

Lavell Edith

The Mystery at Dark Cedars



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Lavell E.

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Characters

Mary Louise Gay a girl detective.

Jane Patterson her chum.

Miss Mattie Grant spinster at Dark Cedars.

Elsie Grant orphan, niece of Miss Grant, living at Dark Cedars.

Mrs. Grace Grant sister-in-law to Miss Grant.

family of Mrs. Grace Grant.

John Grant middle-aged bachelor

Harry Grant younger bachelor

Ellen Grant Pearson married daughter

Corinne Pearson granddaughter, girl of nineteen

Hannah and William Groben servants at Dark Cedars.

Mr. Gay, Mrs. Gay, Joseph (Freckles) Gay family of Mary Louise.

Max Miller, Norman Wilder, Hope Dorsey, Bernice Tracey friends of Mary Louise.

Mrs. Abraham Lincoln Jones a colored woman.

Mira a gypsy fortune teller.

Silky Mary Louise's dog.

CHAPTER I

The House of Mystery

"Be quiet, Silky! What's the matter with you? You don't usually bark like common dogs over nothing!"

The brown spaniel stopped under a maple tree and wagged his tail forlornly, looking pleadingly into his mistress's eyes, as if he were trying to tell her that he wasn't just making a fuss over nothing.

Mary Louise Gay stooped over and patted his head. She was a pretty girl of sixteen, with dark hair and lovely brown eyes and long lashes that would make an actress envious.

"I see what Silky means!" cried her companion, Jane Patterson who lived next door to Mary Louise and was her inseparable chum. "Look, Mary Lou! Up in the tree. A kitten!"

Both girls gazed up at the leafy branches overhead and spied a tiny black kitten crying piteously. It had climbed up and couldn't get down.

"I'll get it," said Mary Louise.

She swung herself lightly to the lowest branch, chinned herself, and climbed the tree. In another minute she had rescued the kitten with her hands.

"Stretch on your tiptoes, Jane," she called to her chum, "and see if I can hand it down to you."

The other girl, who was much shorter and stockier than Mary Louise, did as she was told, but the distance was too great.

"I suppose I'll have to climb down with her in one hand," concluded Mary Louise. "That's not so easy."

"Drop her over to that branch you swung up by, and I'll get her from there," suggested Jane.

A moment later Mary Louise was at her chum's side, stroking the little black kitten, now purring contentedly in Jane's arms.

"I wonder whose it is," she remarked. "There isn't any house near –"

"Except old Miss Grant's."

Both girls turned and looked at the hill which rose at the right of the lonely road on which they had been walking. The house, a large drab plaster building, was barely visible through the dark cedars that surrounded it on all sides. A high, thick hedge, taller than an average-sized man, gave the place an even greater aspect of gloominess and seclusion.

"Maybe it is Miss Grant's kitten," suggested Jane. "Old maids are supposed to like cats, you know."

Mary Louise's brown eyes sparkled with anticipation.

"I hope it is!" she exclaimed. "And then we'll get a look at the inside of that house. Because everybody says it's supposed to be haunted. Our colored laundress's little girl was walking past it one evening about dusk, and she heard the most terrible moan. She claims that two eyes, without any head or body, looked out through the hedge at her. She dropped her bundle and ran as fast as she could for home."

"You don't really believe there is anything, do you, Mary Lou?"

"I don't know. There must be something queer about it."

"Maybe there's a crazy woman shut up in the tower."

"You've been reading *Jane Eyre*, haven't you, Jane? But there isn't any tower on the Grant house."

"Well, I guess Miss Grant is crazy enough herself. She dresses in styles of forty years ago. Did you ever see her?"

“Yes, I’ve had a glimpse of her once or twice when I walked past here. She looks like the picture of the old maid on the old-maid cards. It must be awful for that girl who lives with her.”

“What girl?” inquired Jane.

“A niece, I believe. She must be about our age. Her father and mother both died, so she has to live with Miss Grant. They say the old lady treats her terribly – much worse than the two old servants she keeps.”

While this conversation was going on, the two girls, followed by Silky, were walking slowly up the hill towards the big hedge which surrounded the Grant place. Once inside the yard, it was almost like being in a deep, thick woods. Cedar trees completely enclosed the house and grew thick on both sides of the narrow path leading from the gate to the porch. In spite of the fact that it was broad daylight, Jane found herself shuddering. But Mary Louise seemed delighted with the strange, gloomy atmosphere.

“Doesn’t this girl go to high school?” asked Jane. “If she’s about our age – ”

“I don’t believe so. I never saw her there.”

They stopped when they reached the steps of the porch and looked about with curiosity. It certainly was a run-down place. Boards were broken in the steps, and pieces of plaster had crumbled from the outer wall. The grayish-colored ivy which grew over the house seemed to emphasize its aspect of the past.

“Isn’t Miss Grant supposed to be rich?” whispered Jane incredulously. “It doesn’t look like it!”

“They say she’s a miser. Hoards every cent she can get.” Mary Louise smiled. “I believe I’ll tell Daddy to report her for hoarding. She deserves it!”

“Better wait and find out whether she really is rich, hadn’t you?” returned Jane. “Your father’s a busy man.”

Mary Louise nodded and looked at her dog.

“You lie down, Silky,” she commanded, “and wait here for us. Miss Grant probably wouldn’t like you. She might think you’d hurt Pussy.” She smiled indulgently. “She doesn’t know you belong to the Dog Scouts and do a kind act every day – like rescuing cats in distress!”

The spaniel obeyed, and the two girls mounted the rickety steps of the porch. Although it was late in June, the door was closed tightly, and they had to pull a rusty knocker to let the people inside know that they were there.

It was some minutes before there was any reply.

A sad-faced girl in an old-fashioned purple calico dress finally opened the door and stared at them with big gray eyes. The length of her dress, the way her blond hair was pulled back and pinned into a tight knot, made her seem much older than her visitors.

A suggestion of a smile crossed her face at the sight of the girls’ pleasant faces, and for a second she looked almost pretty.

“Is this your kitten?” asked Mary Louise. “We rescued it from a tree down the road.”

The girl nodded.

“Yes. It belongs to my aunt Mattie. Come in, and I’ll call her.”

The girls stepped into the dark square hall and looked about them. The inside of the house was even more forbidding than the outside. The ceilings were high and the wall paper dark. All the shutters were drawn, as if there were poison in the June sunlight. For no reason at all that they could see, the old stairs suddenly creaked.

Jane shuddered visibly, and the girl in the purple dress smiled.

“Don’t mind the queer noises,” she said. “Nothing ever happens in daytime.”

“Then something does happen after dark?” questioned Mary Louise eagerly.

“Oh, yes. Why, only two nights ago – ”

“What’s this? What’s this?” demanded the sharp, high voice of an old woman. “What are you standing there talking about, Elsie? With all those peaches waiting to be pared!”

All eyes turned naturally towards the old staircase, from which the sound of the voice was coming. Miss Grant slowly descended, holding her hand on her right side and grunting to herself as if the act of walking were painful to her. She was a woman of at least sixty-five, thin and wrinkled, but with little sharp black beady eyes that seemed to peer into everything suspiciously, as if she believed the whole world evil. She was wearing an old-fashioned black dress, and a dark shawl about her shoulders.

