain was beating against the pane, and wind bent the trees low before it.

“I suppose it would be wiser to wait until morning,” she conceded.

“Of course it would,” Allen agreed, and went off to confer with his housekeeper.

Mrs. Edwards served a delicious dinner, and afterward the four young people sat before the fire in the library and talked. Later the housekeeper showed them upstairs to their rooms.

“I have a daughter about your size, Miss Gray,” she said. “She will be glad to lend you and Marcia anything you need.”

Marcia and Beverly were soon settled comfortably in twin beds in a long, high-ceilinged room at the front of the house. The sound of rain on the roof was soft and lulling. Beverly was not sure how long she had been asleep, but suddenly she was sitting up in bed. Somewhere a shutter banged in the wind. The rain had stopped, and moonlight was streaming in the windows.

At first she thought a cloud was passing across the moon, and then she realized that it was a figure at the window. Allen's house had a small balcony across the front, making it easy for an intruder to reach the bedroom windows.

"Beverly!" Marcia whispered in alarm from the other bed.

"I see him," Beverly murmured.

"What will we do?" Marcia demanded frantically.

"You go for Larry and Allen," Beverly whispered. "I'll wait here and watch him."

Marcia slipped out of bed and seized a robe. Noiselessly she opened the door and slipped into the hall. Beverly reached for a robe and slippers and took up a vantage point near the door. The intruder was a black, motionless shadow against the window. Suddenly there was a faint click and one of the windows began slowly to open. Beverly was tense with expectancy, wishing Marcia would hurry.

Suddenly the sharp, clear beam of a flashlight focused upon Beverly's empty bed. Then it shifted swiftly to Marcia's. At the same moment there was a noise in the hall. Larry and Allen! The beam of light turned toward the door and fell full upon Beverly. For a moment she was blinded by the unexpected glare. That moment was enough for the intruder to retreat to the windows and disappear onto the balcony.

"He went out the window," Beverly cried as Larry and Allen burst into the room.

"I'll try to head him off downstairs!" Allen shouted and disappeared into the hall.

Larry ran to the balcony, with Beverly and Marcia close behind him. There was no one on the porch, but they could see a figure running across the lawn. They heard the front door slam, and Allen appeared below them. He set off in hot pursuit of the fleeing figure.

Larry turned and ran back into the house, followed by the girls. They raced for the stairs, and when they emerged onto the front lawn there was no one in sight, but sounds of a struggle were coming from a clump of bushes near the highway. When they reached the spot they found Allen astride a writhing figure on the ground.

"I've got him!" Allen cried jubilantly. "I've got him!"

The figure under him suddenly twisted free, upsetting Allen.

“You fool!” came the angry voice. “I’m not the man you were after. I’m a detective!”

Allen and Larry helped the man to his feet.

“How do I know—” Allen was beginning when Marcia interrupted with a cry:

“There he goes!”

A shadow was outlined for an instant against the house, and the three men set off in pursuit, the girls following closely. The chase led to the stable, and when Beverly and Marcia reached the open door they could hear the horses thrashing about in their stalls, excited at the invasion of their peaceful stable. There was no light except the moonlight which entered through the open door but which did not penetrate very far. Larry, Allen, and the detective were darting back and forth in the darkness.

“There he is!”

“No—over there!”

The shadows were friendly to the fugitive and cloaked his movements.

“You girls better go back to the house,” Larry advised.

“Call Tom, my trainer,” Allen put in. “He can help us. Tell him to bring a flashlight.”

The girls turned to leave when there was a shout.

“He is in Valiant’s stall,” Allen’s voice cried excitedly. “Look out, here he comes!”

The warning was shouted as there came the thunder of hoofbeats and Valiant, with a dark figure on his back, galloped wildly past the young people and out of the stable. He streaked across the lawn, the figure on his back lying low along his neck, and disappeared in a dark clump of trees.

CHAPTER XI

The Trap Is Set

“Our faces are certainly red with embarrassment now,” Larry declared, shaking his head. “You might have caught him if it hadn’t been for us.”

They were in the library again, warming themselves at the open fire.

“How was I to know you were a detective?” Allen added. “I saw you running, Mr. Mulford, and I naturally assumed you were the man I was after.”

“Call me Smiley—everybody does,” the detective said, his face, dark and brooding, belying his nickname. “I saw the man climb down from the balcony. I ran across the lawn and down the driveway after him. I was gaining on him, too, when you tackled me.” He rubbed one shoulder ruefully. “You must have been a football player.”

“How did you happen to be watching the balcony?” Allen wanted to know.

“I followed you down from New York,” Smiley replied. “Inspector Baker thought you might lead us to Miss Morrison.”

There was a moment’s silence. Marcia left her chair and moved closer to the fire to warm her hands.

“We planned to go to Inspector Baker tomorrow morning,” she said.

“Marcia didn’t hit my brother with the andiron,” Allen told the detective.

“I’m not saying she did,” the detective replied, “but the inspector has a lot of questions to ask. Tell the truth and you will be all right.”

The others were silent, wondering what Inspector Baker’s reaction would be to Marcia’s story that she had been present in Max Mengle’s house at the time of the attack but could not identify the attacker. Also, that she had picked up the andiron but had not used it as a weapon. Would the inspector believe her?

“Who was the man broke in here tonight?” Smiley asked. “Did he steal anything?”

“I don’t believe so,” Allen answered. “Nothing, that is, except Valiant, and he can’t ride him very far bareback. My trainer has gone after them. He’ll probably find Valiant abandoned in the woods.”

“Do you know of anyone who might want to injure you? Perhaps someone hates both you and your brother. Or maybe he was after you,” Smiley said, turning his critical eyes upon Marcia.

“Why should he be after Marcia?” Allen demanded.

“It has been in all the papers that she is wanted for questioning. Perhaps the attacker is afraid she can identify him in some way.”

“I heard him talking to Max,” Marcia admitted, “and his voice was vaguely familiar, but as yet I haven’t been able to place him.”

“If you are willing, we might draw him out into the open,” Smiley suggested.

“You want Marcia to be bait?” Allen asked doubtfully.

“We’ll see that she has protection at all times,” Smiley replied.

“I don’t like it,” Allen declared.

“What do you say, Miss Morrison?” Smiley appealed to the girl. “Will you help us catch the man?”

“Do you think I really could—” Marcia murmured.

“You are putting yourself in danger, Marcia,” Allen warned.

“She is also helping to prove her own innocence,” Smiley said bluntly. “We’ll see that she is never alone, so nothing can happen to her. Perhaps Miss Gray will agree to be Miss Morrison’s constant companion. Both girls will have police protection. You can think it over on the way back to New York. It will be dawn in another hour. Shall we start?”

“Now?” Allen exclaimed. “Oh, very well!”

It was dark and cold as they left the house, but the air gave promise of clear weather. Smiley accompanied Marcia and Allen in the latter’s car, while Beverly and Larry flew the *Red Bird* back to town. They were halfway to the city when daybreak came, long, slender fingers of rosy light creeping slowly over the horizon.

“The world seems different in the early morning,” Beverly sighed. “It is a shame we don’t see more sunrises.”

“Oh, for the life of an early bird!” Larry sang off key.

“Remember how beautiful the sunrise and sunset were when we were cruising on the *Susabella*?” Beverly murmured. “Tony Anton wants us to go on another cruise,” she added.

“Why don’t we?” Larry asked. “It would be a grand vacation for you.”

Beverly and Larry enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at Smitty’s before they went to police headquarters to wait for Marcia, Allen, and Smiley.

When Marcia and her companions arrived there was a long session, and then Beverly departed to go to the apartment and get some of her things. It had been agreed that she was to stay with Marcia in the latter’s apartment for a few days.

“The wanderer returneth!” Lenora exclaimed when Beverly appeared. “Where’ve you been? Even Charlie Blaine was beginning to worry.”

“I telephoned him from Inspector Baker’s office,” Beverly said, smiling. “Marcia is back and I am going to stay with her for a few days.”

“Why?”

Lenora trailed Beverly into the bedroom and watched as she drew a traveling bag from the closet.

“Don’t you appreciate my company any longer?” Lenora wanted to know.

Beverly laughed. “I am doubling now for a policewoman.”

“What next?” Lenora dropped to the bed to finish the piece of cake she had brought with her. “Are you going to be handcuffed together?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Beverly returned with a chuckle.

“I don’t like it,” Lenora announced. “Aren’t we working together any longer?”

“At the moment it might be difficult.” Beverly frowned. “I’m supposed to be with Marcia every minute—”

“How dull!” Lenora exclaimed.

Beverly snapped shut her suitcase and swung it to the floor.

“I don’t like this,” Lenora repeated. “May I go with you? If I am your photographer—”

“I don’t anticipate any pictures,” Beverly remarked with a smile.

“At least I may come to see you, mayn’t I?” Lenora demanded. “Would Marcia object to that?”

“Of course not,” Beverly said. “We aren’t going to isolate ourselves. Inspector Baker has told us to go out, to be seen in public places, to give the man a chance to contact Marcia if he wants to.”

“Man?” Lenora demanded. “What man?”

“Marcia believes she can identify Mr. Mengle’s attacker by his voice and the man may try to reach her.”

“Why should he chance it if the police are going to nab him the moment he does?” Lenora asked.

“He doesn’t know the police will be shadowing Marcia,” Beverly said. “So far as the public is concerned, Marcia simply told the inspector she heard someone talking to Mr. Mengle in the library that day. The newspapers will print that the police are going to ask her to listen to the voices of various suspects and try to identify the attacker. We hope the mysterious man will try to reach her first and buy her silence.”

“Or try to silence her some other way,” Lenora said bluntly. “If you are going to be with her all the time—” She shook her head. “Oh, Bev, I don’t like it.”

“There will always be a policeman within call,” Beverly comforted her.

“Make sure you call loudly enough for him to hear you,” Lenora counseled.

Beverly put her suitcase into her car and drove to Marcia’s apartment. She was used to Lenora’s company on most of her news assignments about town, and she missed the cheerful chatter and gay companionship of her friend.

Beverly found Marcia dressing to go out for lunch. After brief deliberation they decided upon a popular restaurant in the shopping district. They chose a table by the window where they could watch the constant stream of passers-by.

“The more I think about this plan, the less I like it,” Marcia declared nervously.

“I know,” Beverly agreed.

“If only I knew where he might come from, or how he might contact me
—”

“He may not come at all,” Beverly said in an effort to be comforting.

“There are so many people,” Marcia sighed, watching the crowd on the pavement. “He could be in that throng and we would never see him.”

“The idea is for him to see us,” Beverly reminded her. “Have you decided what you want for lunch?”



Suddenly there was a crash and something came hurtling through the window beside Beverly and Marcia.

The girls turned their attention to the menus. Suddenly there was a crash and something came hurtling through the window beside them. Marcia screamed, there was a shout from the sidewalk, and a shower of broken glass fell across the girls' table.

The manager and a bevy of waiters hurried toward the scene of the disaster.

A woman on the sidewalk was excitedly shouting:

"I saw a man throw something at the window. I saw him! He ran that way!"

The culprit was swallowed up in the crowd, although several passers-by attempted to pursue him.

The girls looked at each other, horrified. When some of the excitement had subsided and it was found that no one had been cut by the flying glass, the manager suggested the girls take another table and finish their lunch.

