

Lavell Edith

The Mystery of the Secret Band



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CHAPTER I

A Real Detective

Mary Louise stamped the snow from her feet and removed her goloshes on the porch. Whistling the Christmas carol her class had just sung at school, she opened the door of her house and stepped inside.

Her mother was sitting in an armchair in the living room, sewing. She looked up with a smile at her daughter.

“How did your entertainment go?” she inquired.

“Swell!” replied Mary Louise enthusiastically. “The seniors were great. You should have seen Max!”

“I’d like to have seen Mary Louise Gay,” mused her mother. “But this snow – and your father had the car – ”

“Oh, I wasn’t so hot,” laughed Mary Louise modestly. “I’ll tell you who was the star of the afternoon – little Rosemary Dotts. She was so funny. She forgot all of her piece except the second line – ‘I’m going to have plum pudding!’ Well, she said that once, and then she stared around at the audience and repeated it. And still she couldn’t think of any more, so she said it again, and rubbed her fat little tummy as she repeated it. Well, she kept that up until I thought we’d just pass out laughing at her. Honestly, the tears were rolling down my cheeks. Her teacher had to come up to the platform and take her away.”

“That must have been funny,” agreed Mrs. Gay. “Well, I guess you’re thankful that it’s all over. How do you like this weather for your vacation?”

Mary Louise’s brown eyes sparkled with pleasure.

“It’s keen!” she exclaimed. She executed a little dance step in her joy. “Two whole weeks with nothing to do but coast and skate and dance!”

“And eat and sleep once in a while.”

“Oh yes, of course. Especially eat. What would Christmas be without eating?”

“What are you going to do now?” inquired her mother.

“Go coasting. Max and Norman are bringing the bobsled over in ten minutes, and Jane and I are supposed to be ready.”

“You better hurry, then. Get something to eat first. And – I forgot to tell you – your father wants to see you at half-past five this afternoon. Be sure to be home in time. He said he wanted to ‘consult’ you.”

“About somebody’s Christmas present? I thought all our Christmas shopping was finished last week.”

“It was. This hasn’t anything to do with presents, but it concerns your Christmas vacation, I believe,” replied Mrs. Gay.

“Oh, that sounds exciting!” exclaimed Mary Louise. Mr. Gay was a detective on the police force, and, knowing his daughter’s keen interest in the solution of crimes, he sometimes discussed his cases with her. Already she had shown marked ability in the same line herself by unraveling two baffling mysteries the preceding summer.

She ran out into the kitchen and poured out a glass of milk for herself and cut a piece of chocolate cake. This brisk weather certainly made her feel hungry, and the refreshments tasted good.

Then she dashed upstairs to change into her “snow suit,” a long-trousered costume that happened to be popular with the older girls at the moment. When she was all ready she opened her side window and whistled to her chum, Jane Patterson, who lived across the snow-covered lawn in the house next door.

“Yo, Jane!” she called.

Immediately a corresponding window flew up, and a youthful face appeared at the enclosure.

“Ready!” was the reply. “The boys there yet?”

“I think I hear them,” returned Mary Louise. “Come on over.”

The windows were slammed down simultaneously, and the two girls dashed downstairs to their porches. Before they had finished putting on their goloshes, the boys were at the Gays’ house.

“Left the sled at the gate,” announced Max Miller, Mary Louise’s especial boy-friend in Riverside.

“Do you think the snow’s packed hard enough?” demanded Jane.

“Hope so,” returned Max, with a grin. “The kids were sledding last night over near Cooper’s woods, so they ought to have made a track. Anyhow, we can have some fun. You’ve just got to be outdoors, weather like this.”

They made their way across the yard, chatting about the school entertainment, their dates for the next two weeks, and the fun which Christmas always brought them. When they reached the hill where the coasting was the best, near Riverside, they found many of their other high-school friends, and for two hours they alternately rode down the steep incline at a breathtaking speed and then trudged slowly back to the top. The sun was setting, and the afternoon was gone before they knew it.

“Oh, I must go home!” exclaimed Mary Louise, glancing at her wrist-watch in amazement.

“It’s only five o’clock,” returned Max complacently. “You don’t eat at your house before six-thirty, do you?”

“Come on, Mary Lou!” called Jane. “All aboard!”

Her chum shook her head.

“I can’t, Jane. I’ve got to be home by five-thirty.”

“Why the rush?” demanded Max.

“I have to see my father. He left word with Mother for me to be there.”

“Oh, you can see him at supper,” observed Jane lightly. “You don’t want to break up the party, do you?”

“No, of course not. No need for that at all. I’ll just run along by myself. You people take some more rides.”

“Nix,” answered Max loyally. “You’re not going home alone past these woods. If you have to go, Mary Lou, I’ll go too.”

“Oh, we might as well all go,” said Jane. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to be on time for a meal once in a while. Still, I don’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Max looked straight into Mary Louise’s eyes, a serious expression on his face.

“Mary Lou,” he asked, “you’re not doing any more detective stuff, are you? Surely last summer was enough!”

The girl laughed.

“Yes, it was plenty. Haven’t I been pretty good all fall? Never tried to listen in on any of Dad’s cases or hunt for clues!”

“I should think you’d be cured,” remarked Jane. “The whole town could burn down before I’d go through an experience like yours last summer, to discover a criminal. And if it hadn’t been for Max and Norman – ”

“I owe them my life!” said Mary Louise, half seriously and half smilingly. But in her heart she felt a deep sense of gratitude to her two youthful rescuers.

“Max could use it,” remarked Norman slyly.

“I’ll say I could,” muttered the other young man fervently. “But you really don’t think you’ll do dangerous things again, do you, Mary Lou?” he asked eagerly. “You’ll leave the solving of mysteries and crimes to your father hereafter, won’t you?”

Mary Louise’s eyes twinkled.

“I’m not making any rash promises. It sort of gets into the blood, Max. There’s no other thrill like it. I’d rather solve a mystery than eat... But I really don’t think there is anything for me to solve now. So you can put your mind at rest.”

“I’ll feel safer after this talk with your father is over,” returned the young man.

They came to a hill, and the subject was forgotten as they all piled on the sled and rode down together.

It was only a little past five-thirty when Mary Louise opened the door of her house. Her father was already there, beside the roaring logs in the fireplace, comfortably smoking.

Mr. Gay was a tall, impressive-looking man, with a determined jaw which announced to the world that he usually accomplished whatever he set out to do. He was proud of his daughter’s detective work that summer, and delighted to have her follow in his footsteps, though he wished he might keep her always from the more gruesome features in the pursuit of crimes and criminals.

“Hello, Mary Lou!” he called, gazing admiringly at her rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes. “Did you have a good time?”