“These girls have found your kitten, Aunt Mattie,” Elsie informed her. “They rescued her from a tree.”

The black eyes softened, and the old woman came towards the girls.

“My precious little Puffy!” she exclaimed, as one might talk to a baby. Then her tone abruptly became harsh again as she turned to her niece.

“Go back to your work, Elsie!” she ordered gruffly. “I’ll attend to this!”

Without any reply the girl slunk away to the kitchen, and Miss Grant took the kitten from Jane.

“Tell me what happened to my poor little pet,” she said.

Briefly Jane repeated the story, with an emphasis upon Mary Louise’s prowess in climbing trees.

Apparently the old lady was touched.

“I must say that was good of you,” she remarked. “Not a bit like what most young people nowadays would do! All they seem to enjoy is torturing poor helpless creatures!”

She put the kitten down on the floor and turned towards the stairs.

“You wait!” she commanded the girls, “I’m going to get you a reward for this!”

“Oh, no, Miss Grant!” they both protested instantly, and Mary Louise went on to explain that they were Girl Scouts and never accepted money for good turns. (Even Silky knows better than that, she added to herself. He won’t expect a bone for rescuing Pussy – only a pat on the head!)

“You really mean that?” demanded Miss Grant, in obvious relief. She would save two cents! She had meant to give each girl a whole penny!

“Tell me your names, then,” she continued, “and where you live. I might want to call on you for help sometime. I can’t trust my niece as far as my nose, and my servants are both old.” Mary Louise chuckled. So there was a mystery in this house! A lurking danger that Miss Grant and her niece both feared! And she and Jane were being drawn into it.

“Jane Patterson and Mary Louise Gay,” she replied. “We live over in Riverside, next to the high school. You can get us on the phone.”

“I haven’t a telephone. Too expensive. Besides, if I had one, I couldn’t tell what deviltry Elsie might be up to... No, I don’t hold with these modern inventions.”

“Well, you could send Elsie for us if you need any help,” suggested Jane. “It’s only a little over a mile. You see, Mary Louise’s father is a detective on the police force, and we’re both interested in mysteries.”

“I’m not thinking of any mystery,” snapped Miss Grant. “What I’m thinking of is *facts*. One fact is that I’ve got a pack of scheming relations who are trying to send me off to the hospital for an operation while they loot my house.”

Mary Louise’s forehead wrinkled in surprise.

“I didn’t know you had any relations besides your niece,” she said.

“Certainly I have. Haven’t you ever heard of the Grants in Riverside? Mrs. Grace Grant – a woman about my age? She has two grown sons and a married daughter. Well, they spent all their money, and now they want mine. But they’re not going to get it!”

Her hand went to her side again, as if she were in pain, and Mary Louise decided it was time for them to go.

“Well, good-bye, Miss Grant,” she said. “And don’t forget to call on us if you want help.”

It was a relief to be out in the bright sunlight again, away from the gloom and the decay of that ugly house. Mary Louise took a deep breath and whistled for Silky. He was waiting at the foot of the porch steps.

As they walked down the path they were startled by a rustle in one of the cedar trees. Silky perked up his ears and went to investigate the disturbance. In another moment a head peered cautiously through the branches. It was Elsie Grant.

“Will you come over here and talk to me a little while?” she whispered, as if she were afraid of being caught. “I never see any girls my own age – and – you look so nice!”

Both Mary Louise and Jane were touched by the loneliness of this poor unhappy orphan. They went gladly to her side.

“Don’t you go to school?” asked Mary Louise. “I mean – when it isn’t vacation time?”

The girl shook her head.

“That must be awful!” exclaimed Jane. “Sometimes I hate school, but I’d certainly hate worse never to go. How old are you?”

“I’m only fifteen,” replied Elsie. “But it seems as if I were fifty. I mean – the time is so long. Yet I’ve really only lived here with Aunt Mattie two years.”

“And didn’t you ever go to school?” questioned Mary Louise. She couldn’t believe that, for the girl spoke beautiful English.

“Oh, yes – before I came here. I was just ready to enter high school when mother died – only a couple of months after my father was killed in an accident. He was Aunt Mattie’s youngest brother. And he didn’t leave any money, so I had to come and live with her.”

“But I can’t see why she doesn’t send you to school,” protested Jane. “It’s a public high school. It wouldn’t cost her anything.”

“Yes, it would, because I haven’t any clothes except these old things of hers. I can’t go anywhere – I’m too ashamed.”

Mary Louise’s eyes gleamed with indignation.

“That’s terrible!” she cried. “We can report her – ”

Elsie shook her head.

“No, you couldn’t. Because she feeds me well enough and gives me clothing that is clean, and warm enough in winter. No, there isn’t a thing anybody can do. Except wait until I’m old enough to work in somebody’s kitchen.”

“No!” protested Jane.

“But I thought if I could just see you two girls once in a while and talk to you, life wouldn’t seem so bad. If I could call you by your first names – ”

“Of course you can,” Mary Louise assured her, and she told Elsie their names. “We’ll come over often. And I don’t believe your aunt will object, because she seems to like us.”

“She loves that kitten,” explained Elsie. “It’s the only thing in the world she does love, besides money.”

“She mentioned her money,” remarked Jane, “and told us that she believed her relatives were trying to get it away from her.”

“By the way,” said Mary Louise, “you started to tell us about something that happened here two nights ago. Remember? What was it?”

Elsie shivered, as though the memory of it were still painful to her.

“I sleep up in the attic, all by myself. And I hear the most awful noises all night. I’m always scared to death to go to bed.”

“Don’t the servants sleep there too?” asked Mary Louise. She was anxious to get her facts straight from the beginning.

“No. They sleep on the second floor, in a room over the kitchen. There are just two of them – an old married couple named Hannah and William Groben.

“Well, night before last I heard more distinct noises than ever. First I thought it was one of the trees near my window, and I nerved myself to get out of bed and look out. And what do you think I saw?”

“A ghost?” whispered Jane, in awe.

“No, I don’t think so. I believe it was a human being. Anyway, all I saw was two bright eyes peering in at the window!”

“What did you do?” demanded Mary Louise breathlessly. “Scream?”

“No, I didn’t. Once before I screamed, and Aunt Mattie had William investigate everything, and when he found nobody I was punished for my foolishness. I had to eat bread and water for two days. And it taught me a lesson. I never screamed again.”

“Then what happened?”

“I think whoever it was climbed from the tree into the attic storeroom window and went through an old trunk in there. I heard a little noise, but I couldn’t tell whether it was only the wind or not. Anyway, nothing was known about it till yesterday, when Aunt Mattie went up to look for something in her trunk.”

“Did you tell her then?”

“I tried to. But she wouldn’t listen. She accused me of going through her trunk. But I wasn’t punished, because nothing was stolen.”

“Then it couldn’t have been a robber,” said Mary Louise. “Or something would have been taken. Wasn’t there anything else in the house missing?”

“Not a thing! Hannah even counted the silver and found it was all there.”