"I've lost my appetite," Marcia declared. "Let's get out of here."

Beverly followed the other girl as she hurried through the revolving door and started up the avenue.

"It's odd the manager didn't find whatever it was that came through the window," Marcia commented.

Beverly smiled. "I have it here. Since there were four windows to choose from, I thought it significant that the culprit chose ours." She drew a stone from her pocket and a crumpled piece of paper.

"What does it say?" Marcia demanded. "Was it meant for us?"

"'Silence is golden,'" Beverly quoted from the paper in her hand.

The message had been crudely printed in pencil on the margin of a newspaper page and wrapped around the stone which had broken the window.

"Is that all?" Marcia asked in disappointment.

"This is the first step," Beverly replied. "We are making progress."

"What happened to the police guard we are supposed to have?" Marcia demanded.

"He must have been one of those who went chasing after the man," Beverly said.

Marcia cast an apprehensive glance over her shoulder.

“I wonder if we are being followed.”

Beverly hurried her steps to keep up with the other girl.

“Where are we going?”

“To the theater,” Marcia answered. “Max would want us to go on with the play, even though he won’t be able to see the opening next week.”

Beverly wondered what would happen if Shirley and Marcia met at the theater. Her sympathy was all with Shirley, and yet she felt she could understand, though not approve, the ambition that had allowed Marcia to accept the starring role which rightfully belonged to Shirley.

The doorman at the theater told them a rehearsal had been called for that morning, but since Marcia had not appeared the cast had been sent home until the next day.

“I left my compact in my dressing room,” Marcia told the man. “I’d like to get it now.”

Beverly accompanied the other girl backstage, pausing to look out over the vast, empty auditorium. A single, bare electric bulb burned on the stage and it cast huge shadows into the wings where miscellaneous bits of scenery were piled.

Marcia came to stand beside Beverly on the empty stage.

“One week from tonight this place will be crowded,” she declared. “I wonder if I’ll have stage fright when I see all the faces.”

“I probably would.” Beverly smiled. “Dramatics have no appeal for me.”

“You would rather work with words,” Marcia nodded. “That never appealed to me.” She walked closer to the center of the stage. “I feel at home here—as if all I ever wanted is here waiting for me.”

There was a faint sound overhead, and Beverly looked up at the maze of ropes and weights which balanced the curtains.

“Look out, Marcia!”

In the instant that Beverly pushed Marcia to safety a heavy curtain weight plummeted down and crashed to the stage where Marcia had been standing. Swiftly Beverly ran into the shadow of the wings. There was the sound of running footsteps, and she followed them to a storage room where

an open window gave mute testimony to the means of escape employed by the intruder.

Marcia was kneeling to examine the weight, and the doorman was standing beside her.

“One of the stagehands must have left that bag on the catwalk,” the doorman said. “He was to replace one on the asbestos curtain. Someone must have brushed against it and knocked it off.”

“Just when I was under it,” added Marcia faintly. “Beverly, if you hadn’t looked up when you did—” Marcia shook her head and stood up. “I am going to Inspector Baker and call this whole thing off. I’m frightened.”

“I don’t blame you,” Beverly agreed. “The man must have followed us from the restaurant.”

“Who can it be, Beverly?” Marcia shivered as she glanced at the shadowy corners of the stage. “Let’s go out into the sunshine.”

Once in the open air she seemed calmer. She walked along swiftly, head bent against the wind, a worried frown on her face.

“Who can it be?” she repeated. “I seemed to recognize his voice, but his identity puzzles me.”

“He is as elusive as a phantom,” Beverly declared. “Where shall we go now?”

“Home to my apartment,” Marcia said. “I am going to telephone Inspector Baker. I refuse to be bait any longer.”

At her apartment Marcia received word that Allen Mengle had telephoned twice. Marcia was unable to talk to the inspector on the telephone, and she paced restlessly up and down her living room.

“Let’s go out and see Allen,” she proposed at last. “I’m too nervous to sit still.”

Beverly got her car, which was parked near Marcia’s house, and they drove out to the Mengle estate. As they stopped before the house the door opened, as if Collins had been watching for them.

“Mr. Allen is not here, miss,” Collins replied to Marcia’s inquiry. “He has been called to the hospital. They believe Mr. Mengle has reached the crisis.”

“Poor Max,” Marcia murmured. “We’ll wait a little while to see if there is any word.”

There was a fire burning in the library, and the girls sat down before it, welcoming the warmth. Collins returned bearing a tray of tea and cinnamon toast.

“In most of the mystery stories I have read it is the butler who commits the crime,” Marcia declared, “but Collins is a gem. I understand he’s been with Max for years.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t his voice you heard?” Beverly asked.

“It wasn’t Collins,” Marcia said. She stood up, looking about restlessly. “I wish Allen would phone. Let’s go out to the barn and see the horses. I am especially fond of Queenie,” she told Beverly as they walked from the house to the barn. “Max reluctantly let me ride her a few Sundays when Allen and I drove out here.”

The gray mare whinnied softly when she saw Marcia, and the girl patted her gently, moving into the stall with the horse.

“Beverly!” she exclaimed. “Look here! Look at this mark on her flank. It looks as though she had been cut with a whip. I am going to speak to that new groom about it!” she declared indignantly.

Marcia stormed out of the barn, Beverly in her wake, and headed for the groom’s quarters, which were on the second floor of the garage.

A big, black sedan filled almost the entire width of the sliding door of the garage, but Marcia found a door at the side of the building which opened onto a narrow stairway leading to the second floor. The girls climbed the stairs, and Marcia’s hand was raised to knock on the door when she paused, a queer look on her face, listening to the voices inside the room.

“Beverly!” she whispered. “That voice! That is the voice I heard in the library with Max the day he was hurt!”

“Are you sure?” Beverly asked.

“Oh, yes! What will we do?”

“Notify Inspector Baker at once,” Beverly decided swiftly. “Come!”

“They might leave while we are telephoning,” Marcia said as the girls emerged from the building. “I’ll stay inside the garage door and watch to see who comes out, while you telephone.”

“I know!” Beverly exclaimed. “The policeman who is supposed to be our guard should be in his car in the driveway. I’ll get him.”

“Hurry!” Marcia pleaded.

Beverly ran swiftly to the house and around to the front of the building. A small, black roadster was parked behind her car. She saw a man sitting in it and motioned to him. He left the car at once and came toward her. It was Smiley, the man they had first met in Maryland.

“Miss Morrison believes the man she heard in the library that day is with the groom in the garage,” Beverly said.

Smiley departed on the run, Beverly following close behind him.

Marcia had taken up a position in the doorway of the garage, but when Smiley and Beverly arrived she was nowhere in sight. The big, black sedan which had been in the garage a few moments ago was also missing. The sound of a motor came faintly to their ears. The driver had taken the car around the house on the opposite side to that used by Beverly and the detective.

Beverly followed Smiley as he ran back to the front of the house and down to the highway, but it was no use. The black sedan was out of sight.

“It is too late,” Smiley sighed. “She’s gone. I’ll send out an alarm for the black sedan at once.” He shook his head. “She shouldn’t have run away.”

“But why should she run away now?” Beverly objected. “She told Inspector Baker everything she knew. I think we should go to Thurston’s quarters and see who is there,” Beverly declared. “I believe Marcia really did recognize a voice.”

“We will do that,” Smiley assured her, “but I doubt if we will learn anything. I believe she used the voices as a ruse to get you to leave her alone so she could escape.”

They retraced their steps to the garage and climbed the stairs to Thurston’s rooms. Smiley knocked on the door, but there was no response.

“There were people in there,” Beverly assured him. “I heard voices, too.”

“Whoever it was is gone now,” Smiley commented as he tried the door and found it locked. “I doubt if we could have learned anything. It is my opinion that Miss Morrison ran away because she is frightened.”

CHAPTER XII

A Threat

Beverly pushed back her chair, covered her typewriter, and stood up.

“Let’s go, Lenora.”

“Mystery, mystery!” Lenora sighed. “Never a dull moment! Why don’t I get me a nice nine-to-five job?”

“You love this and you know it,” Beverly retorted laughingly.

“But when am I going to do my Christmas shopping?” Lenora wanted to know.

“You can do some now,” Beverly answered.

“And let you solve Marcia’s disappearance alone? Of course, I could pick up a few things before lunch—” Lenora shook her head. “No, I am going with you. Where do you think Marcia disappeared to, yesterday?”

“I wish I knew,” Beverly sighed. “I can’t quite believe that she ran away again.”

Why *had* Marcia disappeared? Was she in hiding again because she was too frightened to accuse openly the man she believed had attacked Max Mengle? Beverly heartily regretted leaving Marcia alone even for an instant. Still, someone had had to go for the police, and if she had remained to watch the garage Marcia would still have had an opportunity to escape.

“I certainly didn’t prove to be much help to Inspector Baker,” Beverly continued gloomily.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Lenora declared. “It was up to the police to keep track of Marcia.” She slipped into her coat and followed Beverly to the door. “Maybe you will find her with Allen again.”

“No, Allen is still at the hospital with Max,” Beverly answered. “Tonight or tomorrow morning should be the turning point.”

The girls drove up Fifth Avenue. Store windows were gaily decorated for the holidays, and shoppers were laden with mysterious packages. As they stopped at Forty-second Street for the traffic light, Lenora exclaimed:

“Look, Bev! There’s Shirley! Yoo-hoo, Shirley! Over here!”

Shirley climbed into the car with them.

“Are you coming from rehearsal?” Lenora asked.

“Certainly not,” Shirley replied. “I don’t go to the theater anymore, remember? They have Marcia. They don’t need me.”

“They don’t have Marcia,” Lenora informed her. “She has disappeared again.”

“She’ll be back,” Shirley said with a shrug. “I’ve been looking for another job all day. Lois thinks she can get me a place in her office.”

“Shirley!” Beverly and Lenora exclaimed in unison.

“You can’t give up your career as an actress!” Lenora cried.

“Yes,” Shirley said calmly, “I certainly can.”

“You love the theater,” Beverly protested. “Just because you are angry now—angry and disappointed—that’s no reason to throw away everything you’ve worked for all this time.”

“It is like throwing away a whole box of strawberries because one is bad,” added Lenora. “It is a shame that characters like Mr. Mengle and Marcia had to be connected with *Spring Magic*, but there are other plays. Try for another, Shirley. All the experience you have had, everything you worked for—”

“You shouldn’t quit like this,” Beverly pleaded. “Go back and fight for your part.”

“I’m too tired and discouraged to fight,” Shirley said wearily. “Besides, I’ve made up my mind.”

“We won’t let you do it!” Lenora persisted. “You are my favorite actress, and I want to see you in more plays.”

“My public of one!” Shirley laughed.

“Two!” Beverly corrected. “Count me among your fans. Why don’t you take a week and think it over, Shirley? You don’t want to act hastily and be sorry.”

“I’ve made up my mind,” Shirley repeated. “I wish I had never tried to be an actress in the first place.”

Beverly and Lenora exchanged significant glances and fell silent. They recognized the fact that nothing they said now would influence Shirley in the slightest degree. Hurt and disillusionment were forcing her to such a decision. Time alone would make her see things more clearly and calmly.

“Beverly and I have been talking about a reunion of the Alpha Delta girls,” Lenora said, changing the subject abruptly. “What do you think?”

