ENNY PARKER MYS

The CLOCK strikes THIRTEEN

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100–160

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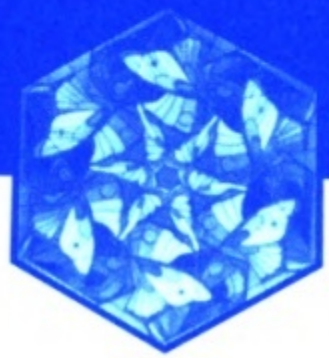

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to mamma from Phyllis

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PENNY HUDDLED AGAINST THE WALL WATCHING FEARFULLY.

"The Clock Strikes Thirteen" **(See Page 191)**

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The Clock Strikes Thirteen

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES
TRAILER STORIES FOR GIRLS

Illustrated

CUPPLES AND LEON COMPANY
Publishers
NEW YORK

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PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

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TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL
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THE SECRET PACT
THE CLOCK STRIKES THIRTEEN
THE WISHING WELL

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The Clock Strikes Thirteen

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CHAPTER

1

SANDWICHES FOR TWO

JAUNTILY, PENNY PARKER walked through the dimly lighted newsroom of the *Riverview Star*, her rubber heels making no sound on the bare, freshly scrubbed floor. Desks were deserted, for the final night edition of the paper had gone to press half an hour earlier, and only the cleaning women were at work. One of the women arrested a long sweep of her mop just in time to avoid splashing the girl with water.

"I sorry," she apologized in her best broken English. "I no look for someone to come so very late."

"Oh, curfew never rings for me," Penny laughed, side stepping a puddle of water. "I'm likely to be abroad at any hour."

At the far end of the long room a light glowed behind a frosted glass door marked: "Anthony Parker—Editor." There the girl paused, and seeing her father's grotesque shadow, opened the door a tiny crack, to rumble in a deep voice:

"Hands up! I have you covered!"

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Taken by surprise, Mr. Parker swung quickly around, his swivel chair squeaking a loud protest.

"Penny, I wish you wouldn't do that!" he exclaimed. "You know it always makes me jump."

"Sorry, Dad," Penny grinned, slumping into a leather chair beside her father's desk. "A girl has to have some amusement, you know."

"Didn't three hours at the moving picture theatre satisfy you?"

"Oh, the show was worse than awful. By the way, here's something for you."

Removing a sealed yellow envelope from her purse, Penny flipped it carelessly across the desk.

"I met a Western Union boy downstairs," she explained. "He was looking for you. I paid for the message and saved him a trip upstairs. Two dollars and ten cents, if you don't mind."

Absently Mr. Parker took two crisp dollar bills from his pocket and reached for the telegram.

"Don't forget the dime," Penny reminded him. "It may seem a trifle to you, but not to a girl who has to live on a weekly allowance."

For lack of change, the editor tossed over a quarter, which his daughter pocketed with deep satisfaction. Ripping open the envelope, he scanned the telegram, but as he read, his face darkened.

"Why, Dad, what's wrong?" Penny asked in surprise.

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Mr. Parker crumpled the sheet into a round ball and hurled it toward the waste paper basket.

"Your aim gets worse every day," Penny chuckled, stooping to retrieve the paper. Smoothing the corrugations, she read aloud:

"YOUR EDITORIAL 'FREEDOM OF THE PRESS' IN THURSDAY'S STAR THOROUGHLY DISGUSTED THIS READER. WHAT YOUR CHEAP PAPER NEEDS IS A LITTLE LESS FREEDOM AND MORE DECENCY. IF OUR FOREFATHERS COULD HAVE FORESEEN THE YELLOW PRESS OF TODAY THEY WOULD HAVE REGULATED IT, NOT MADE IT FREE. WHY DON'T YOU TAKE THAT AMERICAN FLAG OFF YOUR MASTHEAD AND SUBSTITUTE A CASH REGISTER? FLY YOUR TRUE COLORS AND SOFT-PEDAL THE PARKER BRAND OF HYPOCRISY!"

"Stop it—don't read another line!" the editor commanded before Penny had half finished.

"Why, Dad, you poor old wounded lion!" she chided, blue eyes dancing with mischief. "I thought you prided yourself that uncomplimentary opinions never disturbed you. Can't you take it any more?"

"I don't mind a few insults," Mr. Parker snapped, "but paying for them is another matter."

"That's so, this little gem of literature did set you back two dollars and ten cents. Lucky I collected before you opened the telegram."

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Mr. Parker slammed his desk shut with a force which rattled the office windows.

"This same crack-pot who signs himself 'Disgusted Reader' or 'Ben Bowman,' or whatever name suits his fancy, has sent me six telegrams in the past month! I'm getting fed up!"

"All of the messages collect?"

"Every one. The nit-wit has criticised everything from the *Star*'s comic strips to the advertising columns. I've had enough of it!"

"Then why not do something about it?" Penny asked soothingly. "Refuse the telegrams."

"It's not that easy," the editor growled. "Each day the *Star* receives a large number of 'collect' messages, hot news tips from out-of-town correspondents and from reporters who try to sell free lance stories. We're glad to pay for these telegrams. This fellow who keeps bombarding us is just smart enough to use different names and send his wires from various places. Sometimes he addresses the telegrams to me, and then perhaps to City Editor DeWitt or one of the other staff members."

"In that case, I'm afraid you're out of luck," Penny said teasingly. "How about drowning your troubles in a little sleep?"

"It is late," Mr. Parker admitted, glancing at his watch. "Almost midnight. Time we're starting home."

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Reaching for his hat, Mr. Parker switched off the light, locked the door, and followed Penny down the stairway to the street. At the parking lot opposite the *Star* building, he tramped about restlessly while waiting for an attendant to bring the car.

"I'll drive," Penny said, sliding behind the steering wheel. "In your present mood you might inadvertently pick off a few pedestrians!"

"It makes my blood boil," Mr. Parker muttered, his thoughts reverting to the telegram. "Call my paper yellow, eh? And that crack about the cash register!"

"Oh, everyone knows the *Star* is the best paper in the state," Penny said, trying to coax him into a better mood. "You're a good editor too, and a pretty fair father."

"Thanks," Mr. Parker responded with a mock bow. "Since we're passing out compliments, you're not so bad yourself."

Suddenly relaxing, he reached out to touch Penny's hand in a rare expression of affection. Tall and lean, a newspaper man with a reputation for courage and fight, he had only two interests in life—his paper and his daughter. Penny's mother had been dead many years, but at times he saw his wife again in the girl's sparkling blue eyes, golden hair, and especially in the way she smiled.

"Hungry, Dad?" Penny asked unexpectedly, intruding upon his thoughts. "I know a dandy new ham-

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burger place not far from here. Wonderful coffee too."

"Well, all right," Mr. Parker consented. "It's pretty late though. The big clock's striking midnight."

As the car halted for a traffic light, they both listened to the musical chimes which preceded the regularly spaced strokes of the giant clock. Penny turned her head to gaze at the Hubell Memorial Tower, a grim stone building which rose to the height of seventy-five feet. Erected ten years before as a monument to one of Riverview's wealthy citizens, its chimes could be heard for nearly a mile on a still night. On one side, its high, narrow windows overlooked the city, while on the other, the cultivated lands of truck farmers.

"How strange!" Penny murmured as the last stroke of the clock died away.

"What is strange?" Mr. Parker asked gruffly.

"Why, that clock struck thirteen times instead of twelve!"

"Bunk and bosh!"

"Oh, but it did!" Penny earnestly insisted. "I counted each stroke distinctly."

"And one of them twice," scoffed her father. "Or are you spoofing your old Dad?"

"Oh, I'm not," Penny maintained. As the car moved ahead, she craned her neck to stare up at the

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stone tower. "I know I counted thirteen. Why, Dad, there's a green light burning in one of the windows! I never saw that before. What can it mean?"

"It means we'll have a wreck unless you watch the road!" Mr. Parker cried, giving the steering wheel a quick turn. "Where are you taking me anyhow?"

"Out to Toni's." Reluctantly Penny centered her full attention upon the highway. "It's only a mile into the country."

"We won't be home before one o'clock," Mr. Parker complained. "But since we're this far, I suppose we may as well keep on."

"Dad, about that light," Penny said thoughtfully. "Did you ever notice it before?"

Mr. Parker turned to gaze back toward the stone tower.

"There's no green light," he answered grimly. "Every window is dark."

"But I saw it only an instant ago! And I did hear the clock strike thirteen. Cross my heart and hope to die—"

"Never mind the dramatics," Mr. Parker cut in. "If the clock struck an extra time—which it didn't—something could have gone wrong with the mechanism. Don't try to build up a mystery out of your imagination."

The car rattled over a bridge and passed a deserted farm house that formerly had belonged to a queer old

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man named Peter Fenestra. Penny's gaze fastened momentarily upon an old fashioned storm cellar which marred the appearance of the front yard.

"I suppose I imagined all that too," she said, waving her hand toward the disfiguring cement hump. "Old Peter never had any hidden gold, he never had a SECRET PACT with tatooed sailors, and he never tried to burn your newspaper plant!"

"I'll admit you did a nice piece of detective work when you uncovered that story," her father acknowledged. "Likewise, you brought the *Star* one of its best scoops by outwitting slippery Al Gepper and entangling him in his own *Silken Ladder*."

"Don't forget the *Tale of the Witch Doll* either," Penny reminded him. "You laughed at me then, just as you're doing now."

"I'm not laughing," denied the editor. "I merely say that no light was burning in the tower window, and I very much doubt that the clock struck more than twelve times."

"Tomorrow I shall go to the tower and talk with the caretaker, Seth McGuire. I'll prove to you that I was right!"

"If you do, I'll treat to a dish of ice cream decorated with nuts."

"Make it five gallons of gasoline and I'll be really interested," she countered.

Due to an unusual set of circumstances, Penny had fallen heir to two automobiles, one a second-hand con-

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traption whose battered sides bore the signature of nearly every young person in Riverview. The other, a handsome maroon sedan, had been the gift of her father, presented in gratitude because of her excellent reporting of a case known to many as *Behind the Green Door*. Always hard pressed for funds, she found it all but impossible to keep two automobiles in operation, and her financial difficulties were a constant source of amusement to everyone but herself.

Soon, an electric sign proclaiming "Toni's" in huge block letters loomed up. Penny swung into the parking area, tooting the horn for service. Immediately a white-coated waiter brought out a menu.

"Coffee and two hamburgers," Penny ordered with a flourish. "Everything on one, and everything but, on the other."

"No onions for the little lady?" the waiter grinned. "Okay. I'll have 'em right out."

While waiting, Penny noticed that another car, a gray sedan, had drawn up close to the building. Although the two men who occupied the front seat had ordered food, they were not eating it. Instead they conversed in low tones as they appeared to watch someone inside the cafe.

"Dad, notice those two men," she whispered, touching his arm.

"What about them?" he asked, but before she could reply, the waiter came with a tray of sandwiches which he hooked over the car door.

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"Not bad," Mr. Parker praised as he bit into a giant-size hamburger. "First decent cup of coffee I've had in a week too."

"Dad, watch!" Penny reminded him.

The restaurant door had opened, and a man of early middle age came outside. Immediately the couple in the gray sedan stiffened to alert attention. As the man passed their car they lowered their heads, but the instant he had gone on, they turned to peer after him.

The man who was being observed so closely seemed unaware of the scrutiny. Crossing the parking lot, he chose a trail which led into a dense grove of trees.

"Now's our chance!" cried one of the men in the gray sedan. "Come on, we'll get him!" Both alighted and likewise disappeared into the woods.

"Dad, did you hear what they said?" asked Penny.

"I did," he answered grimly. "Tough looking customers too."

"I'm afraid they mean to rob that first man. Isn't there anything we can do?"

Mr. Parker barely hesitated. "I may make a chump of myself," he said, "but here goes! I'll tag along and try to be on hand if anything happens."

"Dad, don't do it!" Penny pleaded, suddenly frightened lest her father face danger. "You might get hurt!"

Mr. Parker paid no heed. Swinging open the car door, he strode across the parking lot, and entered the dark woods.

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CHAPTER

2

NIGHT RIDERS

NOT TO be left behind, Penny quickly followed her father, overtaking him before he had gone very far into the forest.

"Penny, you shouldn't have come," he said sternly. "There may be trouble, and I'll not have you taking unnecessary risks."

"I don't want you to do it either," she insisted. "Which way did the men go?"

"That's what I wonder," Mr. Parker responded, listening intently. "Hear anything?"

"Not a sound."

"Queer that all three of them could disappear so quickly," the editor muttered. "I'm sure there's been no attack. Listen! What was that?"

"It sounded like a car being started!" Penny exclaimed.

Hastening to the edge of the woods, she gazed toward the parking lot. The Parker car stood where it had been abandoned, but the gray sedan was missing. A moving tail light could be seen far down the road.

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"There go our friends," Mr. Parker commented rather irritably. "Their sudden departure probably saved me from making a chump of myself."

"How could we tell they didn't mean to rob that other man?" Penny asked in an injured tone. "You thought yourself that they intended to harm him."

"Oh, I'm not blaming you," the editor answered, starting toward the parking lot. "I'm annoyed at myself. This is a graphic example of what we were talking about awhile ago—imagination!"

Decidedly crestfallen, Penny followed her father to the car. They finished their hamburgers, which had grown cold, and after the tray was removed, started home.

"I could do with a little sleep," Mr. Parker yawned. "After a hard day at the office, your brand of night life is a bit too strenuous for me."

Selecting a short-cut route to Riverview, Penny paid strict attention to the road, for the narrow pavement had been patched in many places. On either side of the highway stretched truck farms with row upon row of neatly staked tomatoes and other crops.

Rounding a bend, Penny was startled to see tongues of flame brightening the horizon. A large wooden barn, situated in plain view, on a slight knoll, had caught fire and was burning rapidly. As she slammed on the brake, Mr. Parker aroused from light slumber.

"Now what?" he mumbled drowsily.

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"Dad, unless I'm imagining things again, that barn is on fire!"

"Let 'er burn," he mumbled, and then fully aroused, swung open the car door.

There were no fire fighters on the scene, in fact the only person visible was a woman in dark flannel night robe, who stood silhouetted in the red glare. As Penny and Mr. Parker reached her side, she stared at them almost stupidly.

"We'll lose everything," she said tonelessly. "Our entire crop of melons is inside the barn, packed for shipment. And my husband's new truck!"

"Have you called a fire company?" the editor asked.

"I've called, but it won't do any good," she answered. "The barn will be gone before they can get here."

With a high wind whipping the flames, Penny and her father knew that the woman spoke the truth. Already the fire had such a start that even had water been available, the barn could not have been saved.

"Maybe I can get out the truck for you!" Mr. Parker offered.

As he swung open the barn doors, a wave of heat rushed into his face. Coughing and choking, he forced his way into the smoke filled interior, unaware that Penny was at his side. Seeing her a moment later, he tried to send her back.

"You can't get the truck out without me to help

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push," she replied, refusing to retreat. "Come on, we can do it!"

The shiny red truck was a fairly light one and stood on an inclined cement floor which sloped toward the exit. Nevertheless, although Penny and her father exerted every iota of their combined strength, they could not start it moving.

"Maybe the brake is on!" Mr. Parker gasped, running around to the cab. "Yes, it is!"

Pushing once more, they were able to start the truck rolling. Once in motion its own momentum carried it down the runway into the open, a safe distance from the flames.

"How about the crated melons?" Penny asked, breathing hard from the strenuous exertion.

"Not a chance to save them," Mr. Parker answered. "We were lucky to get out the truck."

Driven back by the heat, Penny and her father went to stand beside the woman in dark flannel. Thanking them for their efforts in her behalf, she added that her name was Mrs. Preston and that her husband was absent.

"John went to Riverview and hasn't come back yet," she said brokenly. "This is going to be a great shock to him. All our work gone up in smoke!"

"Didn't you have the barn insured?" the editor questioned her.

"John has a small policy," Mrs. Preston replied. "It covers the barn, but not the melons stored inside.

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Those men did it on purpose, too! I saw one of 'em riding away."

"What's that?" Mr. Parker demanded, wondering if he had understood the woman correctly. "You don't mean the fire deliberately was set?"

"Yes, it was," the woman affirmed angrily. "I was sound asleep, and then I heard a horse galloping into the yard. I ran to the window and saw the rider throw a lighted torch into the old hay loft. As soon as he saw it blaze up, he rode off."

"Was the man anyone you knew?" Mr. Parker asked, amazed by the disclosure. "Were you able to see his face?"

"Hardly," Mrs. Preston returned with a short laugh. "He wore a black hood. It covered his head and shoulders."

"A black hood!" Penny exclaimed. "Why, Dad, that sounds like night riders!"

"Mrs. Preston, do you know of any reason why you and your husband might be made the target of such cowardly action?" the newspaper man inquired.

"It must have been done because John wouldn't join up with them."

"Join some organization, you mean?"

"Yes, they kept warning him something like this would happen, but John wouldn't have anything to do with 'em."

"I don't blame your husband," said the editor, seeking to gather more information. "Tell me, what is

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the name of this disreputable organization? What is its purpose, and the names of the men who run it?"

"I don't know any more about it than what I've told you," Mrs. Preston replied, suddenly becoming close-lipped. "John never said much about it to me."

"Are you afraid to tell what you know?" Mr. Parker asked abruptly.

"It doesn't pay to do too much talking. You act real friendly and you did me a good turn saving my truck—but I don't even know your name."

"Anthony Parker, owner of the *Riverview Star*."

The information was anything but reassuring to the woman.

"You're not aiming to write up anything I've told you for the paper?" she asked anxiously.

"Not unless I believe that by doing so I can expose these night riders who have destroyed your barn."

"Please don't print anything in the paper," Mrs. Preston pleaded. "It will only do harm. Those men will turn on John harder than ever."

Before Mr. Parker could reply, the roof of the storage barn collapsed, sending up a shower of sparks and burning brands. By this time the red glare in the sky had attracted the attention of neighbors, and several men came running into the yard. Realizing that he could not hope to gain additional information from the woman, Mr. Parker began to examine the ground in the vicinity of the barn.

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"Looking for hoof tracks?" Penny asked, falling into step beside him.

"I thought we might find some, providing the woman told a straight story."

"Dad, did you ever hear of an organization such as Mrs. Preston mentioned?" Penny inquired, her gaze on the ground. "I mean around Riverview, of course."

Mr. Parker shook his head. "I never did, Penny. But if what she says is true, the *Star* will launch an investigation. We'll have no night riders in this community, not if it's in my power to blast them out!"

"Here's your first clue, Dad!"

Excitedly, Penny pointed to a series of hoof marks plainly visible in the soft earth. The tracks led toward the main road.

"Apparently Mrs. Preston told the truth about the barn being fired by a man on horseback," Mr. Parker declared as he followed the trail leading out of the yard. "These prints haven't been made very long."

"Dad, you look like Sherlock Holmes scooting along with his nose to the ground!" Penny giggled. "You should have a magnifying glass to make the picture perfect."

"Never mind the comedy," her father retorted gruffly. "This may mean a big story for the *Star*, not to mention a worthwhile service to the community."

"Oh, I'm heartily in favor of your welfare work," Penny chuckled. "In fact, I think it would be won-

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derfully exciting to capture a night rider. Is that what you have in mind?"

"We may as well follow this trail as far as we can. Apparently, the fellow rode his horse just off the main highway, heading toward Riverview."

"Be sure you don't follow the trail backwards," Penny teased. "That would absolutely ruin your reputation as a detective."

"Jump in the car and drive while I stand on the running board," Mr. Parker ordered, ignoring his daughter's attempt at wit. "Keep close to the edge of the pavement and go slowly."

Obeying instructions, Penny drove the car at an even speed. Due to a recent rain which had made the ground very soft, it was possible to follow the trail of hoof prints without difficulty.

"We turn left here," Mr. Parker called as they came to a dirt road. "Speed up a bit or the tires may stick. And watch sharp for soft places."

"Aye, aye, captain," Penny laughed, thoroughly enjoying the adventure.

Soon the car came to the entrance of a narrow, muddy lane, and there Mr. Parker called a halt.

"We've come to the end of the trail," he announced.

"Have the tracks ended?" Penny asked in disappointment as she applied brakes.

"Quite the contrary. They turn into this lane."

Both Mr. Parker and his daughter gazed thoughtfully toward a small cabin which could be seen far

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back among the trees. Despite the late hour, a light still glowed in one of the windows.

"The man who set the fire must live there!" Penny exclaimed. "What's our next move, Dad?"

As she spoke, the roar of a fast traveling automobile was heard far up the road, approaching from the direction whence they had just come.

"Pull over," Mr. Parker instructed. "And flash the tail light. We don't want to risk being struck."

Barely did Penny have time to obey before the headbeams of the oncoming car illuminated the roadway. But as it approached, the automobile suddenly slackened speed, finally skidding to a standstill beside the Parker sedan.

"That you, Clem Davis?" boomed a loud voice. "Stand where you are, and don't make any false moves!"

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CHAPTER

A BLACK HOOD

"GOOD EVENING, Sheriff," Mr. Parker said evenly as he recognized the heavy-set man who stepped from a county automobile. "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else this time."

Sheriff Daniels put away his revolver and moved into the beam of light.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Thought you might be Clem Davis, and I wasn't taking any chances. You're Parker of the *Riverview Star?*"

"That's right," agreed the editor, "Looking for Clem Davis?"

"I'm here to question him. I'm investigating a fire which was set at the Preston place."

"You're a fast worker, Sheriff," Mr. Parker remarked. "My daughter and I just left the Preston farm, and we didn't see you there. What put you on Davis' trail?"

"Our officer received an anonymous telephone call from a woman. She reported the fire and said that I'd find my man here."

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"Could it have been Mrs. Preston who notified you?" Mr. Parker inquired thoughtfully.

"It wasn't Mrs. Preston," answered the sheriff. "I traced the call to the Riverview exchange. Thought it must be the trick of a crank until our office got a report that a fire actually had been set at the Preston farm. By the way, what are you doing around here, Parker?"

"Oh, just prowling," the editor replied, and explained briefly how he and Penny had chanced to be at the scene of the fire.

"If you followed a horseman to this lane there may be something to that anonymous telephone call," the sheriff declared. "I'll look around, and then have a talk with Davis."

"Mind if we accompany you?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"Come along," the sheriff invited.

Penny was hard pressed to keep step with the two men as they strode down the muddy lane. A light glowed in the window of the cabin, and a woman could be seen sitting at a table. The sheriff, however, circled the house. Following the trail of hoof marks he went directly to the stable, quietly opening the double doors.

Once inside, Sheriff Daniels switched on a flashlight. The bright beam revealed six stalls, all empty save one, in which stood a handsome black mare who tugged restlessly at her tether. Her body was covered with sweat, and she shivered.

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"This horse has been ridden hard," the sheriff observed, reaching to throw a blanket over her.

"Here's something interesting," commented Mr. Parker. Stooping, he picked up a dark piece of cloth lying in plain view on the cement floor. It had been sewed in the shape of a headgear, with eye holes cut in the front side.

"A black hood!" Penny shouted in awe.

Sheriff Daniels took the cloth from the editor, examining it closely but saying very little.

"Ever hear of any night riders in this community?" Mr. Parker asked after a moment, his tone casual.

"Never did," the sheriff replied emphatically. "And I sure hope such a story doesn't get started."

Mr. Parker fingered the black mask. "All the same, Sheriff, you can't just laugh off a thing like this. Even if the November elections aren't far away—"

"I'm not worried about my job," the other broke in. "So far as I know there's no underground organization in this county. All this mask proves is that Clem Davis may be the man who set the Preston fire."

The officer turned to leave the stable. Before he could reach the exit, the double doors slowly opened. A woman, who carried a lighted lantern, peered inside.

"Who's there?" she called in a loud voice.

"Sheriff Daniels, ma'am," the officer answered. "You needn't be afraid."

"Who said anything about bein' afraid?" the woman belligerently retorted.

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Coming into the stable, she gazed with undisguised suspicion from one person to another. She was noticeably thin, slightly stooped and there was a hard set to her jaw.

"You're Mrs. Davis?" the sheriff inquired, and as she nodded, he asked: "Clem around here?"

"No, he ain't," she answered defiantly. "What you wanting him for anyhow?"

"Oh, just to ask a few questions. Where is your husband, Mrs. Davis?"

"He went to town early and ain't been back. What you aimin' to lay onto him, Sheriff?"

"If your husband hasn't been here since early evening, who has ridden this horse?" the sheriff demanded, ignoring the question.

Mrs. Davis' gaze roved to the stall where the black mare noisily crunched an ear of corn.

"Why Sal *has* been rid!" she exclaimed as if genuinely surprised. "But not by Clem. He went to town in the flivver, and he ain't been back."

"Sorry, but I'll have to take a look in the house."

"Search it from cellar to attic!" the woman said angrily. "You won't find Clem! What's he wanted for anyway?"

"The Preston barn was set afire tonight, and your husband is a suspect."

"Clem never did it! Why, the Prestons are good friends of ours! Somebody's just tryin' to make a peck o' trouble for us."

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"That may be," the sheriff admitted. "You say Clem hasn't been here tonight. In that case, who rode the mare?"

"I don't know anything about it," the woman maintained sullenly.

"Didn't you hear a horse come into the yard?"

"I never heard a sound until your car stopped at the entrance to the lane."

"I suppose you never saw this before either." The sheriff held up the black hood which had been found in the barn.

Mrs. Davis stared blankly at the cloth. "I tell you, I don't know nothin' about it, Sheriff. You ain't being fair if you try to hang that fire onto Clem. And you won't find him hidin' in the house."

"If your husband isn't here, I'll wait until he comes."

"You may have a long wait, Sheriff," the woman retorted, her lips parting in a twisted smile. "You can come in though and look around."

Not caring to follow the sheriff into the house, Penny and her father bade him goodbye a moment later. Tramping down the lane to their parked car, they both expressed the belief that Clem Davis would not be arrested during the night.

"Obviously, the woman knows a lot more than she's willing to tell," Mr. Parker remarked, sliding into the car seat beside Penny.