“How does Hannah account for it? Or does she think, like your aunt, that you did it?” questioned Mary Louise.

“Hannah says it was ‘spirits.’ She says the spirits can’t rest as long as their old things are around. She wants Aunt Mattie to burn or give away all the old clothing in the house. She says dead people’s clothes are possessed.”

Jane let out a peal of laughter, but Mary Louise warned her to be quiet. “We mustn’t get Elsie into trouble,” she explained.

“Was that the only time anything like that ever happened?” asked Jane.

“No. Once, earlier in the spring, when Hannah and William were away at some lodge supper, their room was entered and searched. I was blamed and punished then, though nothing was missing that time, either. But the awful part of it is: I expect it to happen again every night. Every time the wind howls or a branch beats against a windowpane, I’m sure they’re coming again – whoever they are. And – I’m afraid!”

“Something’s got to be done!” announced Mary Louise, with determination. “I’m not my father’s daughter if I allow a mysterious outrage like this to go on.” She pressed Elsie’s hand. “You can count on us,” she concluded. “We’ll be back to see you tomorrow!”

CHAPTER II

The Robbery

The house in which Mary Louise's family lived was as different from the Grants' as day is from night. It was painted white, and its smooth green lawn was dotted here and there with bright flower beds. Modern, airy, and filled with sunshine, the house itself looked like the home of a happy family, which the Gays were – as their name implied.

Mary Louise's young brother – always called "Freckles" – was setting the breakfast table when she came downstairs the morning after her visit to Dark Cedars. It was Mary Louise's task to put the bedding to air while her mother cooked breakfast. Mrs. Gay did not keep a maid, and both children did their share of the work.

As they sat down to breakfast Mary Louise could not help contrasting her life with poor Elsie Grant's. Thinking how different, how cheerful everything was here – though of course it was never quite the same when her father was away on a case, as so happened at the present time. Mary Louise wanted to do something to help Elsie, besides just visiting her. She had a sudden inspiration.

"I have a lot of clothes, haven't I, Mother?" she inquired as she spread marmalade on her toast.

Mrs. Gay smiled. She was a pretty woman, with the same dark hair and dark eyes as her daughter.

"I wouldn't say that, dear," she replied. "I think you have enough. But if there is something you specially want, I guess you can have it. Is that why you ask?"

"No," replied Mary Louise laughingly. "It's just the other way around. Instead of buying more, what I want to do is to give some away. A couple of dresses, perhaps, and some lingerie. And a pair of slippers."

Mrs. Gay nodded approvingly. Being both a neat housekeeper and a charitable woman, she loved to clear things out and, if possible, give them to someone who could use them.

"Yes," she said. "I was thinking of making up a package to send to the Salvation Army today. That old blue sweater of yours could go, and the red woolen dress –"

"No! No!" interrupted Mary Louise. "I didn't mean things like that, Mother. I want to give away a couple of nice dresses. Like my green flowered silk, for instance, and my pink linen. May I?"

"Why, Mary Louise! I thought you especially liked those dresses. What's the matter with them?"

"Nothing. I do like them a lot. That's why I chose them. I want to give them to a girl who hasn't had a new dress for over two years."

"Who is she?" asked Mrs. Gay sympathetically.

"A niece of old Miss Grant. You know – that queer old maid who lives at Dark Cedars. About a mile out of town."

Her mother nodded.

"Yes, I know where you mean, dear. But that woman is reputed to be rich – much better off than we are. I can't understand –"

"Of course you can't, Mother, unless you see poor Elsie Grant. She's about my age – a year younger, to be exact – and she's an orphan. Two years ago, when her mother died, she came to live with Miss Grant because she hadn't anywhere to go and no money. And the old lady treats her shamefully. Dresses her in those old calico dresses that servants used to wear years ago. So Elsie can't go anywhere, not even to school."

Mrs. Gay's lips closed tightly, and her eyes narrowed.

“So that’s the kind of woman Miss Grant is!” she muttered. “I always knew she was queer, but I never thought she was cruel... Yes, of course you can give the girl some clothing, dear. Go pick out anything you want, except those brand-new things we bought last week for our trip in August.”

Mary Louise lost no time in making her selection. She piled the clothing on her bed, after she had put her room in order, and called her mother in for her approval. But before tying up the package she whistled for Jane from her window.

Her chum came running across the grass that grew between the two houses and bounded up the steps. Briefly Mary Louise explained what she was doing.

“But I want to give Elsie something too,” Jane said. “She ought to have some kind of summer coat and a hat. Wait till I ask Mother.”

She returned in less than five minutes bringing a lovely white wool coat and a white felt hat to match it. Mary Louise tied up the bundle.

“Please ask Freckles to take care of Silky this morning, Mother,” she said. “I’m afraid that perhaps Miss Grant might not like him.”

The girls started off immediately through the streets of Riverside to the lonely road that led to Dark Cedars.

“I sort of wish we had Silky with us,” observed Jane as they approached the house. “He is a protection.”

Mary Louise laughed.

“But there isn’t anything to protect us from! Elsie said nothing ever happened in the daytime.”

A stifled sob coming from under the cedar trees caused the girls to stop abruptly and peer in among the low branches. There, half concealed by the thick growth, sat Elsie Grant, crying bitterly.

Mary Louise and Jane were beside her in a second.

“What’s the matter, Elsie?” demanded Mary Louise. “What happened?”

The girl raised her tear-stained face and attempted to smile. For Mary Louise and Jane came nearest to being her friends of all the people in the world.

“Aunt Mattie has been robbed,” she said. “And – everybody thinks I did it!”

“You!” cried Jane. “Oh, how awful!”

The girls sat down on the ground beside her and asked her to tell them all about it. The bundle of clothing was forgotten for the time being in this new, overwhelming catastrophe.

“My aunt has a big old safe in her room, that she always keeps locked,” Elsie began. “She hasn’t any faith in banks, she says, because they are always closing, so all her money is in this safe. I’ve often heard Aunt Grace try to make Aunt Mattie stop hoarding, but Aunt Mattie always refuses. She loves to have it where she can see it and count it.”

“A regular miser,” remarked Jane.

“Yes. It’s her one joy in life – besides the little kitten. Every morning after breakfast she opens that safe and counts her money over again.”

“Doesn’t she ever spend any?” asked Mary Louise.

“A little, of course. She pays William and Hannah a small amount, and she buys some food, especially in winter. But we have a garden, you know, and chickens and a cow.”

“When did she miss this money?”

“This morning. It was there yesterday. Aunt Mattie counted it right after you girls went home. You can hear her say the figures out loud and sort of chuckle to herself. But today she just let out a scream. It was horrible! I thought she was dying.”

“Maybe it was taken last night,” said Mary Louise. “Did you hear any of those queer noises – I mean the kind you heard before, when you thought somebody searched that old trunk in the attic?”

“No, I didn’t. That’s the worst part. Nobody else heard anything, either, all night long, and no door locks were broken. Of course, a burglar might have entered over the front porch roof, through Aunt Mattie’s window. But she’s a light sleeper, and she says she never heard a sound.”

“So of course she claims you stole it!”

