

Lavell Edith

# The Mystery of the Fires



Edith Lavell

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**Lavell E.**

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# Edith Lavell

## The Mystery of the Fires

### Characters

Mary Louise Gay a girl detective.  
Jane Patterson her chum.  
Mr. Gay, Mrs. Gay her parents.  
Joseph (Freckles) Gay her brother.  
Silky her dog.  
David McCall a young insurance agent, visiting Shady Nook.  
boy-friends.  
Max Miller  
Norman Wilder

### Residents of Shady Nook

Reeds two adults and five young people.  
Hunters mother and son.  
Partridges four adults.  
Mr. and Mrs. Flick owners of the inn.  
Robinsons two adults and two boys.  
Smiths two adults and three children.  
Mr. and Mrs. Ditmar a young married couple.  
Adams a farmer with three grown-up children.  
Mr. and Mrs. Frazier owners of the Royal Hotel.  
Eberhardt a village storekeeper.

## CHAPTER I

### *The Burnt Bungalow*

“For the whole month?”

Jane Patterson’s eyes sparkled with anticipation as she repeated the invitation her chum had just extended.

“Yes,” replied Mary Louise Gay. “You see, we never could invite you before, because the bungalow is so small, and there’s just room enough for our own family. But Dad will be out West all of August. He doesn’t expect to be back until Labor Day.”

“On a case?” inquired Jane, for Mr. Gay was a detective on the police force.

Mary Louise nodded.

“Yes. An important one. I almost wish I could go with him – it sounds so thrilling.”

“Didn’t you have enough excitement and mystery at Dark Cedars?” demanded Jane.

“I never have enough,” returned the other girl.

“Well, please don’t dig up anything to spoil our vacation at Shady Nook. Still, I don’t really suppose you could if you tried. The very name implies peace.”

“It is a peaceful spot,” agreed Mary Louise. “Not a bit like a big summer resort. Just the mountains and the woods and the lovely Hudson River. Only half a dozen bungalows, so that everybody knows everybody else. It’s all so friendly and nice.”

“Then I shan’t need any fancy clothes – like dance dresses?” Jane’s tone held a faint note of disappointment. She loved outdoor sports, but she was equally fond of parties.

“You better take a couple along,” replied the other girl. “Across the river from Shady Nook there’s a big modern hotel where we often go for dinners and dances. Everybody wears their best clothes there. But most of the time we eat at Flicks’ Inn. It’s just a bigger bungalow, where they have a dining room for the Shady Nook people and a few boarders. Very nice and informal.”

Jane jumped up and started down the steps, across the lawn that separated the Gays’ house from the Pattersons’.

“I must go tell Mother all about it,” she explained, “and begin to get my clothing ready. What time do we start?”

“Seven o’clock tomorrow morning. Rain or shine.”

Left alone, Mary Louise opened the screen door and went into her own house. Her father, with his suitcase on the floor beside him, was saying good-bye to her mother and to his young son Joseph, whom everybody called “Freckles.”

Mr. Gay put his hand upon his daughter’s shoulder and said to his wife:

“I am counting on Mary Louise to take care of you, dear. After the way she mastered that situation at Dark Cedars, I feel that she is capable of almost anything. Far above and beyond most girls of sixteen!”

“She is!” agreed Mrs. Gay proudly. “But I am not expecting any trouble at Shady Nook. I’m more worried about what may happen to you before you catch those criminals!”

“I’ll be all right,” her husband assured her. “Wire for me if you need me – and I’ll come back by airplane.”

Mrs. Gay nodded, little thinking that she would have to follow his advice before the month was over.

As soon as he was gone, the other three members of the family returned to the business of packing. Silky, Mary Louise’s little brown spaniel, trotted around after them, sniffing at everything and looking serious and important, as if he were doing most of the work.

“I’m thankful your father left us the car,” remarked Mrs. Gay, as the suitcases and packages were piled up near the back door. “We’ll need it.”

“Shady Nook is so far from the Junction,” added Mary Louise. “Yes, we’re lucky. And isn’t it nice I have my license, so you won’t have to drive all the way?”

“It certainly is,” agreed her mother. “You’ve always been a big help to me, Mary Louise. And so have you, Freckles,” she added to the boy.

At last everything was finished, in time to allow them all a good sleep before their trip. Shady Nook was almost a day’s journey from Riverside, if they took it in a leisurely manner, driving slowly enough to enjoy the beautiful Hudson River, and stopping at noon at some pleasant inn to eat lunch and rest.

Jane was on hand early, helping the Gays to stack the luggage in the back seat and on the rack provided at the rear of the car.

“Don’t forget to leave a corner for Silky!” Freckles reminded the girls, “He can’t be left behind!”

“As if I could forget him!” returned his sister, picking up the little spaniel and giving him a hug. “Didn’t he save our lives that night we rode in Harry Grant’s car?”

Jane shuddered; she could never forget the horror of that dark night or the terror she had experienced when the tramp commanded, “Hands up!” Good old Silky, biting a piece out of the thug’s leg while the girls made their escape!