"Dad, do you think it was Clem who set fire to the Preston barn?"

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"We have no reason to suspect anyone else," returned the editor. "All the evidence points to his guilt."

Penny backed the car in the narrow road, heading toward Riverview.

"That was the point I wanted to make," she said thoughtfully. "Doesn't it seem to you that the evidence was almost too plain?"

"What do you mean, Penny?"

"Well, I was just thinking, if I had been in Clem Davis' place, I never would have left a black hood lying where the first person to enter the barn would be sure to see it."

"That's so, it was a bit obvious," Mr. Parker admitted.

"The horse was left in the stable, and the hoof tracks leading to the Davis place were easy to follow."

"All true," Mr. Parker nodded.

"Isn't it possible that someone could have tried to throw the blame on Clem?" suggested Penny, anxiously awaiting her father's reply.

"There may be something to the theory," Mr. Parker responded. "Still, Mrs. Davis didn't deny that the mare belonged to her husband. She claimed that she hadn't heard the horse come into the stable, which obviously was a lie. Furthermore, I gathered the impression that Clem knew the sheriff was after him, and intends to hide out."

"It will be interesting to learn if Mr. Daniels makes

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an arrest. Do you expect to print anything about it in the paper?"

"Only routine news of the fire," Mr. Parker replied. "There may be much more to this little incident than appears on the surface, but until something develops, we must wait."

"If you could gain proof that night riders are operating in this community, what then?" Penny suggested eagerly.

"In that case, I should certainly launch a vigorous campaign. But why go into all the details now? I'm sure I'll not assign you to the story."

"Why not?" Penny asked in an injured tone. "I think night riders would be especially suited to my journalistic talents. I could gather information about Clem Davis and the Prestons—"

"This is Sheriff Daniel's baby, and we'll let him take care of it for the time being," Mr. Parker interrupted. "Why not devote yourself to the great mystery of the Hubell clock? That should provide a safe outlook for your energies."

The car was drawing close to Riverview. As it approached the tall stone tower, Penny raised her eyes to the dark windows. Just then the big clock struck twice.

"Two o'clock," Mr. Parker observed, taking a quick glance at his watch. "Or would you say three?"

"There's no argument about it this time, Dad. All the same, I intend to prove to you that I was right!"

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"How?" her father asked, covering a wide yawn.

"I don't know," Penny admitted, favoring the grim tower with a dark scowl. "But just you wait—I'll find a way!"

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CHAPTER

4

A NEW CARETAKER

"I DECLARE, getting folks up becomes a harder task each morning," declared Mrs. Maud Weems, who had served as the Parker housekeeper for eleven years, as she brought a platter of bacon and eggs to the breakfast table. "I call and call until I'm fairly hoarse, and all I get in response is a few sleepy mutters and mumbles. The food is stone cold."

"It's good all the same," praised Penny, pouring herself a large-size glass of orange juice. "There's not a woman in Riverview who can equal your cooking."

"I'm in no mood for blarney this morning," the housekeeper warned. "I must say quite frankly that I don't approve of the irregular hours in this house."

"Penny and I did get in a little late last night," Mr. Parker admitted, winking at his daughter.

"A little late! It must have been at least four o'clock when you came in. Oh, I heard you tiptoe up the stairs even if you did take off your shoes!"

"It was only a few minutes after two," Penny cor-

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rected. "I'm sorry though, that we awakened you."

"I hadn't been asleep," Mrs. Weems replied, somewhat mollified by the apology. "I'm sure I heard every stroke of the clock last night."

"You did!" Penny exclaimed with sudden interest. "How many times would you say it struck at midnight? I mean the Hubell Tower clock."

"Such a question!" Mrs. Weems protested, thoroughly exasperated.

"It's a very important one," Penny insisted. "My reputation and five gallons of gas are at stake, so weigh well your words before you speak."

"The clock struck twelve, of course!"

"There, you see, Penny," Mr. Parker grinned triumphantly. "Does that satisfy you?"

"Mrs. Weems," Penny persisted, "did you actually count the strokes?"

"Certainly not. Why should I? The clock always strikes twelve, therefore it must have struck that number last night."

"I regret to say, you've just disqualified yourself as a witness in this case," Penny said, helping herself to the last strip of bacon on the platter. "I must search farther afield for proof."

"What are you talking about anyhow?" the housekeeper protested. "It doesn't make sense to me."

As she finished breakfast, Penny explained to Mrs. Weems how the disagreement with her father had

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arisen. The housekeeper displayed slight interest in the tale of the clock, but asked many questions about the fire at the Preston farm.

"That reminds me!" Mr. Parker suddenly exclaimed before Penny had finished the story. "I want to 'phone Sheriff Daniels before I start for the office. Excuse me, please."

Pushing aside his chair, he went hurriedly to the living room. Not wishing to miss any news which might have a bearing on the affair of the previous night, Penny trailed him, hovering close to the telephone. However, her father's brief comments told her almost nothing.

"What did you learn?" she inquired eagerly as he hung up the receiver. "Was Clem Davis arrested last night?"

"No, it turned out about as we expected. Apparently, Davis knew the sheriff was looking for him. Anyway, he never returned home."

Jamming on his hat, Mr. Parker started for the front door. Penny pursued him to the garage, carrying on a running conversation.

"This rather explodes my theory about Clem not being guilty," she remarked ruefully. "If he were innocent, one would expect him to face the sheriff and prove an alibi."

"Davis can't be far away," Mr. Parker responded, getting into the maroon sedan. "The sheriff will nab him soon."

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Penny held open the garage doors, watching as her father backed down the driveway, scraping the bark of a tree whose gnarled trunk already bore many scars. Before she could reenter the house, Louise Sidell, a dark-haired, slightly plump girl, who was Penny's most loyal friend, sauntered into the yard.

"Hi!" she greeted cheerily. "About ready?"

"Ready for what?" Penny asked, her face blank.

Louise regarded her indignantly. "If that isn't just like you, Penny Parker! You make promises and then forget them. Don't you remember telling Mrs. Van Cleve of the Woman's Club that we would help sell tags today, for the Orphans' Home summer camp?"

"Now that you remind me, I have a vague recollection. How many are we to sell?"

"Twenty-five at not less than a quarter each. I have the tags, but we'll have to work fast or the other girls will sell all the easy customers."

"I'll be with you in two shakes," Penny promised, heading for the house. "Wait until I tell Mrs. Weems where I am going."

Returning a moment later with the car ignition keys, she found Louise staring disconsolately at the empty space in the garage.

"What became of your new car?" asked her chum.

"Dad's auto is in the garage for repairs," Penny explained briefly. "I didn't have the heart to make him walk."

"I should think not!" laughed Louise. "Imagine

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having three cars in one family—if you can call this mess of junk by such a flattering name." Depreciatingly, she kicked the patched tire of a battered but brightly painted flivver which had seen its heyday in the early thirties.

"Don't speak so disrespectfully of my property," Penny chided, sliding into the high, uncomfortable seat. "Leaping Lena is a good car even if she is a bit creaky in the joints. She still takes us places."

"And leaves us stranded," Louise added with a sniff. "Oh, well, let's go—if we can."

Penny stepped on the starter and waited expectantly. The motor sputtered and coughed, but true to form, would not start. Just as the girls were convinced that they must walk, there was an explosive backfire, and then the car began to quiver with its familiar motion.

"You should sell Lena to the government for a cannon," Louise teased as they rattled down the street. "What do you burn in this smoke machine? Kerosene?"

"Never mind the slurs. Where do we start our business operations?"

"We've been assigned to the corner of Madison and Clark streets," Louise answered as she separated the yellow benefit tags into two evenly divided piles. "It shouldn't take us long to get rid of these."

Neither of the girls regretted their promise to help with the tag-day sale, for the cause was a worthy one. The campaign to raise sufficient funds with which to

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purchase and equip an orphans' summer camp site, had been underway many weeks, and was headed by Mrs. Van Cleve, a prominent club woman.

Parking Leaping Lena at the designated street corner, the girls went to work with a will. All their lives they had lived in Riverview, and Penny in particular, had a wide acquaintance. Accosting nearly everyone who passed, she soon disposed of all her tags, and then sold many for her chum.

"They've gone fast," Louise declared as the morning wore on. "We have only one left."

"Don't sell that tag!" Penny said impulsively. "I have it earmarked for a certain person—Old Seth McGuire."

"The caretaker at the Hubell Clock Tower?" Louise asked in astonishment.

"Yes, he always liked children and I think he would be glad to help."

"But why drive so far?" protested Louise. "I'm sure we could dispose of it right here, and much quicker."

"Oh, I have a special reason for going to see Seth," Penny answered carelessly. "I'll tell you about it on the way there."

From her chum's manner, Louise deducted that something interesting lay ahead. She had learned, frequently to her sorrow, that Penny enjoyed interviewing unusual characters and engaging in amazing activities. Only a few months earlier, the girls had operated their own newspaper in an abandoned downtown

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building with results which were still the talk of Riverview. Another time they had attended a society wedding on an island guarded by a drawbridge, and had ended by using the drawbridge as a means of capturing a boatload of crooks. In fact, Louise took delight in remarking that if ever her chum chose to write an autobiography, a suitable title would be: "Life with Penelope Parker: Never a Dull Moment."

"What's up now, Penny?" she inquired, as they rattled toward the Hubell Tower in Leaping Lena.

"Just a little argument I had with Dad last night. I maintain that the big clock struck thirteen last night at midnight. He thinks I'm a wee bit touched in the head."

"Which you must be," retorted Louise. "Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"What's so crazy about it?" Penny asked with a grimace. "Didn't you ever hear a clock strike the wrong number?"

"Of course, but not the Hubell clock. Why, the works were purchased in Europe, and it's supposed to be one of the best in the country."

"Even a good clock can make a mistake, I guess. Anyway, we'll see what Seth McGuire has to say about it."

Penny brought Leaping Lena to a quivering halt opposite the tall Hubell Tower. Glancing upward at the octagonical-shaped clock face, she saw that the hands indicated twenty minutes to twelve.

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"Rather an awkward time to call," she remarked, swinging open the car door, "but Seth probably won't mind."

As the girls walked toward the tower entrance, they noticed that the grounds surrounding the building were not as neat as when last they had viewed them. The shrubs were untrimmed, the lawn choked with weeds, and old newspapers had matted against the hedge.

"I wonder if Mr. McGuire has been well?" Penny commented, knocking on the tower door. "He always took pride in looking after the yard."

"At least he seems to be up and around," Louise returned in a low tone. "I can hear someone moving about inside."

The girls waited expectantly for the door to open. When there was no response to their knock, Penny tried again.

"Who's there?" called a loud and not very friendly voice.

Penny knew that it was not Old Seth who spoke, for the caretaker's high-pitched tones were unmistakable.

"We came to see Mr. McGuire," she called through the panel.

The door swung back and the girls found themselves facing a stout, red-faced man of perhaps forty, who wore a soiled suede jacket and unpressed corduroy trousers.

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"McGuire's not here any more," he informed curtly. "You'll probably find him at his farm."

Before the man could close the door, Penny quickly asked if Mr. McGuire had given up his position as caretaker because of sickness.

"Oh, he was getting too old to do his work," the man answered with a shrug. "I'm Charley Phelps, the new attendant. Visiting hours are from two to four each afternoon."

"We didn't come to see the clock," persisted Penny.

"What did bring you here then?" the man demanded gruffly. "You a personal friend of Seth's?"

"Not exactly." Penny peered beyond the caretaker into an untidy living room clouded with tobacco smoke. "We thought we might sell him one of these tags. Perhaps you would like to contribute to the orphans' camp fund?"

She extended the bit of yellow cardboard, bestowing upon the attendant one of her most dazzling smiles.

"No, thanks, Sister," he declined, refusing to take the tag. "You'll have to peddle your wares somewhere else."

"Only twenty-five cents."

"I'm not interested. Now run along and give me a chance to eat my lunch in peace."

"Sorry to have bothered you," Penny apologized woodenly. Without moving from the door, she inquired: "Oh, by the way, what happened to the clock last night?"

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"Nothing happened to it," the caretaker retorted. "What d'you mean?"

"At midnight it struck thirteen times instead of twelve."

"You must have dreamed it!" the man declared. "Say, what are you trying to do anyhow—start stories so I'll lose my job?"

"Why, I never thought of such a thing!" Penny gasped. "I truly believed that the clock did strike thirteen—"

"Well, you were wrong, and I'll thank you not to go around telling folks such bunk!" the man said angrily. "The clock hasn't struck a wrong hour since the day it was installed. I take better care of the mechanism than Seth McGuire ever did!"

"I didn't mean to intimate that you were careless—" Penny began.

She did not complete the sentence, for Charley Phelps slammed the door in her face.

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CHAPTER

5

OLD SETH

"WELL, PENNY, you certainly drew lightning that time," Louise remarked dryly as the girls retreated to Leaping Lena. "I thought Mr. Phelps was going to throw the tower at you!"

"How could I know he was so touchy?" Penny asked in a grieved tone.

"You did talk as if you thought he had been careless in taking care of the big clock."

"I never meant it that way, Lou. Anyway, he could have been more polite."

Jerking open the car door, Penny slid behind the steering wheel and jammed her foot on the starter. Leaping Lena, apparently realizing that her young mistress was in no mood for trifling, responded with instantaneous action.

"I guess you're satisfied now that the clock never struck thirteen," Louise teased as the car fairly leaped forward.

"I should say not!" Penny retorted. "Why, I'm more convinced than ever that something went wrong

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with the mechanism last night. Phelps knew it too, and for that reason didn't want us asking questions!"

"You die hard, Penny," chuckled Louise. "From now on, I suppose you'll go around asking everyone you meet: 'Where were you at midnight of the thirteenth?' "

"It wouldn't do any good. Most folks just take things for granted in this world. But there's one person who would pay attention to that clock!"

"Who?"

"Why, old Seth McGuire. We'll drive out to his farm and ask him about it."

"It's lunch time and I'm hungry," Louise protested.

"Oh, you can spend the rest of your life eating," Penny overruled her. "Business before pleasure, you know."

Seth McGuire, one of Riverview's best known and well loved characters, had been caretaker at the Hubell Clock Tower from the day of its erection, and the girls could not but wonder why he had been relieved of his post. The old man had personally installed the complicated machinery, caring for it faithfully over the years. In fact, his only other interest in life was his farm, located a mile from the city limits, and it was there that Penny hoped to find him.

"Watch for a sign, 'Sleepy Hollow,' " she instructed. "Mr. McGuire has given his place a fancy name."

A moment later Louise, seeing the marker, cried: "There it is! Slow down!"

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Penny slammed on the brakes and Leaping Lena responded by shivering in every one of her ancient joints. Louise was thrown forward, barely catching herself in time to prevent a collision with the windshield.

"Why don't you join a stunt circus?" she said irritably. "You drive like Demon Dan!"

"We're here," replied Penny cheerfully. "Nice looking place, isn't it?"

The car had pulled up near a small, neatly-kept cottage framed in well-trimmed greenery. An even, rich green lawn was highlighted here and there by beds of bright red and blue flowers.

After admiring the grounds, the girls rang the front bell. Receiving no response, they went around to the rear, pounding on the kitchen screen door.

"Mr. McGuire's not here," said Louise. "Just another wild goose chase."

"Let's try this out-building," Penny suggested, indicating a long, low structure made of cement building blocks which was roofed with tin. A sign dangling above the door proclaimed that it was the foundry and machine shop of one Seth McGuire, maker of bells and clocks.

As the girls peered through the open door an arresting sight met their gaze. Through clouds of smoke they saw a spry old man directing the movements of a muscular youth who pulled a large pot-shaped crucible of molten metal on an overhead pulley track.

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"Are you Seth McGuire?" Penny shouted to make herself heard above the noise of running machinery.

The old man, turning his head, waved them back.

"Don't come in here now!" he warned. "It's dangerous. Wait until we pour the bell."

With deft, sure hands, the old fellow pulled control chains attached to the crucible. The container twisted and finally overturned, allowing the molten metal to pour into a bell-shaped mold. As the last drops ran out of it, a great cloud of steam arose, enveloping both the old man and his helper.

"Won't they be burned?" Louise murmured in alarm, moving hastily backwards.

"Mr. McGuire seems to know what he's doing," Penny answered, watching with interest.

In a moment the steam cleared away, and the old man motioned that the girls might come inside.

"You'll have to excuse my manners," he apologized, his mild blue eyes regarding them with a twinkle. "Pouring a bell is exacting work and you can't stop until it's done."

"Is that what you were doing?" Penny inquired, staring at the steaming mass which had been poured into the mold. "It's sort of like making a gelatin pudding, isn't it?"

"Jake and me never thought of it that way," the old man replied. "I learned from an old Swiss bell maker when I was a lad. And I apprenticed under a master, you may be sure of that."

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"How do you make a bell anyway?" Louise inquired curiously.

"You can't tell in five minutes what it takes a lifetime to learn," the old man answered. "Now a bell like this one I'm making for the Methodist Church at Blairstown takes a heap o' work. Jake and me have worked a solid week getting the pattern and mold ready for that pouring job you just saw."

"Do you ever have any failures?" Penny asked, seeking to draw him out.

"Not many, but once in awhile a bell cracks," the old fellow said modestly. "That happens when the mold is damp, or not of proper temperature. If gasses collect you may get a nice healthy explosion, too!"

"Does it take a long while to finish a bell after it's been poured?" Penny pursued the subject.

"A large one may require a week to cool, but I'll have this fellow out of the mold by tomorrow night," Mr. McGuire returned. "Then we'll polish her off, put in the clapper, and attach the bell to a sturdy mounting. If the tone is right, she'll be ready to install."

"How do you tell about the tone?" Louise questioned in perplexity.

"This one should have a deep, low tone," the old man replied. "Other things being equal, a large bell gives a deeper tone than a small one. Pitch depends

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upon diameter, and timbre upon the shape and the alloy used."

"I never realized there was much to a bell besides its ding-dong," commented Penny. "But tell me, Mr. McGuire, do you find this work more interesting than taking care of the Clock Tower?"

"Looking after that place wasn't work. It was more like a rest cure. I took the job because, twelve years ago when the tower went up, they couldn't find a competent man to look after the clock."

"And now you've gone back to your old trade?"

"Oh, I liked it at the tower," Old Seth admitted truthfully. "I'm a bit old to do heavy work such as this. More than likely I'd have gone on putting in my time if Mr. Blake hadn't wanted the job for a friend of his."

"Mr. Blake?" Penny inquired thoughtfully. "Do you mean Clyde Blake, the real estate man?"

The old bell maker nodded as he gazed moodily out the window toward the distant tower which could be seen outlined against the blue sky.

"Yes, it was Blake that eased me out of that job. He has a lot of influence and he uses it in ways some might say isn't always proper. I can make a fair living as long as I have my health, so I'm not complaining."

"We met the new caretaker this morning," Penny said after a moment. "He wasn't very polite to us, and the grounds have gone to wrack and ruin."

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"Did you notice the flower beds?" Old Seth asked, feeling creeping into his voice. "Half choked with weeds. Charley Phelps hasn't turned a hand since he took over there six weeks ago."

"I suppose he spends most of his time looking after the big clock," Penny remarked, deliberately leading the old man deeper.

"Charley Phelps spends most of his hours smoking that vile pipe of his and entertaining his roustabout friends," Old Seth snapped. "He doesn't know as much as a child about complicated clock machinery. What he can't take care of with an oil can goes unrepaired!"

The conversation had moved in exactly the channel which Penny desired.

"No doubt that explains why the clock hasn't always been striking right of late," she said in an offhand way. "Last night I was almost sure I heard it strike thirteen instead of twelve times. In fact, I had a little argument with my father about it."

"You were correct," the old man assured her. "I was working late here in the shop and heard it myself."

"There! You see, Louise!" Penny cried triumphantly, turning to her chum.

"Mr. McGuire, what would cause the clock to strike wrong?" the other asked.

"I was wondering myself," he admitted. "In all the ten years I was at the tower, it never once struck an incorrect hour. I think that there must have

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been something wrong with the striking train."

"Pardon my ignorance," laughed Penny, "but what in the world is the striking train?"

"Oh, we apply that name to the center section of the mechanism which operates the clock. The going train drives the hands, while the quarter train chimes the quarter-hours, sounding four tuned bells."

"Just as clear as mud," sighed Louise who disliked all mechanical things. "Does the clock strike wrong every night?"

"Last night was the first time I ever heard it add a stroke," Mr. McGuire answered. "I'll be listening though, to see if Phelps gets it fixed."

Penny and Louise had accomplished the purpose of their trip, and so, after looking about the shop for a few minutes, left without trying to sell the old man a camp-benefit tag.

"Why didn't you ask him to take one?" Louise asked as she and her chum climbed into the parked car.

"Oh, I don't know," Penny answered uncomfortably. "It just came over me that Old Seth probably doesn't have much money now that he's out of steady work."

"He must make quite a lot from his bells."

"But how often does he get an order?" Penny speculated. "I'd guess not once in three months, if that often. It's a pity Mr. Blake had to push Mr. McGuire out of the tower job."

Louise nodded agreement, and then with a quick

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change of subject, reminded her chum that they had had no lunch.

"It's too late to go home," said Penny, who had other plans. "I'll treat you to one of the biggest hamburger sandwiches you ever wrapped your teeth around! How's that?"

"I'll take anything so long as you pay for it," Louise agreed with a laugh.

Driving on to Toni's, the girls lunched there without incident, and then started for Riverview by a different route.

"Say, where are you taking me anyway?" Louise demanded suspiciously. "I've never been on this road before."

"Only out to the Davis farm," Penny responded with a grin. "We have a little detective work to do."

During the bumpy ride, she gave her chum a vivid account of the adventure she had shared with her father the previous night.

"And just what do you expect to learn?" Louise inquired at the conclusion of the tale. "Are we expected to capture Clem Davis with our bare hands and turn him over to the authorities?"

"Nothing quite so startling. I thought possibly Mrs. Davis might talk with us. She seemed to know a lot more about the fire than she would tell."

"I don't mind tagging along," Louise consented reluctantly. "It doesn't seem likely, though, that the woman will break down and implicate her husband

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just because you want a story for the *Riverview Star*."

Undisturbed by her chum's teasing, Penny parked Leaping Lena at the entrance to the lane, and the girls walked to the cabin.

"It doesn't look as if anyone is here," Louise remarked, rapping for the second time on the oaken door.

"I'm sure there is," Penny replied in a whisper. "As we came up the lane, I saw the curtains move."

Louise knocked a third time, so hard that the door rattled.

"At any rate, no one is going to answer," she said. "We may as well go."

"All right," Penny agreed, although it was not her nature to give up so easily.

The girls walked down the lane until a clump of bushes screened them from the cabin.

"Let's wait here," Penny proposed, halting. "I have a hunch Mrs. Davis is hiding from us."

"What's to be gained by waiting?" grumbled Louise.

Nevertheless, she crouched beside her chum, watching the house. Ten minutes elapsed. Both Louise and Penny grew very weary. Then unexpectedly, the cabin door opened and Mrs. Davis peered into the yard. Seeing no one, she took a wooden water bucket and started with it to the pump which was situated midway between cabin and stable.

"Now's our chance!" Penny whispered eagerly. "Come on, Louise, we'll cut off her retreat and she can't avoid meeting us!"

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CHAPTER

6

TALL CORN

HASTENING UP the lane, Penny and Louise approached the pump in such a way that Mrs. Davis could not return to the house without meeting them. Not until the woman had filled the water bucket and was starting back did she see the two girls.

"Well?" she demanded defiantly.

By daylight the woman appeared much younger than Penny had taken her to be the previous night. Not more than thirty-two, she wore a shapeless, faded blue dress which had seen many washings. Rather attractive brown hair had been drawn back into a tight, unbecoming knot that made her face seem grotesquely long.

"I don't suppose you recognize me," Penny began diffidently. "My father and I were here last night with Sheriff Daniels."

"I remember you very well," the woman retorted. "What do you want?"

"Why, I should like to buy some melons," Penny

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replied, the idea only that instant occurring to her. "Have you any for sale?"

"Melons," the woman repeated, and the hard line of her mouth relaxed. "I thought you came to pester me with questions. Sure, we've got some good Heart o' Gold out in the patch. How many do you want?"

"About three, I guess."

"You can pick 'em out yourself if you want to," Mrs. Davis offered. Setting down the water bucket, she led the way through a gate to a melon patch behind the cabin. Her suspicions not entirely allayed, she demanded: "Sheriff Daniels didn't send you out here?"

"Indeed not," Penny assured her. "I haven't seen him since last night."

"It's all right then," Mrs. Davis said in a more friendly tone. She stooped to examine a ripe melon. "I figured maybe he sent you to find out what became of my husband."

"Oh, no! Didn't Mr. Davis return home last night?"

"Not on your life!" the woman answered grimly. "An' he won't be back either—not while Sheriff Daniels is looking for him."

From Mrs. Davis' manner of speaking, Penny was convinced that she had been in communication with her husband since the sheriff's visit. Trying to keep her voice casual, she observed:

"Don't you think it would be wise for your husband to give himself up? By hiding, he makes it appear as

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though he actually did set fire to the Preston barn."

"Clem would be a fool to give himself up now! Why, they'd be sure to hang the fire onto him, even though he wasn't within a mile of the Preston place."

"Then couldn't he prove it?"

"Not a chance," the woman said with a short, hard laugh. "Clem was framed. He never rode the horse last night, and that black hood was planted in the stable."

"Does your husband have any enemies?"

"Sure, he's got plenty of 'em."

"Then perhaps you can name a person who might have tried to throw blame on your husband."

"I could tell plenty if I was a mind to," the woman said significantly. "I'd do it in a minute, only it would make things worse for Clem."

Penny started to reply, then remained silent as she saw that Mrs. Davis' gaze had focused upon a section of cornfield which fringed the melon patch. The tall stalks were waving in an agitated manner, suggesting that someone might be moving among them.