Elsie nodded and started to cry again.

“But I didn’t! I give you my word I didn’t!”

“Of course you didn’t, Elsie. We believe you.”

“Aunt Mattie did everything but torture me to get a confession out of me. She said if I didn’t own up to it and give it back she’d send me to a reform school, and I’d be branded as a criminal for the rest of my life.”

“She couldn’t do that!” exclaimed Mary Louise furiously. “If she has no proof . . . I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Elsie! I’ll put my father on the case when he comes home! He’s a detective on the police force, and he’s just wonderful. He’ll find the real thief.”

Elsie shook her head.

“No, I’m afraid you can’t do that. Because Aunt Mattie distinctly said that she won’t have the police meddling in this. She says that if I didn’t steal the money somebody else in the family did.”

“What family?”

“Aunt Grace’s family. She’s the Mrs. Grant, you know, who lives in Riverside. She has three grown-up children and one grandchild. Aunt Mattie says one of these relatives is guilty, if I’m not, and she’ll find out herself, without bringing shame upon the Grant name.”

Mary Louise groaned.

“The only thing I can see for us to do, then, is to be detectives ourselves. Jane and I will do all we can to help you, won’t we, Jane?”

Her chum nodded. “At least, if we don’t have to get into any spookiness at night,” she amended. “Those mysterious sounds you told us about, Elsie – ”

“They may all have some connection with this robbery,” announced Mary Louise. “And I’d like to find out!”

Elsie looked doubtful.

“I only hope Aunt Mattie doesn’t try the bread-and-water diet on me, to get a confession. Really, you have no idea how awful that is till you try it. You just get crazy for some real food. You’d be almost willing to lie to get it, even if you knew the lie was going to hurt you.”

“If she tries that, you let us know,” cried Jane angrily, “and we’ll bring our parents right over here!”

“All right, I will.” Elsie seemed to find some relief in the promise.

“Elsie,” said Mary Louise very seriously, “tell me who you really think did steal the money.”

The girl considered the problem carefully.

“I believe it was somebody in Aunt Grace’s family,” she replied slowly. “Because they used to be rich, and now they are poor. And I think that if a burglar had entered the house, somebody, probably Aunt Mattie, would have wakened up.”

“Couldn’t he have entered before your aunt went to bed?” suggested Mary Louise.

“Maybe. But Aunt Mattie was on the front porch all evening, and she’d probably have heard him.”

“All right, then,” agreed Mary Louise. “Let’s drop the idea of the burglar for the time being. Let’s hear about the family – your aunt Grace’s family, I mean.”

She reached into her pocket and took out a pencil and notebook, which she had provided for the purpose of writing down any items of clothing that Elsie might particularly want. Instead of that, she would list the possible suspects, the way her father usually did when he was working on a murder case.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’m ready now. Tell me how many brothers and sisters your aunt Mattie had, and everything else you can.”

“Aunt Mattie had only two brothers, and not any sisters at all. My father was one brother, and Aunt Grace’s husband was the other. They’re both dead.”

“Then your aunt Grace isn’t your aunt Mattie’s real sister?” inquired Jane.

“No. But Aunt Mattie seems to like her better than any of her blood relations, even if she is only a sister-in-law. She comes over here pretty often.”

“Maybe she took the money.”

Elsie looked shocked.

“Not Aunt Grace! She’s too religious. Always going to church and talking about right and wrong. She even argued with Aunt Mattie to let me go to Sunday school, but Aunt Mattie wouldn’t buy me a decent dress.”

At the mention of clothing, Jane reached for the package they had carried with them to Dark Cedars, but Mary Louise shook her head, signalling her to wait until Elsie had finished.

“Well, anyway, Aunt Mattie’s father liked her better than her two brothers, and he promised to leave her his money if she wouldn’t get married while he was alive. And she didn’t, you know.”

“I guess nobody ever asked her,” remarked Jane bluntly.

“That’s what my mother used to say,” agreed Elsie. “She didn’t like Aunt Mattie, and Aunt Mattie hated her. So it’s no wonder I’m not welcome here!”

Mary Louise called Elsie back to her facts by tapping her pencil on her notebook.

“So far I have only one relative written down,” she said. “That’s your aunt Grace. Please go on.”

“As I told you, I think,” Elsie continued immediately, “Aunt Grace has three grown children. Two boys and a girl.”

“Names, please,” commanded Mary Louise in her most practical tone.

“John Grant, Harry Grant, and Mrs. Ellen Grant Pearson. The daughter is married.”

“How old are they?”

“All about forty, I guess. I don’t know. Middle-aged – no, I guess you wouldn’t call Harry middle-aged. He’s the youngest. Except, of course, the granddaughter – Mrs. Pearson’s only child. She’s a girl about eighteen or nineteen.”

“What’s her name?”

“Corinne – Corinne Pearson.”

“Is that everybody?” asked Mary Louise. “I mean, all the living relatives of Miss Mattie Grant?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

Mary Louise read her list aloud, just to make sure that she had gotten the names correctly and to impress them upon her own mind.

“Mrs. Grace Grant – aged about sixty-five, sister-in-law of Miss Mattie.

“John Grant – middle-aged.

“Ellen Grant Pearson – middle-aged.

“Harry Grant – about thirty.

“Corinne Pearson – about nineteen...”

“But you forgot me!” Elsie reminded her.

“No, we didn’t forget you, either,” replied Mary Louise, with a smile. “We’ve got something for you – in that package.”

“Something to make you forget your troubles,” added Jane. “Some new clothes.”

The girl’s eyes lighted up with joy.

“Honestly? Oh, that’s wonderful! Let me see them!”

Mary Louise untied the package and held the things up for Elsie to look at. The girl’s expression was one of positive rapture. A silk dress! In the latest style! And the kind of soft wooly coat she had always dreamed of possessing! A hat that was a real hat – not one of those outlandish sunbonnets her aunt Mattie made her wear! Dainty lingerie – and a pair of white shoes!

“Oh, it’s too much!” she cried. “I couldn’t take them! They’re your best things – I know they are.” And once again her eyes filled with tears.

“We have other nice clothes,” Mary Louise assured her. “And our mothers said it was all right. So you must take them: we’d be hurt if you didn’t.”

“Honestly?” The girl looked as if she could not believe there was so much goodness in the world.

“Absolutely! Now – don’t you want to go in and try them on?”

“I’ll do it right here,” said Elsie. “These cedars are so thick that nobody can see me. And if I went into the house they might not let me out again to show you.”

With trembling fingers she pulled off her shoes and stockings, and the old calico dress she was wearing, and put on the silk slip and the green flowered dress. Then the white stockings and the slippers, which fitted beautifully. And last of all, the coat.

Her eyes were sparkling now, and her feet were taking little dancing steps of delight. Elsie Grant looked like a different person!

“Wonderful!” cried Mary Louise and Jane in the same breath.

“Only – let me fix your hair,” suggested the former. “It’s naturally curly, isn’t it? But you have it drawn back so tightly you can scarcely see any wave.”

“I’d like to wear it like yours, Mary Louise,” replied the orphan wistfully. “But it’s too long, and I have no money for barbers or beauty parlors.”