“Fine!” Shirley nodded. “It’s time we all got together again. When will it be?”

“Whatever date is most convenient to the girls,” Beverly answered. “We haven’t written to any of them yet.”

“Any time is all right with me,” Shirley said. “Let me out at the next corner, Bev. I have to meet Roger and his mother. I’ll see you later.”

Shirley stepped from the car and was swallowed up in the crowd.

“We’ve got to do something about her, Bev,” Lenora said slowly. “She can’t quit the theater—just like that!” She snapped her fingers. “She was more hurt over losing her part than we realized.”

“Yes,” Beverly agreed. “And Marcia is responsible for it.”

“*Dear Marcia!*” Lenora echoed with a grin. “Tell me honestly, Bev, what do you think has happened to her?”

Beverly was silent for a long moment.

“Do you think she is hiding because she is scared?” Lenora prompted.

“Perhaps,” Beverly said. “After what happened at the restaurant and the theater she has a right to be frightened. On the other hand—”

“Yes?” Lenora encouraged.

“I am wondering if she did run away,” Beverly said thoughtfully. “Smiley immediately jumped to that conclusion, but I’ve been thinking. She might have been kidnaped.”

“It is a possibility,” Lenora agreed. “Since the unknown man had warned her to be silent, perhaps he kidnaped her to make sure she wouldn’t identify him to the police. But where would he take her?”

“If, as I suspect, the man who stole the Star of the East and attacked Mr. Mengle has now kidnaped Marcia, he shouldn’t have any trouble,” Beverly murmured. “If he could hide a horse, he can hide a girl.”

“Oh, fine!” Lenora muttered. “That leaves us exactly where we started—looking for a horse. Has Inspector Baker made any progress?”

Beverly shook her head. “He has two men assigned to the case, but so far they haven’t found a trace. I wish I knew *why* that horse was stolen,” she added thoughtfully.

“Maybe someone just didn’t like Mr. Mengle and thought this was a good way to hurt him,” Lenora suggested. “It is surprising how many people don’t like Mr. Mengle. Take Ram, for instance. I don’t like that Hindu. He is too smooth. He has eyes like a hawk—they haunt me.”

“Why would Ram take the Star?” Beverly asked. “His master presented the horse to Mr. Mengle.”

“Ram might have quarreled with Mr. Mengle,” Lenora continued.

“Marcia said the voice wasn’t Ram’s,” Beverly returned. “She would have recognized it easily if it had been Ram.”

“Where are we going?” Lenora demanded suddenly, bringing herself back to the present. “Aren’t we going home to the apartment?”

“You can if you wish,” Beverly answered. “I’m going out to the Mengle house. I want to find out who was in Thurston’s room yesterday.”

“Let’s stop on the way and have something to eat,” Lenora proposed. “I’m starving.”

“All right,” Beverly agreed. “Keep your eye out for a nice place.”

They were almost to Redfern before Lenora decided upon a restaurant.

“There is one called The Brass Hat, and one named the Chicken Nest,” the blond girl reported. “Let’s try the Chicken Nest.”

Beverly turned the car into the parking lot, and the girls went into the small building. A full-length mirror occupied one wall, while against the opposite wall were narrow booths with shaded pink lights. The appetizing odor of cooking food met them as they opened the door.

“Oh, boy!” Lenora exclaimed. “Am I hungry!” She picked up the menu at once. “I could eat an elephant.”

“I think I’ll have something more tasty,” Beverly said, laughing. “How about some chicken?”

“Sorry,” the waitress interrupted. “We’re fresh out of chicken.”

“Fine thing!” Lenora grumbled when they had given their order, and the waitress had disappeared. “The Chicken Nest and no chicken! Why don’t they call it—”

“Lenora!” Beverly whispered. “Look!”

“At what?”

“Thurston is in a booth at the end of the room. Look at the man with him. Isn’t it our mysterious horseman again?”

“Yes!” Lenora whispered back excitedly. “The one Luigi the dwarf called Tools!”

At that moment the men rose to leave. Thurston’s eyes met Beverly’s in the wall mirror. For a moment he hesitated and then came straight to the girls’ booth.

“Are you following me?” he demanded, and there was a hint of menace in his tone.

“No,” Beverly replied. “Why do you think that?”

“I don’t like people following me,” Thurston continued. “If you do it, something might happen to you.”

“Just as something happened to Marcia Morrison?” Beverly inquired quietly.

He stared at her for a moment. “Maybe,” he said. After another long look at the girls he followed his friend to the door.

“There is a man I could cheerfully hate,” Lenora declared with a shiver. “Do you realize he threatened us?”

“Do *you* realize that he practically admitted he kidnaped Marcia?” Beverly countered swiftly. “At least that is the way I interpret his words. If so, either he or his friend must have been the one who attacked Mr. Mengle.”

“But wouldn’t Marcia have been able to identify Thurston’s voice right away?” Lenora asked.

“She probably never heard it more than once.” Beverly frowned. “He hadn’t been with Mr. Mengle more than a week, you know, and Marcia probably would not have gone to the stable the night of the party. There is one thing I would like to know. Where was Thurston the morning Mr. Mengle was attacked?”

“Beverly!” Lenora warned. “You heard what he said—something might happen to you. You wouldn’t want to be kidnaped as Marcia was, would you?”

“No,” Beverly said slowly. “Or would I?” she exclaimed. “That would solve it, Lenora. If he kidnaped me I’d probably find Marcia—perhaps even the Star of the East!”

“Where are you going?” Lenora demanded as Beverly got to her feet and reached for her coat.

“To do a little investigating,” Beverly flung over her shoulder as she went toward the door. “It might even turn into a kidnapping!”

CHAPTER XIII

The Chase

“Wait for me!” Lenora cried, making haste to follow her friend.

The girls climbed into the car, and Beverly swung onto the highway in the direction of the Mengle estate.

“We can’t walk up to Thurston and say ‘Please kidnap me so I can find Marcia,’” Lenora protested.

“Of course not,” Beverly agreed. “I’ll just ask him where he was when Mr. Mengle was attacked and see what he says.”

The car entered the grounds of the Mengle estate and rolled smoothly up the drive. There was no other car in sight. The girls could not tell whether or not Thurston and his friend had arrived ahead of them. Beverly drove around the house to the garage and parked.

A whispering wind gave promise of more snow as Beverly and Lenora approached the door leading to the quarters above the garage. It was dark in the building, but Beverly had brought a flashlight and she used it to light their way up the narrow stairway. She knocked on Thurston’s door, but there was no answer. Cautiously she turned the doorknob and the door swung open.

“Hello!” she called. “Anyone here?”

There was no answer so she advanced a step into the room. There was evidence that someone had taken a hasty departure. Bureau drawers were open and disheveled. Discarded items of clothing were scattered about the room. A lamp had been knocked over. Newspapers littered the floor. To Beverly, Thurston’s hasty departure looked like an admission of guilt.

“The bird has flown!” Lenora said from the doorway. Her eyes ran about the room and she gave a low whistle. “He must have felt the trail getting warm.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything here to help us,” Beverly sighed in disappointment. “We might as well go.”

The girls turned to leave. As she reached for the doorknob Beverly's eyes fell upon a can standing by the closet door. The name attracted her. "Snow White" was printed in large green letters, and further statements extolled the merits of the contents: "The wonder make-up, easy to apply, guaranteed not to rub off—" She read the label eagerly, a suspicion growing in her mind. At last she turned and hurried out, carrying the can with her.

"What are you going to do with that?" Lenora demanded. "What is it?"

"I believe it will be exhibit A," Beverly replied. "Hurry, we haven't a minute to lose."

"Where to and why?" Lenora wanted to know, running down the stairs after her friend.

"I have a hunch," Beverly flung over her shoulder. "You're right, the trail *is* getting warm."

"Are you going to tell me where we are going, or do I have to wait and read about it in the *Tribune*?" Lenora asked as Beverly started the car with a jerk.

"I have a hunch—" Beverly began.

"You said that before," Lenora pointed out. "Sometimes your hunches are good, and sometimes—"

"I hope this is one of the good times," Beverly said, laughing. "Have you ever thought how you could disguise a horse?"

"Are we back to the Star of the East?" Lenora murmured. "No, never having had a steed of my own I was never concerned with disguising a horse. I don't get it." She shook her head. "What has your hunch got to do with that?"

"You've seen horses in the circus which were painted gold or silver, haven't you?" Beverly asked. "A coat of this paint could convert the Star into a white horse very easily."

"Like the make-up an actor wears," Lenora nodded. "Vera Moore has a lot of white horses in her barn."

"Including one that wears the odd shoes the Star does," added Beverly. "Furthermore, she is only boarding that particular horse. She told us he wasn't one of hers. Someone might have tricked her into harboring the Star until he felt it was safe to move him farther away."

“She said it was one of her employees who brought the strange horse to her stable,” Lenora continued eagerly. “Perhaps it was Thurston’s friend, Tools. Remember, the circus people told us he works for Vera Moore.” Another thought occurred to her and she burst out: “Do you think the Star is being moved tonight? Oh, Bev, do hurry! Can’t you go any faster?”

“It isn’t much farther,” Beverly comforted. “We’ll go direct to the barn and go to see Miss Moore afterward.”

The driveway leading from the highway to Vera Moore’s house was empty. The girls drove past the building to the huge barn. As they rounded the corner they saw two vans at the barn door being loaded with horses. A man was trying to coax a white horse into a third van. It was Tools!

“Wait a moment!” Lenora leaned from the car and shouted excitedly.

At that moment Thurston came out of the barn. The two men took one look at the girls in the approaching car and dashed toward a black sedan parked in the shadows. The next moment the car was roaring off down the driveway.

“Follow them, Bev! Hurry!” Lenora urged.

“Hang on!” Beverly muttered, and sent her car speeding after the sedan.

They were close to the black car when they bumped onto the highway, but on the flat stretch of road the larger car began gradually to draw away from them.

“Don’t lose him, Bev, maybe he will lead us to Marcia.”

“I don’t want to lose him,” Beverly answered, and sent her car ahead with a fresh burst of speed. After several moments she glanced up into the rear-vision mirror, as she had done several times before.

“What’s the matter?” Lenora wanted to know.

“I think we are being followed,” Beverly answered. “I thought so before, when we were on our way to Miss Moore’s. Several times he has been lost in traffic, but he always comes back. Should we stop and see who it is?”

“We’ll lose Thurston if we stop now,” Lenora answered. “Keep going. If someone is really following us he will go on as long as we do. Look, Bev, I believe Thurston is taking a side road.”

“It’s beginning to snow,” Beverly sighed. “That’s all we needed!”

They turned from the smooth highway onto a narrow, dirt road which was little more than a wagon track. The ground was rough and uneven, jolting the occupants of the car with every turn of the wheels, and it was impossible to maintain any speed.

“Sometimes I don’t think Marcia is worth all this trouble,” Lenora said between groans at being tossed about.

“She could be a nice girl,” Beverly replied. “The short time I was with her I learned a lot about her. She has always had everything she wanted, and she’s spoiled. Even the lead in *Spring Magic* was given to her without her meriting it. I think this is the first time she has ever had any difficulty in her life. Perhaps she will learn something from it.”