“Wonderful!” she replied, hanging up her snowflaked coat. “I’m sorry to be late, Dad, but I had a hard time getting the others home.”

“That’s all right, Daughter. It won’t take long for me to tell you what I have in mind. It may take longer for you to decide upon your answer.”

Mary Louise sat down opposite him and waited expectantly, not saying another word.

“There is a small hotel for women in Philadelphia,” he began. “It is a pretty up-to-date place, though they try to keep their rates down, because it is endowed, and supposedly was started for girls in moderate circumstances. They have been having some trouble lately, valuables have been stolen – and they are practically sure that none of the servants is guilty. So they want a detective.”

“A detective?” repeated Mary Louise breathlessly. “You mean – ”

“Yes, I mean you, Mary Lou. The proposition was put up to me, and naturally I can’t handle it myself. I was to find them a woman detective for a week or so, and I suggested you. The woman in charge is delighted. She said a young girl like you could work better than anyone else because no one would suspect you of being a detective. And you could have a room near hers, under her protection, you see.

“Now the great question is: would you want to give up your holiday for this purpose? All those engagements you have – all the fun you have planned with your young friends? Christmas Day alone in a strange city? Would it be worth it to you?”

It did not take Mary Louise a moment to make her decision.

“I’d love it, Dad!” she cried ecstatically. “But I shouldn’t know how to go about it,” she added hesitatingly. “What to do – how to begin.”

“Mrs. Hilliard – she is the hotel manager – would give you all the facts,” explained her father. “I’d go with you and get you started. But you must consider carefully, Mary Lou. Think of your friends and your mother and your own pleasures. You can let me know tomorrow.”

Mary Louise nodded solemnly.

“I know, Daddy. But this seems like the chance of a lifetime. Because you see I mean to be a detective when I graduate from high school. This is something definite to go on – a real experience, which I can make use of when I apply for a job.”

“Yes, of course. And, by the way, there is a salary attached. You are to get twenty-five dollars a week, and an extra bonus if you get any of the lost valuables back.”

“Oh, Daddy!” The exclamation was almost a whisper, so awed was Mary Louise at the thought of actually earning money in the work that she loved best in all the world.

“When would I start?” she asked.

“I could take you with me to Philadelphia tomorrow morning. But that wouldn’t give you much time to write notes to your friends and pack your things. I suppose you’d have a lot of engagements to break.”

“Yes, but they don’t matter.”

“Don’t you want to think it over another day? I could come back and take you after the weekend.”

“No, Daddy, there’s not a question of doubt in my mind. I want to try it and start as soon as possible. Some of the crowd will be at Jane’s tonight, and I can tell them and phone to the others. I’ll pack my clothes before I go. Have you told Mother yet?”

“No, I haven’t. I thought there was no use stirring her up if you didn’t care to undertake it. But now we’ll have to break the news to her, if you’re sure.”

“You tell her, Daddy!” urged Mary Louise. “It will be easier.”

“All right, I will,” he promised.

A voice sounded from the kitchen. “Mary Louise, could you do an errand for me? You’ll just have time before supper.”

“Yes, Mother,” replied the girl, jumping to her feet. Then in a whisper to her father she added, “Tell her while I’m gone.”

Picking up her coat again, she ran out into the kitchen.

“I want you to take this basket of jellies and fruit cake over to old Mrs. Detweiler,” said Mrs. Gay. “I think it would be nice for them to have the things earlier this year, because they have so little at Christmas time.”

“Yes it would, Mother,” agreed the girl absently.

“Ask them whether they’ve heard anything from Margaret,” added Mrs. Gay. “Maybe she’s coming home for Christmas.”

“She wasn’t home all summer, was she, Mother?”

“No. And they didn’t hear from her, either. They’re terribly worried. I can’t see why Margaret Detweiler would do a thing like that, when her grandparents have been so good to her all her life. Why, Mrs. Detweiler wore the same dress for five years just so she could put Margaret through high school. And the girl always seemed so grateful and affectionate, too.”

“Maybe something happened to her,” suggested Mary Louise.

“Surely they would have heard if it had... Well, run along, dear. And come right back, because dinner is practically ready.”

Mary Louise pulled on her beret and her goloshes and went out into the snow again. It was entirely dark now, but the stars were shining, and the air was just cold enough to be invigorating. How good it was to be young and lively and happy! How sorry she felt for this poor old couple whom she was visiting, missing their granddaughter so dreadfully. But perhaps everything was all right. Maybe Margaret Detweiler was coming home for Christmas.

The small brick house where the old couple lived was only a few blocks from Mary Louise’s home. Half walking, half running, the girl covered the distance in less than ten minutes. She saw a low light in the living room and knocked at the door.

Both of the Detweilers were well over seventy, and they lived modestly but comfortably on a small pension which Mr. Detweiler received. It had been sufficient for their needs until the death of Margaret’s parents obliged them to take care of their only grandchild. But they had gladly sacrificed everything to give Margaret an education and a happy girlhood. She was older than Mary Louise by three or four years, so that the latter had never known her well. But she had always seemed like a sweet girl.

Mr. Detweiler opened the door and insisted that Mary Louise come inside. Both the old people loved Mrs. Gay and enjoyed the wonderful presents of her own making she sent every Christmas. They were profuse in their thanks.

“You must take off your things and get warm before you start out again,” urged Mrs. Detweiler.

“I’m really not a bit cold,” replied Mary Louise. “And Mother told me to come right back, as supper will be waiting. But she wanted me to ask you whether you had heard anything from Margaret.”

Tears came to the old lady’s eyes, and she shook her head.

“Not a thing since last Christmas,” she answered sadly. “You know she didn’t come home then, but she wrote to us and sent us a box of lovely presents. Expensive things, so I knew she must be doing well. She had a position in a Harrisburg store at first, you know, and then she told us she had gotten a fine job in a Philadelphia store. That was where the last letter came from – the last we ever received from her!”

“Didn’t you write to her?” asked Mary Louise.

“Yes, of course we did. But the letter was returned to us.”

“What store was she working in? I am going to Philadelphia for the Christmas holidays, and I might be able to find her.”

“I’m not sure. But the package was marked ‘Strawbridge and Clothier’ on the box. Did you ever hear of that store?”

“Yes, I did. And I’ll go there and make inquiries for you, Mrs. Detweiler.”

The old lady seized Mary Louise’s hand gratefully.

“Oh, if you could only find her, Mary Louise,” she exclaimed, “we’d be the happiest couple alive!”

“I’ll do the best I can,” promised the girl as she turned to the door.

She ran all the way home, eager to find out what her mother was going to say in reply to her father’s startling proposition about her Christmas vacation.

CHAPTER II

The Job

If Mrs. Gay did not like the idea of losing her daughter for two weeks, at least she kept the feeling to herself. She congratulated Mary Louise heartily on being chosen for a difficult piece of work.