“We’ll see what we can do next time we come,” answered Mary Louise. “But let’s loosen it up a bit now and put your knot down low on your neck so that the hat will fit.”

Defly she fluffed it out a little at the sides and pinned it in a modish style. Then she put the little white felt hat on Elsie’s head at just the correct angle and stepped back to survey the transformed girl with pride.

“You’re positively a knockout, Elsie!” she exclaimed in delight. “Take my word for it, you’re going to be a big hit in Riverside.” She chuckled to herself. “We’ll all lose our boy-friends when they see you!”

“Oh no!” protested Elsie seriously. “You are really beautiful, Mary Louise! And so clever and good. And so is Jane.”

Both girls smiled at Elsie’s extravagant praise. Then Mary Louise turned back to her notebook.

“I’d like to hear more about yesterday,” she said: “whether you think any of these five relatives had a chance to steal that money.”

“They all had a chance,” answered Elsie. “They were all here – and all up in Aunt Mattie’s room at some time or other during the day or evening!”

CHAPTER III

Suspects

“Let’s sit down again while you tell me every single thing that happened here yesterday,” suggested Mary Louise.

Elsie took off the white coat and folded it carefully. Then she removed her hat.

“But I can’t sit down in this silk dress,” she objected. “I might get it dirty, and I don’t want to take it off till I see myself in a mirror. I might not have another chance to put it on all day long!”

“You can sit on the paper,” advised Jane. “That will protect it. Besides, the ground is dry, and these needles are a covering.”

Very cautiously Elsie seated herself, and turned to Mary Louise, who had dropped down beside her on the ground.

“Begin when you got up in the morning,” she said.

“That was about seven o’clock,” replied Elsie. “But really, that doesn’t matter, because I’m sure Aunt Mattie counted her money after you girls brought the kitten back. I heard her. And she stayed in her room until after lunch.”

“Does this safe have a combination lock?” inquired Mary Louise.

“No, it doesn’t. Just a key. John Grant suggested to Aunt Mattie that she have one put on, and she refused. She said people can guess at combinations of figures by twisting the handle around, but if she kept the key with her day and night, nobody could open the safe... But she got fooled!”

“The lock was broken?”

“Yes. But the door of the safe was closed, so she hadn’t noticed it until she went to count her money this morning.”

“Do you know how much was taken?”

“No, I don’t. Plenty, I guess. Only, there was one queer thing about it: the thief didn’t take the bonds she kept in a special drawer.”

“Overlooked them, probably,” remarked Mary Louise.

“Maybe. I don’t know. Well, as I said, Aunt Mattie was in her room until lunch time, and then she went out on the front porch. About two o’clock in the afternoon Aunt Grace and her son John drove over.”

“John – Grant,” repeated Mary Louise, consulting the list in her notebook. “He’s your aunt Grace’s oldest son?”

“Yes. He’s about forty, as I said. Fat and a little bit bald. An old bachelor. Probably you’d recognize him if you saw him, because he’s on the School Board. Aunt Mattie likes him because he does little repair jobs for her around the house that save her spending money for a carpenter.

“Yesterday he went upstairs and fixed a window sash in her bedroom.” Elsie paused thoughtfully. “So you see John had a good chance to open the safe and steal the money.”

“Why, he’s the guilty one, of course!” cried Jane instantly. “It’s just too plain. I should think your aunt would see that.”

Elsie shook her head.

“No, it would never occur to Aunt Mattie to accuse John. He’s the one person in the family she trusts. She always says she is leaving him all her money in her will – so why would he bother to steal it?”

“He might need it now, for some particular purpose,” replied Jane. “He is handy with tools, you say – and had such a good opportunity.”

“We better get on with the story,” urged Mary Louise. “Any minute Elsie may be called in.”

The girl shuddered, as if she dreaded the ordeal of meeting her aunt again.

“Was your aunt Grace in the bedroom at all during the afternoon?” questioned Mary Louise. “By herself, I mean?”

“I don’t know. She and Aunt Mattie went up together to look at the window after John finished fixing it, but whether or not Aunt Grace was there alone, I couldn’t say. Anyhow, there’s no use worrying about that. Aunt Grace just *couldn’t* steal anything.”

“According to the detective stories,” put in Jane, “it’s the person who just *couldn’t* commit the crime who always is the guilty one. The one you suspect least.”

“But this isn’t a story,” said Elsie. “I wish it were. If you knew how dreadful it is for me, living here and having everybody think I’m a thief!”

“Why don’t you run away, now that you have some decent clothes?” suggested Jane. “I just wouldn’t stand for anything like that!”

“But I have nowhere to go. Besides, running away would make me look guiltier than ever.”

“Elsie’s right,” approved Mary Louise. “She can’t run away now. But we’ll prove she’s innocent!” she added, with determination.

“There’s something else that happened during that visit,” continued Elsie. “I mean, while Aunt Grace and John were here. Part of a conversation I overheard that may give you a clue. Aunt Grace said her youngest son – Harry, you remember – had gotten into debt and needed some money very badly. She didn’t actually ask Aunt Mattie to help him out: she only hinted. But she didn’t get any encouragement from Aunt Mattie. She told Aunt Grace just to shut Harry out of the house till he learned to behave himself!”

“So this Harry Grant is in debt!” muttered Mary Louise, making a note of this fact in her little book. “Could he have stolen the money?”

“Yes, it’s possible. After Aunt Grace and John went home, Harry came over to Dark Cedars.”

“What time was that?”

“Around four o’clock, I think. I was out in the kitchen, helping Hannah shell some peas for supper. We heard his car – it’s a terribly noisy old thing – and then his voice.”

“What’s he like?” asked Mary Louise.

“I told you he was the youngest of Aunt Grace’s children, you know, and he’s rather handsome. He treats me much better than any of the other relations, except Aunt Grace, but still I don’t like him. He always insists on kissing me and teasing me about imaginary boy-friends. I usually run out into the kitchen when I hear him coming.”

“Is he here often?”

“Only when he wants something. He tries to flatter Aunt Mattie and tease her money away from her. But, as far as I know, he never gets any.”

“What did he want yesterday?”

“He said he wanted a loan. He didn’t bother to talk quietly: I could hear every word he said from the kitchen.”

“And your aunt refused?”

“Yes. She told him to sell his car if he needed money. As if he could sell that old bus!” Elsie laughed. “You’d have to pay somebody to take that away,” she explained.

Mary Louise tapped her pencil again. She hated to get away from the all-important subject.

“But how do you think Harry could have stolen the money if your aunt Mattie was with him all the time?” she asked.

“Aunt Mattie wasn’t. He had a fine chance. Something had gone wrong with his car, and he had to fix it on the way over. So his hands were all dirty, and he went upstairs to wash them.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Jane significantly.

“Looks bad for Harry Grant,” commented Mary Louise, “because he had a motive. Daddy always looks for two things when he’s solving a crime: the motive, and the chance to get away with it. And it seems that this young man had both.”

Elsie nodded.

“Yes, he had. And he was upstairs a good while, too. But then, he’s an awful dandy about everything. You never see grease in Harry Grant’s finger nails!”