“She certainly hasn’t been an admirable character,” Lenora declared. “I guess that was why Max Mengle didn’t want Allen to marry her. Maybe he wanted to show his brother that she is grasping and selfish.”

The road wound through a forest of bare, black trees and tangled underbrush. Because of the sharp curves and dense growth it was impossible to keep their quarry in sight. They drove on doggedly, hoping at each turn to catch another glimpse of the black sedan.

The road came to a sudden end at the edge of an abandoned rock quarry. For a moment the girls sat and looked at each other.

“How did we miss him?” Lenora murmured.

“He must have turned off the road and waited for us to pass,” Beverly commented. “We’ll have to go back.”

As they turned and started back the way they had come, they headed directly into the storm. The snow was falling fast now, and the trees were gathering a mantle of white. Beverly drove slowly, and they strained their eyes to find another road which could accommodate a car.

They turned a curve and suddenly another automobile loomed before them. Beverly swung the steering wheel sharply to the right and the car plunged off the road. The other driver brought his car to a halt and leaped out.

“Beverly!” Lenora gasped. “Look! It’s Allen and Inspector Baker.”

The two men were running toward them when the girls stepped out of the car.

“Are you all right?” Allen cried.

“We’re fine and are we glad to see you!” Lenora responded.

“Were you in the car that was following us on the highway?” Beverly demanded.

“Yes,” Inspector Baker replied. “We saw you go racing out of the Mengle driveway and came after you. We had a little difficulty with the traffic or we would have overtaken you sooner.”

“If we had had the inspector’s official car instead of my car, we could have caught you easily,” added Allen. “What are you doing out here? Is something wrong?”

“We were following Thurston,” Beverly answered, and hastily explained her theory about the Star of the East and Marcia’s kidnapping.

When she finished, the inspector looked thoughtful. “Mr. Mengle has regained consciousness,” he said, “and he insists it was an accident—that he fell and struck his head against the andiron.”

“But Max did say that Thurston and another man were in the library with him at the time,” Allen added, “and the inspector wants to talk to Thurston anyway.”

“Thurston practically admitted to us that he is responsible for what has happened to Marcia,” Lenora said excitedly. “We know he took this road, but we lost him.”

“I saw one break in the underbrush big enough for a car to enter,” the inspector murmured.

“We’ll go back to that,” Allen proposed.

They hurried into their respective cars, and with the inspector leading in Allen’s car, they drove back the way they had come. Suddenly the inspector signaled Beverly to stop. A narrow trail almost obscured by overhanging trees crossed the road they were on.

“He must have taken this road,” Inspector Baker decided. “You go in that direction, and we will go in the opposite,” he directed Beverly. “Blow your horn as soon as you see him.”

Obediently Beverly turned her car onto the narrow trail. The girls jolted and bounced even worse than before.

“Ouch!” Lenora protested as they encountered a particularly bad spot. “If we endure all this for nothing—” she was beginning threateningly when Beverly interrupted.

“Lenora, look!”

Through the trees and snow they could make out the black sedan standing before a small cottage. There was no one in sight, and the door to the cottage was ajar.

“They must be inside,” Beverly said, bringing her car to a halt, “but it’s funny the door is open.”

“Blow the horn!” Lenora implored. “Call the inspector and Allen.”

“No, not until we are sure Thurston is here,” Beverly said. “I am going to walk closer. As soon as I see someone I will signal to you.”

“And I’ll sound the alarm!” Lenora promised.

Beverly got out of the car and started toward the little cottage. The snow was fine and stinging, mixed with hail, and it was slippery walking over the uneven ground. Not a sound came to her as she moved forward. The open cottage door was almost like an invitation into a trap.

CHAPTER XIV

Marcia

As Marcia watched Beverly hurry toward Max Mengle's house to summon the police, she could hear the beating of her own heart and it was like thunder in her ears. She stood in the shadow of the garage door and glanced about apprehensively. Everything was so still, so hushed, as if the world were waiting for something to happen. Beverly soon disappeared from sight and Marcia thought she had never been as lonely as she was now. The nearness of the man who had attacked Max Mengle, the wind whispering eerily, everything combined to make her wish she were safe in her own apartment in town. She was contemplating following Beverly when a voice spoke behind her.

"It is unfortunate for you that you chose this moment to spy upon us."

Marcia whirled about as a hand reached out of the shadows and pulled her into the garage's dark interior.

"Do as you are told and you won't be hurt," was the crisp command. "Get into the car."

Under pressure of the hand upon her arm Marcia had no choice but to obey. She thought of screaming for Beverly, but by this time the other girl would be inside the house.

The man got into the back seat with her and another man slid behind the steering wheel. The car made scarcely any noise as it eased out of the garage and went down the back driveway. As they passed the house Marcia opened her mouth to scream. Instantly a strong hand was clapped across her mouth, pressing her head back hard against the seat.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the man said. "Just be quiet and you won't get hurt."

"Where are you taking me?" Marcia managed to ask, when they reached the highway and the man released her.

"To a place where, if you feel like talking about what happened to Max Mengle, there won't be anyone to listen to you."

“You were in the library that morning,” Marcia said impulsively and immediately wished she had kept silent.

“You have a good memory,” the man commented. “Both of us were there, but we would prefer not to tell the police about it.”

Marcia tried to figure out where they were taking her. She knew the main highway, and she knew when they left it, but after that the driver made so many turns she lost her sense of direction.

“Why are you kidnapping me?” Marcia asked of her companions. “It will only get you more deeply into trouble.”

“For a few hours you will not be able to tell anyone about the voice in the library, and a few hours are all we need to be safely away from here.”

The road was rough and uneven. She was jolted and tossed about. She protested to the driver, but the man made no response. At last the car came to a halt and the driver got out. He opened the door and motioned to Marcia. Her companion climbed out after her and took her arm. He led her through the gathering darkness to a cottage a few yards away.

“In here!”

Marcia stepped into dense blackness. The door closed behind her at once and she heard the snap of a lock.

“What—” Too late she whirled about. Almost immediately came the sound of the departing automobile.

Marcia leaned against the heavy door and struggled for calmness. The silence was oppressive. From what she had seen, bare black branches against the darkening sky, the wind blowing unbroken across empty fields, she knew she was in some lonely spot and there was no use in screaming. No one would hear her. Uselessly she tugged at the door. It held firm. Gropingly she moved forward and bumped her ankle against something sharp. There was not a glimmer of light from any source, but her eyes, growing accustomed to the dark, began to distinguish vague, bulky shapes. Her exploring fingers found a chair and she sat down to rub her ankle.

What would Beverly think when she returned to the garage and found her gone? Restlessly Marcia stood up. Slowly she moved around the room, touching furniture, unable to identify anything definitely in the cold darkness. At last she came to a fireplace and discovered a pile of logs against the wall. A fire would be just the thing. She was freezing. The flames would also furnish light to see by. After groping about in the darkness she found a

tin can on the shelf above the fireplace. It contained matches and Marcia breathed a thankful sigh as a tiny flame spurted into being. She wasted part of the meager supply of matches to look about the room. There were two windows and each of them was covered with heavy shutters which were nailed into place. There would be no escape that way. There was a door at one end of the room, and she went toward it eagerly. It led into a small kitchen, but here, too, the window had been nailed shut.

Defeated, Marcia returned to the living room and touched a match to the fire already laid in the fireplace. She poked the fire with an iron poker standing at the side, and as the flames in the fireplace mounted higher she could see the room more clearly. It was simply but cozily furnished. Apparently her kidnapers had appropriated the summer cottage for their own use, assuming that the owner would not be likely to appear at this time of year. There was a sofa in front of the fireplace, and when she explored, she found a few provisions in the cupboard in the kitchen.

Marcia sat on the sofa before the fire, grateful for the warmth, and tried to think of some means of escape. She couldn't hope to force either the door or the shutters, they were too secure. There was no telephone. Her one hope was that someone might see the smoke coming from the chimney and decide to investigate.

It had not been her intention to fall asleep, but she dozed, and when she woke the fire had burned to ashes. The room was gray and cold. She hastened to build the fire again. One of the shutters had a small crack in it, through which a small ray of morning light penetrated. By pressing her face close to the crack Marcia could manage to see a small slice of the outside world. Only bare, winter landscape met her eager gaze. There was no sound of any kind.

She discovered an oil lantern under a table. She lit this and carried it into the kitchen. The canned fruit and stale crackers made a most unsatisfactory breakfast.

All morning Marcia waited and listened for someone to come. Nothing disturbed the stillness of the surrounding woods save that of melting snow dripping from the roof and trees. She found a group of old magazines and tried to interest herself in them, but it was no use. She kept thinking of the men who had brought her here, and she wondered if they intended to return and free her. The one man had said she was being kidnaped so they would have an opportunity to escape before she identified him to the police. If that

were true, then they would scarcely come here again to free her. She might be a prisoner for many days!

Her one hope lay in Beverly. More and more she found herself counting on the young reporter. Beverly's warm sympathy and natural charm automatically made friends of the people with whom she came in contact. Beverly would find her, Marcia told herself, and she was surprised at how firmly she believed that. Beverly would not rest, she would even risk danger to find her.

Why should Beverly do all that, a small voice within Marcia seemed to demand. Why should she place herself in jeopardy for even a moment?

Marcia sighed. Looking back, she realized that all her life she had been selfish and spoiled, taking what she wanted without regard for anyone else, and it had all culminated in what she had done to Shirley—Beverly's good friend. How could she expect Beverly to do anything for her? Marcia was ashamed now of what she had done and silently she vowed to make reparation as soon as she could.

If only someone would come! The solitude and uncertainty were becoming unbearable. The hours were one long stretch of empty time. The supply of firewood was swiftly disappearing, as were the supplies in the kitchen cupboard. She was beginning to believe the men had really abandoned her when at last she heard the sound of a motor. She ran to put her eye to the crack in the shutter, and through the gently falling snow she recognized the car she had arrived in. Footsteps crunched on the hard earth, and a key was inserted in the padlock on the outside of the door.

Marcia slipped behind the door, pressing her body tightly against the wall. As the door opened, she was hidden from the sight of the man who paused on the threshold.

He called over his shoulder to someone:

“Walk back to the road and watch!”

The man stood quietly for a moment, looking about the room, and then she heard heavy steps as he moved toward the little kitchen.

In an instant Marcia was outside and running toward the parked automobile. The ignition key was missing. It was impossible for her to start the car without it. Escape that way was cut off.

In desperation she turned and fled toward the woods. Too late she realized how bitter cold it was and how much she needed her coat. She had

been so intent on escape she had forgotten it, and it was impossible to return for it.

A hasty glance over her shoulder revealed a man's dark figure emerging from the cottage. He was watching the ground as he walked, and in dismay Marcia realized her footprints in the newly fallen snow would be easy to follow. Wildly she turned and plunged through the tangled underbrush.

Briars caught at her skirt, and she stumbled and fell as snow-covered vines snared her feet. Without realizing it she screamed as she felt herself falling. She pushed herself up again, wet and shivering. The snow, which she had so often thought of as beautiful, was now another enemy, pitted against her, revealing her trail to her pursuer. The cold, too, was a foe, making her limbs stiff and awkward, slowing her flight.

If only there were some place for her to hide, or some way to disguise her trail! Her pursuer was gaining upon her. She could hear him crashing through the underbrush.