“You’re a lucky girl!” cried Freckles, Mary Louise’s young brother. “Wish I was old enough to take the job!”

“You couldn’t take this one, Son,” his father reminded him, “because it’s a woman’s job. A man would be out of place in a woman’s hotel. But Mary Lou can go about unnoticed – people will think she’s just a guest.”

“Twenty-five bucks a week!” repeated Freckles. “What are you going to do with all that money, Sis?”

“I don’t know. Wait and see if I earn it. But if I do, we’ll all have something nice out of it.”

“I wasn’t asking for it!” protested the boy.

“No, I know you weren’t. But wait, and we’ll see.” She turned to her mother. “The Detweilers haven’t heard a thing from Margaret, Mother. Not since they received a box last Christmas from Philadelphia. But I promised to try to hunt her up for them.”

“Oh, I feel so sorry for them!” exclaimed Mrs. Gay. “I do hope that nothing has happened to Margaret.”

“So do I. But, anyhow, that will give me two jobs in Philadelphia.”

“Yes,” agreed her father, “and you can give that as your reason for being in Philadelphia – to the other guests at the hotel – if you care to.”

“That’s an idea,” said Mary Louise. “And maybe this is the more important of the two. I’m sure Margaret Detweiler is more precious to her grandparents than money and valuables to the women at that hotel.”

Though her mother accepted the situation calmly – owing to her father’s persuasion, no doubt – Mary Louise found her best friends less agreeable. Jane raised a howl of protest when she heard of the plan, and Max Miller looked so crushed and unhappy that for a moment or two Mary Louise even considered the idea of giving the whole thing up.

“I asked you two months ago to go to the senior dance during Christmas week,” he said. “And you promised me faithfully, Mary Lou!”

“I know, Max. But I couldn’t foresee anything like this coming up.”

“It spoils my whole vacation. It spoils my whole senior year, because this is the biggest affair we have... In fact, it spoils my whole life!”

“Now, Max, be reasonable! We’d have only a few dances together – you’re class president, don’t forget, and you’ll need to perform your social duties – and any other girl will do as your partner.”

“No other girl will do at all,” he protested stubbornly. “I won’t take anybody else. I’ll go stag. I’d stay home entirely if I weren’t president!”

“Well, maybe I’ll have the whole mystery solved in the week before Christmas, and get home in time for the dance,” remarked Mary Louise optimistically.

“More likely you’ll stay a week overtime,” muttered the young man. “Or maybe take on the job for good and never come back to Riverside at all.”

Mary Louise laughed.

“You certainly can dish out gloom when you want to, Max! You don’t suppose my parents would allow me to leave high school and take a regular job when I’m only sixteen, do you? I shan’t be seventeen till next spring, you know.”

But Max refused to be consoled, and Jane Patterson upheld him in his attitude. It was ridiculous, foolhardy, dumb, silly – every adjective she could think of – to go to a strange city and be all alone during Christmas week when you could be having a perfectly wonderful time in Riverside.

“You’ll get to be a dried-up old maid by the time you’re twenty-five,” she told her chum. “And what good will your career be to you then?”

“Lots of good,” returned Mary Louise complacently. “If I’m going to be an old maid, I’ll certainly want a career. But I don’t see why a career should interfere with marriage. I’ll have plenty of time to have it first.”

“All the men will be married by that time.”

“I’ll take a chance,” laughed Mary Louise.

Nothing anybody said could stop her. Mary Louise was more thrilled than she had ever been in her life, and she meant to put her whole soul into this job. Not only for her own sake, but for her father’s, as well. In her two previous experiences, personal inclination had made her unravel the mysteries, but now she felt that her father’s reputation was involved. If he recommended someone who was incompetent, a failure would reflect upon him. Oh, she must succeed – if it were humanly possible!

She left the party early that evening and went home to finish packing her suitcase. Immediately after breakfast the next morning she and her father took the train to Philadelphia.

The snow had ceased falling, but the country was still covered with white. The sun shone, and the landscape was lovely. Mary Louise had never been to Philadelphia before, and she watched everything eagerly as she approached the terminal. It was a big city, in comparison with Riverside or even Harrisburg. But not so big as New York, which she had visited several times.

“Where is the hotel, Daddy?” she asked as they left the train. “And what is its name?”

“It is up near the Parkway, and it is called ‘Stoddard House,’ because a wealthy woman by the name of Stoddard left some money in her will to build it and help keep it up. It is a very attractive place.”

“I wonder how many rooms it has,” said his daughter.

“Not so many as you might expect, because I understand the whole first floor is planned for the girls’ social uses. A card room, several small rooms for the girls to entertain callers, a library, a larger reception room for dancing, and the dining room are all part of the plan. But you’ll soon go all over the place and see for yourself.”

Mary Louise’s eyes sparkled.

“It is going to be thrilling, Dad!” she said.

“I hope you don’t run into any danger,” he remarked a little apprehensively. “The Philadelphia police will have your name on file – I saw to that – so the minute you call for help you can get it. And don’t hesitate to phone me long distance any time you need me. I’ll give you my list of addresses for the week. Don’t stop for expense – we can’t consider money in cases like this.”

Mary Louise nodded proudly. Never in her life had she been so happy. She walked along beside her father with her head high and her eyes shining. Her only misgiving, as they approached the hotel, was caused by her extreme youth. She hoped fervently that nobody would guess her age.

The hotel was an attractive place. Set back from the street by a small terrace, its trim brick walls and white-painted doorway and windows looked cozy and home-like. What a nice place to live, Mary Louise thought, if you weren’t lucky enough to have a home of your own!

How thankful she was that the place wasn’t gloomy and tumbledown like Dark Cedars, where she had made her first investigations as an amateur detective! Nobody would be telling her that ghosts haunted the walls of Stoddard House.

Her father opened the door for her, and she preceded him into the lobby. It was rather small, as lobbies go, with only one counter-desk, one lounge, and a couple of elevators, which you worked

yourself, at the side. But doors opened out from the lobby on all sides, revealing glimpses of numerous attractive reception rooms beyond.

Mr. Gay nodded to the girl at the desk and inquired for Mrs. Hilliard. In a couple of minutes a stout middle-aged woman appeared and smiled pleasantly at him. He introduced Mary Louise.

“Let’s get back into my office where we can talk undisturbed,” suggested Mrs. Hilliard, leading the way out of a door and along a hall to another smaller room. “Now sit down and I’ll tell you all about our difficulties.”

Mr. Gay and his daughter made themselves comfortable, and Mary Louise took out her notebook. The same notebook which she had made so valuable on two previous occasions.