“Did he go right out when he came downstairs?” inquired Mary Louise.

“No. He laughed and joked a lot. I heard him ask Aunt Mattie to lend him her finger-nail rouge because he had forgotten his. Then he said he’d like some cookies, and I had to make lemonade.”

“So, if he took the money, he must have had it in his pocket all this time? He didn’t go upstairs again?”

“No, he didn’t. And I know Aunt Mattie had a good deal of it in gold, so it must have been terribly heavy. Still, men have a lot of pockets.”

Mary Louise nodded. “Yes, that’s true. But you’d think if he really had taken it he’d have been anxious to get away. That story about asking for cookies and lemonade almost proves an alibi for him.”

She sighed; it was all getting rather complicated. “Did anything else happen yesterday?” she asked wearily. “I mean, after Harry went home?”

“Not till after supper. Then Mrs. Pearson and her daughter walked over to see Aunt Mattie. They used to be rich, but Mr. Pearson lost his job, and they had to sell their car. So now they have to walk wherever they go.”

Jane let out a groan.

“So every one of those five relations of Miss Grant was here yesterday and had a chance to steal that money!” she exclaimed.

“Yes,” agreed Elsie. “Every one of them!”

“What are the Pearsons like?” asked Mary Louise.

“Well, Mrs. Pearson looks like Aunt Grace – she’s her daughter, you remember – but she isn’t a bit like her. She isn’t religious; in fact, she doesn’t seem to care for anything in the world but that nasty daughter of hers. Corinne, you know. Have you ever seen Corinne Pearson?”

“I think I have,” replied Mary Louise. “Though she never went to our school. I believe she attended that little private school, and now she goes around with the Country Club set, doesn’t she?”

“Yes. Her one ambition, and her mother’s ambition for her, is to marry a rich man. I hate both of them. They’re so rude to me – never speak to me at all unless they give me a command as if I were a servant. Last night Corinne told me to bring her a certain chair from the parlor, because she thought our porch rockers were dirty. And the tone she used! As if I ought to keep them clean just for her!”

“I always imagined she was like that,” said Jane. “I was introduced to her once, and when I passed her on the street the next day she cut me dead.”

“Once she told me to untie her shoe and see if there was a stone in it,” continued Elsie. “In the haughtiest tone!”

“I’d have slapped her foot!” exclaimed Jane. “You didn’t obey her, did you?”

“I had to. Aunt Mattie would have punished me if I hadn’t. She dislikes Corinne Pearson and her mother, but she hates me worst of all... So you can easily see why I run off when I see the Pearsons coming. I went back into the kitchen with Hannah, but Aunt Mattie soon called me to bring some ice water. And the conversation I heard may be another clue for you, Mary Louise.”

“Oh, dear!” sighed Jane. “We’ve got too many clues already.”

A voice sounded from the house, making the girls pause for a moment in silence.

“Elsie! Oh, Elsie!”

“It’s Hannah. I’ll have to go in a minute,” said the girl, carefully getting to her feet, not forgetting her new dress. “But first I must tell you about this conversation, because it’s important. It seems Corinne was invited to a very swell dance by one of those rich Mason boys, and she came over to ask Aunt Mattie for a new dress. Aunt Mattie laughed at her – that nasty cackle that she

has. And then she said, 'Certainly I'll give you a dress, Corinne. Go up to my closet and pick out anything you want. You'll find some old party dresses there!'

"Well, I could see that Corinne was furious, but she got up and went upstairs. And she did pick out an old lace gown – I thought maybe she was going to make it over. Perhaps she was just using it to hide the money, if she did steal it... Anyhow, she and her mother went home in a few minutes, carrying the dress with them."

Mary Louise closed her notebook in confusion. "You better run along now, Elsie, or you'll get punished," she advised.

"All right, I will," agreed the younger girl as she gathered up her things. "You know all the suspects now."

"All but the servants," replied Mary Louise. "And if I can, I'm going to interview Hannah immediately."

CHAPTER IV

Interviewing Hannah

Keeping under cover of the cedar trees, Mary Louise and Jane followed Elsie Grant, at a discreet distance, to the back of the house. Unlike the front entrance, there was a screen at the kitchen door, so the girls could hear Hannah's exclamation at the sight of the transformation in Elsie's appearance.

"My land!" she cried in amazement. "Where did you get them clothes, Elsie?"

Elsie laughed; the first normal, girlish laugh that Mary Louise and Jane had ever heard from her.

"Don't I look nice, Hannah?" she asked. "I haven't seen myself yet in a mirror, but I'm sure I do. I feel so different."

"You look swell, all right," agreed the servant. "But no credit to you! If that's what you done with your aunt's money –"

"Oh, no, Hannah!" protested Elsie. "You're wrong there. I didn't *buy* these things. They were given to me."

The two girls were standing at the screen door now, in full view, and Elsie beckoned for them to come inside. "These are my friends, Hannah. The girls who rescued Aunt Mattie's kitten – remember? And they brought me the clothes this morning."

The woman shook her head.

"It might be true, but nobody'd believe it. Folks don't give away nice things like that. I know that, for I've had a lot of 'hand-me-downs' in my life... Besides, they fit you too good."

"But we did bring them to Elsie," asserted Jane. "You can see that we're all about the same size. And we can prove it by our mothers. We'll bring them over –"

"You'll do nuthin' of the kind!" returned Hannah. "Miss Mattie don't want a lot of strangers pokin' into her house and her affairs. Now, you two run along! And, Elsie, hurry up and get out of that finery. Look at them dishes waitin' fer you in the sink!"

The girl nodded and disappeared up the back stairs, humming a little tune to herself as she went. Mary Louise stood still.

"We want to ask you a question or two, Hannah," she explained. "We want to help find the thief who stole Miss Grant's money."

The woman's nose shot up in the air, and a stubborn look came over her face.

"Is that so?" she asked defiantly. "And what business is that of your'n?"

"We're making it our business," replied Mary Louise patiently, "because we're fond of Elsie. We think it's terrible for her to be accused of something she didn't do."

"How do you know she didn't do it?"

"Why – we just know."

"That ain't no reason! Besides, what do you know about Elsie Grant? Seen her a couple of times and listened to her hard luck story and believe you know all about her!"

"But surely you don't believe Elsie stole that money?" demanded Jane. "If she had, she'd certainly have run away immediately. Wouldn't she?"

"Maybe – if she had the spirit. But, anyhow, it ain't none of your business, and Miss Mattie don't want it to get around. She don't want no scandal. Now – get along with you!"

"Please, Hannah!" begged Mary Louise. "We'll promise not to tell anybody about the robbery – not even our mothers. If you'd just answer a couple of questions –"

The woman eyed her suspiciously.

“You think maybe I done it?” she demanded. “Well, I didn’t! Miss Mattie knows how honest I am. William too – that’s me husband. We’ve been in this house ever since Miss Mattie was a girl, and the whole family knows they can trust us.”

“Oh, my goodness!” exclaimed Mary Louise. “I’m not suspecting *you*, Hannah! All I want is a little information.”

“You’re not going to the police and tell what you know? Or to some detective?”