"Here are your melons," Mrs. Davis said nervously, thrusting three large ones into Penny's hands. "That will be a quarter."

As the girl paid her, she abruptly turned and hurried toward the house.

"Just a minute, Mrs. Davis," Penny called. "If you'll only talk to me I may be able to help your husband."

The woman heard but paid no heed. Picking up

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the water bucket, she entered the cabin, closing the door behind her.

"Well, we gained three melons, and that's all," Louise shrugged. "What's our next move?"

"I think Mrs. Davis was on the verge of telling us something important," Penny declared, her voice low. "Then she saw someone out there in the corn field and changed her mind."

"I don't see anyone now," Louise said, staring in the direction her chum had indicated. "The stalks aren't even moving."

"They were a moment ago. Clem Davis may be hiding out there, Lou! Or it could be some of Sheriff Davis' men watching the cabin."

"Or an Indian waiting to scalp us," teased Louise. "Let's go back to the car."

Penny shook her head and started toward the corn patch. Reluctantly, Louise followed, overtaking her at the edge of the field.

"Sheriff Daniels!" Penny called through cupped hands.

There was no answer, only a gentle rippling of the corn stalks some distance from them.

"Whoever the person is, he's sneaking away," Penny whispered. "Come on, let's stop him!"

"Don't be foolish—" Louise protested, but her chum had vanished into the forest of tall corn.

After a moment of indecision she, too, entered the field. By that time there was no sign of Penny, no

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sound to guide her. Wandering aimlessly first in one direction, then another, she soon became hopelessly lost.

"Penny!" she shouted frantically.

"Here!" called a voice not far away.

Tracing the sound, and making repeated calls, Louise finally came face to face with her chum.

"Such a commotion as you've been making," chided Penny. "Not a chance to catch that fellow now!"

"I don't care," Louise retorted crossly. Her hair was disarranged, stockings matted with burs. "If we can get out of this dreadful maze I want to go to the car."

"We're at the edge of the field. Follow me and I'll pilot you to safety."

Emerging a minute later at the end of the corn row, Penny saw the stable only a few yards away. Impulsively, she proposed to Louise that they investigate it for possible clues.

"I've had enough detective work for one day," her chum complained. "Anyway, what do you hope to discover in an old barn?"

"Maybe I can induce the horse to talk," Penny chuckled. "Sal must know all the answers, if only she could speak."

"You'll have to give her the third degree by yourself," Louise decided with finality. "I shall go to the car."

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Taking the melons with her, she marched stiffly down the lane and climbed into Leaping Lena. Carefully she rearranged her hair, plucked burs, and then grew impatient because her chum did not come. Fully twenty minutes elapsed before Penny emerged from the stable.

"Sorry to keep you waiting so long, Lou," she apologized as she reached the car. "See what I found!"

Penny held up a bright silver object which resembled a locket, save that it was smaller.

"What is it?" Louise inquired with interest.

"A man's watch charm! It has a picture inside too!"

With her fingernail, Penny pried open the lid. Flat against the cover had been fastened the photograph of a boy who might have been ten or twelve years of age.

"Where did you get it, Penny?"

"I found it lying on the barn floor, not far from the place where we picked up the black hood last night."

"Then it must belong to Clem Davis!"

"It may," Penny admitted, sliding into the seat beside her chum. "Still, I don't believe the Davis' have any children."

"What will you do with the charm? Turn it over to the sheriff?"

"I suppose I should, after I've shown it to Dad," Penny replied, carefully tying the trinket into the

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corner of a handkerchief. "You know, Lou, since finding this, I wonder if Mrs. Davis may not have told the truth."

"About what, Penny?"

"She said that her husband had been framed."

"Then you think this watch charm was left in the barn to throw suspicion upon Clem Davis!"

Penny shook her head. "No, this is my theory, Louise. Perhaps someone hid the black hood there, and rode Clem's horse to make it appear he was the guilty person. Inadvertently, that same person lost this watch charm."

"In that case, you would have a clue which might solve the case."

"Exactly," Penny grinned in triumph. "Get ready for a fast ride into town. I'm going to rush this evidence straight to the *Star* office and get Dad's opinion."

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CHAPTER

7

MR. BLAKE'S DONATION

NOT WISHING to ride to the *Star* building, Louise asked her chum to drop her off at the Sidell home. Accordingly, Penny left her there, and then drove on alone to her father's office. The news room hummed with activity as she sauntered through to the private office.

"Just a minute, please," her father requested, waving her into a chair.

He completed a letter he was dictating, dismissed his secretary, and then was ready to listen. Without preliminary ado, Penny laid the watch charm on the desk, explaining where she had found it.

"Dad, this may belong to Clem Davis, but I don't think so!" she announced in an excited voice. "It's my theory that the person who planted the black hood in the stable must have lost it!"

Mr. Parker examined the charm carefully, gazing at the picture of the little boy contained within it.

"Very interesting," he commented. "However, I fear you are allowing your imagination to take you

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for a ride. There isn't much question of Clem Davis' guilt according to the findings of the sheriff."

"Has any new evidence come to light, Dad?"

"Yes, Penny, the sheriff's office has gained possession of a document showing beyond question that Clem Davis is a member of a renegade band known as the Black Hoods."

"Where did they get their proof?"

"Sheriff Davis won't disclose the source of his information. However, our star reporter, Jerry Livingston, is working on the case, and something may develop any hour."

"Then you're intending to make it into a big story?" Penny asked thoughtfully.

"I am. An underground, subversive organization, no matter what its purpose, has no right to an existence. The *Star* will expose the leaders, if possible, and break up the group."

"Since the Hoods apparently burned the Preston storage barn, their purpose can't be a very noble one," Penny commented. "Nor are their leaders especially clever. The trail led as plain as day to Clem Davis—so straight, in fact, that I couldn't help doubting his guilt."

"Penny, I'll keep this watch charm, if you don't mind," Mr. Parker said, locking the trinket into a drawer. "I'll put Jerry to work on it and he may be able to learn the identity of the little boy in the picture."

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Abruptly changing the subject, the editor inquired regarding his daughter's success in selling Camp-Benefit tags.

"I have only one left," Penny replied, presenting it with a flourish. "Twenty-five cents, please."

"The cause is a worthy one. I'll double the amount." Amiably, Mr. Parker flipped a half dollar across the desk.

"While you're in a giving mood I might mention that my allowance is due," Penny said with a grin. "Also, you owe me five gallons of gasoline. I saw old Seth McGuire this morning and he agreed with me that the Hubell clock struck thirteen last night."

Mr. Parker had no opportunity to reply, for just then his secretary re-entered the office to say that Mr. Clyde Blake wished to see him.

"I suppose that means you want me to evaporate," Penny remarked, gazing questioningly at her father.

"No, stay if you like. It's probably nothing of consequence."

Penny welcomed an invitation to remain. After her talk with Seth McGuire she was curious to see the man who had caused the old bell maker to lose his position at the Hubell Tower.

"Blake probably wants to ask me to do him a personal favor," Mr. Parker confided in a low tone. "He's a pest!"

In a moment the door opened again to admit the real estate man. He was heavy-set, immaculately

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dressed, and the only defect in his appearance was caused by a right arm which was somewhat shorter than the left.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Parker," he said expansively. "And is this your charming daughter?"

The editor introduced Penny, who bowed politely and retreated to a chair by the window. Prejudiced against Mr. Blake, she had no desire to talk to him.

"What may I do for you?" Mr. Parker asked the caller.

"Ah, this time it is I who shall bestow the favor," Mr. Blake responded, taking a cheque book from his pocket. "Your paper has been campaigning for a very worthy cause, namely the Orphans' Summer Camp Fund. It wrings my heart that those unfortunate kiddies have been denied the benefit of fresh air and sunshine."

"If you wish to make a donation, you should give your money to Mrs. Van Cleve," the editor cut him short.

"I much prefer to present my cheque to you," the caller insisted. "Shall I make it out for a hundred and fifty dollars?"

"That's a very handsome donation," said Mr. Parker, unable to hide his surprise. "But why give it to me?"

Mr. Blake coughed in embarrassment. "I thought you might deem the offering worthy of a brief mention in your paper."

"Oh, I see," the editor responded dryly.

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"I don't wish publicity for myself, you understand, but only for the real estate company which bears my name."

"I quite understand, Mr. Blake. If we should use your picture—"

"That will be very acceptable," the real estate man responded, smiling with satisfaction. "I'll be happy to oblige you by posing."

Helping himself to a pen, he wrote out the cheque and presented it to the editor.

"Penny, how would you like to write the story?" inquired her father. "You've been helping Miss Norton with the publicity, I believe."

"I'm rather bogged down with work," Penny demurred. "I think Mrs. Weems wants me to clean the attic when I get home."

"Never mind the attic. Please conduct Mr. Blake to the photography room and ask one of the boys to take his picture."

Penny arose obediently, but as the real estate man left the office ahead of her, she shot her father a black look. She considered a publicity story very trivial indeed, and it particularly displeased her that she must write honeyed words about a man she did not admire.

"You have a very nice building here, very nice," Mr. Blake patronizingly remarked as he was escorted toward the photographic department. Noticing a pile of freshly printed newspapers lying on one of the desks, he helped himself to a copy.

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"I see the sheriff hasn't captured Clem Davis yet," he commented, scanning the front page. "I hope they get him! It's a disgrace to Riverview that such a crime could be perpetrated, and the scoundrel go unpunished."

"He'll probably be caught," Penny replied absently. "But I wonder if he's the guilty person."

"What's that?" Mr. Blake demanded, regarding her with shrewd interest. "You think Davis didn't burn the Preston barn?"

"I was only speculating upon it."

"Reflecting your father's opinion, no doubt."

"No, not anyone's thought but my own."

"Your father seems to be making quite a story of it," Mr. Blake resumed. "It will be most unfortunate for the community if he stirs up talk about underground organizations."

"Why unfortunate?" Penny asked.

"Because it will give the city a bad reputation. I doubt there is anything to this Black Hood talk, but if there should be, any publicity might lead to an investigation by state authorities."

"A very good thing, I should think."

"You do not understand," Mr. Blake said patiently. "Depredation would increase, innocent persons surely would suffer. With Riverview known unfavorably throughout the country, we would gain no new residents."

Penny did not reply, but opened the door of the

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photographic room. While Mr. Blake wandered about, inspecting the various equipment, she relayed her father's instructions to Salt Sommers, one of the staff photographers.

"Better get a good picture of Blake," she warned him. "He'll be irritated if you don't."

"I'll do my best," Salt promised, "but I can't make over a man's face."

Mr. Blake proved to be a trying subject. Posed on a stool in front of a screen, he immediately "froze" into a stiff position.

"Be sure to make it only a head and shoulders picture, if you please," he ordered Salt.

"Can't you relax?" the photographer asked wearily. "Unloosen your face. Think of all those little orphans you're going to make happy."

Mr. Blake responded with a smirk which was painful to behold. Nothing that Salt could say or do caused him to become natural, and at length the photographer took two shots which he knew would not be satisfactory.

"That'll be all," he announced.

Mr. Blake arose, drawing a deep sigh. "Posing is a great ordeal for me," he confessed. "I seldom consent to having my picture taken, but this is a very special occasion."

Completely at ease again, the real estate man began to converse with Penny. In sudden inspiration, Salt seized a candid camera from a glass case, and before

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Mr. Blake was aware of his act, snapped a picture.

"There, that's more like it," he said. "I caught you just right, Mr. Blake."

The real estate man turned swiftly, his eyes blazing anger.

"You dared to take a picture without my permission?" he demanded. "I'll not have it! Destroy the film at once or I shall protest to Mr. Parker!"

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CHAPTER

8

PUBLICITY BY PENNY

THE REAL estate man's outburst was so unexpected that Penny and Salt could only stare at him in astonishment.

"It's a good full length picture," the photographer argued. "Much better than those other shots I took."

"I can't allow it," Blake answered in a calmer tone. He touched his right arm. "You see, I am sensitive about this deformity. Unreasonable of me, perhaps, but I must insist that you destroy the film."

"Just as you say," Salt shrugged. "We'll use one of the other pictures."

"No, I've changed my mind," Blake said shortly. "I don't care for any picture. Kindly destroy all the films—now, in my presence."

"Why, Mr. Blake!" Penny protested. "I thought you wanted a picture to accompany the story I am to write."

"You may write the article, but I'll have no picture. The films must be destroyed."

"Okay," responded Salt. Removing two plates from

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a holder he exposed them to the light. He started to take the film from the candid camerá, but did not complete the operation. Mr. Blake, however, failed to notice.

"Thank you, young man," he said, bowing. "I am sorry to have taken so much of your valuable time, and I appreciate your efforts."

Nodding in Penny's direction, Mr. Blake left the studio, closing the door behind him.

"Queer duck," commented Salt. "His picture on the front page would be no break for our readers!"

"I can't understand why Mr. Blake became so provoked," Penny said thoughtfully. "That excuse about his arm seemed a flimsy one."

"Let's develop the film and see what it looks like," Salt suggested, starting for the darkroom. "It was just an ordinary shot though."

Penny followed the young photographer into the developing room, watching as he ran the film through the various trays. In exactly six minutes the picture was ready, and he held it beneath the ruby light for her to see.

"Nothing unusual about it," he repeated. "Blake's right arm looks á bit shorter than the left, but we could have blocked that off."

Salt tossed the damp picture into a wastepaper basket, only to have Penny promptly rescue it.

"I wish you would save this," she requested. "Put it in an envelope and file it away somewhere in the office."

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"What's the big idea, Penny?"

"Oh, just a hunch, I guess. Someday the paper may want a picture of Blake in a hurry, and this one would serve very nicely."

Aware that time was fast slipping away, Penny returned to her father's office to report Mr. Blake's strange action. Mr. Parker, well versed in the peculiarities of newspaper patrons, shrugged indifferently.

"Blake always was a queer fellow," he commented, fingering the cheque which still lay on his desk. "I never trusted him, and I wish I hadn't accepted this money."

"How could you have refused, Dad?"

"I couldn't very well. All the same, I have a feeling I'll regret it."

"Why do you say that?" Penny asked curiously.

"No reason perhaps. Only Blake isn't the man to give something for nothing. He aims to profit by this affair, or I'm no judge of human nature."

"He craves publicity, that's certain."

"Yes, but there's more to it than that," Mr. Parker declared. "Oh, well"—he dismissed the subject, "I'll turn the cheque over to the camp committee and let someone else do the worrying."

"I'll tell you why I dislike Mr. Blake," Penny said with feeling. "He caused Seth McGuire to lose his job at the Hubell Tower."

"That so?" the editor asked in surprise. "I hadn't heard about it."

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"Blake gave the position to a special friend of his. Can't you do something about it, Dad?"

"I don't know any of the basic facts, Penny. Why should I interfere in a matter which is none of my affair?"

"At least let's not give Mr. Blake a big build-up because of his donation."

"The story must be written," Mr. Parker said with finality. "I always keep a bargain, even a bad one."

"Then you might write the story," Penny proposed mischievously. "I can't spell such a big word as hypocrite!"

"Never mind," Mr. Parker reproved. "Just get busy and see that you handle the article in a way favorable to Blake."

With a deep sigh, Penny took herself to the adjoining newsroom. Selecting a typewriter, she pecked listlessly at the keys. Presently Jerry Livingston, one of the reporters, fired a paper ball at her.

"Your story must be a masterpiece," he teased. "It's taken you long enough to write it."

Penny jerked the sheet of copy from the typewriter roller. "It's not fair," she complained. "I have to dish out soft soap while you handle all the interesting stories. There should be a law against it."

"Learn to take the bitter along with the whipped cream," chuckled Jerry. "I've also just been handed an assignment that's not to my liking."

"Covering the Preston fire, I suppose."

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"Nothing that spectacular. DeWitt's sending me out to the Riverview Orphans' Home to dig up human interest material in connection with the camp-fund campaign. Want to ride along as ballast?"

"Well, I don't know?" Penny debated. "I've had almost enough of publicity stories for one day."

"Oh, come on," Jerry coaxed, taking her by the arm. "You can talk to the orphans and maybe turn up a lot of interesting facts."

"For you to write," she added ruefully. "Just a Sister Friday—that's my fate in this office."

Actually Penny welcomed an opportunity to accompany Jerry, for she liked him better than any young man of her acquaintance. Spearing the story she had just written on the copy desk spindle, she followed the reporter to the parking lot. Jerry helped her into one of the press cars, and they expertly drove through heavy downtown traffic.

"What's the latest on the Preston case?" Penny inquired, clutching her hat to keep it from blowing out the window.

"No latest," Jerry answered briefly. "The Prestons won't talk, Mrs. Davis won't talk, the sheriff won't talk. So far it totals up to one little story about a fire."

"Dad said the sheriff had learned Clem Davis was a member of a secret organization, probably known as the Black Hoods."

"Sheriff Daniels claims he has documentary proof," Jerry admitted. "He won't produce it though, and I

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have a sneaking suspicion that he may be bluffing."

"Then you think he wants to convict Clem Davis whether or not he's guilty?"

"He wants to end the case just as quickly as he can, Penny. The November elections aren't far away. If this night rider story gets a start, the dear public might turn on him, demanding action or his job."

"Do you think there actually is such an organization as the Black Hoods, Jerry?"

"I do," he returned soberly. "After talking with the Prestons and Mrs. Davis, I'm convinced they could tell quite a bit about it if they were willing to furnish evidence."

It pleased Penny that Jerry's opinion so nearly coincided with her own. Eagerly she told him of her own talk with Mrs. Davis, mentioning that someone had been hiding in the cornfield near the cabin.

"What time was that?" Jerry asked, stopping the car at a traffic light.

"Shortly after twelve o'clock."

"Then it couldn't have been Sheriff Daniels or his deputies," the reporter declared. "I was at the county office talking to them about that same time."

"It might have been Clem Davis," Penny suggested. "I'm sure his wife knows where he is hiding."

As the car sped over the country road, she kept the discussion alive by mentioning the watch charm which she had picked up at the Davis stable. Jerry had not seen the picture of the little boy, but promised to in-

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spect it just as soon as he returned to the *Star* offices.

"Clem Davis has no children," he assured Penny, "so it's unlikely the charm ever belonged to him. You may have found an important clue."

"I only wish Dad would officially assign me to the story," she grumbled. "He never will, though."

Presently the car approached the Riverview Orphans' Home, a large brick building set back some distance from the road. Children in drab blue uniforms could be seen playing in the front yard, supervised by a woman official.

"Poor kids," Jerry said with honest feeling, "you can't help feeling sorry for 'em. They deserve the best summer camp this town can provide."

"The project is certain to be possible now," Penny replied. "Mr. Blake's cheque put the campaign over the top."

Jerry gave the steering wheel an expert flip, turning the car into the private road.

"Don't tell me that old bird actually parted with any money!"

"Oh, he did, Jerry. He donated a cheque for a hundred and fifty dollars."

"And no strings attached?"

"Well, he hinted that he wanted a nice write-up about himself. I was torturing myself with the story when you interrupted."

"It's mighty queer," the reporter muttered. "Leopards don't change their spots. Blake must expect

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something more tangible than publicity out of the deal."

His mind centering on what Penny had just told him, Jerry gave no thought to his driving. Handling the steering wheel skillfully, but automatically, he whirled the car into the play area of the institution, drawing up with a loud screeching of brakes.

Uncertain that the reporter could stop, the children scattered in all directions. One little girl remained squarely in front of the car. Covering her face with her hands, she began to scream.

"Gosh all fish hooks!" Jerry exclaimed in dismay. "I didn't mean to frighten the kid."

Jumping from the coupe, he and Penny ran to the child.

"You're all right," Jerry said, stooping beside the little girl. The car didn't come within a mile of you. I'm mighty sorry."

Nothing that either he nor Penny could say seemed to quiet the child. Her screams did not subside until a matron appeared and took her by the hand.

"Come Adelle," she said gently. "We'll go into the house."

"I'm as sorry as I can be," Jerry apologized, doffing his hat. "I didn't intend to drive into the yard so fast. It's all my fault."

The attendant smiled to set him at ease. "Don't mind," she said quietly. "Adelle is very easily upset. I'll explain to you later."

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CHAPTER

9

JERRY'S PARTY

BOTH PENNY and Jerry regretted the incident, feeling that they had been at fault because they had driven into the play area at such high speed.

"Maybe I can send the kid a box of candy or make it up to her in some way," the reporter remarked.

Roving about the yard, he and Penny talked to many of the orphans. Nearly all of the children answered questions self-consciously and had little to say.

"We'll not get much of a story here," Jerry commented in an undertone. "These youngsters are as much alike as if they had been cut from one pattern."

"Adelle was different," Penny returned with a smile. "Almost too much so."

In a short while, Miss Anderson, the young woman who had taken the child away, returned to the play yard. Penny and Jerry immediately inquired about the little girl.

"Oh, she is quite herself again," the young woman responded. "The upset was only a temporary one."

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"Is Adelle easily frightened?" Penny inquired curiously.

"Unfortunately, she is terrified of automobiles," responded Miss Anderson. "I am afraid it is becoming a complex. You see, about a year ago both of her parents were killed in a motor accident."

"How dreadful!" Penny gasped.

"Adelle was in the car but escaped with a broken leg," the young woman resumed. "The incident made a very deep impression upon her."

"I should think so!" exclaimed Jerry. "How did the accident occur?"

"We don't know exactly, for Adelle was the only witness. According to her story, the Hanover automobile was crowded off the road by another motorist who drove at reckless speed, without lights. The car upset, pinning the occupants beneath it."

"It seems to me I remember that story," Jerry said thoughtfully. "The hit-run driver never was caught."

"No, according to Adelle he stopped, only to drive on again when he saw that her parents were beyond help."

"The man must have been heartless!" Penny declared indignantly. "How could he run away?"

"Because he feared the consequences," Miss Anderson answered. "Had he been apprehended he would have faced charges for manslaughter, and undoubtedly would have been assessed heavy damages."

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"I take it the child has no property or she wouldn't be at this institution," Jerry said soberly.

"Adelle is penniless. Her parents were her only relatives, so she was brought to us."

"It's a shame!" Penny declared feelingly. "Wasn't there any clue as to the identity of the man who caused the fatal accident?"

"No worthwhile ones. Adelle insists that she saw the driver's face plainly and could recognize him again. However, she never was able to give a very good description, nor to make an identification."

Having heard the story, Jerry was more than ever annoyed at himself because he had caused the child needless suffering.

"Miss Anderson, isn't there something I can do to make amends?" he asked earnestly. "What would the little girl like? Candy, toys?"

"It isn't necessary that you give her anything."

"I want to do it," Jerry insisted.

"In that case, why not make some small bequest to the institution, or send something which may be enjoyed by all the children."

"Jerry, I have an idea!" cried Penny impulsively. "Why not give a party? Would that be permissible, Miss Anderson?"

"Indeed, yes. The children love them, and outings away from the institution are their special delight."

"Let's give a watermelon party!" Penny proposed,

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immediately considering herself Jerry's partner in the affair. "We could take the children to a nearby farm and let them gorge themselves!"

"The children would enjoy it, I'm sure," Miss Anderson smiled. "Can transportation be arranged? We have sixty boys and girls."

"I'll take care of everything," Jerry promised. "Suppose we set tomorrow afternoon as the date."

"Oh, can't we have the party at night?" Penny pleaded. "There will be a full moon. A watermelon feast wouldn't be much fun by daylight."

Miss Anderson replied that she thought the children might be allowed to attend such a party, providing it were held early in the evening. Penny and Jerry talked with her about various details of the plan, and then drove away from the institution.

"Well, you certainly got me into something," Jerry chuckled as the car turned into the main road. "Where are we going to throw this party?"

"Oh, any melon farmer will be glad to let the children invade his patch, providing we pay for the privilege," Penny answered carelessly. "You might turn in at the next farm."

Her confidence proved to be ill-founded, for Mr. Kahler, the farmer whom they accosted, would not consider the proposition.

"The children will trample the vines, and do a lot of damage," he declined. "Why don't you try the Wentover place?"

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At the Wentover farm, Jerry and Penny likewise were turned down.

"No one wants sixty orphans running rampant over his place," the reporter observed in discouragement. "We may as well give up the idea."

"It's possible Mrs. Davis would allow us to hold a muskmelon party at her farm," Penny replied thoughtfully. "Now that her husband has skipped, she must be in need of money."

The chance of success seemed unlikely. However, to please Penny, Jerry drove to the Davis property. To their surprise they found the place humming with activity. Professional melon pickers were at work in the patch, and Mrs. Davis, dressed in overalls, was personally supervising the laborers.

"I have no time to answer questions!" she announced to Jerry before he could speak. "Please go away and leave me alone!"

"Oh, I'm not here in an official capacity this time," the reporter grinned. "We want to make you a business proposition."

He then explained what he had in mind. Mrs. Davis listened attentively but with suspicion.

"It's likely some trick!" she declared. "I'll have nothing to do with it!"

"Mrs. Davis, we're not trying to deceive you," Penny interposed earnestly. "We've tried several other farms before we came here. No one is willing to let the children trample the vines."

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"I suppose it wouldn't hurt mine," the woman admitted. "By tomorrow night we'll have all the best melons picked and sorted. I reckon the youngsters can have what's left in the patch."

"We'll pay you well for the privilege," Jerry promised, taking out his wallet.

"I don't want your money," the woman answered shortly. "Just see to it that the youngsters don't tear up the place."

Neither Penny nor Jerry wished to accept such a favor, but Mrs. Davis firmly refused to take pay.

"You know, I think the old girl has a tender heart beneath a hard exterior," the reporter remarked after the woman had gone back to the patch. "Down under she's a pretty decent sort."

For a time Penny and Jerry watched the laborers at their work. Heaping baskets of melons were brought from the patch to the barn. There they were sorted, stamped, and packed into crates which were loaded into a truck.

"Nice looking melons," the reporter remarked. "Mrs. Davis should make a pretty fair profit."

An elderly workman, who was sorting melons, glanced sideways at Jerry, grinning in a knowing way.

"Maybe," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" Jerry questioned him.