Suddenly Marcia came upon a small stream of water, and instantly a plan formed in her mind. Ice extended out from both banks, but right in the center of the small creek was a dark streak of water not yet frozen over. She stepped into it and her whole body trembled with the shock of the icy water. It was no more than ankle deep, and she walked carefully through it, lest a step upon a mossy rock would cause her to fall. She believed her pursuer might suspect she had taken to the stream to hide her trail, but she also believed he would suspect her of continuing away from the cottage. Therefore, she felt it wiser to double back, to follow the stream the way she had come. Perhaps she could manage to reach the automobile and follow the tire tracks to the highway.

Her legs were growing numb with cold. It was becoming more and more of an effort to put one foot carefully before the other. Once she paused to listen and could hear nothing but the faint gurgle of the water around her feet. It couldn't be much farther to the cottage. She would see if she could get her coat before she tried to make the highway. She should have run in that direction in the first place, instead of letting panic drive her blindly into the woods.

She stumbled and fell to one knee, splashing herself with the icy water. It was almost impossible to stand upright again, but she forced herself to do it. What was that? Someone was coming through the underbrush! Her ruse had failed. Her pursuer was closer than she had expected. In terror she turned and tried to run toward the opposite bank. Her foot tangled in

something as it crashed through the thin ice, and she fell heavily, half in the water and half out.

CHAPTER XV

Thurston's Story

Beverly's steps grew slower as she warily approached the open cottage door. The silence and apparent emptiness puzzled her. What had become of the occupants of the automobile? Had it been their intention to hide in this cottage until their pursuers had given up the chase?

Before Beverly could step inside, she heard the sound of a motor and Allen's car came into sight. Allen and the inspector jumped out.

"Our part of the road ended in a farmyard," Allen called, "so we came after you."

"The car is here, but there aren't any signs of life," Beverly told them. "I haven't been inside yet."

"Perhaps they are hiding, waiting to pounce upon us," Lenora suggested fearfully.

"I'll go inside," Inspector Baker said. "The rest of you wait here."

The three young people waited in breathless anticipation as the inspector stepped across the threshold and disappeared into the cottage. After a brief moment he reappeared in the doorway.

"The place is empty."

Beverly followed the inspector across the threshold and looked about. She had an overwhelming sense of disappointment. For some reason she had felt Marcia would be here. The feeling had been so strong she had half expected the girl to come running to meet them. Now there was nothing! Then she saw it—Marcia's coat.

"Allen! Inspector!" Beverly picked up the coat. "This belongs to Marcia. She is here—somewhere!"

"Come here," Lenora called from the doorway. "Footprints lead into the woods."

"We'll follow them," the inspector said and was off at a run.

"Let's spread out," Beverly suggested. "That way we should find her sooner."

They followed the inspector into the woods, and then each of them went in a different direction. Beverly struck off to the right, her heart beating fast with hope. If Marcia was fleeing, then she must be all right. That at least was a good sign. If only it would stop snowing! It was hard to distinguish objects in the white, clinging mist. Once she slipped on a wet stone and fell to her knees. She rose, wet and cold, and went on.

As she walked, Beverly could hear the others making their way through the underbrush. They sounded like animals scurrying through the woods. Once she stopped to shout Marcia's name through cupped hands, but her voice seemed weakened by the cold wind. A wet branch slapped at her, knocking off her hat. Impatiently she stuffed it into her pocket and paused as she came to what in summer must be a clear, bubbling brook. Now it was half frozen over and looked dark and bitter cold.

There was a crashing noise upstream to her right. What was it? The others, Beverly knew, were to her left and behind her. Was it Thurston? Or, more hopefully, was it Marcia? She hastened her steps to investigate, wondering what she would do if she came face to face with Thurston.

The bank of the little stream was slippery, and Beverly had to move cautiously lest she slide down and break through the ice. Suddenly she caught sight of a figure on the opposite bank lying half on the snowy ground and half in the black water of the stream. Beverly's heart leaped in alarm. Marcia! She splashed through the ice and water to the other girl's side and succeeded in dragging Marcia onto firm ground. Her face and hands were blue with cold, and her skirt was wringing wet.

Anxiously Beverly looked around. She couldn't hope to carry Marcia herself. She stood up and called for help as loudly as she could, over and over. The wind flung her voice back in her face.

Then came the sound of someone hurrying through the brush. Help at last! Beverly dropped to one knee beside Marcia, clasping the girl's cold hands in hers, aching to impart warmth and life through her touch. Someone came up behind her, and Beverly spoke over her shoulder.

“We must take her to a doctor at once.”

Then Beverly looked up and uttered a little cry when she saw the new arrival. It was Thurston, his face scratched and his clothes torn from his flight through the underbrush. Thurston, white and wild-eyed, a heavy iron poker in his hands. Panic, despair, fear—Beverly read them all in his distorted face.

“You again!” Thurston exclaimed. “I warned you to stop following me.” He moved closer, the poker half raised.

“You can’t escape,” Beverly said clearly, hoping desperately to keep him talking until the inspector or Allen appeared. Surely someone would come within hearing distance and investigate!

“There is still time,” Thurston murmured. He looked at Marcia and shook his head. “I didn’t mean to harm her. We were only going to hide her until we got away—” he broke off abruptly. “She knew Tools and I were in the library that morning, but what happened to Mr. Mengle was an accident. He became very angry and got up quickly and started for me. But he tripped over a footstool and fell, striking his head on the andiron—I don’t suppose you believe that, but it’s the truth.”

“I believe it,” Beverly said, “but why did you steal the Star of the East? You were the one who took him, weren’t you?”

Thurston nodded. “I stole some money from Mr. Mengle. He found out about it and made me sign a confession. I had Tools steal the horse so that I could bargain with Mengle for my freedom.”

“You ransacked the library looking for the signed confession Mr. Mengle had,” Beverly guessed.

“That’s right,” Thurston said. “I still haven’t found it or I wouldn’t be here now.”

“You were the man who came to Allen Mengle’s farm,” Beverly continued.

“Yes,” Thurston admitted. “When I couldn’t find what I was looking for at the Mengle house I thought Max might have given it to Allen, so I went there. I tried to enter the house through the front bedroom because when I worked for Allen Mengle that room was usually empty. I didn’t expect to find you there.”

“About the Star of the East,” Beverly said. “Did you have your accomplice cover him with paint and hide him at Vera Moore’s farm?”

“That’s right,” Thurston agreed. “Tools worked for Miss Moore. It was easy to ride him from the Mengle house, through the woods to an old deserted farm, paint him, and take him into Miss Moore’s barn.” He looked uneasily about him. “You’ll probably get a reward for recovering the horse, but you won’t be able to say you captured me. There is still time to get away—” the hand gripping the poker closed more tightly.

“No!” Beverly cried. “You can’t—”

As Thurston raised his arm there was a sound in the underbrush and Allen Mengle and Inspector Baker hurled themselves upon him. In another moment he was a subdued prisoner.

“We found his friend a few yards downstream,” the inspector told Beverly. “Miss Morrison—how is she?”

“Fainted, I think,” Beverly said, “and suffering from exposure and shock. We must get her to a doctor.”

Allen picked up Marcia and they started back to the automobiles, the inspector carefully shepherding his prisoners before him. Lenora was waiting at the cottage and she greeted them with a cheer.

“You go along with Allen,” Beverly directed her friend, “and get Marcia to a doctor. I am going to Vera Moore’s to see the Star of the East.”

“Very well,” Lenora agreed. “At this point even I feel sorry for Marcia. I’ll wait for you at the *Tribune* office after I hear what the doctor says about her.”

Beverly, in her car, followed Allen’s automobile over the rough, narrow road to the highway. She watched it disappear in traffic before she turned in the opposite direction and drove to Vera Moore’s farm. If all went well, she should be able to write the last chapter to this mystery within a short time.

When Beverly drove up to the big white barn she looked first for the van into which Thurston and his accomplice had been about to load the Star of the East. It was gone. The barn doors were shut, and the yard was empty.

CHAPTER XVI

The Maharajah's Diamond

Where was everyone? On the other occasions when she and Lenora had come to Vera Moore's farm, the place had been bustling with activity. Now it looked deserted—as if the owner had moved and taken all her animals with her.

Hastily Beverly went up to the house. A knock on the door brought a thin, gray-haired woman to a window on the second floor.

“What do you want?” she called down to Beverly.

“I want to see Miss Moore,” Beverly replied.

“She is off on tour with her show.”

“But she was here not long ago!” Beverly protested. “She can't be very far from here. I must see her!”

“You might go over to Chalmers where the show is assembling,” the woman said with a shrug. “Perhaps you can catch her before she leaves.”

“How do I get there?” Beverly asked.

“Take the first turn to the left past the drive-in,” the woman replied and disappeared from the window.

What had become of the Star of the East? The question puzzled Beverly as she drove away. Vera Moore would scarcely take him with her show troupe. Tools, who was now in police custody, was the man who had brought the Star to Vera Moore's, and he was the logical one to take him away. However, that was impossible now.

Beverly drove several miles, and was beginning to think she was on a fruitless quest, when she saw a huge, white tent in the distance. As she drew closer, she passed several trailers loaded with animals and equipment already starting on their journey south. If only she was in time to see Vera Moore!

One driver was having difficulty with his van, and as Beverly slowed down to pass him, she caught a glimpse of his cargo of white horses. She brought her car to a halt beside his and opened the window.

“Are those Miss Moore’s horses?” she asked.

“That’s right, miss,” the man responded.

“Has Miss Moore left the show grounds?” Beverly continued.

“As late as five minutes ago she was still in the tent,” was the reply.

Beverly hurried on and parked her car beside a trailer waiting to be loaded. She stepped from her car into what seemed to be another world. The huge, white tent, gay pennants flying in the breeze, was surrounded by trucks and busy workers. From somewhere came the shrill cry of a wild animal. It was answered by another and another, a chorus of weird voices. Someone was practicing on a trumpet, and strange characters, members of the circus troupe, wandered about on personal errands.

Too bad Lenora was not along, Beverly thought. It was a good opportunity to get some intimate scenes of circus life.

Beverly went to the tent and stepped inside. No one tried to stop her. Everyone seemed intent on his own affairs. Possibly they took her for a new addition to the show, Beverly reflected.

High up, near the roof of the tent, two acrobats were going through their breath-taking routine. There were two arenas in the tent, one in the process of being dismantled, and the other occupied by a trio of white horses. The slender figure putting the horses through their paces was a welcome sight to Beverly and she hurried forward.

“Hello there!” she called.

Vera Moore returned the salutation and stopped working to join Beverly.

“Do you know anything about horses?” she asked. “Do you want a job?”

“Me?” Beverly asked laughingly.

“I’m short-handed,” the trainer replied with a sigh. “One of my best men has disappeared, just when we are about to leave on tour.”

“If you mean Tools, I can tell you what happened to him,” Beverly said, and proceeded to review the happenings of the last few hours.

“So you see,” Beverly finished, “you have had the Star of the East in your stable all this time.”

“It is amazing!” Vera Moore exclaimed. “How clever of you to solve the mystery so quickly.”

“Half the mystery still remains to be solved,” Beverly said. “I would like to find the Star and finish it. I’ll appreciate any help you can give me.”

“I’d like to see him, too,” Vera Moore declared, “but I know he isn’t here with me, and there were no horses left at my farm.”