“Last September was the first time we ever had any trouble at all,” began Mrs. Hilliard. “We lost a complete set of silverware – a dozen each of knives, forks, and spoons. But as these were only plated, the loss did not run into a great deal of money, so we didn’t make much fuss. I supposed that one of the maids stole them – a waitress who left the next day to be married.

“But I must have been mistaken, for more things disappeared after she left. A very unusual vase we had in the library, quite valuable too, for it had belonged in the Stoddard family. That made it look as if the thief were a connoisseur.

“The matron and I were watching the help carefully, and we felt sure that none of them was responsible. We hadn’t many guests at the time – there are only about a dozen who live here permanently. And there happened to be only a couple of transients.”

“What are ‘transients,’ Mrs. Hilliard?” asked Mary Louise, who was unfamiliar with the term.

“They’re the people who stop in for a day or two – or even a week – and don’t stay permanently,” explained the other.

“I should think they’d be the people who would be most likely to steal,” observed Mary Louise. “Because they could get away with it more easily.”

“I thought so too, at first. But when things kept right on being stolen, and the same transients never came back, it began to look to me as if one of the permanent lodgers were responsible... These two girls – I have forgotten their names – were here when the silverware and the vase disappeared, but they were not here in October when our watches were taken.”

“How many watches?” asked Mary Louise.

“Four – including my own!”

“And were there any transients here at that time?”

“Just one. A chorus girl named Mary Green. She stayed a couple of days and then said her show was closing up.”

The young detective wrote all these facts into her notebook and asked whether that was all.

“Not quite,” replied Mrs. Hilliard. “Last Friday Miss Violet Granger had a valuable oil painting stolen from her room, and a purse containing fifty dollars... So you see the situation has become pretty serious. Two of our regular guests have moved away because of it, and others have threatened to do so if anything else is stolen.”

She looked doubtfully at Mary Louise. “I’m sure I don’t know how you would go about an investigation like this,” she said. “But perhaps you do. Are you willing to try it?”

“Of course I am!” cried the girl eagerly. “It’s just the kind of thing I love. I’ve put down everything you said, Mrs. Hilliard, and I’m all ready to go to work now. I want to see the hotel and meet the guests as soon as possible.”

“I think Mary Louise had better keep secret the fact that she is spying on them,” put in Mr. Gay. “Just let them think that she is a young friend of yours, Mrs. Hilliard, visiting you for her Christmas vacation. As a matter of fact, she wants to look up a young girl from Riverside, whose whereabouts have been lost by her relations. But use your own discretion, Mrs. Hilliard.”

“I will, Mr. Gay,” agreed the woman. “And I will take good care of Mary Louise for you,” she added.

“That’s right. No late hours – or being out alone at night, Mary Lou. Don’t forget that this is a big city, and girls can easily get lost.”

“I’ll be careful, Daddy,” she promised.

Mr. Gay kissed his daughter good-bye, and Mary Louise and Mrs. Hilliard took the elevator to the second floor.

“There are ten rooms on each floor,” the manager explained. “The fourth floor belongs to the help, and I have my own little three-room apartment at the back.

“The third floor is reserved for our permanent guests. We have thirteen of them now – some two in a room, some alone.

“Our second floor is principally for transients, although sometimes guests prefer to live there permanently. One woman named Mrs. Macgregor, a wealthy widow, likes her room and bath so much that she has decided to keep it indefinitely. But most of the guests on the second floor come and go...

“And now, my dear, here is your room. I was going to take you into my own apartment at first, but I decided that would be too far away from everybody. Here you can mix more with the other guests. Of course, whenever you get lonely, you can come up with me. I have some nice books, if you care to read in the evening, and a radio. And perhaps you brought your knitting?”

“I forgot all about that,” replied Mary Louise. “But of course I do knit, and I can easily buy some wool and some needles.”

Mrs. Hilliard opened the door of the room that was to be Mary Louise’s and handed her the key.

“Now I’ll leave you to rest and unpack,” she said. “Perhaps you can come down early before dinner to meet some of the girls in the reception room. The younger ones usually play the radio and dance a little before dinner.”

“I’ll be there!” returned Mary Louise joyfully.

CHAPTER III

The Book Club

Mary Louise was a little awe-struck as she sat down alone in her new bedroom. The first time she had ever been away from home by herself, without any friends! Alone in a big city – working on a job! It seemed to her that she had suddenly grown up. She couldn't be the same care-free high-school girl who had gone coasting only yesterday afternoon with her friends.

A momentary sensation of depression took hold of her as she thought of Jane and the boys and the informal party she was missing that evening. It would be wonderful if Jane could be with her now, sharing her experiences as she always had, helping her to solve this mystery. But such a thing was impossible, of course. Jane wouldn't want to give up the Christmas gayety at Riverside, and besides, this was a real job. You couldn't bring your friends along on a real job as if it were only play.

Then she thought of that other Riverside girl alone in this big city. Margaret Detweiler, the girl who had so mysteriously disappeared. What could have happened to her? Suppose something like that should happen to Mary Louise!

"I'm positively getting morbid," she thought, jumping up from the chair on which she was seated and beginning to unpack her things. "I'd better get dressed and go down and meet some of the young people. I'll never accomplish anything by mooning about like this."

She unpacked her suitcase and hung her clothing in the closet. What a neat little room it was, with its pretty maple furniture and white ruffled curtains! So different from the common, ugly boarding-house bedroom! She was lucky to have such a nice place to live in. And Mrs. Hilliard was certainly a dear.

She found the shower bath down the hall, and feeling refreshed, slipped into a new wine-red crêpe, which her mother had bought her especially for the holidays. It was very becoming, and her eyes sparkled as she ran down the steps to the first floor. No use bothering with elevators when she had only one flight to go.

Mrs. Hilliard was at the desk, talking to the secretary, who was putting on her hat and coat.

"Oh, Mary Louise," she said, "I want you to come here and register and meet Miss Horton. This is Miss Gay," she explained, "a young friend of mine. She is visiting me for the holidays, and I forgot to have her register when she came in. But as she is using room 206, and not my apartment, I think she had better register."

Mary Louise nodded approvingly and wrote her name in the book.

"You have never come across a girl named Margaret Detweiler, have you, Miss Horton?" she asked. "I want to find her if I can while I am in Philadelphia."

The secretary shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. You might look through the book, though. I can't remember all the transients who have stopped here at Stoddard House."

"Naturally," agreed Mary Louise, and she turned the pages eagerly. But of course she did not find the name. Coincidences like that don't often happen, and besides, she reasoned, if she did find it, it wouldn't do her much good. That wouldn't tell her where Margaret was now.

"Come into the music room with me," said Mrs. Hilliard. "I see one of our newest arrivals here – a young girl who came only last week. She can't be more than nineteen or twenty. I think you'd like each other."