"Sellin' melons is a speculative business," the old fellow shrugged. "You ain't sure o' anything until your harvest is sold and you get the money in your fist."

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Penny and Jerry watched the sorting work for a few minutes longer and then returned to the car.

"You know, for a minute I thought that old duffer was hinting at something," the reporter remarked. "He acted as if it would give him real pleasure to see something happen to Mrs. Davis' melons."

"Oh, I didn't take it that way," Penny responded. "He was only waxing philosophical."

The hour was late. Knowing that he might be wanted at the *Star* office, Jerry drove rather fast over the bumpy road.

As the press car sped around a bend, a man who stood leaning against a fence post, quickly retreated into the woods. His act, however, had drawn Penny's attention.

"Stop the car, Jerry!" she cried. "There he is again!"

"Who?" demanded the reporter, slamming on brakes.

"I think it's the same man who hid in the cornfield!" Penny exclaimed excitedly. "It must be Clem Davis!"

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CHAPTER

10

IN THE MELON PATCH

"WHICH WAY did the fellow go?" Jerry demanded, bringing the car to a standstill.

"Into the woods," Penny answered tersely.

Leaping from the automobile, they climbed a fence, and reached the edge of the woods. Pausing there, they listened intently. No sound could be heard, not even the crackling of a stick.

"This timber land extends for miles," said Jerry. "We'd only waste time playing hide and seek in there. Our best bet is to notify Sheriff Daniels and let him throw a net around the entire section."

"I guess you're right," Penny acknowledged regretfully.

Making all haste to Riverview, they stopped briefly at the sheriff's office to make their report. Penny then said goodbye to Jerry and went to the newspaper building where she had parked Leaping Lena. The car would not start. Experienced in such matters, Penny raised the hood and posed beside it, a picture of

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a young lady in deep distress. Soon a taxi-cab cruised along.

"Having trouble, sister?" the driver asked.

Penny slammed down the hood, and scrambled into Leaping Lena.

"Just give me a little push," she instructed briskly.

Obligingly, the taxi driver backed into position behind Leaping Lena. After the two cars had gathered speed, Penny shifted gears. Lena responded with an ailing cough and then a steady chug.

"Thanks!" Penny shouted, waving farewell to her benefactor. "I'll return the favor someday."

"Not with that mess of junk!" the taxi man laughed.

By keeping the motor running at high speed, Penny reached home without mishap. Her father had arrived ahead of her, she noted, for the maroon car had been put away for the night.

Locking the garage doors, Penny entered the house by way of the kitchen.

"Where's Dad?" she asked the housekeeper, absently helping herself to a freshly baked cookie.

"Listen, and I think you can tell," Mrs. Weems answered.

A loud hammering noise came from the basement. Inspired by an advertisement of Waldon's Oak Paneling, Mr. Parker had decided to wall up the recreation room without the services of a carpenter. Much of his spare time was spent carrying on a personal feud with boards which refused to fit into the right places.

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"Poor Dad," Penny grinned as she heard a particularly loud exclamation of wrath. "I'll go down and drip a few consoling words."

Descending the stairs, she stood watching her father from the doorway of the recreation room.

"Hello, Penny," he said, looking over his shoulder. "You may as well make yourself useful. Hold this board while I nail it in place."

"All right, but be careful where you pound. Remember, I have only two hands and I prize them both."

With Penny holding the board, Mr. Parker nailed it to the underpinning.

"Well, what do you think of the job?" he asked, standing back to admire his work.

"As a carpenter you're a very good editor," Penny answered with exaggerated politeness. "Aren't walls supposed to come together at the corners?"

"I made a little mistake in my calculations. Later on I may build a corner cupboard to cover up the slight gap."

"Slight!" Penny chuckled. "Dad, if I were you I wouldn't get tangled up in any more carpenter jobs. It's too hard on your disposition."

"I never was in a better mood in my life," Mr. Parker insisted. "Good reason, too. At last I've got the best of Mr. Ben Bowman!"

"Bowman?" Penny inquired in a puzzled tone.

"That crank who keeps sending me collect messages."

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"Oh, to be sure! I'd forgotten about him."

"He sent another telegram today," Mr. Parker declared, smiling grimly. "I suspected it came from him and refused to pay for it."

"Bravo," Penny approved. "I knew you could get the best of that fellow if you just put your mind to it."

On the floor above a telephone rang, but neither of them paid any heed, knowing that Mrs. Weems would answer. In a moment the housekeeper called down the stairway, telling Mr. Parker he was wanted on the 'phone.

"It's Mr. DeWitt from the office," she informed him.

Putting aside his hammer, Mr. Parker went upstairs. Soon he returned to the basement, his manner noticeably subdued.

"What's the matter, Dad?" Penny inquired curiously. "You look as if you had just received a stunning blow."

"DeWitt telephoned to tell me the *Star* lost an important story today."

"How did that happen, Dad?"

"Well, a correspondent wired in the news, but by accident the message never reached DeWitt's desk."

Penny regarded her father shrewdly. "Ben Bowman's telegram?"

"I'm afraid it was," Mr. Parker admitted. "The message came to two dollars. I didn't know DeWitt had hired a correspondent at the town of Altona. Naturally I jumped to conclusions."

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"So you lost a news story because you refused a bona fide telegram," Penny said, shaking her head. "Ben Bowman scores again."

"You see what I'm up against," the editor growled. "I'd give a hundred dollars to be rid of that pest."

"You really mean it?" Penny demanded with interest.

"My peace of mind would be well worth the price."

"In that case, I may apply my own brain to the task. I could use a hundred dollars."

The discussion was interrupted by Mrs. Weems who called that dinner was ready. As Mr. Parker went to his usual place at the dining room table, he saw a yellow envelope lying on his plate.

"What's this?" he demanded sharply.

"A telegram," explained Mrs. Weems. "It came only a moment ago. I paid the boy."

"How much was the message?" the editor asked, his face grim.

"A dollar and a half." Mrs. Weems regarded her employer anxiously. "Did I do anything I shouldn't have? I supposed of course you would want me to accept the message."

"This is just too, too good!" Penny chuckled, thoroughly enjoying the situation. "Everything so perfectly timed, almost as if it were a play!"

"I don't understand," Mrs. Weems murmured. "I've done something I shouldn't—"

"It was not your fault," Mr. Parker assured her.

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"In the future, however, refuse to accept any collect message."

As her father did not open the telegram, Penny seized upon it.

"This is from a man who calls himself Isaac Fulterton," she disclosed, glancing at the bottom of the typed page.

"Merely one of Ben Bowman's many names," Mr. Parker sighed.

"Ah, this is a gem!" Penny chuckled, and read aloud: " 'Here is a suggestion for your rotten rag. Why not print it on yellow paper? I know you will not use it because editors think they know everything. I once knew a reader who got a little good out of your paper. He used it to clean the garbage can.' "

"How dreadful!" Mrs. Weems exclaimed, genuinely shocked.

"Penny, if you insist upon reading another line, I shall leave the table," Mr. Parker snapped. "I've had quite enough of Ben Bowman."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Penny apologized, slipping the message into her pocket. "I can appreciate that this doesn't seem very funny to you."

The telegram was not mentioned again. Nevertheless, Mr. Parker's good humor had given way to moody silence, contributing no cheer to the evening meal. Mrs. Weems kept glancing uneasily at her employer, wondering if she had offended him. Only Penny, whose appetite never failed, seemed thoroughly at ease.

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"Dad," she said suddenly. "I have an idea how Ben Bowman might be trailed!"

"Never mind telling me," her father answered. "I prefer not to hear his name mentioned."

"As you like," she shrugged. "I'll shroud myself in mystery and silence as I work. But when the case is ended, I'll present my bill!"

Actually, Penny held slight hope that ever she would be able to turn the elusive Ben Bowman over to the police. The wily fellow was far too clever ever to file two messages from the same telegraph office, and very seldom from the same city. However, the town of Claymore, from which the last message had been sent, was only fifty-five miles away. It had occurred to her that by going there she might obtain from telegraph officials the original message filed.

"In that way I'd at least have Ben Bowman's signature," she reflected. "While it wouldn't be much, it represents a start."

Always, Penny's greatest problem was insufficient time. Greatly as she desired to drive to Claymore, she knew it would be out of the question for several days. Not only must arrangements for the orphans' melon party be completed, but other interests demanded attention.

Temporarily dismissing Ben Bowman from her mind, Penny devoted herself to plans for the outing. Cars easily were obtained, and the following night, sixty excited orphans were transported to the Davis

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farm. With shrieks of laughter, the boys and girls took possession of the melon patch.

"Pick all you like from the vines," Penny called, "but don't touch any of the crated ones."

In the yard not far from the storage barn stood a truck loaded with melons which were ready for the market.

"This must represent the cream of Mrs. Preston's crop," Jerry remarked, lifting the canvas which covered the load. "Maybe she'll be luckier than her neighbors, the Doolittles."

"What happened to them?" Penny asked, surprised by the remark.

"Don't you ever read the *Star?*"

"I didn't today. Too busy. Tell me about the Doolittles, Jerry."

"Mr. Doolittle was taking a load of melons to market. Another truck brushed him on the River road. The melon truck upset, and the entire shipment was lost."

"Can't he get damages?"

"Doolittle didn't learn who was responsible."

"Was it an accident or done deliberately?" Penny asked thoughtfully.

"Sheriff Daniels thinks it was an accident. I'm inclined to believe the Black Hoods may have had something to do with it."

"Why should anyone wish to make trouble for Mr. Doolittle, Jerry? All his life he has stayed on his little

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truck farm, and strictly attended to his own affairs."

"There's only one possible reason so far as I know," the reporter answered. "Not long ago Doolittle refused to join the Holloway County Cooperative, an organization that markets crops for the truck farmers."

"And you believe the Hoods may be connected with the Cooperative?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," Jerry replied hastily. "Fact is, the Holloway Cooperative always has had a good reputation."

"There's no question the Preston barn was destroyed by the Hoods," Penny said reflectively. "Although the evidence pointed to Clem Davis, I've never felt satisfied he was guilty."

"Same here," agreed Jerry. "Another thing, I keep mulling over what that melon sorter said yesterday."

"You mean his hint that something might happen to Mrs. Davis' crop?"

"Yeah. Maybe he knew more than he let on."

"The Hoods will have to work fast if they destroy the Davis melons," Penny rejoined. "Besides, didn't the sheriff uncover proof that Clem Davis is a member of the organization?"

"That's what he says. I wonder about that too."

Not far from the truck was a small pile of discarded melons, culls which were misshapen or over-ripe. Selecting one, Jerry tossed it into the air and caught it.

"Just the right size for a hand grenade," he remarked. "Watch!"

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He threw the melon hard against the barn. It burst against the siding, breaking into a dozen fragments and leaving an unsightly blotch of oozing seeds.

"Jerry, you shouldn't do that," Penny chided. "Mrs. Davis won't like it."

"Okay, I'll be good," the reporter promised. "The temptation was just too strong to resist."

By this time, the hubbub in the melon patch had slightly subsided as the youngsters gained their fill of cantaloupe. Soon institution officials began to pilot the children to the waiting cars. Several lads protested at the early termination of the party.

"Do let the boys stay awhile longer," Penny pleaded. "Jerry and I will bring them back in a few minutes."

"Very well," the matron consented. "But don't allow them to eat so many melons that they will be sick."

The responsibility of looking after six orphans weighed heavily upon Penny. After the cars had driven away, she and Jerry patrolled the patch, trying vainly to maintain order. With institution authorities no longer present, the boys proceeded to enjoy themselves. They ran races down the furrows, lassoed one another with vines, and pelted ripe melons against the fence posts.

"Hey, you little hoodlums!" Jerry shouted. "Cut it out or you'll go back to the Home pronto!"

"Says who?" mocked one saucy little fellow in a piping voice.

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"Quiet everyone!" commanded Penny suddenly. "Listen!"

In the silent night could be heard the clatter of horses hoofs. Jerry whirled around, gazing toward the entrance to the lane. Two horsemen, black hoods covering their faces, rode at a hard gallop toward the storage barn.

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CHAPTER

11

PENNY'S CLUE

"THE NIGHTSHIRT riders!" Jerry exclaimed. "Duck down, everyone!"

Penny and the six lads from the Riverview Home crouched low, watching the approach of the two riders.

"One of those men may be Clem Davis, but I doubt it!" muttered Jerry. "They're here to destroy the crated cantaloupes!"

"Jerry, we can't let them get away with it!" Penny exclaimed. "Why not pelt them with melons when they get closer?"

"Okay," he agreed grimly, "we'll give 'em a spoiled cantaloupe blitz. Gather your ammunition, gang, and get ready!"

Screened from the approaching horsemen by trees and bushes, the young people hastily collected a few over-ripe cantaloupes which were small enough to throw with accuracy.

Unaware of the barrage awaiting them, the two hooded men rode into the yard.

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"Now!" Jerry gave the signal. "Let 'em have it!"

Taking careful aim, he hurled his own melon with all his strength. It found its mark, striking one of the men with stunning force, nearly causing him to fall from the saddle.

Penny and the boys from the orphans' home concentrated their efforts on the other horseman. While many of their shots were wild, a few went true. One struck the horse which reared suddenly on her hind legs, unseating the rider.

"Give it to him!" Jerry shouted, observing that the fallen man was unhurt.

Handicapped by lack of ammunition, there followed a brief lull in the battle, as the young people sought to replenish their stock. Seizing the opportunity, one of the night riders galloped away. The other man, who had lost his horse, scrambled into the cab of the loaded melon truck.

"He's going to drive off!" Penny cried. "Let's stop him!"

She and Jerry ran toward the truck, but they were too late. The giant motor started with a roar, and the heavy vehicle rolled out of the yard.

Just then, Mrs. Davis came running from the cabin.

"My melons!" she screamed. "They've taken my melons! Oh, I was afraid something like this would happen!"

"Maybe I can overtake that fellow," Jerry called to her. "Ride herd on these kids until I get back!"

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As he ran toward his own car, Penny was close at his heels. She slid into the seat beside him and they raced down the lane.

"Which way did the truck go?" Jerry demanded. "I was so excited I forgot to notice."

"It turned right. No sign of it now, though."

"The fellow is running without lights to make it harder for us to follow him."

Jerry and Penny both were hopeful that they could overtake the truck, which carried a heavy load. However, they had been delayed several minutes in getting started, and as the miles fell behind them, they caught no glimpse of the man they pursued.

"He must have turned off on that little side road we passed a quarter of a mile back," Penny declared in discouragement. "Switch off the engine a minute."

Bringing the car to a standstill, Jerry did as instructed. Both listened intently. From far over the hills they thought they could hear the muffled roar of a powerful motor.

"You're right, Penny! He turned off at that side road!" Jerry exclaimed, backing the coupe around. "We'll get him yet!"

Retracing their route, they started down the narrow rutty highway. Five minutes later, rounding a sharp bend, they caught their first glimpse of the truck, a dark object silhouetted in the moonlight. Only for a moment did it remain visible, and then, descending a hill, was lost to view.

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"We're gaining fast," Jerry said in satisfaction. "It won't be long now."

The coupe rattled over a bridge. For no reason at all it began to bump, a loud pounding noise coming from the rear of the car.

"Gracious! What now?" Penny exclaimed.

"A flat," Jerry answered tersely. "Just our luck."

Pulling up at the side of the road, he jumped out to peer at the tires. As he had feared, the left rear one was down.

"We'll probably lose that fellow now," he said irritably.

With Penny holding a flashlight, the reporter worked as fast as he could to change the tire. However, nearly fifteen minutes elapsed before the task had been accomplished.

"We may as well turn back," he said, tossing tools into the back of the car. "How about it?"

"Oh, let's keep on a little farther," Penny pleaded. "If we drive fast we might still overtake him."

Without much hope, they resumed the pursuit. Tires whined a protest as they swung around sharp corners, and the motor began to heat.

"This old bus can't take it any more," Jerry declared, slackening speed again. "No sense in ruining the car."

Penny had been watching the road carefully. They had passed no bisecting highways, so she felt certain that the truck could not have turned off. On either

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side of the unpaved thoroughfare were lonely stretches of swamp and woods.

"Let's not turn back yet," she pleaded. "We still have a chance."

"Okay," Jerry consented, "but don't forget we have six orphans waiting for us at the Davis place."

The car went on for another eight miles. Then came a welcome stretch of pavement.

"We must be getting near the state line," Jerry remarked. "Yeah, there it is."

Directly ahead was a tiny brick building with an official waiting to inspect cars which passed beyond that point. A series of markers warned the motorist to halt at the designated place.

As Jerry drew up, a man came from the little building.

"Carrying any shrubs, plants or fruit?" he began but the reporter cut him short.

"We're following a stolen truck!" he exclaimed. "Has a red truck loaded with cantaloupes gone through here tonight?"

"I checked one about fifteen minutes ago."

"Fifteen minutes!" Jerry groaned. "That finishes us."

"The trucker could have reached Claymore by this time," the inspector responded. "Once in the city you wouldn't have much chance to pick him up. I have the truck license number though. If you'll give me all the facts, I'll make a report to Claymore police."

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There was no point in pursuing the thief farther. Accordingly, Penny and Jerry provided the requested information, and then drove to the Davis farm. Regretfully, they told Mrs. Davis of their failure to trace the melon thief.

"I've lost my crop, the truck—everything," she said in a crushed voice. "What's the use trying anyhow? A body would be smarter to go along with 'em than to try to fight."

"I take it you have a pretty fair idea who it was that came here tonight?" Jerry said shrewdly. "Who are these Hoods?"

"I don't dare tell you," the woman answered fearfully. "You saw what they did tonight. They threw the blame of the Preston fire on Clem. They'll do worse things if I don't keep mum."

"You want to help your husband, don't you?" Penny inquired.

"Of course I do! But I know better than to talk."

"You've been warned?" Jerry pursued the subject.

"Yes, I have. Now don't ask me any more questions. I've told you too much already."

"I just want to know one thing," Jerry said relentlessly. "Did your trouble start because you and your husband refused to join the Holloway Cooperative?"

"Maybe it did," the woman answered, her voice barely above a whisper. "I ain't saying."

It was apparent to Jerry and Penny that they could expect no assistance from Mrs. Davis. Although the

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events of the night had convinced them that Clem Davis was innocent, others would not share their opinion. They felt that by shielding the guilty parties, Mrs. Davis was adopting a very stupid attitude.

"Come along, Penny," Jerry said with a shrug. "Let's be moving."

Six reluctant orphans were rounded up from the hay loft where a boisterous game of hide and seek was in progress.

"I can jam four into my coupe if you can handle the other two in your car," Jerry remarked to Penny. "If they make you any trouble, just toot the horn twice, and I'll come back and settle with 'em!"

"Oh, we'll get along fine," she smiled. "Come along, boys."

"Here's a souvenir to remember the night by," Jerry said. From the ground he picked up two melons which he handed to the orphans. "Just don't sock the matron with them when you get back to the Home!"

"Jerry, let me see one of those melons!" Penny exclaimed suddenly. "They fell from the truck, didn't they?"

"I guess so," Jerry responded, surprised by her display of interest. "What about 'em?"

"I'll show you."

Turning on the dash light of the car, Penny held the melon in its warm glow. Slowly, she turned it in her hands.

"There!" she said, pointing to a tiny triangle shaped

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marking on the cantaloupe. "This may prove a clue which will lead to the capture of the thief!"

"I don't get it," answered Jerry. "What clue?"

"Why, this stamping on the melon!" she replied excitedly. "The Hoods must intend to sell that load of cantaloupes. If they do, we may be able to trace the shipment."

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CHAPTER

12

ADELLE'S DISAPPEARANCE

JERRY TOOK the melon from Penny's hand to examine it.

"This stamp may be helpful," he said dubiously, "but I doubt it. The Hoods never would be so stupid as to sell melons which could be traced. No, I think our investigation will have to center close at home."

"You're referring to the Holloway Cooperative, Jerry?"

"That outfit certainly merits an investigation. In the morning I'll jog out to their packing plant and talk to the manager, Hank Holloway."

"What time will you be going, Jerry?"

"About nine o'clock probably."

"Perhaps I'll meet you there," Penny said thoughtfully. "That is, if you don't mind."

"Glad to have you," the reporter responded in a hearty voice.

The two cars soon started for the Riverview Orphans' Home, arriving there without mishap. After unloading the boys entrusted to their care, Jerry

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and Penny then went to their respective residences.

"I'm glad you came at last," Mrs. Weems remarked as the girl entered the house. "You're to telephone Miss Anderson at the Riverview Orphans' Home."

"But I just left there," Penny protested. "When did the call come?"

"About fifteen minutes ago."

Wondering what could be amiss, Penny went to the telephone. In a moment she was in communication with Miss Anderson, who assisted the matron of the institution. The young woman's voice betrayed agitation as she disclosed that following the night's outing, an orphan had been discovered missing.

"Oh, goodness!" Penny exclaimed, aghast. "One of those six boys?"

Miss Anderson's reply slightly reassured her.

"No, the missing child is a little girl who was not permitted to attend the party because of a severe cold. You may remember her—Adelle."

"Indeed I do, Miss Anderson. Tell me how I may help."

"We've already organized searching parties," the young woman returned. "Adelle surely will be found within a few hours. However, if the story gets out it will do the institution no good—particularly at this time when our drive for funds is on."

"I see," Penny murmured, "you would like the news kept out of the *Star?*"

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"Can it be arranged?" Miss Anderson asked eagerly. "If you will talk to your father about it we'll be very grateful."

"I'll ask him not to print the story," Penny promised, none too pleased by the request. "I do hope Adelle is found soon."

She could not help feeling that the institution officials seemed far more worried about the prospect of unfavorable publicity than over the missing child's welfare. Saying goodbye to Miss Anderson, she sought her father who was reading in the library.

"Penny, you know I don't like to grant such favors," Mr. Parker frowned when the conversation was repeated to him. "As a matter of principle, it never pays to withhold information unless the telling will harm innocent persons."

"In this case, it will damage the institution," Penny argued quietly. "Besides, I feel more or less responsible. What started out as a nice little party for the orphans, ended in a regular brawl. It was planned primarily for Adelle and then she ran away because she wasn't permitted to attend."

Starting at the very beginning, Penny told her father everything that had happened during the night. The tale was one of absorbing interest to Mr. Parker. When she had finished, he said:

"Don't worry about the affair, Penny. I am as interested in the Riverview Camp fund as you are.

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We'll give the institution no unfavorable publicity."

"Oh, thanks, Dad!" she cried gratefully, wrapping her arms about his neck. "You're just grand!"

"Weak as water, you mean," he corrected with a chuckle. "By the way, I suppose you know that your friend Blake has been named to the Camp Fund board."

"No!" Penny exclaimed. "How did that happen?"

"He hinted to Mrs. Van Cleve that he would like to serve. Naturally, after his handsome donation, she couldn't refuse."

"Why do you suppose Mr. Blake has taken such a sudden interest in the Home?"

"I wonder myself. I've thought from the first that he's up to something. So far I've not been able to figure out his little game."

"Well, you're on the board too," Penny declared, undisturbed. "If he starts any monkey business you can put a quick stop to it."

"I fear you overestimate my talents," Mr. Parker responded. "However, I do intend to see that Blake doesn't profit too much by his donation."

The hour was late and Penny soon went to bed. Disturbed by Adelle's disappearance, she did not sleep well. Arising early, she telephoned the Orphans' Home, hoping to learn that the child had been found. No such good news awaited her.

"Searchers have looked everywhere between here and the Davis farm," Miss Anderson revealed. "Un-

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less the child is found by noon, it will be necessary to broadcast a general alarm. And that's certain to bring unfavorable attention to the Home."

"Is there any chance she could have been kidnaped?" Penny asked thoughtfully.

"Not the slightest," was the prompt reply. "Adelle took most of her clothes with her. It's a plain case of a runaway, but most annoying at this time."

Penny ate a hasty breakfast, and then remembering her appointment with Jerry, drove to the Holloway Cooperative. The buildings were of modern concrete construction, located three and a half miles from Riverview in the heart of the truck farming district.

Jerry Livingston had not yet arrived, so Penny waited in the car. Soon his coupe swung into the drive and pulled up alongside Leaping Lena.

"Sorry to be late," he apologized. "I was held up at the office."

Knowing that her father would have told Jerry about Adelle's disappearance, Penny inquired regarding the latest news.

"So far there's not a trace of the child," the reporter answered. "Your father's sore at himself for promising not to carry the story. It may develop into something big."

Penny walked beside Jerry to the entrance of the cooperative plant.

"No one seems to worry much about Adelle," she

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remarked. "The institution people are afraid of unfavorable publicity, Dad's alarmed about his story, while you and I are just plain indifferent."

"I'm not indifferent," Jerry denied. "In a way I feel responsible for that kid. But what can we do?"

"Nothing, I guess," acknowledged Penny unwillingly. "Miss Anderson said they had enough searchers."

Opening the door of the building, they stepped into a huge room which hummed with activity. Girls in uniforms stood at long tables inspecting melons which moved on an endless belt arrangement before them. Sorted as to quality and size, each cantaloupe was stamped and packed in a crate which was then borne away.

"Hank Holloway around here?" Jerry asked one of the workers.

"Over there," the girl responded, pointing to a burly, red-faced man who stood at the opposite end of the room.

Jerry and Penny approached the manager of the co-operative.

"Good morning," the man said gruffly, gazing at them critically. "What can I do for you?"

"We're from the *Star*," Jerry informed. "Do you mind answering a few questions?"

"I'm pretty busy," Hank Holloway responded, frowning. "What do you want to know?"

"There's a rumor going the rounds that this co-

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operative has been forcing farmers to market their melons through your organization."

"It's a lie!" the manager retorted. "Why they come here begging us to take their stuff! We get better prices than anyone in this section of the state, and we pass the profit right back to the farmers."

"How do you account for the depredation that's been going on around here lately? Who would you say is behind it?"

"What d'you mean, depredation?" Hank Holloway demanded.

"The destruction of the Preston barn just as their melons were ready for market. Then last night a truck of cantaloupes was stolen from the Davis place."