“I hope he isn’t in any of the trucks which have already left the show grounds,” Beverly said.

“No,” the trainer shook her head. “I personally supervised the loading of my horses, and I know just which ones have already left. Let’s question some of my men and see what they can tell us.”

She called three of her employees and asked them about the horse Tools had brought to the barn.

“He started to load the horse into a van,” one man volunteered, “and then he disappeared. Another fellow came and took the horse away.”

“Do you have any idea who the man was?”

“No, I didn’t get a good look at him, but the horse seemed to know him. I thought Tools had sent the fellow to get the horse, so I didn’t pay much attention to him.”

Vera Moore dismissed the men and turned again to Beverly.

“I guess that is all the help I can give you. I’m sorry my man wasn’t more observant. I hope you will let me know if you find him.”

“I will,” Beverly promised, “but now I don’t know where to look for him.”

There was no reason for Beverly to linger any longer at the circus grounds, and as she drove slowly out of the grounds she wondered what to do next. Once more the Star of the East was missing. Once more her mystery was right where it started.

Who could have taken the horse this time? The horse appeared to know the man—that should narrow the field to a small number. In fact, the more she considered it, there were only two men the horse might recognize with any semblance of gladness. He was a stranger in this land. Thurston and Tools had handled him since his arrival here, but before that he had known Prince Houssain and Ram! If either of them had come for the Star he must have figured out the change in color. The next step was—where would the Star be taken this time? Would he be returned to Max Mengle’s stable? She decided to drive over there and make sure.

Beverly considered Ram, the prince's servant. She remembered the times she thought he had acted in a suspicious manner. There was the mysterious figure she saw the first time she and Lenora went to the Mengle house. It could have been Ram searching the grounds for the horse. He and the prince had just discovered the Star's absence. There was the time little Irene was showing her and Lenora the hoofprint in the mud. They had seen Ram leaving the garage, and later Thurston said his rooms had been searched. Ram, too, was always anxious to know if there was any word of the horse's whereabouts. Whenever there was any discussion of the horse, Ram was sure to be near at hand to hear what was said.

Why was Ram so concerned? After all, his master had given the horse to Mr. Mengle. The horse was no longer Ram's concern. It might have been a natural affection he had for the horse, or it might be something else. But what?

Beverly parked her car in the driveway and approached the Mengle house. Collins opened the door for her, and Smiley waved from the telephone.

"Is Ram, the prince's servant, in the house?" Beverly asked the butler.

"I haven't seen him for hours, miss," Collins replied. "I believe the prince is quite put out about his disappearance, too. I don't know—" he broke off, and Beverly turned to follow his gaze.

Ram had entered the hallway from the door leading back toward the dining room. He looked as calm and impassive as ever. He bowed slightly as he went past them and up the stairs.

"He will catch it now, miss," Collins said with a grin. "The prince is waiting for him."

"Don't you like Ram?" Beverly asked, surprised at the evident enjoyment Collins found in the prospect of Ram being reprimanded.

"I do not," Collins said firmly. "He is always snooping about, listening in corners."

"Hello, Miss Gray!" Smiley finished his telephone conversation and came toward her as Collins disappeared kitchenward. "I just heard the news about Miss Morrison. Congratulations!"

Beverly smiled. "Thanks. I am going to telephone my editor now," she added, "though there are still a few loose ends."

“You mean the horse.” Smiley nodded. “Funny thing about him. You’d think a horse would be hard to hide.”

Beverly told him about Thurston’s confession and what she had discovered at the circus grounds. However, she did not mention her suspicion of Ram. She had nothing but an inexplicable feeling that it was the Hindu who had taken the Star this time.

“I must be getting back to town,” Smiley said, struggling into his topcoat. “I’ll let you chat with your editor in peace.”

Beverly went into the little alcove and picked up the telephone. She heard the front door close after Smiley, and then all was silence. She gave the operator the number she wanted and settled down to wait. From her position in the alcove she could see part of the hall and the front door. Suddenly a figure came into view, moving silently and swiftly. It was Ram. Noiselessly he opened the front door and went out. Where was he going so stealthily?

Beverly immediately replaced the telephone and followed the Hindu. She paused in the doorway outside and watched Ram cross the lawn and disappear into the barn. Swiftly she followed. If he discovered her trailing after him, she would give the excuse of wanting to tell him about the Star of the East.

No one was in sight as she swung the door open a crack and slid into the barn. As she closed the door behind her she heard a click. The outside latch must have fallen into place! That meant the door was locked. She shrugged her shoulders and looked about. She would worry about the lock later. Now she wanted to find Ram.

Caution made her move as silently as possible. Fortunately the two horses that watched her made no sound to betray her presence. Ram was out of sight, and Beverly moved along the aisle toward the stall which the Star of the East had occupied. Suddenly a whinny, and then a soothing voice, made her stop. There was a horse in the Star’s stall. She could see the top of his head, and as she moved closer she saw that it was a white horse. Still she could not see the Hindu.

Beverly moved closer to the stall and peered over the half door. Ram was on his knees beside the horse. From his sleeve he brought forth a pair of scissors. Then she saw that the horse’s forelegs were bandaged, with bandages such as are often used on the legs of racehorses. As she watched, Ram inserted the shears and cut away the wrappings on the left foreleg.

Where the bandage had been the horse's leg was a rich, brown color. The Star of the East!

"Aiee!" Beverly heard the man's quick intake of breath as his fingers fumbled with the wrappings and brought forth something round and shiny. Even from where she stood Beverly could identify the object as a jewel.

Something, she knew not what, made Ram look up directly at her. She had made no sound, and yet some instinct had warned him that he was not alone. She watched him in silence as he slowly stood up. It was like the uncoiling of a snake.

"Beautiful, is it not, mem-sahib?" Ram held aloft, for her to see, a stone upon which the light sparkled in a rainbow of colors.

"Yes," Beverly said briefly and waited.

"Those stupid men did not know they possessed a fortune," Ram continued. "I have been very fortunate. It is a jewel worth many thousand rupees."

"You thought Thurston had found the jewel when he took the Star," Beverly murmured. "That was what you were looking for when you searched his rooms. The prince will be happy that you have recovered it."

"His highness knows nothing of it," Ram snapped. "It is mine!" His slender, brown fingers fondled the jewel, seeming to enjoy the touch of its cool hardness, but his dark eyes never left her face. He seemed to be debating what to do about her.

"You were very clever to smuggle it into the country in such a fashion," Beverly stated clearly, deciding she might as well let him know she suspected what had happened. "It is the maharajah's diamond, isn't it?"

A ghost of a smile flitted for an instant across his features.

"Mem-sahib is also clever," he said with a little bow. "It is her misfortune."

Beverly paid no attention to the word "misfortune." She was thinking about the story this would make. Her mystery had turned out to be more far reaching than anyone had expected.

"Tell me about the jewel," she said to Ram.

He considered her in silence for a moment. Then he held the stone in the palm of his hand and looked down at it.

“It is a very rare diamond. It has been worshiped by many people. Long ago it adorned the figure of Buddha.”

“How did you manage to steal it from the maharajah?” Beverly asked.

Ram shrugged. “His servant was careless. It was a simple matter. It is said a curse will fall upon anyone who dares to remove the stone from my country,” he continued in a murmur, “but I do not believe such idle tales.” He raised his head defiantly. “I have been fortunate. It was lost, but it is recovered. I will sell it for many rupees.”

“No one will dare to buy it,” Beverly told him. “It has been smuggled into the country. The authorities are already looking for it. When it is learned you have it—”

“The police will not learn of it,” Ram interrupted. His face grew cold and stern. “They will not learn of it unless you tell them.”

Beverly did not want to show she was afraid of him, so she tried to move in a leisurely, unconcerned fashion to the door. Ram followed slowly and relentlessly. At last Beverly reached the big barn door and tried to push it open. Only then did she remember the latch that had fallen into place on the outside. She was locked in the barn with Ram!

For the space of a second Beverly leaned against the door, and then she turned to face the Hindu. He had stopped a few paces behind her and was watching her. She wished she knew what he was thinking. Neither of them said a word. Each was waiting for the other to move. If he hoped to keep his possession of the diamond a secret, Ram dared not let her escape, and yet it was obvious he did not know what to do about her.

Beverly knew she should take advantage of his indecision, but what to do? Perhaps she should attempt to get to a window. She thought next of somehow gaining the hayloft and swinging to the ground outside by means of the pulley which was used to hoist bales of hay to the storage room overhead. But Ram stood between her and the ladder leading to the loft.

Beverly decided that if Ram took one step closer she would scream as loudly as she could. Perhaps someone on the outside would hear and open the door. The barn was quite a distance from the house, still someone might hear her. If only Smiley had not gone back to town! She would feel a lot better if she knew an officer of the law was within hailing distance.

“Fate is smiling upon Ram,” the Hindu said quietly. “You are not meant to reveal Ram’s secret.”

“If I do not reveal it someone else will,” Beverly answered. “The police are looking for the stone, and they will find it.”

“They do not suspect me,” Ram said, “and that is well.”

He began moving toward Beverly, and the girl screamed as loudly as she could. The results were not what she had expected. She had hoped someone outside the barn would hear and investigate. She had not anticipated the effect of her scream upon the horses in the stalls beside her.

When Ram followed Beverly away from the Star’s stall he had neglected to close the gate behind him. Now the Star of the East, startled by the unexpected scream, reared on his hind legs and plunged from his stall into the aisle. The other horses could not leave their stalls, but they reared up on their hind legs, snorting in fright. The Star, his terror increased by the actions of the other horses, reared up again, his forefeet pawing the air wildly.

Even in her alarm and consternation, Beverly found herself admiring the beautiful animal. He was a magnificent specimen of horseflesh. His muscles rippled under his satiny skin, and his mane and tail were like silk.

In his fright the Star plunged the length of the aisle, ignoring Ram who had leaped toward him with soothing words. In one stall a horse had begun kicking against the door, and the constant thudding seemed to further incite the Star. He looked about wildly, tossing his head from side to side, now and then stopping to rear and paw the air.

Beverly made herself as small as possible against the door in order to avoid those flying hoofs. There was no secluded spot to which she could retreat.

Ram, recovering from his initial surprise, tried to soothe the Star, murmuring strange words in his native tongue, which the Star either did not hear or would not heed. More than once Ram darted in close to the fear-crazed horse to attempt to grasp his dangling bridle, but each time he was forced to leap aside empty-handed.

The whinnying of the other horses, together with the loud kicking and stamping of their feet, goaded the Star into a frenzy. He plunged up and down the aisle, seeking a means of escape into the open. If, as the prince had said, the Star was a gentle, docile animal, those traits were gone now. He felt himself trapped and he wanted only to escape, refusing to recognize Ram or his commands.

Ram made another attempt to grasp the dangling reins of the Star's bridle when the horse paused at the locked door. The Star reared and one of his flying hoofs struck Ram. Stunned, the Hindu fell heavily to the floor.

Beverly moved swiftly. The Star was standing over the fallen man. He was quivering with fright. But his wildness was leaving him, and he let Beverly seize his bridle and lead him to his stall. When Beverly returned to Ram someone was opening the barn door.

“What’s going on in here?” Collins demanded. “The horses—” he broke off as he saw Ram on the floor.