The girl, an attractive brunette with a gay manner and a little too much lipstick, was standing beside the radio, turning the dials. She looked up as Mrs. Hilliard and Mary Louise entered the room.

“Miss Brooks, I want you to meet a friend of mine – Miss Gay,” said Mrs. Hilliard. “Perhaps I’d better say ‘Pauline’ and ‘Mary Louise,’ because I know you young people don’t bother with last names.”

The girls smiled at each other, and the manager went towards the door.

“Would you be good enough to take care of Mary Louise – introduce her to any of the other guests who come in – Miss Brooks? I have to go back to the desk, for the secretary has gone home.”

“Certainly,” agreed Pauline immediately. She turned on some dance music. “What do you say we dance?” she asked Mary Louise. “And does everybody call you by both names?”

“Most people shorten it to ‘Mary Lou.’ Yes, I love to dance. That’s a dandy fox trot.”

The girls stepped off, Pauline talking gayly all the time, asking Mary Louise all sorts of questions: where she was from, how long she was going to stay, and so on. Mary Louise answered pleasantly, happy to have found a new friend. It wouldn’t be so bad without Jane, now that she had found a girl near her own age in Philadelphia, although she thought that Pauline was probably nearer twenty-five than twenty. Middle-aged people like Mrs. Hilliard weren’t so good at guessing young people’s ages, unless they had children of their own.

“I wish I could take Pauline into my confidence,” thought Mary Louise, “and have her help me the way Jane did. It would be so much nicer.” But she knew that would not be wise: her father and Mrs. Hilliard wanted her to keep her job a secret. However, she did make it a point to ask Pauline a few questions in return for those she had answered. Not that she was interested in Pauline as a suspect – the girl had only arrived last week, Mrs. Hilliard said – but because she really wanted a young companion while she was in this strange city.

“My parents are dead,” Pauline told her. “I have a rich aunt who usually stays at the Ritz when she’s in Philadelphia, but I don’t care enough about her to live with her. I sort of flit from place to place, and write fashion articles for the magazines whenever my income runs short. I have a pretty good time.”

“Have you ever stayed at Stoddard House before?” asked Mary Louise.

“No, I usually avoid women’s places like Y. W. C. A.’s and girls’ clubs,” was the reply. “But this sort of looked different to me, and I thought I’d give it a try. It’s pretty good, don’t you think?”

“I like it very much.”

By this time half-a-dozen people had entered the room, and two more couples were dancing. Suddenly Mary Louise felt bewildered. How could she possibly get to know so many people in the short space of two weeks and hope to find the thief?

The music changed, and the other dancers left the room. Apparently the dining-room doors were open.

“Gosh, I couldn’t introduce you to any of those women, Mary Lou,” said Pauline. “I don’t know any of their names.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” agreed the young detective. “I’m not feeling a bit lonely.”

“Let’s go eat – or are you supposed to wait for Mrs. Hilliard?”

“No, she told me not to. She’s such a busy person, she has to snatch her meals whenever she can. But I’ll be with her in the evenings.”

“Exciting life!” observed Pauline. “Maybe I can rake up a date for you later. I’ve got one myself for tonight, and I’ll sound Ben out. If he can get hold of another fellow for tomorrow night – ”

“Oh, I don’t think I better make any plans,” interrupted Mary Louise. “Though I do appreciate it a lot, Pauline. But you see I am Mrs. Hilliard’s guest. I have to consult her.”

“O.K.”

The two girls went into the dining room, an attractive place, with tables for two and four persons, and chose one of the smaller ones.

“We don’t want any of the old dames parking with us,” observed Pauline, glancing at a couple of elderly women just entering the room. “They cramp my style.”

“Rather,” laughed Mary Louise, though she secretly wished she might meet some of the “old dames,” as Pauline called them. Any one of them might be the thief.

Pauline Brooks was very different from the girls of Riverside – not nearly so refined, Mary Louise thought – but she was a gay companion and made witty remarks about everything. No doubt she was a clever writer.

Just as the girls finished their excellent dinner, Mrs. Hilliard came into the room. Pauline stood up.

“I’ll be running along, Mary Lou,” she said. “Now you have company I better leave you and get dressed.”

Mary Louise smiled. “Have a good time – and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Not too early!” warned Pauline. “I’ll probably be dancing till the small hours tonight.” She left the room, and Mrs. Hilliard sat down in her place.

“Will you stay here with me while I eat my dinner, Mary Louise?” she asked.

“Yes, indeed,” replied the girl.

“And did you enjoy your dinner?”

“It was wonderful! Just like a fine hotel.”

“I think Stoddard House is a fine hotel – on a small scale, of course... And now I have a suggestion to offer for tonight,” she continued as she ate her dinner. “Some of the regular guests here have a book club which meets once a week. I seldom go to the meetings – I never seem to have time – but I thought I could take you tonight, and in that way you would get acquainted with some of these people. Though I don’t suppose you’ll find the person we’re looking for among them. Thieves aren’t often book lovers.”

“But it will help me to get the people sorted out, and I am so at sea,” said Mary Louise. “I think it is a fine idea, Mrs. Hilliard. What time does the club meet?”

“Seven-thirty. But we’ll go to my room first, and you can copy down the names of all the guests, and their room numbers.”

“Oh, that’s great!” she cried, thankful to be getting at something definite to start with.

As soon as Mrs. Hilliard finished her dinner she and Mary Louise took the elevator to the fourth floor and walked down the long corridor to the back of the hotel. Here was Mrs. Hilliard’s own private apartment, a cozy suite of three rooms and a bath.

Mary Louise settled herself comfortably in an armchair and took out her notebook.

“Do you want the names of the maids?” asked Mrs. Hilliard as she picked up some papers from her desk.

“No, not yet,” replied the girl. “You believe in their innocence, so I think I’d rather study the guests first.”

Mrs. Hilliard handed her a paper, a methodical list of the bedrooms on the second and third floors, and Mary Louise copied it, just as it was, into her notebook:

"Second Floor:	
Room 200	Pauline Brooks.
202	May and Lucy Fletcher.
204	
206	Mary Louise Gay.
208	
201	Mrs. B. B. Macgregor.
203	
205	Anne Starling.
207	
209	

Third Floor:	
Room 300	Miss Henrietta Stoddard.
302	Mrs. Weinberger.
304	Miss Hortense Weinberger.
306	Dorothy Semple.
308	Miss Hastings.
301	Ruth and Evelyn Walder.
303	
305	Mrs. Moyer.
307	
309	Miss Violet Granger."

"You have quite a lot of empty rooms, haven't you, Mrs. Hilliard?" inquired Mary Louise, when she had finished her copy.