“Who’s driving first?” she asked, as the last bundle was stored away.

“I am,” answered Mary Louise. “You and Silky in front with me, and Mother and Freckles in back. We’ll shift places after lunch.”

It was a lovely clear day, not so hot as it often is in August, and the whole party was in the gayest of spirits. Mary Louise loved to drive, and she did it well. She would not have minded if she had been kept at the wheel all day.

Nevertheless, after their pleasant lunch at a quaint little tea room on the roadside, she was perfectly willing to exchange places with her mother and enjoy the better opportunity to look at the scenery.

Jane, however, was more interested in Shady Nook than in the country through which they were passing. She asked innumerable questions.

“How many bungalows did you say there are, Mary Lou?” she inquired.

“There were six last year, counting Flicks’ Inn. But I understand that there were two new ones put up this spring.”

“And are there plenty of young people?”

“Not so many at the cottages, but it doesn’t matter, because we have just as much fun with the middle-aged people. Everybody swims and paddles and dances and plays tennis. Besides, there are always extra young people boarding at Flicks’ for shorter vacations. And sometimes we meet the people at the Royal Hotel.”

“Is that where they hold the dances?” inquired Jane. “When we wear our flossy dresses?”

“Yes. That’s the place. Across the river from Shady Nook.”

“Tell me some of the people’s names,” urged Jane.

“Well, next door to us – only it really isn’t next door, because there’s quite a little woods between – is the loveliest cottage at Shady Nook. It was built by a man named Hunter, who was very rich. He bought all the land around there on our side of the river and sold it to people he knew and liked. But he died last year, so only his wife and son came back this summer.”

“A son?” repeated Jane, rolling her eyes. “Not a babe in arms, I hope!”

“A sophomore at Yale,” replied Mary Louise. “Rather homely, but awfully nice – and piles of fun.”

“What’s the youth’s name?”

“There you go! Putting him down in your notebook already! His name’s Clifford. We all call him Cliff.”

“Naturally. But if he’s your property, Mary Lou, just say the word, and I’ll keep off.”

Mary Louise laughed.

“Nobody’s my special property,” she said. “Not even Max Miller,” she added, mentioning her particular boy-friend in their home town of Riverside. “Though he sometimes acts as if he believed I were his! I like Cliff Hunter a lot – everybody does. But we don’t pair off much at Shady Nook, except sometimes to go canoeing. Most of the time we’re just one big family.”

“Who else are there besides the Hunters?” inquired the other girl. “I mean, what other families with young people?”

“The Reeds are about the jolliest family at Shady Nook,” answered Mary Louise. “There are five children, and the father and mother are just as much fun as the kids. The two oldest girls – Sue and Mabel – are twins about our age. Seventeen, I believe, to be exact. Then there are two younger boys that Freckles chums up with, and a little girl.”

“I’m afraid I’ll never be able to keep all those names straight,” sighed Jane.

“Wait till we get there and you meet them one at a time,” advised the other. “It’s so much easier to remember people after you’ve seen them.”

This advice sounded sensible, and Jane settled back in her corner to enjoy the remainder of the ride. The time passed quickly; at five o’clock they crossed the railroad junction and turned into the private road that led to Shady Nook.

The trees were thick on one side of the road, but on the other they could see the lovely Hudson River, gleaming blue in the August sunlight. Jane went into ecstasies over the beauty of the spot.

“Here we are!” announced Mrs. Gay as she turned off to a dirt driveway and brought the car to a stop at a tin garage. “Our back door!”

“Why, we’re right in the woods!” cried Jane, still unable to see the Gays’ cottage.

“Wait till you see the bungalow!” returned Mary Louise. “It’s like a little dream house. You can borrow it for your honeymoon, if you like – provided you don’t get married in the summer time.”

“Thanks a lot! But I think I’ll wait a few years before I accept your kind offer.”

In another moment they were all out of the car, following Mrs. Gay around to the front of the cottage, up to the screened porch, from which they had a good view of the river.

As Mary Louise had said, the bungalow was charming. Built entirely of logs, it combined the picturesqueness of olden times with the conveniences of the modern day. A huge fireplace covered one entire wall of the living room, and the chairs were big and soft and comfortable. A drop-leaf table at one end of the room was sometimes used for meals, because there was no dining room. But the spotless kitchen contained a breakfast nook where the Gays always ate their first meal of each day. Two bedrooms branched off from the living room, with a white bathroom between them.

“A little bit too civilized for me,” said Freckles, in a most superior manner. “I sleep out back in a tent.”

“In good weather,” amended Mrs. Gay. “Now, girls, suppose we just unpack one suitcase apiece and get ready for dinner. We’re going over to Flicks’, of course.”

“I got to have a swim!” announced Freckles.

“All right, if you’ll be quick about it. And don’t go in all by yourself.”

The group gathered together again at half-past six and started down the private road to Flicks’ Inn, where they would have their supper. Mary Louise and Jane had both put on light summer dresses and looked as rested and refreshed as if they had been at Shady Nook all summer.