“No. On my word of honor, no! Jane and I are going to try to be detectives ourselves, that’s all. For Elsie’s sake.”

The woman’s expression softened. After all, Mary Louise’s brown eyes had a winning way.

“All right. Only hurry up. I got a lot of work to do.”

Mary Louise smiled. “I’ll be quick,” she promised. “I just want to know whether you think there was any time during the day or evening – before Miss Grant went to bed – when a burglar could have entered the house without being seen or heard.”

Hannah stopped beating the cake which she had been mixing while this conversation was taking place and gave the matter her entire consideration.

“Let me think,” she muttered. “Not all mornin’, fer Miss Mattie was in her room herself. Not in the afternoon, neither, fer there was too many people around. All them relations come over, and Miss Mattie was right on the front parch – and I was here at the back... No, I don’t see how anybody could have got in without bein’ heard.”

“How about supper time?” questioned Mary Louise. “Couldn’t somebody have climbed in over the porch roof while the family were eating in the dining room?”

“It’s possible,” answered Hannah. “But it ain’t likely. Burglars ain’t usually as quiet as all that. No; I hold with Miss Mattie – that Elsie or maybe that good-fer-nuthin’ Harry took the money.”

Mary Louise sighed and turned towards the door.

“I’m sure it wasn’t Elsie,” she said again. “But maybe you’re right about Mr. Harry Grant. I hope we find out... By the way,” she added, “you couldn’t tell me just how much was taken, could you, Hannah?”

“No, I couldn’t. Miss Mattie didn’t say... Now, my advice to you girls is: fergit all about it! It ain’t none of your affairs, and Elsie ain’t a good companion fer you young ladies. She ain’t had no eddication, and probably, now she’s fifteen, her aunt’ll put her into service as a housemaid somewheres. And you won’t want to be associatin’ with no servant girl!”

Jane’s eyes blazed with indignation.

“It’s not fair!” she cried. “In a country like America, where education is free. Anybody who wants it has a right to it.”

“Then she can git it at night school while she’s workin’, if she sets her mind to it,” remarked Hannah complacently.

“Well, Hannah, we thank you very much for your help,” concluded Mary Louise as she opened the screen door. “And – you’ll see us again!”

Neither girl said anything further until they were outside the big hedge that surrounded Dark Cedars. Both of them felt baffled by the conflicting information they had gathered.

“I wish I could put the whole affair up to Daddy,” observed Mary Louise, as they descended the hill to the road. “He isn’t home now, but he soon will be.”

“Well, you can’t,” replied her chum. “It might get Elsie into trouble. And besides, we gave our promise.”

“It’ll be hard not to talk about it. Oh, dear, if we only knew where and how to begin!”

“I guess the first thing to do is to find out just what was stolen,” said Jane. “That would make it more definite, at least. We have heard that it was money, but we don’t know how much or what kind.”

“Yes, that’s true – and it would help considerably to know. For instance, if there was a lot of gold, as Elsie seems to think, it would be practically impossible for Harry Grant to have concealed it in his pockets, or for Corinne Pearson to have carried it back to Riverside without any car. But if, on the other hand, it was mostly paper money, it would be no trick at all for either one of them to have made away with it.”

The shrill screech of a loud horn attracted the girls’ attention at that moment. A familiar horn, whose sound could not be mistaken. It belonged on the roadster owned by Max Miller, Mary Louise’s special boy-friend.

In another second the bright green car flashed into view, came up to the girls, and stopped with a sudden jamming on of the brakes. Two hatless young men in flannel trousers and tennis shirts jumped out of the front seat.

“What ho! and hi! – and greetings!” cried Max in delight. “Where have you two been?”

“Taking a walk,” answered Mary Louise calmly.

“Taking a walk!” repeated Norman Wilder, the other young man, who was usually at Jane’s elbow at parties and sports affairs. “You mean – giving *us* the air!”

“Giving *you* the air? In what way?” Jane’s tone sounded severe, but her eyes were smiling into Norman’s, as if she were not at all sorry to see him.

“Forgot all about that tennis date we had, didn’t you?” demanded Max. “Is that a nice way to treat a couple of splendid fellows like ourselves?” He threw out his chest and pulled himself up to his full height, which was six feet one.

Mary Louise gasped and looked conscience-stricken.

“We did forget!” she exclaimed. “But we can play now just as well as not – at least, if you’ll take us home to get our shoes and rackets.”

“O.K.,” agreed Max. He turned to Norman. “Get into the rumble, old man. I crave to have Mary Louise beside me.”

The car started forward with its customary sudden leap, and Max settled back in his seat.

“We’ve got some great news for you, Mary Lou,” he announced immediately. “Big picnic on for this coming Saturday! Rounding up the whole crowd.”

Mary Louise was not impressed. Picnics seemed tame to her in comparison with the excitement of being a detective and hunting down thieves.

“Afraid I have an engagement,” she muttered. She and Jane had a special arrangement, by which every free hour of the day was pledged to the other, so that if either wanted to get out of an invitation, she could plead a previous date without actually telling a lie.

“The heck you have!” exclaimed Max, in disappointment. “You’ve got to break it!”

“Sez you?”

“Yeah! Sez I. And you’ll say so too, Mary Lou, when you hear more about this picnic. It’s going to be different. We’re driving across to Cooper’s woods – ”

“Oh, I’ve been there,” yawned Mary Louise. “There’s nothing special there. Looks spooky and deep, but it’s just an ordinary woods. Maybe a little wilder – ”

“Wait! You women never let a fellow talk. I’ve been trying to tell you something for five minutes, and here we are at your house, and you haven’t heard it yet.”

“I guess I shan’t die.”

With a light laugh she opened the car door and leaped out, at the exact moment that Jane and Norman jumped from the rumble, avoiding a collision by a fraction of an inch.

“Tell me about it when I come out again,” called Mary Louise to Max as she and Jane ran into their respective houses to change.

Freckles met Mary Louise at the door.

“Can I go with you, Sis?” he demanded.

“Yes, if you’re ready,” she agreed, making a dash for the stairs. Her mother, meeting her in the hall, tried to detain her.

She asked, “Did the girl like the clothes, dear?”

“Oh, yes, she loved them,” replied Mary Louise. “I’ll tell you more about it when I get back from tennis. The boys are pestering us to hurry.”

Three minutes later both she and Jane were back in the car again, with Freckles and Silky added to the passenger list.

Max immediately went on about the picnic, just as if he hadn’t been interrupted at all.

“Here’s the big news,” he said, as he stepped on the starter: “There are gypsies camping over in that meadow beside Cooper’s woods! So we’re all going to have our fortunes told. That’s why we’re having the picnic there. Now, won’t that be fun?”

“Yes, I guess so. But I really don’t see how Jane and I can come – ”

She was interrupted by a tap on her shoulder from the rumble seat.

“I think we can break that date, Mary Lou,” announced her chum, with a wink.

Mary Louise raised her eyebrows.

“Well, of course, if Jane thinks so – ” she said to Max.

“It’s as good as settled,” concluded Max, with a chuckle.