"That so?" the manager asked. "Hadn't heard about it. Clem Davis always was a worthless, no-good. It wouldn't surprise me that he covered his harvest with plenty of insurance, and then arranged the snatch so he could collect."

"That hardly seems reasonable," Jerry said dryly.

"You asked for my opinion and I'm giving it to you. The Davis melons were so inferior we wouldn't handle them at the cooperative."

"Why, I thought their cantaloupes were particularly fine ones!" Penny protested.

"I don't know what you two are trying to get at!" Hank Holloway said with sudden anger. "The Co-operative does business in a fair and square way. Our books are open for inspection at any time. Now

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you'll have to excuse me, for I've got work to do."

With a curt nod, he turned away.

Penny and Jerry wandered about the room for a few minutes, watching the packers. They did not much blame Hank Holloway for showing irritation. Their questions had been very pointed and the man had immediately guessed that their purpose was to uncover facts detrimental to the Cooperative.

"We learned about as much as I expected to," Jerry said with a shrug, as he and Penny finally left the building. "Naturally one couldn't hope he'd break down and confess all."

"What did you really think of him, Jerry?"

"Hard to say," the reporter answered. "He's a rough and ready sort, but that's not against him. There's no real reason to believe he's crooked—just a hunch of mine."

Having been assigned to cover a board meeting, Jerry hurriedly said goodbye to Penny. Left to herself, she drove slowly toward Riverview.

"Since I am so near Seth McGuire's place, I may as well stop for a minute or two," she thought impulsively.

Despite many exciting events, Penny had not lost interest in the Hubell clock. Although it seemed reasonable that a faulty mechanism had caused it to strike thirteen, such an explanation did not completely satisfy her. She was eager to learn from the former caretaker if the difficulty had been corrected.

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Leaving her car by the main road, Penny went directly to the shop. The door was closed and locked. However, as she turned away, she distinctly heard a voice inside the building. Although she could not make out the words, she was certain that a child had called.

"Who is it?" she shouted.

"Help! Let me out!" came the plaintive cry from inside the shop.

Penny ran to the window and peered into the dark interior. She scarcely was able to believe what she saw. A little girl, her face streaked with tears and dirt, pounded fiercely on the heavy door, seeking release.

"It's Adelle!" she gasped. "How in the world did she get locked in Mr. McGuire's shop?"

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CHAPTER

13

AN EXTRA STROKE

WITH ALL the windows and the door of the shop locked, Penny did not know how to free the imprisoned child. However, as she considered the problem, Seth McGuire appeared on the porch of the cottage.

"Good morning," he greeted her pleasantly.

"Oh, Mr. McGuire!" Penny exclaimed. "Did you know there is a child locked inside your shop?"

"A child!" the old man exclaimed, coming quickly down the steps. "Why bless me! How can that be?"

"I don't understand how she got inside, but she's there! Officials of the Riverview Orphans' Home have been searching for Adelle Hanover since last night."

"Wait until I get my key," the old man said in an agitated voice. "I hope you don't think I locked the child into the shop!"

Knowing Mr. McGuire as she did, Penny entertained no such thought. Waving encouragingly to

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Adelle through the window, she waited for the old man to return.

"I locked the door about eleven o'clock last night," he explained, fumbling nervously with the key. "The little girl must have stolen in there sometime between six o'clock and that hour."

The old man's hand shook so that he could not unlock the door. Taking the key, Penny did it for him. Adelle, her hair flying wildly about her face, stumbled out of the shop.

"I'm hungry," she sobbed. "It was cold in there, and a big rat kept running around. Why did you lock me inside?"

"Why, bless you," Mr: McGuire murmured, "I never dreamed anyone was inside the shop! How did you get in there?"

"I went inside last night and hid," Adelle explained in a calmer voice. "It was cold outside and I had to have some place to sleep."

"You never should have run away from the Home," Penny reproved. "Why did you do it?"

"Because I don't like it there," the child answered defiantly. "I'll never be adopted like the other children."

"Why, how silly!" Penny answered. "Of course someone will adopt you."

Adelle shook her head. "Miss Anderson says I won't be—I heard her tell the matron. It's on account

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of a nervous 'fliction. I'm afraid of things, 'specially cars."

"That's very natural, everything considered," Penny replied, thinking of the story Miss Anderson had told her. "Now I'll take you to the Home."

Adelle drew away, and as if seeking protection, crowded close beside Mr. McGuire.

"I'm never going back, even if I freeze and starve!" she announced. "I'll find me a cave and live on berries. It would be more fun than being an orphan."

Penny gazed despairingly at the old bell maker. With a chuckle, he took the child by the hand and led her toward the cottage.

"We'll have lunch and talk things over," he proposed. "How will that be?"

"I'm awful hungry," Adelle admitted, smiling up at him. "But you won't give me any old boiled potatoes, will you? We have 'em every single day at the Home."

"No potatoes," he laughed. "We'll have the very nicest things I can find in the icebox, and maybe a stick of candy to top it off."

While Mr. McGuire pottered about the kitchen preparing a warm meal, Penny washed Adelle and combed her tangled hair. Afterwards, she telephoned officials of the Home, telling them that the child had been found.

"I'll bring her there within an hour," she promised. "Just as soon as she has had her lunch."

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Adelle was ravenous. She was not a pretty child, but her face had an elfin quality when she smiled. Her brown eyes, roving about the spick and span little dinette, took in every detail.

"This is almost as nice as it was at our home," she remarked. "I mean my real home, when Daddy and Mother were alive."

"You'll have a nice place again when you are adopted," Penny assured her kindly.

"I'd like to stay here," Adelle said, looking thoughtfully at the old man. "Would your wife let me?"

"Why, bless you, I haven't a wife," he answered in embarrassment. "I'm a bachelor."

"Wouldn't you like a little girl?" Adelle persisted. "I could do your dishes for you and sweep the floor. I'd be real good."

"Well, now I've often thought I would like a nice little girl," he replied, smiling.

"Then you can have me!" Adelle cried, jumping up from her chair. "You can tell the Home I won't be back!"

"Not so fast, not so fast," Mr. McGuire said hastily. "I'd like a little girl, but I am afraid I can't afford one. You see, I don't make much money any more and there are other reasons—"

"Oh, I won't eat much," Adelle promised. "Please keep me, Mr. McGuire."

The old man was so distressed that Penny tried to come to his rescue. However, despite repeated ex-

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planations, Adelle refused to understand why she could not immediately become Mr. McGuire's little girl.

"If I had my old job back, I'd be tempted, sorely tempted," the old man said to Penny. "I've always wanted someone that was near and dear to me." He drew a deep sigh. "As things are, I don't see how it could be worked out."

"Won't you keep thinking about it?" Adelle pleaded. "Anytime you want me, I'll come right away."

"Yes, I'll think about it," Mr. McGuire promised soberly. "I really will."

An hour later Penny took a very depressed Adelle back to the Riverview Orphans' Home. Leaving her there, she drove on into town, chancing to see her chum, Louise Sidell on the street. Signalling her with a toot of the horn, Penny swung wide the door.

"On your way home, Lou?" she inquired.

"No, just wandering around in a daze trying to do a bit of shopping," Louise answered, sharing the seat. "The stores here never have anything I want."

"Then why not go to Claymore?" Penny proposed suddenly.

"I would if I could get there."

"I'll take you," Penny offered. "I need to go to Claymore on special business, and I'd like to have someone ride along."

"Well, I don't know," Louise replied dubiously. "I

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doubt Leaping Lena would stand such a long trip."

"Oh, I'll take the other car."

"In that case the answer is 'yes,' " Louise replied instantly.

Penny drove directly home to exchange cars and tell Mrs. Weems where she was going.

"Louise and I may not be back until very late," she warned. "It's barely possible we'll attend the theatre while we're at Claymore. There's a new play on, and everyone says it's grand."

"If you drive after night, be very careful," the housekeeper responded uneasily. "There are so many accidents these days."

A brief stop was made at the Sidell residence, and then the girls took to the road. Deliberately, Penny selected the same route which she and Jerry had followed the previous night.

"Is that why we're going to Claymore?" Louise inquired curiously, as she heard the story of what had happened to the Davis truck. "You intend to trace those stolen melons?"

"I haven't much hope of doing that," Penny answered. "I want to visit the telegraph office and get an original message which was sent to Dad. His life has been made miserable by a pest who keeps sending him telegrams, and I'm out to catch the rascal."

"You jump around from one thing to another so fast I can't keep track of your enterprises," Louise sighed.

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"I concentrate on the ones which offer a prospect of ready cash," Penny rejoined with a laugh. "If I catch Mr. Ben Bowman it means exactly one hundred dollars to me!"

Upon reaching Claymore, the girls spent two hours shopping at the large department stores. Penny then made a tour of the telegraph offices, finally locating the one from which Mr. Bowman's message had been sent. After explaining why she wished it, she was allowed to inspect and keep the original copy which bore the sender's signature.

"I'll turn this handwriting over to the police," she explained to Louise. "They may be able to trace Ben Bowman by means of it."

"Providing the man ever comes to Riverview," Louise said skeptically. "It seems like a forlorn hope to me."

Before leaving the office, Penny inquired of the clerk who had handled the message if a description of Ben Bowman could be provided.

"I really don't remember him," the young woman answered. "In general I should say he was well-dressed—probably about thirty-five years of age."

"Not much to go on," Penny said regretfully. "Thanks anyhow."

"Where now?" Louise asked in a weary voice as they finally left the telegraph office. "Shall we buy tickets to the play?"

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"Not yet," said Penny. "I'd like to wander around the market district a bit."

For the next hour they did exactly that, selecting a section of the city where farmers brought their produce to sell in open stalls. Penny went from one counter to another, inspecting cantaloupes, hoping to find one which bore the Davis stamp.

"I'm getting tired of pawing vegetables!" Louise presently complained. "When do we eat?"

"All right, we may as well call it a day," Penny replied reluctantly.

In the downtown section of the city, the girls found a small cafe which advertised a deluxe dinner for one dollar. Treating themselves to the best, they enjoyed a leisurely meal, and then bought theatre tickets.

"Penny, do you realize what all this is costing us?" Louise began to worry belatedly.

"Oh, I'll soon make it up," Penny joked. "Wait until I capture Ben Bowman! With my profit from him we'll paint the town red!"

"You're nothing if not optimistic," Louise said pityingly.

The play was an excellent one and when the curtain fell at eleven, neither girl begrudged the money paid for tickets.

"It's been a grand day," Louise sighed contentedly as they left the theatre. "Let's get home now as quickly as we can."

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The drive to Riverview consumed nearly an hour. As the girls approached the Hubell Tower, they noted by the illuminated clock face that the hands pointed to twelve o'clock.

"The witching hour of midnight," Louise remarked. "Do you still think that mechanical creature has supernatural powers?"

"Quiet!" Penny commanded, idling the car as the big clock began to strike. "I'm going to count the strokes."

"I'll do it too, just so you can't pull a fast one on me. That's two now."

As each slow note sounded, Louise counted it aloud. Reaching twelve, she paused, but the clock did not. There was a slight break, then another stroke.

"Why, it did strike thirteen!" she gasped. "Or perhaps I became mixed up!"

"You made no mistake," Penny declared, easing the car to a standstill by the curb. "It struck thirteen, and that last stroke wasn't like the others!"

"It did seem to have a slightly different tone. I wonder why?"

"Someone may have struck the bell an extra tap!" Penny answered with conviction. "Louise, don't you see! It must be a signal!"

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CHAPTER

14

THROUGH THE WINDOW

"YOU HAVE the craziest ideas, Penny," Louise scoffed. "I'll admit the clock struck an extra time, but it must have been because something is wrong with the mechanism. A signal, my eye!"

Lowering the car window, Penny peered curiously up at the tower which was shrouded in fog and mist.

"Lou, there's someone up there in the cupola! It may be Charley Phelps!"

"You can't make a mystery out of Charley," yawned Louise. "Probably he's trying to repair the clock. Come on, let's get home."

Reluctantly, Penny raised the window glass. Before she could drive on, another car pulled up not far from the tower. The driver, a man in an overcoat, swung open the door as if to alight. However, observing Penny's car parked close by, he seemed to change his mind. Keeping his head lowered so that his face was shadowed, he drove away.

"Who was that man?" Penny demanded suspiciously.

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"I'm afraid I neglected to inquire," Louise retorted. "So careless of me!"

"Whoever he was, he intended to enter the tower! When he saw us here, he became nervous and drove away!"

"Oh, Penny, you're the limit."

"Maybe I am, but I know what I think. The striking of the clock was a signal for some sort of meeting at the tower!"

"A board of directors confab perhaps?" teased Louise.

"Listen!" said Penny, ignoring the jibes. "I want to park the car on a side street, and then come back here afoot. Something is up and I mean to find out about it!"

"Oh, Penny," Louise sighed. "If I don't get home Mother never will allow me to go anywhere with you again. Don't you realize what time it is?"

"Thirteen o'clock!" Penny chuckled. "It may never be that again, so I must strike while the clock strikes, so to speak. How about it?"

"Well, it's your car," Louise replied with a shrug. "I'm powerless in your hands."

Penny drove around a block, parking on a well-lighted street. She and Louise then approached the tower afoot. Not wishing to be seen, they took care to keep close to a high hedge which edged the grounds.

"I never felt more silly in my life," Louise complained. "What are we supposed to do now?"

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"Windows were made to look through," Penny responded coolly. "Let's see what Charley Phelps is doing inside the tower."

Circling the building, the girls placed a rock beneath one of the rear windows. From that unstable perch, Penny was able to peer into the living quarters of the tower.

"Well, what do you see, Sherlock?" Louise demanded impatiently.

"Nothing."

"How perfectly amazing!" Louise taunted mischieviously. "What do you make of it?"

"Charley Phelps seems to be reading a newspaper."

"Baffling! It must have some deep, dark significance."

With a sigh, Penny stepped down from the rock. "Want to look?" she invited.

"I do not!"

"Then I guess we may as well go home," Penny said reluctantly.

As she spoke, both girls heard an automobile pull up in front of the tower. With reviving hope, Penny placed a restraining hand on Louise's arm, forcing her to wait in the shadow of the building. A minute elapsed and then the front door of the tower slammed shut. Without the slightest hesitation, Penny once more moved to her previous position beneath the window.

"Charley has some visitors," she reported in a whis-

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per. "Four men I never saw before. I wish I could hear what they are saying."

"Why not smash the window, or saw a hole through the wall?" Louise proposed sarcastically.

Penny stepped from the rock, offering the place to her chum.

"Do look inside," she urged. "Maybe you'll recognize those men. It's really important."

Louise unwillingly did as requested, but after a moment moved away from the window.

"I never saw any of them either," she said. "They must be friends of Charley Phelps."

"It's a special meeting," Penny insisted. "I suspect other men may come along within a few minutes."

"I know one thing," Louise announced flatly. "I'll not be here to see them. If you're not ready to go home, then I shall walk!"

"Oh, all right, I'll go," Penny grumbled. "It seems a pity though, just when we might have learned something important."

Taking care to remove the stone from beneath the tower window, she hastened after her chum. In silence they drove to the Sidell home where Louise alighted.

"Sorry to have spoiled your fun, Penny," she apologized as she said goodnight. "If you'll only arrange to conduct your explorations by daylight I'll try to cooperate."

Arriving at her own home a few minutes later,

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Penny found her father waiting up for her. Mr. Parker had attended a meeting of the Camp Fund board, and upon returning at eleven-thirty, had been disturbed to find his daughter absent.

"Hold it! Hold it!" Penny greeted him before he could speak. "I know it's late, but I can explain everything."

"You're always able to explain—too well," the editor responded dryly. "Mrs. Weems expected that you would be home not later than eleven o'clock."

"Well, one thing just seemed to lead to another, Dad. Louise and I saw a wonderful show, I obtained a copy of Ben Bowman's signature, and then to top it off, the Hubell clock struck thirteen again!"

"Which in your estimation explains everything?"

"I wish it did," Penny said, neatly changing the subject. "Dad, Louise and I saw a number of men going into the tower tonight. Obviously, they were summoned there by the striking of the clock."

"Tommyrot!"

"Oh, Dad, you haven't a scrap of imagination," Penny sighed. "Has it never occurred to you that Charley Phelps may be connected with the Hoods?"

"Never," replied Mr. Parker. "And if I were you I shouldn't go around making such wild suggestions. You *might* find yourself involved in serious trouble."

"You're the only one to whom I've confided my theory, Dad. In fact, it only this minute occurred to me."

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"So I thought, Penny. If I were you I would forget the Hubell clock. Why not devote yourself to something worthwhile?"

"For instance?"

"I'll provide an interesting job. I've been asked to select play equipment for the new orphans' camp. I'll be happy to turn the task over to you."

"Do you think I could do it?" Penny asked dubiously.

"Why not? You can learn from the matron of the Home what is needed, and then make your selection."

"I'll be glad to do it, Dad. When is the camp to open?"

"The actual date hasn't been set, but it will be soon. That is, unless a serious disagreement arises about the camp site."

"A disagreement?" Penny inquired curiously.

"Yes, Mr. Blake is trying to influence the board to buy a track of land which he controls."

"At a very high price?"

"The price seems to be fair enough. I personally don't care for the site, however. It's located on the river, but too close to the swamp."

"Then why does the board consider it?"

"Mr. Blake gave a very generous donation, you remember. I figured at the time he would expect something in return."

"He'll profit by the sale?"

"Obviously. I don't know who owns the land, but

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Blake will receive a commission on the sale. The board also is considering a wooded property closer to Riverview, and I favor that site."

"Will the board listen to you, Dad?"

"I rather doubt it. My objections weren't especially vigorous. Either property will be satisfactory, and Blake's price is a trifle more attractive."

With a yawn, Mr. Parker arose and locked the front door.

"It's after one," he said. "Let's get to bed."

Penny started up the stairway, only to pause as the telephone rang. While her father answered it, she waited, curiously to learn who would be calling at such a late hour. In a moment he replaced the receiver on its hook.

"That was the night editor of the *Star*," he explained briefly.

"Has a big story broken, Dad?"

"Another storage barn was burned to the ground about ten minutes ago. The night editor called to ask how I wanted the story handled."

"Then the depredation was done by the Hoods!"

"It looks that way."

Penny came slowly down the stairway to face her father.

"Dad, if the fire was set only a few minutes ago, doesn't that support my theory?"

"Which theory? You have so many."

"I mean about the Hubell Tower," Penny said so-

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berly. "The clock struck thirteen on the night the Preston barn was destroyed! Don't you see, Dad? The Hoods hold their meetings and then ride forth to accomplish their underhanded work!"

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CHAPTER

15

TRACING BEN BOWMAN

"PENNY, LET'S postpone this animated discussion until morning," Mr. Parker said wearily, reaching to switch out the bridge lamp.

"Then you don't agree with me that the caretaker of the Tower may have some connection with the Hoods, Dad?" she asked in an injured tone.

"I certainly do not," he answered firmly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed."

Decidedly crestfallen, Penny followed her father upstairs. For several minutes she stood by the window of her room, gazing toward the Hubell Tower whose lights could be dimly seen across the city. Then, with a shrug, she too dismissed the subject from her mind and gave herself to slumber.

Mr. Parker had gone to the office by the time Penny arose the next morning. Finding a discarded newspaper by his plate, she eagerly scanned it for an account of the midnight fire. To her disappointment, only a brief item appeared on the front page. The

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story merely said that the barn of John Hancock, truck farmer, had been destroyed by a blaze of unknown origin. In the right hand column was another news item to the effect that Sheriff Daniels had made no progress in tracing the missing Clem Davis.

Tossing aside the paper, Penny helped with the breakfast dishes. As gently as possible she broke the news to Mrs. Weems that she might make another trip to Claymore.

"Why bother to remain home even for meals?" the housekeeper said severely. "I declare, I don't know what your father is thinking about to allow you such liberties! When I was a girl—"

"It was considered very daring to go for a buggy ride without a chaperon," Penny completed mischievously. "Now, I'm very sorry about last night. Louise and I didn't intend to remain out so late."

"It was after one o'clock when you came in," Mrs. Weems replied, her voice stern. "You know I don't approve of such hours for a girl of your age."

"I promise it won't happen again. Please let me go to Claymore though. I'm expected to buy playground equipment for the Riverview Orphans' new camp."

Exerting all her charm, Penny explained the necessity for the trip. Finally convincing Mrs. Weems that the excuse had not been "thought up" on the spur of the moment, she was granted the requested permission.

Penny's next move was to induce Louise Sidell to accompany her on the excursion. Both girls laid siege

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to Mrs. Sidell who somewhat dubiously said that her daughter might go, providing she would be home by nightfall.

Recalling her father's instructions, Penny called at the Riverview Orphans' Home to talk with the matron. There she obtained a list of playground equipment to be purchased, with suggested prices for each item.

As the girls were leaving the institution they met Miss Anderson and paused to inquire about Adelle.

"The child seems to be nervous and unhappy," the young woman told them. "Especially so since she ran away. We sincerely hope she will presently become adjusted."

Penny asked if there was any prospect the little girl would be adopted.

"Not very soon," Miss Anderson answered regretfully. "In fact, her name is not on the list of eligibles. We never allow a child to leave the Home until we feel that he or she is capable of adapting himself to new conditions."

The drive to Claymore was an enjoyable one, and by eleven o'clock, the girls had purchased many of the items on their list. To the amusement of the department store salesman, they insisted upon testing teeter-totters, swings, and even the slides.

"All this equipment is for the Riverview Orphans' Home—not for ourselves," Penny explained. "The committee will pay for it."

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"Very well, we'll send the merchandise just as soon as a cheque is received," the salesman promised, giving her an itemized bill.

Feeling very well satisfied with their purchases, Penny and Louise wandered into another department of the store. The delightful aroma of food drew them to a lunch counter, and from there they went to the main floor.

The store was very crowded. As Penny was inspecting a pair of gloves on a counter, a man pushed past her, and ran toward the nearest exit. In surprise she turned around, unintentionally blocking the way of a store detective. Shoving past her, he pursued the first man only to lose him in the milling crowd near the front door.

"That fellow must have been a shoplifter!" Penny remarked to Louise. "I think he got away too!"

The unexpected commotion had drawn the interest of many shoppers. Mingling with the crowd, the girls heard a woman tell a companion that the man who had escaped was wanted for attempting to pass a forged cheque.

A moment later, the store detective came striding down the aisle. Pausing at the jewelry counter he spoke to the floorman, confirming the report.

"Well, the fellow escaped! He tried to pass a bum cheque for fifty dollars."

"What name did he use?" the floorman inquired.

"Ben Bowman. It will be something else next time."

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Penny had heard the words. Startled by the name, she moved hastily to the detective's side.

"Excuse me," she addressed him, "did I understand you to say that a man by the name of Ben Bowman forged a cheque?"

"That's correct, Miss," the detective answered, staring at her curiously. "Know anything about the man?"

"I think I may. Would it be possible for me to see the cheque?"

The detective removed it from a vest pocket, offering the signature for inspection. One glance satisfied Penny that the cheque had been signed by the same man who had been sending her father "crank" messages.

"At home I have a telegram which I'm sure bears this identical signature!" she revealed. "I've never seen the man though—except as he ran through the store."

The store detective questioned Penny at length about her knowledge of Bowman. Realizing that a description of the man might be of great value to her, he showed her a small card which bore a mounted photograph.

"This is Ben Bowman," he assured her. "He's an expert forger, and uses any number of names. Think you can remember the face?"

"I'll try to," Penny replied. "He doesn't seem to have any distinguishing features though."

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"His angular jaw is rather noticeable," the detective pointed out. "Brown eyes are set fairly close together. He's about six feet two and dresses well."

Penny was highly elated to have gained a description of Bowman, and especially pleased that the man had been traced to Claymore. The fact that he was a known forger, encouraged her to hope that police soon would apprehend him.

"That one hundred dollars Dad offered for Bowman's capture is as good as mine already," she boasted gleefully to Louise as they left the store. "All I need to do is wait."

"No doubt you'll collect," Louise admitted grudgingly. "I never met anyone with your brand of luck."

"I feel especially lucky today too," Penny said with a gay laugh. "Tell you what! Let's make another tour of the vegetable markets."

"It will make us late in getting home. The time is sure to be wasted too."

"Oh, come along," Penny urged, seizing her by the arm. "I promise to have you in Riverview no later than three o'clock."

In driving into Claymore that morning the girls had noticed a large outdoor market near the outskirts of the city. Returning to it, Penny parked the car, and with her chum wandered about the sales area.

"A nice fat chicken?" a farm woman asked persuasively, holding up an uninviting specimen. "Fresh eggs?"

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"We're looking for melons," Penny replied.

"Mr. Breldway has some nice cantaloupes," the woman returned. "He got a truck load of 'em in from Riverview just the other day."

Locating Mr. Breldway's place of business, Louise and Penny began to inspect the melons offered for sale. Almost at once they came upon a basket of cantaloupes which bore a blurred stamp.

"Louise, these look like the Davis crop!" Penny cried excitedly. "Wouldn't you say someone deliberately had blocked out the old marking?"

"It does appear that way."

"Maybe we can find just one melon with the original stamp!"

Penny dug into the basket with both hands, tossing up cantaloupes for Louise to place on the ground. Their activities immediately drew the attention and displeasure of Mr. Breldway.

"If you're looking for a good melon let me help you," he said, hurrying toward them.

Penny straightened, holding up a cantaloupe for him to see.

"I don't need any help," she said distinctly. "I've found the melon I want. It bears the Davis stamp."

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CHAPTER

16

A FAMILIAR NAME

"THE MELON you have selected is a very good one," the market man declared, not understanding the significance of Penny's remark. "Shall I put it in a sack for you?"

"I'm not interested in the melon—only in the stamp," Penny replied. "Do you realize that you may be liable to arrest?"

"What d'you mean, liable to arrest?" the man demanded. "I'm an honest dealer and I have a license."

"Look at these melons." Penny held up one which bore the blurred stamp. "The trade name has been altered."