"Yes. It's always dull at this time of year. And we never are very full. After all, it's rather expensive, with wages on the scale they are now."

"How much do you charge?"

"Fourteen dollars a week. But that doesn't cover our expenses."

"No, I'm sure it doesn't. Everything is lovely – I didn't tell you how much I like my room – and the food couldn't be better."

"Well, we have an income from the Stoddard estate which helps to pay expenses," Mrs. Hilliard explained.

"There is a woman here named Miss Henrietta Stoddard," observed Mary Louise, looking at her list. "Is she any relation of the founder?"

"Yes, she is her niece. Old Mrs. Stoddard provided in her will that Henrietta should be allowed to live here free all her life, as long as she was single or a widow."

"How old a woman is she?"

"About forty-five now, I should judge. And very bitter. She expected to inherit her aunt's money, and she even tried to break the will. She hasn't any money – I think she does odd jobs like taking care of children and doing hand sewing for her spending money and her clothing."

"Hm!" remarked Mary Louise.

Mrs. Hilliard smiled. "I know what you are thinking – and I kind of think so myself. That Miss Stoddard is the thief. But you'd never believe it to look at her. She's prim and proper and austere."

"You never can tell," said Mary Louise.

"No, that's true... Well, you'll have a good chance to judge for yourself tonight. Miss Stoddard is the one who is in charge of the book club. There is a library fund in the endowment, and these women decide upon what to buy."

"Tell me which of these guests belong to the club," urged the girl.

"All the regular residents belong, except Miss Violet Granger. She is an artist – she draws for magazines and for an advertising firm – and she always keeps apart from the other guests. She is the one from whom the oil painting and the fifty dollars were stolen."

Mary Louise nodded and put a check beside Miss Granger's name.

"Now," she said, "I ought to check the names of all the other people who have had valuables stolen. Who else was there?"

"Well, as I told you, the hotel itself lost the silverware and the Chinese vase. Then there were four watches stolen – my own, Mrs. Weinberger's, and the two Walder girls... By the way, they are lovely girls, Mary Louise – they've lived here a couple of years, and I know their families – I'm sure you're going to like them..."

“And the final – at least, I hope it’s the final robbery – was the painting and the money from Miss Granger’s room. But I have a feeling that isn’t the end, and the guests are all nervous too. It’s hurting our business – and – making my own job seem uncertain.”

Mary Louise closed her notebook thoughtfully and sighed.

“I’ll do the best I can, Mrs. Hilliard,” she promised solemnly.

Ten minutes later they took the elevator to the first floor, and Mrs. Hilliard led the way into the library. It was a cheerful room with an open fireplace, a number of comfortable chairs and built-in bookcases around the walls.

Miss Henrietta Stoddard, a plain-looking woman with spectacles, sat at the table on one side, with a pile of books and a notebook beside her. She was talking to an elderly woman and a younger one. Mrs. Hilliard introduced Mary Louise.

“Mrs. Weinberger and Miss Weinberger,” she said, and Mary Louise immediately placed them as the mother and daughter who lived in rooms 302 and 304.

The daughter was complaining to Miss Stoddard.

“I don’t see why we can’t have some more exciting books,” she said. “Something a little more youthful.”

Miss Stoddard drew the corners of her severe mouth together.

“We buy just what the club votes for,” she replied icily.

“Because the younger members never come to put in their votes!” returned the younger woman petulantly. “I asked the Walder girls to come to the meeting tonight, but of course they had dates.” She turned eagerly to Mary Louise. “You can put in a vote, Miss Gay!” she exclaimed. “Will you suggest something youthful?”

Mary Louise smiled. “I shan’t be here long enough to belong to the club,” she answered. “I’m just visiting Mrs. Hilliard for the vacation.”

“You’re a schoolgirl?”

“Yes. A junior at Riverside High School.”

“Never heard of it,” returned Miss Weinberger, abruptly and scornfully.

“I’m afraid it’s not famous – like Yale or Harvard,” remarked Mary Louise, with a sly smile.

Miss Weinberger went on talking to the others in her complaining, whining tone. Mary Louise disliked her intensely, but she didn’t believe she would ever steal anything.

“What time is it?” demanded Miss Stoddard sharply.

“I don’t know. My watch was stolen, you know,” replied Mrs. Weinberger, looking accusingly at Mrs. Hilliard, as if it were her fault.

“You never heard anything about those watches, did you?” inquired Miss Stoddard.

“No,” replied the manager, keeping her eyes away from Mary Louise. “There was a night watchman that night, but he said he didn’t see any burglar or hear any disturbance.”

“The night watchman couldn’t watch four watches,” Mary Louise remarked facetiously.

“Yes, there were four stolen,” agreed Mrs. Weinberger. “I suppose Mrs. Hilliard told you?”

Mary Louise flushed: she must be more careful in the future.

“I think that bleached-blond chorus girl took them,” observed Miss Weinberger. “She was here then and left the next day. That name of hers was probably assumed. ‘Mary Green!’ Too common!”

Mary Louise wanted to write this in her notebook, but caution bade her wait till the meeting was over.

The door opened, and an old lady came in, leaning on her cane. She was past eighty, but very bright and cheerful, with beautiful gray hair and a charming smile.

Mrs. Hilliard sprang up and offered her the best chair in the room and introduced Mary Louise to her. Her name was Mrs. Moyer.

Now the meeting began: the guests returned the books they had borrowed and discussed new ones to purchase. At half-past nine a maid brought in tea and cakes, and the evening ended sociably.

Thankful to slip off alone to write her observations in her notebook, Mary Louise went to her own room.

CHAPTER IV

A Midnight Visitor

Mary Louise put on her kimono and stretched herself out comfortably on her pretty bed, with her notebook in her hands. What a lovely room it was! What a charming little bedside table, with its silk-shaded lamp, its dainty ice-water jug – and its telephone. For that convenience especially she was thankful: she'd far rather have a telephone than a radio. Little did she realize how soon she was to find that instrument so useful!

She opened her notebook at the page upon which she had written the guests' names, and counted them. Fourteen people besides herself, and of that number she had met only five. Rather a slow beginning!

"If I only had Jane here, she'd know everybody in the place by now," she thought wistfully. "Jane is clever, but she does jump at conclusions. Maybe I'm better off alone."

She glanced at the notebook again and resolved not to bother yet with the names of people she hadn't met. She'd concentrate instead upon the five that she did know. She began at the beginning with the girl with whom she had danced and eaten supper.

"Pauline Brooks couldn't be guilty," she decided. "Because she came to Stoddard House only a few days ago for the first time. After the first two robberies had taken place. So she's out..."

"Now I'm not so sure about Miss Henrietta Stoddard. She might even believe she had a right to steal things, because she was cheated out of her inheritance. Yes – I'll watch Miss Stoddard carefully.