But Mary Louise was not convinced until she had a chance, after the game was over, to talk to Jane alone and to ask her why she wanted to go on the picnic when they had such important things to do.

“Because I had an inspiration,” replied Jane. “One of us can ask the gypsy to solve our crime for us! They do tell strange things, sometimes, you know – and they might lead us to the solution!”

CHAPTER V

The Stolen Treasure

"I'm not just tired," announced Jane Patterson, dropping into the hammock on Mary Louise's porch after the tennis was over. "I'm completely exhausted! I don't believe I can even move as far as our house – let alone walk anywhere."

"Oh, yes, you can," replied Mary Louise. "You'll feel lots better after you get a shower and some clean clothing. Four sets of tennis oughtn't to do you up. Many a time I've seen you good for six."

"I know, but they weren't so strenuous. Honestly, you and Max ran me ragged. I tell you, Mary Lou, I'm all in. And I couldn't walk up that hill to Miss Grant's house if it meant life or death to me."

"But think of poor Elsie! She may need us now."

"Oh, what could we do?"

"I don't know yet. But we have to go to find out just what was stolen, if for nothing else. She may know by this time."

"Then why not let the boys drive us up?" asked Jane, with a yawn.

"You know why. We can't let them into the secret: they'd tell everybody. And I bet, if the thing got out, Miss Grant would be so mad she'd have Elsie arrested then and there. No, there's nothing for us to do but walk... So please go get your shower."

Wearily Jane struggled to her feet.

"O.K. But I warn you, I may drop in my tracks, and then you'll have to carry me."

"I'll take a chance."

Mary Louise met another protest from her mother, who tried to insist that her daughter lie down for a little rest before supper. But here again persuasion won.

"Really, I'm not tired, Mother," she explained. "It's only that I'm hot and dirty. And we have something very important to do – I wish I could tell you all about it, but I can't now."

Her mother seemed satisfied. She had learned by this time that she could trust Mary Louise.

"All right, dear," she said. "Call Jane over, and you may all have some lemonade. Freckles said he had to have a cold drink."

The refreshments revived even Jane, and half an hour later the two girls were walking up the shady lane which led towards the Grant place. It wasn't so bad as Jane had expected; the road was so sheltered by trees that they did not mind the climb.

Once inside the hedge they peered eagerly in among the cedar trees for a glimpse of Elsie. But they did not see her anywhere.

"She's probably in the kitchen helping Hannah with the dinner," concluded Mary Louise. "Let's go around back."

Here they found her, sitting on the back step, shelling peas. She was wearing her old dress again, and the girls could see that she had been crying. But her eyes lighted up with pleasure at the sight of her two friends.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you girls!" she cried. "I wanted you so much, and I didn't know how to let you know. You see, I don't even have your address – though that wouldn't have done me much good, because I'm not allowed out of the gate, and I haven't any stamp to put on a letter. The only thing I could do was pray that you would come!"

"Well, here we are!" announced Mary Louise, with a significant look at Jane. "Now tell us why you specially wanted us."

"I wanted you to assure Aunt Mattie that you really did give me those dresses and things. Right away she said I must have bought them with her money. Though how she thinks I ever had a chance to get to any store is beyond me. She knows I never leave this place."

"How did she find out about them?" inquired Mary Louise. "You didn't show them to her, did you?"

"No, I didn't. She found them while she was searching through my things this morning, to see whether I had her money hidden anywhere."

"That's terrible!" exclaimed Jane. "Oh, how dreadful it must be to be all alone in the world, without anybody who trusts you!" Something of the same thought ran through Mary Louise's brain at the same time.

"Tell us just what has happened today, since we left," urged Mary Louise. "Has anybody been here?"

"No. Not a soul. But Aunt Mattie put me through a lot more questions at lunch, and afterward she gave my room a thorough search. When she found my new clothes, she was more sure than ever that I was the thief. She told me if I didn't confess everything right away she'd have to change her mind and call the police."

"Did she call them?" demanded Jane.

"Not yet. It's lucky for me that she hasn't a telephone. She said she guessed she'd send William after supper. So you can see how much it meant to me for you girls to come over now!"

Mary Louise nodded gravely, and Jane blushed at her reluctance in wanting to come. If Elsie had gone to jail, it would have been their fault for giving her the clothing!

"When can we see your aunt?" inquired Mary Louise.

"Right now. I'll go in and tell her. She's out on the front porch, I think."

Elsie handed her pan to Hannah and went through the kitchen to the front of the house. She was back again in a moment, telling the girls to come with her.

They found the old lady in her favorite rocking chair, with her knitting in her lap. But she was not working – just scowling at the world in general, and when Elsie came out on the dilapidated porch an expression of pain crossed her wrinkled brows. Whether it was real pain from that trouble in her side which she had mentioned, or whether it was only a miserly grief over the loss of her money, Mary Louise had no way of telling.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Grant," she said pleasantly. "How is your kitten today?"

A smile crept over the woman's face, making her much more pleasant to look at.

"She's fine," she replied. "Come here, Puffy, and speak to the kind girls who rescued you yesterday!"

The kitten ran over and jumped into Miss Grant's lap.

"She certainly is sweet," said Mary Louise. She cleared her throat: why couldn't the old lady help her out by asking her a question about the clothing?

But Elsie, nervously impatient, brought up the subject they were all waiting for.

"Tell Aunt Mattie about the dresses and the coat," she urged.

"Oh, yes," said Mary Louise hastily. "Your niece told us, Miss Grant, that she never gets to Riverside to buy any new clothes, so when I noticed we were all three about the same size, Jane and I asked our mothers whether we couldn't give her some of ours. They were willing, and so we brought them over this morning."

"Humph!" was the only comment Miss Grant made to this explanation. Mary Louise could not tell whether she believed her or not and whether she was pleased or angry.

"You didn't mind, did you, Miss Grant?" she inquired nervously.

"No, of course not. Elsie's mighty lucky... I only hope when she's working as somebody's maid that they'll be as nice to her. It helps out, when wages are small. For nobody wants to pay servants much these days."

A lump came into Mary Louise's throat at the thought of Elsie's future, which Miss Grant had just pictured for them. She longed to plead the girl's cause, but she knew it would do no good. Especially at the present time, with Miss Grant poorer than she had ever been in her life.

The old lady's eyes suddenly narrowed, and she looked sharply at Mary Louise.

"See here!" she said abruptly. "You two girls are the only people besides those living in this house who know about this robbery, and I don't want you to say a word of it to anybody! Understand? I don't want the police in on this until I am ready to tell them. Or my other relatives, either. I expect to get that money back myself!"

All three girls breathed a sigh of relief: it was evident that the police would not be summoned that evening. And both Mary Louise and Jane gave their promise of utmost secrecy.

"But we'd like to help discover the thief, if we can," added Mary Louise. "You don't mind if we try, do you, Miss Grant – if it's all on the quiet?"

"No, I don't mind. But I don't see what you can do." Miss Grant looked sharply at Elsie, as if she thought maybe her niece might confess to these girls while she stubbornly refused to tell her aunt anything. "Yes," she added, "you might succeed where I failed... Yes, I'll pay ten dollars' reward if you get my money back for me."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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