The dealer took the cantaloupe from her, examining it briefly. She then offered him the single melon bearing the Davis stamp.

"Well, what about it?" he asked.

"Just this. A few nights ago a truck load of melons similar to these, was stolen from the Davis farm near

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Riverview. The thief was trailed right to this city."

"You're trying to say that I sell stolen melons!"

"I'm not making any direct accusations," Penny replied evenly. "No doubt you can explain where you got the melons."

"Certainly I can. I bought a truck load of them from a farmer named John Toby. The melons were good, the price cheap, and I didn't pay any attention to the stamp."

"Is Mr. Toby a regular dealer?"

"I buy from him now and then, when his prices are right. I never bothered to ask any questions."

"Where does the man live?"

"I can't tell you that. He's a large, heavy-set fellow with brown hair and eyes."

The description was too meagre to be of value to Penny.

"Does Mr. Toby drive a red truck?" she inquired thoughtfully.

"He did this last time."

"It was a red truck which was stolen from the Davis farm," Penny said quietly. "I'm sure these melons came from there too."

"I paid good money for them," the dealer retorted in a defiant tone. "So far as I knew, they belonged to this fellow Toby. I can't investigate every farmer who offers me produce."

"All the same, you could get into serious trouble for

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selling stolen melons," Penny replied. "Of course, I have no intention of going to the police, providing you are willing to cooperate."

"What d'you mean, cooperate?" the dealer inquired suspiciously.

"Only this. Will you see John Toby again?"

"That's hard to tell. He said he might bring in another load of melons within the next few days."

"When you receive the next shipment, will you notify me?"

"Yes, I'm willing to do that," the dealer promised. "If Toby is crooked, I want to know it myself."

Penny gave the man her name, address, and telephone number. Knowing that he might not be able to reach her quickly enough, she instructed him to detain the farmer by force if necessary.

"If I can't get in touch with you, I may have the fellow questioned by police," the dealer offered. "I don't want to put myself into a hole."

Penny was not entirely satisfied that the market man would keep his promise. However, she hesitated to make a report to the police without first consulting her father. Everything considered, it seemed best to let the situation work out as it would.

"Well, your luck is still running true to form," Louise said jokingly, as the girls drove toward Riverview. "Do you have any idea who John Toby may be?"

"Not the slightest," Penny confessed. "The de-

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scription would fit Hank Holloway, or for that matter, any one of a dozen men I know."

The girls arrived in Riverview by mid-afternoon after an uneventful trip. Penny dropped Louise at the Sidell home and then went to the *Star* office to talk with her father. Mr. Parker was absent from his desk, but his secretary who was typing letters, explained that he would return in a moment.

Penny sat down in her father's chair to wait. A bulky, unsealed envelope lay on the desk. Peering at it curiously she noted that it bore the marking: "Property Deed: Lots 456, 457, and 458."

"What's this?" she asked aloud. "Is Dad buying property?"

"Oh, no," the secretary replied, glancing up from her typewriter. "That is the deed and abstract for the Orphans' Camp site."

"I wonder which property it is?"

"The land Mr. Blake controls, I believe. At least he brought the papers into the office this morning for your father's inspection. I heard him say that if the forms are satisfactory, the deal will be completed at once."

Penny unfolded one of the lengthy documents, shaking her head as she scanned the legal terms.

"I don't see how Dad makes anything of this," she said. "Such a mess of words and names!"

"I imagine Mr. Parker intends to turn it over to his lawyer," the secretary smiled.

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The editor entered the office at that moment, and Penny directed her next question to him.

"Dad, is it all settled that the camp board will purchase Mr. Blake's land?"

"Practically so," he answered. "If my lawyer, Mr. Adams, approves the abstract, the deal will be completed. Against my advice Mrs. Van Cleve already has given Blake five hundred dollars to hold an option."

"Why did she do that, Dad?"

"Well, Blake convinced her he had another buyer for the property. It's the old story. Competition stimulates interest."

"Do the papers seem to be all right?"

"Oh, I've not looked at them," Mr. Parker replied. "Blake is a good real estate man though, so there's not likely to be any flaw."

"Who actually owns the property, Dad?"

"It's there on the abstract," he answered. "Why not look it up for yourself?"

"Too much like doing home-work," Penny grinned, but she spread the document on the desk and began to read various names aloud. "'Anna and Harry Clark to Lydia Goldwein, Lydia Goldwein to Benjamin Bowman—'"

"What was that name?" Mr. Parker demanded sharply.

"Benjamin Bowman." Penny peered at the document a second time to make certain she had made no

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mistake. "That's the truth, Dad. Who knows, maybe it's your old pal, Ben!"

"Are you making up that name?" Mr. Parker asked skeptically.

Penny thrust the abstract into his hand. "Here, read it for yourself, Dad. Bowman seems to be the present owner of the land."

Mr. Parker rapidly scanned the document.

"The land is held by a Benjamin Bowman," he admitted, frowning. "A strange coincidence."

"I never heard of a Bowman family living near Riverview," Penny remarked, reaching for a telephone book. "Did you?"

"No, but Bowman is a fairly common name."

Turning to the "B" section Penny went through the telephone list.

"There's only one Bowman here," she said, penciling a circle around the name. "A Mrs. Maud Bowman."

"The name Maud Bowman doesn't appear on the abstract," Mr. Parker declared, as he studied the document once more. "There's something funny about this."

"Mr. Blake seemed rather eager to dispose of the land, didn't he?"

"His price was a bit low, which surprised me," Mr. Parker said, thinking aloud. "Probably everything can be explained satisfactorily."

"Then why not ask Mr. Blake to do it?" Penny

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proposed. "He should be able to tell you something about his client."

"That's really a first-class idea," Mr. Parker agreed and he reached for a telephone. "I'll ask Mr. Blake to come here at once."

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CHAPTER

17

FALSE RECORDS

MR. BLAKE, suave, completely at ease, sat opposite Mr. Parker and Penny in the editor's private office.

"I came as soon as I could after receiving your telephone message, Mr. Parker," he said pleasantly. "Now what seems to be the trouble?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have bothered you," the editor apologized. "However, in glancing over the abstract for the Orphans' Camp property I noticed that the land is owned by a man named Benjamin Bowman."

"Quite true. I am acting as his agent."

"It happens that I have had dealings with a man by that same name," resumed Mr. Parker. "Rather unpleasant dealings, I might add. I'm curious to learn if this property owner is the same fellow."

"Very unlikely, I think," Mr. Blake shrugged. "My client does not reside in Riverview."

"Nor does the man I have in mind."

"Can you tell us what he looks like?" Penny interposed eagerly.

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"I am very sorry, but I can't," Mr. Blake returned. "I've never met Mr. Bowman."

"Yet you act as his agent?" Mr. Parker inquired in astonishment.

"All our dealings have been by mail or telephone."

"I see," the editor commented reflectively. "Well, at least you can provide me with the man's address."

"I can't do that either," Mr. Blake declined. "Benjamin Bowman is a salesman with no permanent address. He communicates with me at fairly regular intervals, but until I hear from him, I have no idea where he will be the following week."

"Your description seems to fit the man of my acquaintance," Mr. Parker said dryly. "But tell me, how do you expect to complete this deal? Will Bowman come here to sign the necessary papers?"

"Oh, that won't be required. He's already made out the sales documents, and also given me a power of attorney."

"Mr. Bowman seems to think of everything," Mr. Parker remarked grimly. "I was hoping for the pleasure of meeting him."

"I really don't see what all this has to do with the sale of the property," Mr. Blake reproved in a mild voice. "You feel that the site is a suitable one, and the price right?"

"I have no serious objections to it."

"Then why allow your personal feelings to interfere with the deal?"

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"I have no intention of doing so," Mr. Parker answered.

"Then if you'll give your approval, we'll sign the final papers tomorrow at my office. The dedication of the new camp has been set for the tenth of the month, and that means no time can be lost."

"Everything seems to have been settled without my approval," Mr. Parker said, smiling. "However, if you don't mind, I'll keep this abstract a little longer."

"As you like," the real estate man shrugged. "Have your lawyer go over the records with a fine tooth comb. He'll find no flaws anywhere."

Arising, Mr. Blake bowed politely and left the office. Penny waited until she knew that he was a considerable distance from the door before seeking her father's opinion of the interview.

"Everything may be on the level," he conceded, frowning. "I've no reason to distrust Blake, and yet I can't help feeling that there's something peculiar about this land deal."

"Blake has been rushing things through at such a furious rate," Penny nodded. "Another thing, Ben Bowman is a well-known forger."

"What makes you think that?" the editor asked alertly. "Any real information?"

Penny revealed everything she had learned that day at Claymore. Mr. Parker listened attentively, making few comments until she had finished.

"I am more than ever convinced there is something

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phoney about Bowman's connection with this affair," he declared grimly. "We'll see what my lawyer has to say."

Having made up his mind that the transaction merited a thorough investigation, Mr. Parker personally carried the questionable abstract to a reliable law firm, Adams and McPherson. The report came back late in the afternoon, and was relayed to Penny at the dinner table.

"Mr. Adams says that the abstract seems to be drawn up correctly," the editor disclosed. "He could find no flaw in it or in any of the records at the court house."

"Then apparently we jumped too hasty to conclusions," Penny remarked in disappointment.

"I'm not so sure. Mr. Adams tells me that the ownership of the property is a very muddled affair."

"Muddled?"

"Yes, it has changed hands many times in the past year, and oddly, none of the buyers or sellers seem to be known in Riverview."

"What does Mr. Adams think about that, Dad?"

"He advises that the records be inspected very carefully. It will take weeks though, for they are quite involved."

"I suppose that will hold up the opening of the camp."

"It may," Mr. Parker acknowledged. "However, it seems wise to take every precaution even if the camp

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isn't opened this year. Too much money is involved to risk paying for land which may have a faulty title."

The following day, the editor conferred with members of the Camp Fund board, telling of his findings. To his chagrin, Mrs. Van Cleve did not share his views.

"I trust Mr. Blake's judgment implicitly," she insisted. "I am sure the property will be satisfactory in every way. If there should by chance be any flaw in the title, he would make it good."

"We can't possibly delay the dedication another week," added another feminine member of the board. "The Summer is nearly over now."

"At least postpone making the final payment until after I have had another report from my lawyers," Mr. Parker pleaded.

"Very well, we'll do that," Mrs. Van Cleve agreed. "Mr. Blake is so obliging I am sure he will allow us to set up equipment on the land, even though we don't actually possess title."

The entire transaction seemed very unbusinesslike to Mr. Parker, but he did not attempt to force his opinion upon the board members. Accordingly, plans went forward for the grand opening of the camp. Stories appeared regularly in the *Star*, playground equipment and floored tents were set up on the camp site, and the actual dedication program was announced.

"You might know Mr. Blake would be invited to

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make the main speech," Penny remarked disapprovingly as she scanned the latest story of the coming affair. "Every day, in every way, he gives me a bigger and bigger pain!"

Throughout the week both she and Louise had been very active, helping out at the new camp site. The land had been cleared of underbrush, trails had been constructed, and a well dug. While supervising the setting-up of slides, merry-go-rounds and tetter-totters, Penny upon several occasions had had disagreements with Mr. Blake. The man remained at the site almost constantly, imposing his wishes upon everyone.

"A great deal of time and money has been spent getting that place ready for the dedication," Penny commented to her father. "If anything should happen that the final papers aren't signed, it would be a pity."

"I've had no report as yet," Mr. Parker answered. "My lawyers tell me they never delved into a more involved case."

"What does Mr. Blake think about the investigation?"

"He seems to be agreeable. However, I suspect he's been working on the various board members, trying to get them to conclude the deal without waiting."

"How long will it be before you'll have a final report, Dad?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I expected to get it long before this."

In the flurry of preparing for the camp dedication,

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Penny had no opportunity to give much thought to other affairs. She did not see Seth McGuire, the sheriff had nothing to disclose concerning Clem Davis' disappearance, and the Black Hoods seemed to have become an extinct organization.

On the morning of the designated date, Penny was abroad early. She and Louise planned to drive to the dedication exercises together, and wished to arrive before the grounds were congested. Eating breakfast hurriedly, Penny scarcely noticed when her father was called to the telephone. He absented himself from the dining room nearly fifteen minutes. As he returned to the table, Penny pushed back her chair, ready to leave.

"Well, I'll see you at the camp grounds, Dad," she said lightly.

"I don't know what to do about the dedication," responded Mr. Parker in a sober tone. "By rights there should be none."

Penny stared at him.

"I've just heard from my lawyers," Mr. Parker explained.

"Then, there is a flaw in the title as you suspected!"

"Decidedly. It's a very mixed-up mess, and as yet we're not sure what it may mean."

"Tell me about it, Dad," Penny pleaded, sliding back into her chair.

"Benjamin Bowman—whoever he may be—doesn't own the camp property."

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"Then in whose name is it?"

"The property doesn't belong to anyone."

"Why, how ridiculous!" Penny exclaimed. Doesn't every piece of land in the world belong to someone?"

"Actually the heirs of Rosanna and Joseph Schulta own this particular property. But there are no heirs."

"What you say doesn't make sense to me, Dad."

"The whole affair is very involved," Mr. Parker explained. "In tracing back the history of the land, my lawyers found that originally it was owned by Rosanna and Joseph Schulta, an elderly couple, who had no known relatives. They sailed for Germany more than fifty years ago. The ship sank, and presumably they were lost. Their land was never claimed, and somehow the state overlooked the case."

"But I thought the property had changed hands many times in recent years!"

"Only theoretically. All those records have been falsified."

"By whom, Dad? Ben Bowman?"

"My lawyers are inclined to think Blake may be at the bottom of it. He is a very shrewd real estate man, and in examining records at the court house, he may have learned about this floating property."

"Then he deliberately tried to cheat the Camp Fund board!"

"It looks that way. Neither Ben Bowman nor anyone else owns the property. Had you not noticed his name on the abstract, it's unlikely the fraud would

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have been uncovered for quite a few years to come."

"What will you do, Dad?" Penny inquired, deeply distressed. "The dedication is scheduled to start within an hour."

"I don't see how it can be postponed," Mr. Parker said soberly. "It will have to go on according to schedule."

"Afterwards you'll ask for Blake's arrest?"

"There's no real evidence against him."

"No evidence!"

"He claims to be a mere agent of Ben Bowman. All of the deeds and legal papers were drawn up by some other person. If any accusation is made against him, he can escape by maintaining that he knew nothing of the back records."

"There's one person who might be able to implicate him!" Penny exclaimed. "Ben Bowman!"

"Bowman should have it in his power to clear up some of the mystery," Mr. Parker agreed. "But how are we to find him?"

"I don't know," Penny admitted. "It looks rather hopeless unless the police just present him to us wrapped in pink ribbon."

The clock struck nine. Daring not to linger any longer, Penny hastily bade her father goodbye and left the house.

Driving to the camp site with Louise Sidell, she told her chum of the latest complications.

"Mr. Blake is one of the worst hypocrites in the

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world," she declared feelingly. "He pretends he wants to help the orphans, and all the while he intends to trick the Board and make a nice profit for himself."

"Your father won't let him get away with it," Louise returned confidently. "So long as the money hasn't been paid over there's no need to worry."

Arriving at the camp site, the girls went at once to the official tent. To their surprise, Mr. Blake, Mrs. Van Cleve, and all members of the Board save Mr. Parker, were there. On the table lay various legal papers which bore signatures still moist with ink.

Penny gazed from one person to another, slowly comprehending the scene.

"You're not buying this property!" she exclaimed in protest.

Mrs. Van Cleve's reply stunned her.

"It seemed unreasonable to keep Mr. Blake waiting," the woman said quietly. "The transaction has just been completed."

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CHAPTER

18

ADELLE'S ACCUSATION

"OH, MRS. VAN CLEVE! You've been cheated!"

The signing of the papers had taken Penny so by surprise that she did not weigh her words before speaking. Too late, she realized that her father never would approve of revealing the facts in such blunt fashion. However, having said so much, she was determined to go on.

"My dear, what do you mean?" inquired Mrs. Van Cleve, troubled by the unexpected accusation.

"Any money paid for this land will be lost! My father has just learned—"

"I resent such loose talk!" Mr. Blake broke in irritably. "Mr. Bowman, whom I represent, has taken a substantial loss on the property."

"And who is Ben Bowman?" Penny challenged. "You can't produce him, nor prove that he owns the land. The title is faulty. Neither you nor Ben Bowman has any right to sell it!"

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"This isn't true?" Mrs. Van Cleve asked the real estate man.

"Certainly not! You may be sure that if there is the slightest flaw in the title, I shall return your cheque."

"Perhaps, considering the uncertainty, it might be wise to postpone payment until I have talked again with Mr. Parker," Mrs. Van Cleve said diffidently.

The real estate man made no attempt to hide his annoyance. "My dear Mrs. Van Cleve," he said, "the deal already has been completed. I have tried to remain patient, but really this is too much."

On the table lay several typewritten papers. Clipped neatly to the uppermost one, was the cheque endorsed by Mrs. Van Cleve. Mr. Blake reached to take possession of it, but his move was deliberate. Acting impulsively, Penny darted forward and seized the bit of paper. To the horror of everyone in the tent, she tore the cheque into a dozen pieces and tossed them into the air.

"There!" she announced, a trifle stunned by her own act.

"Penelope, you shouldn't have done that," Mrs. Van Cleve reproved, but she smiled faintly.

"You are an outrageous child!" Mr. Blake exclaimed, losing his temper. "What do you expect to accomplish by such a stupid trick? Mrs. Van Cleve will merely write out another cheque."

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"Well, under the circumstance, it might be better to wait," the club woman demurred. "I really shouldn't have acted without consulting Mr. Parker."

"Unless the transaction is completed now I shall have nothing to do with the dedication," Mr. Blake declared. "I shall decline to make my speech."

Penny's broad grin made it clear that she thought the loss would not be a great one.

"Furthermore, I shall ask that my recent donation be returned," Mr. Blake resumed severely. "I shall withdraw this property for sale—"

"*You* will withdraw it!" Penny caught him up. "I thought you merely were acting as the agent for Benjamin Bowman!"

"I mean I shall make such a suggestion to him," the real estate man amended.

Penny waited anxiously for Mrs. Van Cleve's decision. To her relief, the society woman seemed annoyed by the attitude Mr. Blake had taken.

"I am sorry," she said coldly. "If you don't wish to make the dedication speech, we will manage to do without your services. As for the cheque, I cannot make out another until I have discussed the situation with Mr. Parker."

The argument went on, but Penny did not remain to hear it. Louise took her forcibly by the arm, fairly pulling her outside the tent.

"Haven't you caused enough trouble?" she de-

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manded disapprovingly. "Such a mess as everything is in now!"

"I don't care," Penny replied. "I saved the Camp Fund money. Mrs. Van Cleve was glad I tore up the cheque too! She just didn't dare say so."

"There will be no dedication. What will everyone think?"

Disconsolately, Louise gazed toward the area which had been roped off for cars. Although it was half an hour before the formal program was to start, hundreds of persons had arrived. On a platform, built especially for the occasion, an orchestra played spritely selections. There were picnic tables and a stone fireplace for outdoor cooking.

As the girls wandered slowly toward the river, a bus loaded with orphans arrived from the Riverview Home. With shrieks of laughter, the children swarmed over the grounds, taking possession of swings, sand pile, and slides.

"It seems a pity," Louise remarked again.

By ten o'clock the grounds were jammed with visitors. Penny knew that her father must have arrived for the exercises, but although she searched everywhere, she could not find him. In roving about, she did meet Mr. Blake, who pretended not to see her.

How matters had been arranged, the girls did not know. However, promptly at ten-thirty, the dedication exercises began, exactly as scheduled. Mr. Blake occupied the platform with other members of the

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board, and at the proper time made a brief and rather curt speech.

"Everything seems to have turned out rather well," Louise remarked in relief. "Mr. Blake may not be such a bad sort after all."

"Don't you believe it," Penny returned. "He's just clever enough never to put himself in a bad light if he can help it. I only hope Mrs. Van Cleve didn't give in to him and sign another cheque."

Following the dedication exercises, a portion of the crowd dispersed, but many persons remained to enjoy picnic lunches. Penny and Louise ate their own sandwiches, and then watched the orphans at play.

"The new camp director seems very efficient," Louise remarked, her gaze upon a young man who supervised the children.

Presently, as the girls watched, the camp supervisor announced that he would take several boys and girls for a sail on the river. The boat, a twelve-foot dinghy, had been the gift of a well-to-do Riverview department store owner.

Immediately there was a great clamor from the children, for everyone wanted to take the first ride.

"Only six may go," the director said, and called off the names.

Penny and Louise wandered down to the water's edge to watch the loading of the boat. Adelle had been one of the orphans chosen, and they waved reassuringly to her.

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The camp director shoved off, and quickly raised the sail. There were squeals of delight from the children as it filled, causing the craft to heel over slightly.

"The breeze is quite uncertain today," Penny remarked anxiously. "I hope that young man knows what he is about."

The boat sailed a diagonal course across the river, turned, and came back on another tack. Then as the breeze died, it seemed to make no progress at all. Losing interest, Penny and Louise started to walk on down the shore.

Scarcely had they turned away than they were startled to hear screams from the river. Whirling around, they saw that the camp director was in serious trouble. A sudden puff of wind had caught the boat when it did not have steerage way. Unable to drive ahead, it slowly tilted sideways.

"It's going over!" Louise screamed.

Already Penny had kicked off her shoes. Without waiting for the inevitable result, she plunged into the river. When her head emerged from the water, she saw the boat on its side. Two children were clinging to it, the camp director was frantically trying to support two others, while another girl and boy struggled wildly to keep from sinking.

Swimming as rapidly as she could, Penny reached the overturned boat. Her first act was to help the camp director who was being strangled by the two children who clung to him. Drawing the trio to the

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craft, she then seized a struggling boy by the hair, and pulled him to safety.

"Adelle!" the camp director gasped. "Get her!"

The little girl had been carried a considerable distance from the boat. Penny started to swim toward her, but she saw that it would not be necessary. From the forest close by had emerged an unshaven man in rough, soiled clothing. Diving into the water, he seized Adelle, and swam with her to shore.

Penny did not return to the overturned boat for several men had waded out to tow it to land. Concerned regarding Adelle, she followed the child's rescuer.

The man bore the orphan in his arms to a grassy spot on shore. Stretching her out there, he hesitated an instant, and then before the crowd could surround him, darted quickly away toward the woods.

"Wait!" Penny shouted, wading through the shallow water.

The man heard, but paid no heed. He entered the forest and was lost to view.

"That was Clem Davis!" Penny thought tensely. "I'm sure of it!"

Before she could reach Adelle, other persons had gathered around the child. Clyde Blake pushed through the crowd.

"What is this?" he inquired. "What has happened?"

As the man bent over Adelle, the little girl opened her eyes, gazing directly into his face. For a moment

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she stared at him in a bewildered way. Then, struggling to a sitting position, she pointed an accusing finger.

"You are the one!" she whispered shakily. "You're the man whose car killed my Mother and Daddy!"

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CHAPTER

19

TRAILING A FUGITIVE

ADELLE'S ACCUSATION brought a murmur of consternation and shocked surprise from the crowd. Mr. Blake, however, seemed undisturbed. Dropping on his knees, he supported Adelle and wrapped his coat about her trembling shoulders.

"There, there, my poor child," he said soothingly. "You are quite upset, and for good reason."

"Don't touch me," Adelle shivered, cringing away. "You're mean and cruel!"

By this time, Miss Anderson and other officials of the Riverview Home had reached the scene. Somewhat sternly they tried to silence the child.

"She doesn't know what she is saying," Miss Anderson apologized to Mr. Blake. "Adelle has been very nervous since she was in an automobile accident."

"I quite understand," the real estate man responded. "The child must have a change of clothing, and no doubt, medical care. May I send her to the Home in my car?"

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"Why, that is very kind of you, I am sure," Miss Anderson said gratefully.

With every appearance of concern, Mr. Blake picked Adelle up in his arms and carried her away. Penny was kept busy helping bundle up the other children who had been rescued from the water. None the worse for the misadventure, they too were taken to Mr. Blake's car.

"Here, put on my coat before you freeze," Louise said anxiously to Penny after the automobile had sped away. "We must start home at once."

"I don't want to go now!" Penny protested. "Did you notice that man who pulled Adelle from the water?"

"He looked like a tramp. I wonder what made him run away?"

"Lou, I think that man was Clem Davis. By rights I should tell the sheriff, but I can't bring myself to do it—not after the way he saved Adelle."

"Never mind all that now," Louise said, forcing Penny toward the car. "You must go home and change your wet clothes."

"But I want to find Clem Davis and talk with him!"

"That will have to wait. You're going home!" Taking her chum firmly by the arm, Louise pushed her into the car.

At the Parker home, Penny changed her clothes, discussing the day's events as she dried her hair. Adelle's accusation had not escaped her, and she had

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taken it more seriously than did others in the crowd.

"Perhaps that child knew what she was talking about!" she declared to Louise. "Blake's car may have been the one which killed her parents!"

"Oh, Penny, you're so hopelessly prejudiced against the man," her chum replied.

"Maybe I am, but Adelle is the only person who can identify the hit-run motorist."

"Even so, you know she probably is not a reliable witness."

"I'll grant that her accident today may have upset her emotionally," Penny conceded. "After she recovers, I'm curious to learn what she'll have to say."

The hour was so late that the girls did not return to the camp site. Louise soon went to her own home and Penny was left alone. She restlessly wandered about, polished the car, and fretted because neither her father nor Mrs. Weems came home. At length, for want of another occupation, she motored to the Riverview Home on the pretext of inquiring about the condition of the children rescued from the water.

"They're doing just fine," Miss Anderson assured her. "That is, all except Adelle. The child is very upset."

"Has she said anything more about Mr. Blake?" Penny inquired.

"She doesn't know his name, but she keeps insisting he was the man whose car killed her parents. I never was so mortified in my life as when she made the ac-

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cusation. Fortunately, Mr. Blake did not take offense."