"Next those two Weinberger women. Hardly possible, when the mother lost her own watch. Of course, thieves sometimes pretend to have things stolen, just to establish their innocence, the same way murderers often wound themselves – for alibis. But, just the same, I believe those women are honest. They're pretty well off, too, to judge from their clothes and their jewelry."

She came to the last person she had met – the old lady who had come to the book-club meeting with a cane – Mrs. Moyer. Mary Louise's face broke into a smile. Nobody in her right senses could suspect a person like that!

That was all. Except the secretary, Miss Horton, whom she had met at the desk.

Mary Louise closed the notebook and put it on the table beside her. That was enough for tonight; now she'd try to get some sleep. She put out the light and opened the window. Snow still covered everything except the streets and the sidewalks, and the moon shone over the roofs of the buildings beyond. Right below her side window was a fire escape, which made her feel somehow safe and secure.

It was not nearly so quiet here as in Riverside; automobile horns honked now and again, and the sound of trolleys from the street in front was plainly heard. But Mary Louise was not worried about the noise, and a few minutes after she was in bed she was sound asleep.

How many hours later she was awakened by a dream about Margaret Detweiler, Mary Louise had no way of knowing, for she had left her watch on the bureau. She thought she had found Margaret alone in an empty house, cold and starving to death, and she was trying to remember just what principles of first aid to apply, when she awoke and found it was only a dream.

But something, she realized instantly, had awakened her. Something – somebody – was in her room!

Her first sensation was one of terror. A ghost – no, a gypsy, perhaps – who would clap a gag over her mouth and bind her hand and foot! But before she uttered a sound she remembered where she was and why she was there. A delirious feeling of triumph stole over her, making her believe that success was at hand for her in her sleuthing. If this person were really the Stoddard House sneak

thief, Mary Louise could lie still and watch her, for the room was light enough from the moon and the street lamps to show up the intruder quite plainly.

Ever so cautiously, without turning her head or making any kind of sound, she rolled her eyes toward her bureau, where she could sense the intruder to be. Her reward was immediate: she saw a short person in dark clothing standing there, carefully picking up some object.

“My purse – and my watch!” Mary Louise thought grimly. The little engraved watch her father had given her last Christmas.

The figure turned around and silently crept towards the door. But sudden, swift dismay took possession of Mary Louise, making her tremble with fear and disappointment. The thief was not a woman, whom she could hope to identify as a guest at Stoddard House. He was a man!

He turned the key in the lock so quietly that only the tiniest click could be heard. Then, just as softly, he closed the door again and vanished into the hall.

Mary Louise gasped audibly with both relief and disappointment. Relief that he was gone, disappointment that he was a common, ordinary burglar whom she could not hope to catch.

Nevertheless, she meant to do what she could, so she turned on her light and reached for the telephone beside her bed. In another moment she had told her story to the police, and, so perfect were their radio signals, in less than five minutes one of their cars stood at the door of the hotel.

Meanwhile, Mary Louise had hastily thrown on a few clothes and run down the stairs to warn the night watchman.

The halls were lighted all night, as well as the lobby of the hotel; she did not see how the burglar could escape without attracting the watchman’s notice.

She found him quietly smoking a pipe on the doorstep. He said he had seen nobody.

“I think the burglar came in through the window from the fire escape,” Mary Louise said.

“Don’t see how he could,” returned the man. “I’ve been around there at the side for the last half hour. Nobody came along that alley.”

Baffled, Mary Louise summoned Mrs. Hilliard on the house phone, and by the time she stepped out of the elevator the two policemen had arrived.

“The thief must be hiding somewhere in the building,” concluded Mary Louise. “Waiting for a chance to slip away.”

“We’ll have to make a search,” announced Mrs. Hilliard. “You guard the doorway and the stairway, Mike,” she said to the watchman, “and one of you officers go around the first floor and see whether the windows are all securely locked – in case the burglar escaped through one of them. Then the other officer can come with Miss Gay and me while we search the floors above.”

Immediately the plan was put into effect, and the searchers began on the second floor, looking first in the corridors and closets and empty rooms, then knocking at the doors of the guests’ rooms.

Pauline Brooks’ door was the first they went to, and here a light shone under the cracks.

“Sorry to disturb you, Miss Brooks,” called Mrs. Hilliard, “but a sneak thief has gotten into the hotel, and we want to find him. May we come in?”

“Just a minute,” replied the girl. “Till I put on my bath robe. I was out late – at a dance, and I’m just undressing now.”

“What time is it, anyway?” asked Mary Louise. “You see, my watch was stolen.”

“It’s only a few minutes after one,” replied the policeman.

A moment later Pauline unlocked the door, and the three people entered. The room was very untidy: clothing had been flung about everywhere, and two open suitcases occupied the chairs.

“Look in the closet,” advised Mrs. Hilliard.

“There’s nobody there,” answered Pauline. “I’ve just been in it. But you might look under the bed. That’s where men always hide in the bedroom farces.”

“You wouldn’t think this was a ‘bedroom farce’ if you’d just lost your watch and your purse,” remarked Mary Louise sharply.

“I’m sorry, Mary Lou,” apologized Pauline. “You see, I didn’t know that *you* were the victim.”

“We’ve got to get along,” interrupted the officer. “There’s nobody here – I’m sure of that.”

They passed on to the other rooms, waking up the guests when it was necessary, apologizing, explaining – and finding nobody. In only two of the rooms besides Pauline’s had they found lights burning. Miss Granger, the artist, was still working on some drawings she was making for a magazine, and Miss Henrietta Stoddard, who explained that she was “such a poor sleeper,” was reading a book. But both these women said that they had heard no disturbance.

When the search was completed and the group returned to the first floor of the hotel, the watchman and the officer had nothing to report. The windows on the ground floor were all securely locked, the latter announced, and the former said that no one had escaped by the front door or the fire escape.

“It’s either an inside job or your young friend dreamed it,” one of the policemen said to Mrs. Hilliard.

“It couldn’t be an inside job,” returned the manager. “For there isn’t any man who lives in the hotel.”

“And I didn’t dream it,” protested Mary Louise. “Because my watch and my purse are gone, and my door was unlocked. I locked it myself when I went to bed last night.”

“Well, we’ll keep an eye on the building all night,” promised the policeman as he opened the door. “Let us know if you have any more trouble.”

When the men had gone, Mrs. Hilliard persuaded Mary Louise to come to her apartment for the rest of the night. She had a couch-bed in her sitting room which she often used for her own guests.

Mary Louise agreed, but it was a long while before she fell asleep again. She kept listening for sounds, imagining she heard footsteps in the hall, or windows opening somewhere in the building. But at last she dozed off, and slept until Mrs. Hilliard’s alarm awakened her the next morning.