Behind Collins loomed the stocky figure of Smiley. Beverly greeted the detective with a sigh of relief.

“I’m so glad you didn’t go back to town.”

“I was on my way and came back because I forgot my pipe,” Smiley said, bending over Ram. “What’s been going on here?”

Hastily Beverly explained the events of the past few minutes as Ram got unsteadily to his feet. He was not seriously hurt, but he realized now that his dreams of a fortune were over. He stood mute and with bowed head as Beverly told the detective about the diamond and the Star of the East. Reluctantly Ram brought forth the jewel when Smiley demanded it.

The policeman rolled the stone around in his hand and gave a long, low whistle.

“A pink diamond! I’ve heard there are rare, colored diamonds, blue, green, pink, and such, but I’ve never seen one before. It must be worth a fortune.”

“It is the one Inspector Baker received word about,” Beverly added.

Smiley nodded. “The maharajah’s pet diamond. There is a reward for this as well as for the horse, and you should get them both, Miss Gray.”

CHAPTER XVII

Beverly's Reward

“And so Marcia is giving the part back to you,” Lenora finished.

“Oh, she is?” Shirley retorted. “Well, she can keep it now. I’m not interested.”

“Don’t be stubborn,” Lenora chided with a grin.

“Marcia tried to get you on the telephone to tell you herself, but when she couldn’t reach you she called Beverly at the office.”

“What has moved Marcia to play Lady Bountiful?” Shirley wanted to know.

Beverly and Lenora had just arrived at the apartment. The girls were delivering a message from Marcia to the effect that she wanted Shirley to resume the leading role in *Spring Magic*.

“I think she’s really sorry about the way she treated you,” Beverly said. “Anyway, she’s leaving town. Marcia won’t be here when the play opens next Tuesday.”

“I’m not interested,” Shirley said and walked out of the living room into the bedroom.

Beverly and Lenora followed her relentlessly.

“What is this all about?” Lenora wanted to know. “You were heartbroken when the part was taken away from you. Now you have the chance back again and—”

“You’re wasting your breath,” Shirley interrupted. “I am not going back to the theater and that is final. It meant nothing to Marcia when she took the part away from me. It means nothing to me now that she wants to give it back.”

“It wasn’t all Marcia’s fault,” Beverly told her. “Max Mingle was just as much to blame. Oh, I know Marcia was selfish. She wanted the role and she didn’t care whose feelings she hurt. Max counted on that when he made the bargain. And he didn’t like Marcia and wanted her to hurt Allen so much

that he would not want to see her again. She is sorry now and so is Mr. Mengle for the hurt they inflicted upon you.”

“You were an innocent bystander in a feud of long standing,” added Lenora. “Can’t you let bygones be bygones?”

“I simply am not interested,” Shirley answered. “Lois thinks there is a good chance of my getting a job in her office. I will know definitely tomorrow. I have said good-bye to the grease paint and footlights.”

“I don’t believe it,” Lenora said flatly. “It is your pride that is making you so stubborn.”

“You must go back into the play,” Beverly urged. “It opens next week. Where can they get another girl to play it as well as you? They’ll never be ready for opening night. Think of the other people in the cast. They are depending upon you.”

“You needn’t try to work on my sympathy,” Shirley said flatly. “I won’t listen.”

“Perhaps if you talked to Marcia—” Beverly began.

“I never want to see her again!” Shirley said firmly.

“She has changed, Shirley,” Beverly assured her friend. “Really she has.”

“People *do* change,” Lenora pointed out.

“Perhaps Marcia did change,” Shirley acknowledged. “That still doesn’t make me want to go back to the play. If she wanted the part so badly she can have it.”

“But she won’t be here.”

“Then they’ll have to postpone the opening until someone else can rehearse the part,” Shirley said. “I’m going out. I have a date with Roger.”

She left her friends staring after her and went out humming a song.

“What’ll we do?” Lenora demanded.

“I thought she would be so happy to get the part again,” Beverly sighed.

“Her pride won’t let her accept it as a gift from Marcia,” Lenora said wisely. “We’ll have to plot something.”

“You plot,” Beverly said, smiling. “I have to run over and see Marcia, remember?”

“I wonder why she wants to see you?” Lenora mused. “She could have told you what she wanted, this morning on the telephone.”

“When I get home, I’ll tell you all,” Beverly promised laughingly. “In the meantime, if Shirley returns, try and persuade her to change her mind.”

“You know Shirley’s stubbornness as well as I do,” Lenora said. “When she says ‘no’ she means it.”

As Beverly left Mrs. Callahan’s brownstone house, the December wind nipped at her nose and ankles. She burrowed into her coat and started off at a brisk pace.

Marcia had requested Beverly to be at her apartment promptly at four o’clock. She hadn’t told Beverly why, but she had insisted that Beverly come alone and on time.

Luckily, after her adventure, Marcia had escaped pneumonia. She had remained in bed all day Thursday and was now feeling better although fighting a heavy cold.

Max Mengle was on the road to recovery at last, and Thurston and his accomplice, Tools, were awaiting trial. Prince Houssain had interceded for Ram, and although the Hindu was being held on a charge of smuggling, it was probable that he would be deported to India eventually.

When Beverly reached Marcia’s apartment, Allen Mengle, his face flushed and smiling, a white carnation in his lapel, opened the door for her. The moment she stepped into the room Beverly knew what was going to take place.

“We didn’t want any publicity or fuss,” Marcia explained, looking radiant in spite of her cold, “so we planned to have our wedding here.”

“You are to be bridesmaid as well as sole representative of the press,” added Allen.

“I’m very happy for you,” Beverly declared.

“But you are wondering how Max feels about it,” Marcia guessed.

Beverly nodded.

“He has given us his blessing,” Allen told her. “He is sorry that he caused us so much unhappiness.”

“What about your career in the theater?” Beverly asked the other girl.

“I may try again sometime,” Marcia said, “but now Allen and I are going to his farm in Maryland, raise horses, and live the life of gentlemen farmers. I think we’ll be very happy.”

“I think you will, too,” she murmured, looking at their shining faces.

“Did you talk to Shirley?” Marcia asked. “Will she go back into the play?”

“She hasn’t agreed to it yet,” Beverly said slowly. “In fact, she refuses even to consider it.”

“Oh, Beverly!” Marcia cried. “The play is scheduled to open in four days. There is no one else who could play the lead as well as Shirley. You must persuade her!”

“I’ll try,” Beverly promised, but in her heart she wondered how she was to do it.

After the simple wedding ceremony Beverly went to the *Tribune* office to write about the happy ending to the mystery involving Marcia and Allen. She found Inspector Baker there, talking to Charlie Blaine.

“Don’t take off your coat,” he said cheerfully to Beverly. “You’re coming with me.”

“Why?” Beverly asked. “Is it another mystery?”

Charlie Blaine was grinning broadly, but he offered no explanation. He merely nodded when Beverly turned to him.

“Go along with the inspector, Beverly.”

“But I have a story to write,” Beverly protested. “Marcia Morrison and Allen Mengle were married about an hour ago.”

“Give the details to one of the other girls and she can write up the story,” Blaine replied.

“You are going on a better story, anyway,” Inspector Baker added. “Come along, young woman.”

“Can’t you tell me where we are going?” Beverly wanted to know as she got into the police car beside the inspector.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he said with a smile.

“Is it another mystery?” Beverly persisted.

“It won’t be a mystery long.” He laughed. That was all he would tell her.

Beverly was puzzled until they pulled up in front of a huge, gray stone building.

“Why, this is Marshall Hospital,” Beverly exclaimed. “Is it about Mr. Mengle?” she guessed.

“It has to do with him,” the inspector nodded. “Come, we are going up to his room.”

“Is he well enough to receive visitors?” Beverly asked.

“He insists upon seeing you,” the inspector told her. “He wouldn’t give either his doctor or me any peace until we agreed you could come.”

“Why does he want to see me?” Beverly wondered.

The inspector pushed open the heavy door to Mr. Mengle’s room, and stood aside to let her enter. The patient was well on the road to recovery. He was pale, but otherwise he seemed much as he had the night Beverly and Lenora first went to his house.

“Good afternoon, Miss Gray!” his voice boomed out in the quiet room. “I’m glad the inspector finally did as I requested. I wanted to see you and tell you how much I appreciate all you did to find the Star of the East. Allen and Marcia both speak very highly of you. I’ve told the inspector that he should employ you as one of his regular assistants.”

“Charlie Blaine would never give up one of his star reporters,” the inspector retorted. “Get on with it, Mr. Mengle. The doctor said we may stay only ten minutes.”

“Bother the doctor!” Max Mengle growled. “Miss Gray you have my deep and lasting gratitude, and I hope you will accept this as a small token of it.”

He drew a folded slip of paper from beneath his pillow and handed it to Beverly. It was a check for a thousand dollars.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Christmas Party

“’Twas the morning before Christmas,” Lenora chanted as she went about diligently dusting the living room.

Beverly and Shirley had begun to trim the Christmas tree, while Lois was wandering around with the morning paper in her hands, reading aloud.

“‘Furthermore,’” she quoted, “‘Mr. Mengle insisted that Miss Gray accept his check for one thousand dollars as a reward for finding the Star of the East.’” Lois put down the paper and beamed at her friend. “What do you propose to do with all your wealth?”

“It’s in the bank at present,” Beverly replied, “but I’ll think of something. Half of it belongs to Lenora.”

“Me?” the blond girl cried in surprise. “Oh, no! I didn’t do anything.”

“We won’t argue about it,” Beverly said. “In the future there may be something we both want and we can use the money then.”

“Well, not having won any reward money myself, I’ll hie me to the office,” Lois sighed. “So long, gals, see you tonight!”

Lois departed and Lenora paused to view the work Beverly and Shirley had done on the Christmas tree.

“I’m sure our party tonight will be a huge success,” Lenora declared. “The tree is sure to make a big hit. Doesn’t it smell good?”

“Do you think Tony Anton will come?” Shirley asked.

“I hope so,” Beverly said. “He’s been out of town, but I left the invitation at his hotel.”

“We thought he might be lonely on Christmas Eve,” added Lenora. “What time is it, Bev?”

Beverly glanced at her watch and hastily put aside the tinsel she was holding.

“Hey!” Shirley protested. “The tree is only half trimmed. You can’t desert me now.”

“Sorry, chum, but duty calls,” Lenora told her. “Mr. Blaine wants us to stop in and interview Lettie Pearson, who is taking over your role in *Spring Magic*.”

“Lettie Pearson!” Shirley shook her head. “Anyway,” she flung back, “it isn’t my role, it’s Marcia’s role.”

“For the umpteenth time—” Lenora exclaimed. “Marcia is no longer interested.”

“Would you care to go to the theater with us?” Beverly asked when she and Lenora were ready.

“No, thanks,” Shirley replied.

“Oh, come on,” Lenora urged. “You can sit in the back of the auditorium and watch.”

“No, thanks!” Shirley repeated.

“Afraid?” Lenora wanted to know.

“Of what?” Shirley demanded indignantly.

“Well, you *are* letting the others down,” Lenora said slowly.

“I am not!” Shirley flung back. “I was fired, and I refuse to be rehired, that’s all. Just because I don’t want Marcia’s hand-me-downs—”

“That’s silly and you know it!” Lenora interrupted.