Penny was eager to talk with Adelle, and Miss Anderson said that she might do so for a few minutes. The little girl had been put to bed but seemed quite content as she played with a new doll.

"Mr. McGuire sent me this," she said, holding it up for Penny to see. "I've named her Imogene."

Miss Anderson was called to the telephone. During the young woman's absence, Penny discreetly questioned Adelle about the motor accident in which her parents had lost their lives. She was worried lest the child be upset again, but to her relief Adelle answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"No one will believe me," the little girl said. "Just the same, that man I saw today was the one who ran into my Daddy's car. He had a big, gray automobile with a horn on it that played a tune."

"A gray car?" Penny repeated thoughtfully. "I'm quite sure Mr. Blake's sedan is dark blue. Why, you were taken home in his automobile this afternoon, Adelle."

"It wasn't that car," the child answered. "He must have another one."

Miss Anderson re-entered the room, so Penny did not ask additional questions. Soon leaving the Home, she motored slowly toward the camp site by the river. Although she readily understood that Adelle might

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be mistaken, a conviction was growing upon her that Clyde Blake could have been the hit-run driver.

"Even if he doesn't drive a gray car, that proves nothing," she mused. "He easily could have changed it during the past year."

Penny thought that she might find her father or some of the Camp Board officials still at the river. However, as she drove into the parking area, she observed that the grounds were entirely deserted. Paper plates, napkins and newspapers had been blown helter-skelter by the wind. Picnic tables still held the unsightly remains of lunches. The speakers' platform had been torn down, even the tents were gone, for it was not planned to make practical use of the grounds until more work had been done.

As Penny was starting to drive away, she noticed a lone man near one of the picnic tables. He was dressed in rough, unpressed garments, and seemed to be scavenging food which had been left behind.

"That's the same man who pulled Adelle from the water!" she thought alertly.

Leaping from the car, Penny ran toward him. Hearing footsteps, the man turned and saw her. Almost in panic he started for the woods.

"Wait!" Penny shouted. "I won't turn you over to the police! Please wait!"

The man hesitated, and then apparently deciding that he had nothing to fear from a girl, paused.

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"I want to thank you for saving Adelle," Penny said breathlessly. "Why did you run away?"

"Well, I don't know," the man answered, avoiding her gaze. "I never liked crowds."

Penny decided to risk a direct accusation. "You are Clem Davis," she said, eyeing him steadily.

"That's a laugh," the man retorted, starting to edge away. "My name is Thomas Ryan."

"Now please don't run away again," Penny pleaded, sensing his intention. "If you are Clem Davis, and I'm sure you are, I want to help you."

"How could you help me?"

"By exposing the men who framed you. I never believed that you set fire to the Preston barn."

"I never did."

"Please tell me about it," Penny urged, seating herself at one of the picnic benches.

"Who are you anyhow?" the man asked suspiciously. "Why are you so willing to help me, as you say?"

"I'm Penelope Parker, and my father publishes the *Star*."

"Oh, I see, you're after a story!"

"No, that part is only incidental," Penny said hurriedly. "What my father really wants to do is to expose the Black Hoods and drive them out of existence. You're the one person who might be able to provide evidence which would convict the guilty parties."

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"I could tell plenty if I was a mind to do it. No one would believe me though."

"I will, Mr. Davis."

"I was in the notion of going to the Grand Jury at one time," the man said slowly. "That's what brought on all my trouble. If I'd had sense enough to have kept my mouth shut, I wouldn't be a fugitive now."

"What connection did you have with the Hoods? Were you a member of the organization?"

"Yes, I was," the man admitted reluctantly. "I didn't know much about the Hoods when I joined 'em. Then I tried to drop out, and that's what turned 'em against me."

"Suppose you tell me all about it. What is the real purpose of the organization?"

"Well, right now the Hoods are trying to force every truck farmer in this district to join the County Cooperative."

"Then Hank Holloway must be the ring leader!" Penny exclaimed, startled by the information.

"No, he's not at the head of the Hoods," Clem Davis corrected.

"Who is the man?" Penny questioned eagerly.

Clem Davis started to speak, then hesitated. An automobile had driven into the parking area only a few rods away. Several workmen who had been assigned to clean up the grounds, alighted.

"They're coming this way," Clem Davis said uneasily. "I can't risk being seen."

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Abruptly, he started toward the sheltering trees.

"Wait!" Penny pleaded, pursuing him. "You haven't told me half enough. Please wait!"

"I'm not going to risk arrest," the man returned over his shoulder.

"At least meet me here again!"

"Okay, I'll do that," Clem Davis agreed.

"Tomorrow night just at dusk," Penny said quickly. "And please don't fail me. I promise. I'll help you."

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CHAPTER

20

CLEM DAVIS' DISCLOSURE

AFTER CLEM DAVIS had disappeared into the woods, Penny wasted no more time in the vicinity. Jumping into her car, she drove home in a daze of excitement, to tell her father the amazing story.

"Meeting that man was wonderful luck!" she assured him exultantly. "Why, if only he reveals what he knows, we will get an exclusive story for the *Star!* We'll expose the Hoods and put an end to the organization!"

"As easy as that?" laughed Mr. Parker. "Seriously though, I think we are on the verge of cracking the story. In going over the books of the County Cooperative, Jerry has discovered any number of discrepancies."

"I've always thought that Hank Holloway might be connected with the Hoods, Dad! I believe he was the night rider who made off with Mrs. Davis' melons."

"Any idea who the other members of the outfit may be?"

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"Not yet, but I expect to find out when I meet Clem Davis tomorrow."

"I'll go with you," Mr. Parker declared. "Maybe I should take Sheriff Daniels along too."

"Oh, Dad," Penny protested indignantly. "I promised to help Clem, not turn him over to an officer. I am afraid that unless I go alone, he'll not even show himself."

"Perhaps it would be best for you to go by yourself," the editor admitted. "Learn what you can from Davis, and make an appointment for him to see me."

Another matter weighed heavily on Penny's mind. In her encounter with Clyde Blake that morning, she had acted in a high-handed manner, and sooner or later her father must hear about the cheque episode.

"Dad, I have a confession to make," she began awkwardly. "When I reached the camp this morning I found that Mr. Blake had induced the board members to buy the property—"

"Never mind," Mr. Parker interrupted. "I've already heard the details of your disgraceful actions from Mrs. Van Cleve."

"I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself," Penny said contritely. "I tore up the cheque on the spur of the moment."

"It was a foolish, rather dramatic thing to do. However, I must acknowledge the result was highly pleasing to everyone save Clyde Blake."

"What does he have to say, Dad?"

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"He claims that he acted in good faith for Benjamin Bowman. Likewise, that he had no suspicion the title was faulty."

"Naturally he would take such an attitude."

"I've asked Blake to produce Ben Bowman," Mr. Parker resumed. "Unless he can do so and prove that the property actually is owned by him, the deal is off."

"Do you think Blake will bring the man to Riverview?"

"I doubt it very much," the editor answered. "I suspect he'll bluff, and finally let the deal go by default. It will be an easy way out for him."

"Blake always seems to escape his misdeeds. I wish we could find Ben Bowman ourselves, and bring the two men together. That would be interesting!"

"Finding Ben Bowman would serve many useful purposes," Mr. Parker said grimly. "But now that I would actually welcome a communication from him, he no longer pesters me!"

Eagerly Penny awaited the hour appointed for her meeting with Clem Davis. Knowing that the man did not obtain enough to eat, she spent considerable time the next afternoon preparing a lunch basket of substantial food. Taking it with her, she waited at the camp site for nearly a half hour. Finally, just as she began to think that the man had failed her, he appeared.

"I've brought you some hot coffee," Penny said, taking the plug from a thermos bottle. "A little food too."

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"Say, that's swell!" the man murmured gratefully. "My wife slips me a handout whenever she can, but lately the house has been watched so closely, she can't get away."

Seating himself at the picnic table, Clem Davis drained the cup of coffee in a few swallows, and greedily devoured a sandwich.

"Now what do you want to know?" he asked gruffly.

Mr. Parker had told Penny exactly what questions to ask. She began with the most important one.

"Mr. Davis, tell me, who is the head man of the Hoods?"

"I don't know myself," he answered promptly. "At the meetings, the Master always wore a robe and a black hood. None of the members ever were permitted to see his face."

"You have no idea who the man may be?"

Clem Davis shook his head as he bit into another sandwich. "I doubt there are more than one or two members of the order who know his identity. Hank Holloway might, or maybe Charley Phelps."

"Is Phelps a member?" Penny asked quickly.

"One of the chief ones. Most of the meetings are held at his place."

"You don't mean at the Hubell Tower?"

Penny's pulse had stepped up to a faster pace, for the information was of the greatest value. Further-

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more, it thrilled her that her own theory regarding Charley Phelps was receiving support.

"Sure, the Hoods meet at the Tower about once a month," Clem Davis disclosed. "Usually they get together on the thirteenth, but sometimes they have extra sessions. When special meetings are held, a green light burns on the tower, or the clock strikes thirteen times just at midnight.

"I thought so!" Penny exclaimed, highly elated. "Tell me, why did you decide to break your connection with the Hoods?"

"I joined the organization before I knew what I was letting myself in for. When they made plans to burn the Preston barn, I wanted to quit. The Hoods threatened me, and to get even, planted evidence that made it look as if I had set the fire."

Penny was inclined to believe that Clem Davis had told a straight story for it coincided with her own theories. Always it had seemed to her that evidence pointing to his guilt had been entirely too plain. To corroborate her conclusions, she had brought from home the watch fob found at the Davis stable, hoping that he might identify it.

"That's not mine," he said promptly when she showed the article to him. "I never saw it before."

Penny opened the tiny case, displaying the child's picture. However, the man had no idea who the little boy might be.

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"Mr. Davis," she said quietly, replacing the watch fob in her pocket. "I believe in your innocence, and I want to help you. I am sure I can, providing you are willing to cooperate."

"I've already told you about everything I know."

"You've given me splendid information," Penny praised. "What I want you to do is to talk with my father. He'll probably ask you to repeat your story to the Grand Jury."

"I'd be a fool to do that," Clem Davis responded. "I can't prove any of my statements. The Preston fire would be pinned on me, and the Hoods might try to harm my wife. Why, they ran off with a truck load of our melons the other night."

"I know. But unless someone has the courage to speak out against the Hoods they'll become bolder and do even more harm. Supposing you were promised absolute protection. Then would you go before the Grand Jury?"

"Nothing would give me more pleasure. But who can guarantee I'll not be made to pay?"

"I think my father can," Penny assured him. "Will you meet him here tomorrow night at this same hour?"

"Okay," the man agreed, getting up from the table. "You seem to be on the level."

"I'll bring more food tomorrow," Penny said as an extra inducement. "You must have had a hard time since you've been hiding out in the woods."

"Oh, it's not so bad once you get used to it," the

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man shrugged. "I've got a pretty good place to sleep now."

"Inside a building?" Penny asked curiously.

"An automobile," the man grinned. "Someone abandoned it in the swamp and I've taken possession."

"An old one, I suppose."

"Not so old," Clem Davis answered. "Funny thing, it's a 1941 Deluxe model with good upholstery. The only thing I can see wrong with it is that the front grill and fenders have been smashed."

"The car isn't by chance a gray one?"

"Yes, it is," the man admitted. "How did you guess?"

"I didn't guess," Penny returned soberly. "I have a suspicion that car is the one which killed two people about a year ago. Mr. Davis, you must take me to it at once!"

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CHAPTER

21

A BROKEN PROMISE

"YOU WANT me to take you to the abandoned car now?" Clem Davis echoed in surprise. "It's located deep in the swamp, just off a side road."

"Would it require long to get there?" Penny asked thoughtfully.

"A half hour at least. With night coming on you wouldn't be able to see a thing."

"It is getting dark," Penny admitted regretfully. "Everything considered, I guess it would be better to wait until tomorrow. But in the meantime, I wish you would search the car carefully. Get the engine number—anything which might help to identify the owner."

"The engine number has been filed off," Clem answered. "I'll give the car a good going over though to see what I can learn. Thanks for the food."

Raising his hand in a semi salute, the man started into the woods.

"Don't forget to meet Dad and me tomorrow night,"

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Penny called after him. "We'll be waiting here about this same time."

The interview with the fugitive had more than fulfilled Penny's expectations. Driving straight home, she made a full report of the talk to her father. Breathlessly, she revealed that the Hoods held monthly meetings at the Hubell Tower, and that both Hank Holloway and Charley Phelps were members of the order.

"You weren't able to learn the name of the head man?" Mr. Parker questioned.

"No, Clem didn't know it himself. He says the Master never shows himself to anyone, but always appears in mask."

Mr. Parker began to pace the floor, a habit of his when under mental stress. The information Penny had acquired was of utmost importance. He believed it to be authentic, but he dared not overlook the possibility that Clem Davis had deliberately lied.

"We must move cautiously on this story," he said aloud. "Should we make false accusations against innocent persons, the *Star* would face disastrous lawsuits."

"You're not going to withhold the information from the public?" Penny demanded in disappointment.

"For the present, I must. The thing for us to do is to try to learn the identity of the head man. Any news published in the *Star* would only serve as a tip-off to him."

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"You're right, of course," Penny agreed after a moment of silence.

"Now that we have such a splendid start, it should be easy to gain additional information," the editor resumed. "You say the meetings usually are held on the thirteenth of the month?"

"That's what Clem Davis told me."

"Then we'll arrange to have the Tower watched on that night. In the meantime, I'll see Davis and learn what I can from him. Jerry is working on the County Cooperative angle of the story, and should have some interesting facts soon."

Penny knew that her father was adopting a wise policy, but she could not help feeling slightly disappointed. Always eager for action, she had hoped that Clem Davis' disclosures would lead to the immediate arrest of both Hank Holloway and Charley Phelps. However, she brightened at the thought that at least additional revelations might follow her father's meeting with the fugitive.

The following night, shortly after six-thirty, Penny and Mr. Parker presented themselves at the Orphans' Camp site. They had brought a basket of food, coffee, and a generous supply of cigarettes.

"What time did Davis promise to meet you?" Mr. Parker asked impatiently.

"He should be here now," Penny returned. "I can't imagine why he's late."

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Another half hour elapsed, and still the fugitive did not appear. Mr. Parker paced restlessly beside the picnic table, becoming increasingly impatient.

"He's probably waiting until after dark," Penny declared optimistically.

Another hour elapsed. The shadows deepened and a chill wind blew from the river. Hungry mosquitoes kept Mr. Parker more than occupied as he sought to protect himself.

"Well, I've had enough of this!" he announced at last. "The man isn't coming."

"Oh, Dad, let's wait just a little longer," Penny coaxed. "I'm sure he meant to keep his promise."

"Perhaps he did, although I'm inclined to think otherwise. At any rate, I am going home!"

Penny had no choice but to follow her father to the car. She could not understand Clem Davis' failure to appear unless he had feared that he would be placed under arrest. While it was quite possible that the man might come to the picnic grounds the following night, she was afraid she would never see him again.

"I half expected this to happen," Mr. Parker remarked as he drove toward Riverview. "Unless we can get Davis to swear to his story, we haven't a scrap of real evidence against the Hoods."

"We may learn something on the night of the thirteenth," Penny said hopefully.

"Possibly, but I'm beginning to wonder if every-

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thing Davis told you may not have been for the purpose of deception."

"He seemed sincere. I can't believe he deliberately lied to me."

Submerged in gloom, Penny had little to say during the swift ride into Riverview. She could not blame her father for feeling annoyed, because the trip had cost him two hours of valuable time. Clem Davis' failure to appear undoubtedly might deprive the *Star* of a spectacular scoop.

"Never mind," Mr. Parker said to comfort her. "It wasn't your fault. We'll find another way to get our information."

The car proceeded slowly through the downtown section of Riverview. Turning her head to read an electric sign, Penny's attention was drawn to a man in a gray suit who was walking close to the curb.

"Dad, stop the car!" she cried, seizing his arm. "There he is now!"

"Clem Davis?" Mr. Parker demanded, swerving the automobile toward a vacant space near the sidewalk.

"No! No! Ben Bowman! I'm sure it is he!"

Springing from the car, Penny glanced up the street. She had alighted just in time to see the man in gray enter a telegraph office.

"What nonsense is this?" Mr. Parker inquired impatiently. "Why do you think the fellow is Bowman?"

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"I'm sure he's the same man I saw at Claymore. The one who tried to pass a forged cheque! Oh, please Dad, we can't let him get away!"

Switching off the car ignition, Mr. Parker stepped to the curb.

"If it should prove to be Ben Bowman, nothing would please me better than to nab him," he announced grimly. "But if you've made a mistake—"

"Come on," Penny urged, seizing his hand. "We can talk about it later."

Through the huge plate glass window of the telegraph office, the man in gray could be seen standing at one of the counters. His back was to the street and he appeared to be writing a message.

"I'm sure it's Ben Bowman," Penny said again. "Why not go inside and ask him if that's his name?"

"I shall. But I'm warning you again, if you've made one of your little mistakes—"

"Go ahead, faint heart!" Penny chuckled, giving him a tiny push. "I'll stay here by the door ready to stop him if he gets by you."

With no appearance of haste, Mr. Parker sauntered into the telegraph office. Deliberately taking a place at the counter close beside the man in gray, he pretended to write a message. Actually, he studied his companion, and attempted to read the lengthy telegram which the other had composed. Before he could do so, the man handed the paper to a girl clerk.

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"Get this off right away," he instructed. "Send it collect."

The clerk examined the message, having difficulty in reading the writing.

"This night letter is to be sent to Anthony Parker?" she inquired.

"That's right," the man agreed.

Mr. Parker waited for no more. Touching the man on the arm, he said distinctly:

"I'll save you the trouble of sending that message. I am Anthony Parker."

The man whirled around, his face plainly showing consternation.

"You are Ben Bowman I assume," Mr. Parker said coolly. "I've long looked forward to meeting you."

"You've got me mixed up with someone else," the man mumbled, edging away. "My name's Clark Edgewater. See, I signed it to this telegram."

As proof of his contention, he pointed to the lengthy communication which lay on the counter. One glance satisfied Mr. Parker that it was another "crank" message.

"I don't care how you sign your name," he retorted. "You are Ben Bowman. We have a few matters to talk over."

The man gazed uncertainly at Mr. Parker. He started to speak, then changed his mind. Turning, he made a sudden break for the exit.

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"Stop him!" Mr. Parker shouted. "Don't let him get away!"

Penny stood close to the door. As the man rushed toward her, she shot a bolt into place.

"Not quite so fast, Mr. Bowman," she said, smiling. "We really must have a chat with you."

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CHAPTER

22

THE MAN IN GRAY

WITH THE door locked, the man saw that he could not hope to escape. Accepting the situation, he regarded Mr. Parker and Penny with cold disdain.

"All right, my name is Ben Bowman," he acknowledged, shrugging. "So what?"

"You're the man who has been sending me collect messages for the past three months!" Mr. Parker accused.

"And what if I have? Is there any law against it? You run a lousy paper, and as a reader I have a right to complain!"

"But not at my expense. Another thing, I want to know what connection you've had with Clyde Blake."

"Never heard of him."

"Then you don't own property in this city?"

"Nor anywhere else. Now if you're through giving me the third degree, I'll move on."

"Not so fast," interposed Penny, refusing to unbar the door, "if I'm not mistaken you're the same man

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who is wanted at Claymore for forging a cheque."

"Really, this is too much!" Ben Bowman exclaimed angrily. "Unless you permit me to pass, I shall protest to the police."

"I see an officer just across the street," Mr. Parker declared. "Penny, will you call him over?"

"Just a minute," Ben Bowman interposed in an altered tone. "We can settle this ourselves. I'll admit I was hasty in sending those messages—just a way to let off steam, I guess. If you're willing to forget about it I'll repay you for every dollar you spent."

"I'm afraid I can't forget that easily," Mr. Parker retorted. "No, unless you're willing to come clean about your connection with Clyde Blake I'll have to call the police."

"What do you want to know about him?"

"Is he acting as your real estate agent?"

"Certainly not."

"You do know the man?"

"I've done a little work for him."

"Didn't he pay you to allow him to use your name on a deed?"

"He gave me twenty-five dollars to make out some papers for him. I only copied what he told me to write."

"That's all I want to know," Mr. Parker said grimly. "Penny, call the policeman!"

"See here," Bowman protested furiously, "you

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intimated that if I told what I knew about Blake you'd let me off. Why, you're as yellow as that paper you run!"

"I make no deals with men of your stamp!" Mr. Parker retorted.

As Penny unlocked the door, Ben Bowman made a break for freedom. However, the editor was entirely prepared. Seizing the man, he held him until Penny could summon the policeman. Still struggling, Bowman was loaded into a patrol wagon and taken to police headquarters.

"I guess that earns me a nice little one hundred dollars!" Penny remarked as she and her father went to their own car. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're entirely welcome," Mr. Parker grinned. "I never took greater pleasure in acknowledging a debt."

"What's your next move, Dad? Will you expose Clyde Blake in tomorrow's *Star?*"

"I'm tempted to do it, Penny. The evidence still is rather flimsy, but even if Ben Bowman denies his story, I think we can prove our charges."

"It's a pity you can't break the Hood yarn in the same edition," Penny said musingly. "What a front page that would make!"

"It certainly would be a good three pennies worth," Mr. Parker agreed. "Unfortunately, it will be many days before the Hoods are supposed to hold their meeting at the Tower."

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"But why wait? We could call that gathering ourselves!"

"Just how?"

"Simple as pie. All we would need to do would be to have the clock strike thirteen instead of twelve." Penny glanced at her wrist watch and added persuasively: "We have several hours in which to work!"

"You're completely crazy!" accused Mr. Parker. "Just how would you arrange to have the clock strike thirteen?"

"I'll take care of that part, Dad. All I'll need is a hammer."

"To use on the caretaker, Charley Phelps, I suppose," Mr. Parker remarked ironically.

"Oh, no," Penny corrected, "I propose to turn all the strong-arm work over to you and your gang of reporters. Naturally, Phelps will have to be removed from the scene."

"What you propose is absolutely impossible," the editor declared. "Even so, I'll admit that I find your idea rather fascinating."

"This is no time for being conservative, Dad. Why, the Hoods must know you are out to break up their organization. Every day you wait lessens your chance of getting the story."

"I realize that only too well, Penny. I pinned quite a bit of hope on Clem Davis. His failure to appear puts everything in a different light."

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"Why not test what he told us?" Penny argued. "It will be easy to learn if the striking of the clock is a signal to call the Hood meeting. If the men should come, we'll have them arrested, and run a big story tomorrow morning!"

"Coming from your lips it sounds so very simple," Mr. Parker smiled. "Has it occurred to you that if we fail, we'll probably breakfast at the police station?"

"Why worry about that?" grinned Penny. "You have influence."

Mr. Parker sat for several minutes lost in thought.

"You know, I've ALWAYS been lucky," Penny coaxed. "I feel a double dose of it coming on to-night!"

"I believe in hunches myself," Mr. Parker chuckled. "No doubt I'm making the biggest mistake of my life, but I'm going to try your wild scheme. Crazy as it is, it may work!"

"Then let's go!" laughed Penny.

At the *Star* office, Mr. Parker hastily summoned a special staff of newspaper men, warning them to hold themselves in readiness to get out a special edition on short notice. From the group he chose Salt Sommers, Jerry Livingston, and two reporters known for their pugilistic prowess.

"Now this is the line up, boys," he revealed. "We're going to kidnap Charley Phelps from the Tower. It's risky business unless things break right for us, so if any

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of you want to drop out now, this is your chance."

"We're with you, chief!" declared Salt Sommers, tossing a pack of photographic supplies over his shoulder.

"Sure, what are we waiting for?" chimed in Jerry.

It was well after eleven o'clock by the time the overloaded press car drew up not far from the Hubell Tower. Penny parked on a dark side street, and Jerry was sent to look over the situation. Soon he returned with his report.

"Charley Phelps is alone in the Tower," he assured the editor. "We shouldn't have any trouble handling him."

"Okay, then let's do the job," Mr. Parker returned. "Remember, if we muff it, we'll do our explaining to a judge."

Separating into groups so that they would not attract attention, Penny and the five men approached the Tower. A light glowed from within, and the caretaker could be seen moving about in the tiny living room.

Tying handkerchiefs over their faces, Salt and Jerry rapped on the back door. Charley Phelps opened it to find himself gazing into the blinding light of two flashlights.

"Say, what—" he began but did not finish.

Jerry and Salt had seized his arms. Before he could make another sound, they shoved a gag into his mouth,

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and dragging him into the Tower, closed the door. Working swiftly, they trussed his hands and feet and pushed him into a machinery room.

"Nice work, boys," Mr. Parker praised.

"Listen!" whispered Penny, who had followed the men into the Tower.

The clock had begun to strike the hour of midnight.

"Get up there quickly and do your stuff!" her father commanded. "You've not much time!"

Two steps at a time, Penny raced up the steep iron stairway which led to the belfry of the Tower. Anxiously, she counted the strokes as they pealed forth loud and clearly. Eight—nine—ten. The clock had never seemed to strike so fast before. Desperately she wondered if she could reach the belfry in time.

The stairway was dark, the footing uncertain. In her nervousness, Penny stumbled. Clutching the handrail, she clung to it a moment until she had recovered balance. But in that interval the clock had kept striking, and she was no longer sure of the count.

"It must be eleven," she thought, running up the remaining steps. "The next stroke will be the last."

Penny reached the great bell just as the clapper struck against the metal. The sound was deafening.

"Now!" she thought excitedly. "This is the moment, and I dare not fail!"

Balancing herself precariously, Penny raised a hammer high above her head. With all her strength she brought it down hard against the bell.

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CHAPTER

23

A TRAP SET

TO PENNY'S sensitive ears, the sound which resulted from the hammer blow, seemed weak and lacking in resonance. She sagged back against the iron railing, feeling that she had failed.

"That was swell!" a low voice said in her ear. "A perfect thirteenth stroke!"

Turning around, Penny saw that Jerry Livingston had followed her into the belfry.