“You had better go down to the dining room for your breakfast, Mary Louise,” said the manager. “I just have orange juice and coffee, up here – if I go into the dining room I am tempted to overeat, and I put on weight.”

“All right,” agreed Mary Louise. “I want to go to my room for fresh clothing anyway – I just grabbed these things last night in a hurry... Mrs. Hilliard, what do you think of last night’s occurrence?”

“I don’t know what to think. I was convinced that all our robberies before this were inside jobs, because our watchman was so careful. But now I don’t know. Of course, this may be something entirely different. We’ll see if anything happens tonight. You’re sure it was a man, Mary Louise?”

“Positive. He wore a cap pulled down over his head, and a mask over his eyes. He had on a dark suit – sneakers, too, for I couldn’t hear him walk.”

“Did he have a gun?”

“I don’t know, because I pretended to be asleep, so he didn’t need to defend himself. He got out so quickly. Where could he have vanished to?”

Mrs. Hilliard shook her head with a sigh.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” she said.

“Of course, he might have had an accomplice,” mused Mary Louise. “Some woman may have let him out her window to the fire escape. Still, the watchman was keeping his eye on that...” Mary Louise’s tone became dreary. “I guess I’m not much use to you, Mrs. Hilliard. I don’t think I ought to take the salary.”

“You mean you want to go home, Mary Louise?”

“Oh no! I wouldn’t leave now for anything. But I mean I probably shan’t be any help in finding a thief like that. So I oughtn’t to accept any pay.”

“Don’t worry about that,” returned Mrs. Hilliard, patting Mary Louise’s arm affectionately. “You just do the best you can. Nobody can do more. I’d really like it proved that none of our guests is the thief. I’d much rather find out that it was a common burglar.”

Reassured, Mary Louise went to her own room and dressed. By the time she reached the dining room the guests who held positions had already eaten their breakfasts and gone, and the others, who had nothing to do all day, had not yet put in an appearance. It was only a little after eight, but the dining room was deserted.

“I wish I had somebody to talk to,” she thought sadly as she seated herself at a little table by a window. The sunlight streamed in through the dainty ruffled curtains, there were rosebuds in the center of her table, and a menu from which she could order anything she wanted, but Mary Louise was not happy. She felt baffled and lonely.

She ordered grapefruit first, and just as she finished it, Mrs. Weinberger came into the room. She made her way straight to Mary Louise’s table.

“May I sit with you, Miss Gay?” she asked. “My daughter won’t eat breakfast for fear of gaining a pound, and it’s so lonesome eating all by yourself.”

Mary Louise smiled cordially.

“I think so too, Mrs. Weinberger,” she replied. “I’ll be delighted to have you.”

“Do you feel nervous after last night? It must have been terrible to be right in the room when the burglar got in. I was away when my watch was stolen.”

“Tell me about it, Mrs. Weinberger,” urged Mary Louise.

“I was over in Mrs. Moyer’s room,” the woman explained, after she had given her order to the waitress, “and my daughter went out of my room and couldn’t remember whether she locked the door or not. Anyway, I discovered that my watch was gone when I was dressing for dinner.” She sighed. “It was very valuable – a present from my late husband.”

Mary Louise had an inspiration.

“I believe I’ll visit some pawnshops today, to ask about mine,” she said, “and I can inquire about yours at the same time, if you want me to, Mrs. Weinberger.”

“Yes, indeed! But I am afraid it is too late now. Mine was an old-fashioned watch – we used to wear them pinned on our dresses, with a brooch. Mine had seven diamonds on it in front, and my initials ‘E. W.’ in tiny pearls on the back.”

“Did you advertise?”

“Yes, of course. But nothing came of it. My daughter thinks that transient guest – a chorus girl named Mary Green – stole it. We tried to trace her, but we couldn’t find her name with any of the theatrical companies in town at the time.”

“She never came back here to Stoddard House?”

“Oh no.”

“And were the other watches stolen the same day?”

“Yes. Mrs. Hilliard’s was taken during the supper hour, but she had laid it down on the desk, so that was her own carelessness. But the Walder girls had theirs taken while they were asleep – just as yours was.”

“What were theirs like?”

“Plain gold wrist-watches, with their initials – R. W. and E. W. Their names are Ruth and Evelyn.”

“Well, I’ll do what I can,” concluded Mary Louise. “And now let’s talk about something pleasant.”

So for the rest of the meal she and Mrs. Weinberger discussed books and the current moving pictures.

CHAPTER V

Another Robbery

Mary Louise had three separate plans in view for the morning. First, she would visit as many pawnshops as possible in the vicinity and ask to see their displays of watches. Second, she meant to go to Strawbridge and Clothier's department store and find out whether Margaret Detweiler had worked there, and why and when she had left. And third, she wanted to find some pretext to call on Miss Henrietta Stoddard in her own room and observe her closely.

As she walked out of the dining room she met Mrs. Hilliard going towards her little office on the first floor.

"Could I see you for a moment, Mrs. Hilliard?" she inquired.

"Certainly, my dear. Come into the office with me."

Mary Louise followed her into the room, but she did not sit down. She knew how busy the hotel manager would be on Saturday morning.

"I have decided to visit some pawnshops, Mrs. Hilliard," she said. "I have my own watch to identify, and I got a pretty good description of Mrs. Weinberger's today. But I want you to tell me a little more about the other things that were stolen."

"The silverware had an ivy-leaf pattern, and the initials 'S. H.' – for Stoddard House – engraved on it," replied the woman. "The vase was an old Chinese one, of an odd size, with decorations in that peculiar red they so often use. I believe I can draw it better than I can describe it. But I feel sure you'd never find it in a pawnshop. Whoever stole that sold it to an antique dealer."

However, she picked up her pencil and roughly sketched the vase for Mary Louise, giving her a good idea of its appearance. At the same time she described the painting which had been stolen from Miss Granger's room – an original by the American artist Whistler.

Mary Louise wrote all these facts in her notebook and kept the drawing.

"That's fine, Mrs. Hilliard," she said as she opened the door. "I'm going out now, and I'll be back for lunch."

"Good-bye and good luck!"

Mary Louise went to her room, and from the telephone book beside her bed she listed the addresses of all the pawnshops in the neighborhood. This was going to be fun, she thought – at least, if she didn't lose her nerve.

She hesitated for a few minutes outside of the first shop she came to. The iron bars guarding the window, the three balls in the doorway, seemed rather forbidding. For Mary Louise had never been inside a pawnshop.

"I can say I want to buy a watch," she thought. "I do, too – I certainly need one. But I'm afraid I'd rather have a brand-new Ingersoll than a gold one that has belonged to somebody else. Still, I don't have to tell the shopkeeper that."

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