“Girls!” Beverly interposed. “Stop arguing. Lenora, it is none of our business if Shirley doesn’t want to face her former coworkers.”

“I am not afraid to face them!” Shirley flung her last bit of tinsel at the tree. “I’ll go with you. Wait until I get my hat.”

She stalked into the bedroom, and Beverly and Lenora exchanged broad grins.

“She doesn’t suspect a thing!” Lenora whispered.

“Sh-h!” Beverly warned.

“Are you ready?” Shirley asked, reappearing with her hat and coat.

“Ready and waiting!” Lenora responded cheerily.

On the way to the theater they chatted mostly about the coming party, discussing decorations and refreshments.

“I hope Mike gets back in time to come,” Lenora sighed.

“Whatever made him decide to become a traveling salesman?” Shirley wanted to know. “Is he too restless to settle down in an office?”

“Michael McKay is apt to do anything,” Lenora said, laughing. “Selling tractors was one of the few things he hadn’t tried. He says he would rather be a cowboy.”

“Is that all he says in those fat letters you get twice a week?” Shirley teased.

“Yes,” Beverly fell in with Shirley’s mood, “the envelopes fairly bulge. Is he trying to sell you a tractor, too?”

Lenora giggled and blushed. “It isn’t a tractor he is trying to sell me.”

“Ah!” Shirley exclaimed. “Could it be a rose-covered cottage surrounded by a white picket fence—”

“Here’s the theater,” Lenora interrupted thankfully.

The girls went to the stage door and the doorman greeted them with a smile.

“It is good to see you back, Miss Arden,” he said to Shirley.

“I am only a visitor today,” Shirley returned.

A thin, worried-looking man with graying hair and glasses hurried up to the girls. He was Mr. Brewster, the director.

“You are late, Miss Gray.” He nodded to Lenora and Shirley and consulted his wrist watch. “We are just about to run through a scene. Would you mind waiting until we have finished?”

“We’ll sit down and watch,” Beverly replied.

“Fine!” He hurried away, calling: “Places, everybody!”

Beverly, Lenora, and Shirley took seats in the orchestra to watch the rehearsal.

“Mr. Brewster certainly gave me a warm welcome,” Shirley commented.

“What did you expect?” Lenora retorted. “Hugs and kisses?”

“Yes,” Beverly agreed. “You weren’t very cordial in your manner when you refused to come back to the play. Every time he telephoned you—”

“I know, I know,” Shirley muttered. “Let’s not go into that again!”

The girl who was to play the role Shirley had had was an attractive brunette, but she did not know her lines and had to read them from the script. And even making allowances for the fact that the girl had just stepped into the role, she was undeniably bad in her part. What emotion she put into her characterization was not convincing. She seemed wholly miscast.

“How could Mr. Brewster even consider giving Lettie that part?” Shirley muttered under her breath.

“It seems like a different play with Lettie doing it,” Lenora declared.

“I thought this was a tragic scene,” added Beverly. “Lettie seems to think it is a comedy.”

The scene went on under Mr. Brewster’s guidance. The director seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of patience. They would do a line over and over, until he was convinced it was the best Lettie could do.

“Her interpretation is all wrong,” Shirley murmured to her friends. “Lettie doesn’t seem to understand what the playwright is driving at.”

“She is trying hard,” Lenora sighed as Lettie listened patiently to Mr. Brewster’s third explanation of the same scene.

“After she has had a few more rehearsals she may be better,” Beverly offered.

“I doubt it,” Shirley muttered. “Lettie is a whiz at comedy, but she isn’t suited to this kind of thing. Why doesn’t Mr. Brewster see that?”

“I imagine he does see it,” Lenora said dryly, “but the poor man is helpless. It is Lettie or no one. He told us he tried to get several other girls, but Lettie was the only one available.”

Patiently and kindly, Mr. Brewster illustrated to Lettie how he wanted her to make her exit—on a high note of suspense. Lettie tried it three times without success. The other players in the scene were getting tired and impatient. At last came the crucial moment of the scene when the heroine decided to give up all her hopes for happiness. It was meant to be a heroic, unselfish gesture, but Lettie made it pathetic and a little silly.

“I can’t stand it!” Shirley exclaimed. “She’s ruining the play!” She stood up and started toward the stage. “Mr. Brewster! May I please show Lettie how I did it?”

“I thought she would never break down!” Lenora groaned to Beverly. “Poor Lettie really had to act. How she managed to be so awful—”

“Shh!” Beverly smiled. “Wait and see what happens now.”

“I don’t need your advice, Miss Arden,” Lettie’s voice rang out. “I thought you weren’t interested in the play any more.”

“Miss Pearson, please!” Mr. Brewster exclaimed. “All right, Miss Arden, if you’d like to run through this scene just once—”

“Well! If she wants to play the role, let her! I’m through!” Lettie shrieked and ran off the stage toward the dressing rooms.

“I’m sorry,” Shirley murmured, and started back toward Beverly and Lenora.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Mr. Brewster seized her arm. “You’ve lost me my only hope, and now you’ve got no choice but to play it.”

“But I—” Shirley began and hesitated.

The girls who knew her so well could almost see the struggle going on within her. Ever since college days Shirley had been more at home on a stage than anywhere else. To give it up even for the past few days had been terribly hard. She knew that if she walked off the stage now she would never return. She must have looked far into the future, as she hesitated, and it must have looked bleak and bare without the thrill she always found behind the footlights.

“Yes, I’d like to come back, Mr. Brewster,” Shirley said at last.

“So far as I am concerned, you have never been away,” he replied joyfully.

The other actors crowded around her, shaking hands, welcoming her back, and Beverly and Lenora quietly stole away, knowing Shirley would be hard at work within a few minutes. They met Lettie Pearson at the stage door.

“Lettie, you were a genius!” Lenora exclaimed. “We will always be indebted to you.”

“I thought it was a crazy idea when you and Mr. Brewster first suggested it,” Lettie said, laughing, “but it worked.”

“When Shirley stops to think about it, she will know it was a trick and that you couldn’t possibly be as bad as you pretended,” Beverly said with a smile.

“It will be too late for her to back out then.” Lettie chuckled. “Well, I’m off to a genuine rehearsal now. Tell Shirley I hope she is a smashing success.”

“It’s a good thing Shirley has such a warm feeling for the play,” Lenora commented as she and Beverly left the theater. “Otherwise, she wouldn’t have cared what happened to it.”

“I must telephone Marcia and tell her everything is settled,” added Beverly. “Do you have the list of things we need for tonight?”

“Right here!” Lenora drew a sheet of paper from her handbag. “Let’s get started, we have a lot to do.”

For several hours Beverly and Lenora were engrossed in preparations for the coming party. They found shopping difficult in the last-minute Christmas rush, and when they arrived home, laden with packages, they were exhausted.

“A warm bath will make us feel better,” Beverly prophesied.

“I am going to use tons of bath salts,” Lenora sighed.

The time passed swiftly. Lois and Shirley arrived home to help with preparations, and when the guests began to arrive all was in readiness. The Christmas tree lent fragrance and sparkle to the living room. Gaily wrapped, mysterious packages were piled beneath the tree. The room echoed to laughter and talk and the rustle of tissue paper.

It was a pleasant group, gathered for a merry evening. There were the Alpha Delta girls from upstairs, Connie Elwood and Kathleen Ryan, and two boys from their home town. Tony Anton was there, and Katharine Merrill, a rival reporter but the girls’ friend. Even their landlady, Mrs. Callahan, looked in long enough to wish everyone a happy holiday.

Just when the merriment was at its height, there came the sound of sleigh bells in the hall, and a heavy knock upon the door. Lenora, closest to the door at the time, threw it wide and the doorway was immediately filled with a huge, red-suited, white-bearded individual with a brown sack on his shoulder. He strode into the room and looked around, nodding and smiling to everyone.

“You must have the wrong apartment,” Lenora said, following him. “We didn’t plan—”

“Santa Claus visits all good little girls—and boys,” the jolly newcomer said, patting her cheek with a gloved hand.

“But—” Lenora protested weakly.

“You *must* have the wrong apartment,” Lois chimed in. “I believe there is another party on the floor below. That’s probably where your friends are.”

Santa Claus shook his head and chuckled.

“I see Beverly, Larry, Shirley—this is the right place. Don’t tell me, Lenora, that you would turn Santa Claus away from your door!”

“I—” Lenora looked dazed.

“Who are you?” Lois demanded.

“I’ve been called many things,” the jolly figure said, setting his pack beside the Christmas tree. “Santa Claus, Kris Kringle, the spirit of Christmas—each one of you has his own name for me.”

“Who is he, Beverly?” Shirley whispered to her friend.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Beverly confessed.

“He is wearing gloves so we won’t recognize his hands,” Roger Garrett, Shirley’s fiancé, put in. “It certainly is a complete disguise.”

Santa Claus proceeded to open his sack and rummage through the packages, unmindful of the speculative whispers which rose around him.

“Aha!” his voice boomed out so suddenly that they all jumped. “The first package is for a little lady named Beverly.”

Across the room Beverly’s eyes met Santa’s and as she came forward to take the package he held out she had a flash of recognition, but no name came to her mind.

Everyone waited with interest while Beverly opened the box and brought to light a beautiful handbag made of alligator skin.

“Whoever he is, he certainly has good taste,” Lenora remarked.

“Next—Lenora!” Santa boomed out.

Lenora moved forward a bit reluctantly and accepted the oblong box. It proved to be an exquisitely carved silver bracelet.

There were appropriate gifts for everyone present, and the mystery of Santa’s identity mounted with the passing moments. The brown sack of gifts was almost empty when there arose a clatter in the hall that drew the attention of all of them to the door.

“Merry Christmas! Jolly Noel!” The voice was a shout as its owner hammered on the door.

Lois opened the door this time—to reveal another Santa Claus, as rotund but not quite as tall as the first. This one doffed his cap and bowed sweepingly.

“Greetings of the season, everyone!” He straightened up and then his eyes fell upon his counterpart standing by the Christmas tree. “Oh, but I say, I didn’t know there would be another chap,” the new arrival protested. “It is a bit confusing, what?”

Lenora moved closer to the newcomer. There was a glow in her eyes and a mischievous smile about her lips. This Santa Claus she was sure she could identify. With a sweep of her hand she seized Santa’s beard and yanked it off.

“Terry!” she cried. “Terry Cartwright! When did you get into town?”

The young Englishman, long a friend of all the young people there, broke into laughter and discarded his white wig.

“Just this afternoon, Lenora. I thought it would be jolly fun to surprise you. It seems someone else had the same idea.” His eyes moved to the other Santa Claus standing silently by the tree.

This time Beverly came forward.

“There is a label from a Rio shop in my handbag,” she said clearly. “The only one we know who might have been in Brazil recently is Jim Stanton.”

The first Santa Claus bowed and swept off his whiskers.

“Discovered! But it was fun while it lasted,” he declared.

The newcomers were welcomed warmly and hilariously, and when some of the noise had abated Tony Anton observed to Beverly:

“Now the passenger list of the *Susabella* is complete. Why don’t we keep it this way and sail together once more?”

The idea had to be explained anew to Terry and Jim. As they discussed plans for a cruise, to ports they had never seen, little did they realize what thrilling adventures Beverly Gray’s Vacation would bring.

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 *Beverly Gray's Mystery* by Clair Blank]