"Did it really sound all right?" she inquired anxiously.

"It was good enough to fool anyone. But the question is, will it bring the Hoods here?"

In the room far below, Mr. Parker had lowered the blinds of the circular windows. Making certain that Charley Phelps was securely bound and gagged so that he could make no sound, he opened the front door a tiny crack and left it that way.

"How about the lights?" Salt Sommers asked.

"Leave them on. Shove that sound apparatus under

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the daybed. Now I guess everything's set. Upstairs, everyone."

Mr. Parker, Salt, and the two reporters, joined Penny and Jerry on the iron stairway.

"We may have a long vigil," the editor warned. "In fact, this whole scheme is likely to turn out a bust."

Few words were spoken during the next twenty minutes. Penny stirred restlessly, and finally went to join Jerry who was maintaining a watch from the belfry.

"See anyone?" she whispered, scanning the street below.

"No sign of anyone yet."

At intervals automobiles whizzed past the tower, and presently one drew up not far from the building. Immediately, Jerry and Penny focused their attention upon it. The headlights were turned to parking, then a man alighted and came toward the Hubell Tower.

"Who is he?" Jerry whispered. "Can you tell?"

"I'm not sure," Penny said uncertainly. "It may be Hank Holloway."

As the man stepped into the light, they both saw that her identification had been correct. The man rapped on the door several times. Receiving no answer, he finally entered.

"Charley!" those on the iron stairway heard him call. "Where are you?"

The brilliantly lighted living room combined with the absence of the caretaker, seemed to mystify the

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newcomer. Muttering to himself, he moved restlessly about for a few minutes. Finally seating himself, he picked up a newspaper and began to read.

From their post in the belfry, Penny and Jerry soon observed two other men approaching the tower. One they recognized as a workman who had sorted melons at the Davis farm, but his companion was unknown to them. Without rapping, they too entered the building.

"Where's Charley?" inquired one of the men.

"That's what I was wondering," Hank Holloway replied, tossing aside his paper. "For that matter, I can't figure out why this special meeting was called. Something important must have come up."

Within ten minutes, three other men had arrived. Jerry was able to identify two of them by name, but he dared not risk whispering the information to Mr. Parker who crouched on the stairway.

"There's something mighty queer about this meeting," Hank Holloway growled. "Where is the Master? And what's become of Charley?"

From the machinery room in which the caretaker had been imprisoned came a slight thumping sound.

"What was that?" Hank demanded suspiciously.

"I didn't hear anything," answered one of the other men. "Maybe it was someone at the door."

Hank tramped across the room to peer out into the night. As the door swung back; a dark figure moved swiftly along the hedge, crouching low.

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"Who's there?" Hank called sharply.

"Quiet, you fool!" was the harsh response.

A man wearing a dark robe and a black hood which completely hid his face, brushed past Holloway, and entered the Tower living room.

"Close the door!" he ordered.

Holloway hastened to obey. An expectant and rather tense silence had fallen upon the men gathered in the room.

"Now what is the meaning of this?" the Master demanded, facing the group. "Who called this meeting?"

"Why, didn't you?" Holloway asked blankly.

"I did not."

"All I know is that I heard the clock strike an extra stroke," Holloway explained. "I thought it was queer to be having another meeting so soon. Then I found Charley wasn't here—"

"Charley not here!" the Master exclaimed.

"He must have stepped out somewhere. The lights were on, and the door partly open."

"I don't like this," the Master said, his voice harsh. "Charley has no right to call a meeting without a special order from me. It is becoming increasingly dangerous for us to gather here."

"Now you're talking!" Holloway nodded. "Anthony Parker of the *Star* is on the warpath again. One of his reporters has been prying into the books of the County Cooperative."

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"He'll learn nothing from that source, I trust."

"Not enough to do any harm."

"You act as though you had a grievance, Holloway. Any complaints?"

"Why, no, the Cooperative has made a lot of money since you've taken over. We want to go along with you, if your flare for the dramatic doesn't get us in too deep."

"What do you mean by that, Holloway?"

"This night riding business is getting risky. Why, if Clem Davis should talk—"

"We're not through with him yet."

"Another thing, most of us never did approve of holding meetings here at the Tower," Hank Holloway went on. "It's too public a place, and sooner or later someone will start asking questions about what goes on."

"Anything else?"

"Well, we think you ought to show yourself—let us know who you are. We're all in this together, and we ought to take the same risks. I've been carrying the heavy end."

"That settles it!" the masked man said with finality. "We're through."

"How do you mean?" Holloway asked.

"We're breaking up the organization—now—tonight."

"There's no call to do that."

"Holloway, you do a lot of talking and not much

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thinking," the other snapped. "This will be our last meeting. We'll divide the profits, and for a time at least, remain inactive."

"That's all very well for you," Holloway complained. "You step out of it without anyone even knowing who you are. But some of us are tied up with the County Cooperative. If there's any investigation, we'll take the rap."

"There will be no investigation."

"That's easy to say," Holloway argued. "I don't like the way things have been going lately. If we're breaking up, we have a right to know who you are."

"Sure," chimed in another. "Remove your mask, and let's have a look. We think we have your number but we ain't positive."

"You never will be," the masked man returned coolly, backing toward the door. "And now, goodnight."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Holloway cried, trying to head him off.

"Stand back!" ordered the Master harshly.

From beneath his robe he whipped a revolver.

"All right," Holloway sneered. "I never argue when I'm looking into a muzzle."

Before the Master could retreat, there was another disturbance from inside the machinery room. Unmistakably, the door rattled.

"Someone is in there!" Holloway exclaimed.

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Startled, the Master postponed his flight. Still holding the revolver, he tried to open the door, but found it locked.

For those hiding on the stairway, the situation had become a tense one. In another moment, the members of the Black Hoods unquestionably would break the door lock and find Charley Phelps.

"Let's take 'em, Chief!" whispered Jerry, who was eager for action. "Now is our only chance."

"All set!" Mr. Parker gave the signal.

With a concerted rush, the four young men leaped down the stairway, hurling themselves on Holloway and the masked man. Catching the latter unaware, Jerry knocked the revolver from his hand and it went spinning over the floor.

Penny started down the stairway, but Mr. Parker pushed her back.

"Stay where you are!" he ordered as he too joined the fray.

Penny huddled against the wall, watching fearfully. Her father and the reporters outnumbered their opponents by one man, but the Hoods were all strong, powerful fellows who fought desperately. A chair crashed against the lamp, shattering it. In the resulting darkness, she no longer could see what was happening.

Suddenly a figure broke away from the general tangle of bodies and darted toward the circular stair-

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way. For a moment Penny believed that he must be one of the reporters, then she saw that the man wore a hood over his face.

"The Master!" she thought, chills racing down her spine. "He's trying to get away, and I've got to stop him!"

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CHAPTER

24

TIMELY HELP

AS THE black-robed man started up the stairway, Penny attempted to block his path. Failing to trip him, she seized his arms and held fast.

"Out of my way!" the man cried, giving her a hard push.

Penny clung tightly and struggled to reach the hood which covered his face.

Suddenly, the man jerked free and darted on up the steep, circular stairway. Pursuing him, Penny was able to seize the long flowing black robe, only to have it tear loose in her hands.

Gaining the first landing, midway to the belfry, the man did not hesitate. Swinging his legs through an open window, he leaped to the ground twenty feet below.

"He'll be killed!" Penny thought.

Reaching the window she saw the man lying in a heap at the base of the tower. For a moment he remained motionless, but as she watched, he slowly scrambled to his feet and staggered off.

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Until the man ducked behind the high hedge, Penny saw him plainly silhouetted in the moonlight. Although his black hood remained in place, his body no longer was covered by the dark robe.

"I know him!" she thought. "Even with his mask on, I'm sure I can't be wrong!"

Fearing to attempt the hazardous leap, Penny ran down the iron stairway, shouting that the Master of the Hoods had escaped. By this time, Mr. Parker's crew of reporters had gained the upperhand of the remaining members of the organization.

"Which way did the fellow go?" the editor demanded, running to the door.

"Along the hedge toward the street!" Penny directed.

Leaving Jerry, Salt, and the others to guard the prisoners, Mr. Parker and his daughter hastened outdoors. There was no sign of anyone in the vicinity of the Tower.

"He can't be far away," Penny maintained. "Anyway, I know his identity!"

"You saw his face?"

"No, but as he ran across the yard I noticed that one arm was much shorter than the other."

"Clyde Blake!"

"That's what I think. Maybe we can catch him at his home!"

"If Blake is our man, we'll get him!" Mr. Parker said tersely. "We may need help though."

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Reentering the Tower building, he telephoned police headquarters, asking that a patrol wagon be sent for Hank Holloway, Charley Phelps, and the other prisoners.

"Send a squad to Clyde Blake's home," he added crisply. "I'll meet your men there and provide all the evidence they'll need to make the arrests."

Jerry, Salt, and the two reporters were instructed to remain at the Tower pending the arrival of the patrol wagon. There was slight danger that any of the prisoners could escape for all the captives had been locked into the machinery room.

Delaying only long enough to obtain the case of sound equipment hidden beneath the daybed, Mr. Parker and Penny hastened to the waiting press car.

"Dad," she marveled as they passed near a street light, "you should see your eye! It's turning black. Someone must have pasted you hard."

"Never mind that now," he returned indifferently. "We're out for a big story, and we're going to get it too!"

The police cruiser which had been summoned was not in sight by the time Mr. Parker and Penny reached the Blake home. At first glance, the house seemed to be dark. However, a dim light glowed from the windows of one of the upstairs, rear bedrooms.

"We'll not wait for the police," Mr. Parker said, starting up the walk.

His knock at the door went unanswered. Even

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when the editor pounded with his fist, no one came to admit him.

"Someone is inside," Penny declared, peering up at the lighted window. "It must be Blake."

Mr. Parker tried the door and finding it unlocked, stepped boldly into the living room.

"Blake!" he shouted.

On the floor above Mr. Parker and Penny heard the soft pad of slippered feet. The real estate man, garbed in a black silk dressing gown, gazed down over the balustrade.

"Who is there?" he called.

"Anthony Parker from the *Star*. I want to talk with you."

Slowly Clyde Blake descended the stairway. His gait was stiff and deliberate.

"You seem to have injured your leg," Mr. Parker said significantly.

"I stumbled on the stairway not fifteen minutes ago," Blake answered. "Twisted my ankle. May I ask why I am honored with a visit at this hour?"

"You know why I am here!" Mr. Parker retorted, reaching to switch on a living room light.

"Indeed, I don't." Deliberately Blake moved away from the bridge lamp into the shadow, but not before both Penny and her father had noted a long, ugly scratch across his cheek.

"It's no use to pretend," Mr. Parker said sharply.

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"I have all the evidence I need to convict you of being a ringleader of the Hoods."

"You are quite mad," the real estate man sneered. "Parker, I've put up with you and your methods quite long enough. You queered my deal with the Orphans' Camp Board. Now you accuse me of being a member of a disreputable organization. You must be out of your mind."

"You've always been a good talker, Blake, but this time it will get you nowhere. My reporters were at the Hubell Tower. I have a complete sound record of what transpired there. Either give yourself up, or the police will take you by force."

"So you've notified the police?"

"I have."

"In that case—" Blake's smile was tight. With a dextrousness which caught Penny and her father completely off guard, he whipped a revolver from beneath his dressing robe. "In that case," he completed, "we'll handle it this way. Raise your hands, if you please."

"Your politeness quite overpowers me," the editor said sarcastically, as he obeyed.

"Now turn your back and walk to the telephone," Blake went on. "Call the police station and tell the chief that you made a mistake in asking for my arrest."

"This will get you nowhere, Blake."

"Do as I say!"

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Mr. Parker went to the telephone, stalling for time by pretending that he did not know the police station number.

"Garfield 4508," Blake supplied. "Say exactly what I tell you or you'll taste one of my little bullets!"

The real estate man stood with his back to the darkened dining room, in such position that he could cover both Mr. Parker and Penny. As the editor began to dial the phone, he backed a step nearer the archway. Behind him, the dark velvet curtains moved slightly.

Penny noted the movement but gave no indication of it. The next instant a muscular arm reached through the velvet folds, seizing Blake from the rear. The revolver was torn from his hand.

Dropping the telephone, Mr. Parker snatched up the weapon and covered Blake.

"All right, it's your turn to reach," he said.

As Blake slowly raised his hands, another man stepped into the circle of light. He wore rough garments and had not shaved in many days.

"Clem Davis!" Penny exclaimed.

"I came here to get Blake," the man said briefly. "I've thought for a long time he was the person responsible for all my trouble. Tonight when the clock struck thirteen, I watched the Hubell Tower. I saw Blake put on his hood and robe and then enter the building, so I knew he was the Master."

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"You're willing to testify to that?" Mr. Parker asked.

"Yes," Clem Davis nodded, "I've been thinking things over. I'm ready to give myself up and tell what I know."

"You'll have a very difficult time of it proving your absurd charges," Blake said scathingly.

"I think not," Mr. Parker corrected. "Ben Bowman was captured tonight, and he's already confessed his part in the real estate swindle. Even if you weren't mixed up with the Hoods, you'd go to jail for that."

Blake sagged into a chair, for the first time looking shaken.

"I'll make a deal with you, Parker," he began, but the editor cut him short.

"You'll face the music! No, Blake, you can't squeeze out of it this time."

A car had drawn up in front of the house. Running to the window, Penny saw three policemen crossing the street. She hurried to the door to open it for them.

"Here's your man," Mr. Parker said as the policemen tramped into the living room.

Turning the revolver over to one of the officers, he disclosed exactly what had occurred. Blake was immediately placed under arrest. He was granted ten minutes to change into street clothing and prepare for his long sojourn in jail.

"I am being persecuted," he whined as he was led

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away. "This is all a trick to build up circulation for the *Star*. If there is such an organization as the Black Hoods, Clem Davis is the man who heads it!"

Penny and Mr. Parker felt very grateful to the fugitive who had come to their aid at such a timely moment. They wished to help him if they could, but they knew he could not escape arrest. Clem Davis realized it too, for he made no protest when told that Sheriff Daniels must be called.

"I'm ready to give myself up," he repeated. "I was a member of the Hoods, but I never went along with them once I learned that they meant to defraud the truck farmers. I hope I can prove my innocence."

Within a few minutes Sheriff Daniels arrived to assume charge of his prisoner. Entertaining no sympathy for the man, he told Penny and her father that in all likelihood Davis must serve a long sentence.

"He's wanted for setting fire to the Preston barn," the sheriff insisted. "Unless he can prove an alibi for himself, he hasn't a chance."

"Can't you tell where you were at the time of the fire?" Mr. Parker asked the man.

"I was at a place called Toni's."

"Why, that's right, Dad!" Penny cried. "Don't you remember? We saw Davis leave the place, and he was followed by two men—probably members of the Hood organization."

"We saw a man leave there shortly after midnight," Mr. Parker agreed.

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"You wouldn't swear he was Clem Davis?" the sheriff asked.

"I'm not sure," Mr. Parker admitted truthfully. "However, it's obvious that a man scarcely could have gone from Toni's at that time and still set fire to the barn. My daughter and I drove directly there, and when we arrived the building had been burning for some time."

"All of which proves nothing unless you can show that Clem Davis actually was at Toni's after midnight."

"Could the owner of the place identify you?" Penny thoughtfully inquired.

"I doubt it," Davis answered. "It might be worth a try, though."

"Perhaps I can prove that you weren't near the Preston farm at midnight!" Penny exclaimed as a sudden idea came to her. "Clem, you heard the Hubell clock strike the hour?"

"Yes, I did."

"How many strokes were there?"

"Thirteen," Davis answered without hesitation. I counted them and figured the Hoods were having one of their get-togethers."

"What is this?" the sheriff demanded in bewilderment.

"We can prove that the Hubell clock did strike thirteen on that particular night," Penny resumed. "It was a signal used by the Hoods, but that's not the point."

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"What are you getting at?"

"Just this. The Hubell clock can't be heard at the Preston farm."

"True."

"One can still hear the clock at Toni's but not a quarter of a mile beyond it. You see, if Mr. Davis heard the thirteenth stroke, he couldn't have had time to reach the Preston farm and set the fire."

"That's an interesting argument," the sheriff said, smiling. "And you plead Clem's case very earnestly. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll investigate all these angles you've brought up, and if the evidence supports your theory, I promise he'll go free."

"That's fair enough," declared Mr. Parker.

The sheriff did not handcuff his prisoner. As they were leaving the house, Clem Davis turned to thank Penny for her interest in his behalf.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said, taking a rectangular metal object from beneath his baggy coat. "Here's something for you."

"A rusty automobile license plate!" Penny exclaimed, staring at it.

"Found it in the swamp not far from that abandoned car I told you about."

"Then it must have been thrown away by the driver of the hit-skip car!"

"That's how I figure," Clem Davis drawled. "If you can learn the owner of this license plate, you'll know who killed that orphan's folks!"

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CHAPTER

25

SPECIAL EDITION

LIGHTS BLAZED on every floor of the *Riverview Star* building, proclaiming to all who passed that another special edition was in the process of birth. Pressmen industriously oiled the big rotaries ready for a big run of papers; linotype men, compositors, reporters, all were at their posts, having been hastily summoned from comfortable beds.

In the editor's office, Penny sat at a typewriter hammering out copy. Jerking a long sheet of paper from beneath the roller, she offered it to her father.

"My contribution on the Hubell Clock angle," she said with a flourish.

Mr. Parker rapidly scanned the story, making a number of corrections with a blue pencil.

"I should slug this 'editorial material,' " he remarked with a grin. "Quite a plug you've put in for Seth McGuire—suggesting that he be given back his old job as caretaker of the Tower."

"Well, don't you think it's a good idea?"

"The old man will get his job back—I'll see to that,"

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Mr. Parker promised. "But the front page of the *Star* is not the place to express wishful thinking. We'll reserve it for news if you don't mind."

Crossing out several lines, Mr. Parker placed the copy in a pneumatic tube, and shot it directly to the composing room. He glanced at his watch, noting aloud that in exactly seven minutes the giant presses would start rolling.

"Everything certainly has turned out grand," Penny sighed happily. "Hank Holloway and Clyde Blake are sure to be given long prison sentences for their Black Hood activities. You've promised to see that Old Seth gets his job back, so that part will end beautifully. He'll adopt Adelle and I won't need to worry about her any more."

"What makes you think Seth will adopt the orphan?" Mr. Parker asked curiously.

"Why, he's wanted to do it from the first. He hesitated because he had no steady work, and not enough money. By the way, Dad, how long will it take to learn the owner of that automobile license plate that Clem Davis gave us?"

"Jerry is trying to get the information now, Penny. All the registry offices are closed, but if he can pull some official out of bed, there's a chance he may obtain the data tonight. I'm not counting on it, however."

The door of the office swung back and City Editor DeWitt hurried into the room.

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"Everything set?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"We need a picture of Clyde Blake. There's nothing in the morgue."

"Salt Sommers has one you might use!" Penny cried. "It was taken when Blake came here the other day. He objected to it because it showed that one arm was shorter than the other."

"Just what we need!" DeWitt approved. "I'll rush it right out. Except for the picture, the front page is all made up."

The door closed behind the city editor, but before Mr. Parker could settle comfortably into his chair, it burst open again. Jerry Livingston, breathless from running up several flights of stairs, faced his chief.

"I've got all the dope!" he announced.

"You learned who drove the hit-run car?" Penny demanded eagerly.

"The license was issued in Clyde Blake's name!"

"Then Adelle's identification at the picnic was correct!" Penny exclaimed.

"Write your story, Jerry, but make it brief," Mr. Parker said tersely. "We'll make over the front page."

Calling DeWitt, he gave the new order. In the composing room, headlines were jerked and a story of minor importance was pulled from the form to make room for the new material.

"We'll roll three minutes late," Mr. Parker said, glancing at his watch again. "Even so, our papers will

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make all the trains, and we'll scoop every other sheet in town."

Jerry wrote his story which was sent paragraph by paragraph to the composing room. Barely had he typed "30," signifying the end, when the lights of the room dimmed for an instant.

"There go the presses!" Mr. Parker declared, ceasing his restless pacing.

Within a few minutes, the first paper, still fresh with ink, was laid upon the editor's desk. Penny peered over his shoulder to read the headlines announcing the arrest of Blake and his followers.

"There's not much here about Ben Bowman," she commented after a moment. "What do you think will happen to him, Dad?"

"That remains to be seen," answered the editor. "He's already wanted for forgery, so it should be fairly easy to prove that he worked with Blake to defraud the Camp Board."

"I'm worried about the orphans' camp. So much money has been spent clearing the land and setting up equipment."

"Probably everything can be settled satisfactorily in the end," Mr. Parker returned. "It may take time and litigation, but there's no reason why a perfect title can't be obtained to the land."

Penny felt very well pleased at the way everything had turned out. Only one small matter remained unexplained. She had been unable to learn the signifi-

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cance of the watch fob found in Clem Davis' stable.

"Why, I can tell you about that," Jerry Livingston assured her. "The fob belonged to Hank Holloway. He admitted it at the police station. The little boy in the picture is his nephew."

Both Penny and her father were tired for it was very late. With the *Star* ready for early morning street sales, they thought longingly of home and bed. Yet as their car sped down a dimly lighted street, Penny revived sufficiently to say:

"How about a steak at Toni's, Dad?"

"Oh, I don't feel like eating at this late hour," Mr. Parker declined.

"That's not the idea, Dad. I'm suggesting a raw steak for that left eye of yours. By morning it will be swollen shut."

"It is quite a shiner," the editor agreed, gazing at his reflection in the car mirror. "But the story was well worth the cost."

"Thanks to whom?" Penny asked mischievously.

"If I say thanks to you, Penny, you will be expecting an increase in your allowance or something of the sort."

"Maybe I'll ask for it anyhow," Penny chuckled. "And don't forget that you owe me a hundred dollars for getting that crack-pot, Ben Bowman, out of your hair!"

"So I do," Mr. Parker conceded with a laugh. "That also will be worth the price."

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Wirt, Mildred A. (Mildred Augustine), 1905-2002

The clock strikes thirteen

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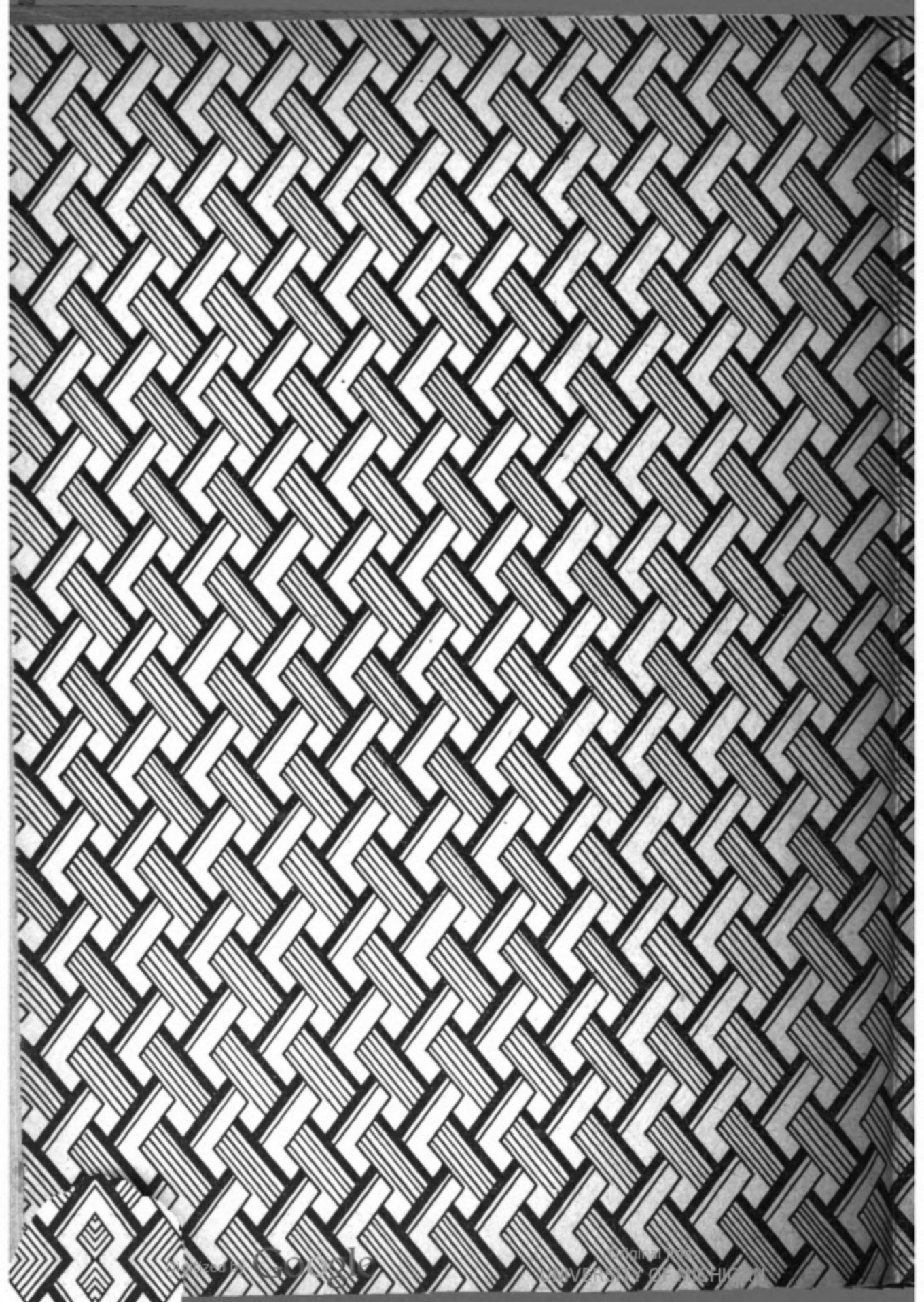

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The Clock Strikes Thirteen

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES
TRAILER STORIES FOR GIRLS

Illustrated

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