“And where is our next-door neighbor’s cottage?” inquired Jane, peering through the trees on the road. “Or do the Hunters live on the other side of you?”

“No, the Reeds live on the other side. Theirs is the last bungalow. The Hunters’ is right in here.” She paused at a path between two big oak trees.

Jane stepped to her side and looked in among the foliage.

“I don’t see it,” she said.

“It’s been burnt down!” cried Freckles, dashing up behind the girls. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you. About a week ago, Larry Reed said. Awful mysterious. In the night.”

“Burned down!” repeated Mary Louise, rushing in through the trees beside the path. “Honestly?”

“See for yourself!” replied her brother.

A few steps more, and they saw for themselves that it was only too true. The blackened trunks, the dry, scarred grass, and the faint smoky odor confirmed his statement. The beautiful cottage was gone forever. Nothing remained but the charred stones of its foundation.

“Boy, don’t I wish I’d been here!” exclaimed Freckles regretfully. “It must have been some fire. But they say nobody saw it. It was practically out when they discovered it.”

“Lucky that it was!” said Mrs. Gay. “Suppose ours had caught too!”

Mary Louise shuddered; such an idea was too dreadful to contemplate.

“Do you know any of the details, Freckles?” asked his mother, as the party turned back to the road again.

“No, I don’t. Nobody does. It just happened, at night, while everybody was over at a dance at the Royal Hotel across the river.”

“Maybe we’ll hear more about it at Flicks’. Come on, let’s hurry.”

They passed one bungalow on the way to the inn, which Mary Louise pointed out to Jane as belonging to the Partridges – all middle-aged people, she explained – so that her chum was not interested. Nobody over twenty-five was any use to Jane Patterson.

The inn, a large square frame building, was completely surrounded by porches on which tables were placed where people were already eating their dinners. Of the eight families at Shady Nook, all except one took their lunches and suppers at Flicks’. Besides them, there were at least half a dozen boarders. Roughly, Mary Louise estimated there were about thirty-five people at the inn.

They all seemed to know the Gays, for everybody was bowing and smiling as the little party opened the screen door of the front porch.

Mrs. Flick, a fat, good-natured woman of about fifty, came forward to welcome them.

“My, it’s good to see you all back again!” she exclaimed, with genuine pleasure. “But where is Mr. Gay?”

“He had to go to California on business,” explained Mrs. Gay. “So we brought Mary Louise’s friend, Jane Patterson, in his place. Mrs. Flick, this is Jane.”

“Happy to meet you, Miss Jane,” returned the landlady as she led the Gays to their accustomed table. When they were seated, she pulled up a chair beside them to talk for a few minutes with Mrs. Gay.

“Tell us about the Hunters’ bungalow!” begged Mary Louise immediately.

“There isn’t much to tell. Nobody knows much... Oh, here’s Hattie to take your order.” And the newcomers had to exchange greetings with the waitress, the daughter of a farmer named Adams who lived a couple of miles from Shady Nook.

When the order had been given, Mary Louise repeated her question.

“It happened a week ago – on a Saturday,” explained Mrs. Flick. “Mr. Clifford had four college boys visiting him, and they all went across the river that evening to a dance at the Royal Hotel. Mrs. Hunter went along with ’em. When they came back, the place was burned to the ground.”

“Didn’t anybody see the flames – or smell the smoke?”

“No. The wind was the other way from the hotel, and there wasn’t anybody at Shady Nook to notice. Everybody, except Pa and me, went to the dance. And we were sound asleep.”

Hattie came back with the soup, and Mrs. Flick rose from her chair. “I’ll see you later,” she said as she hurried into the house.

“It sounds very mysterious,” muttered Mary Louise.

“Oh, there’s probably some simple explanation,” replied Jane lightly. “We’ll have to ask Clifford Hunter. Where is he, Mary Lou? Do you see him?”

The other girl glanced hastily about the big porch and shook her head.

“Not here,” she answered. “But he may be inside. There’s another dining room in the bungalow.”

“This isn’t Clifford?” asked Jane, watching a tall, good-looking, dark-eyed young man coming out of the door.

Mary Louise turned around and smiled.

“No. That’s David McCall. He usually comes up just for two weeks’ vacation and stays here at Flicks’.”

A moment later the young man reached the Gays’ table and was introduced to Jane. But he merely nodded to her briefly: his eyes seemed to devour Mary Louise.

“I thought you’d never come, Mary Lou!” he exclaimed. “A whole week of my vacation is gone!”

“But you have another week, don’t you, David?”

“Yes. A measly seven days! And then another year to wait till I see you again!” His tone was not bantering, like the boys at home. David McCall was serious – too terribly serious, Mary Louise sometimes thought – about everything.

“May I come over to see you after supper?” he pleaded.

“Of course,” agreed Mary Louise lightly. “And then you can tell us about the fire. You were here when it happened?”

“No. I didn’t get here till Sunday. But I can tell you something about it, all right!”

Mary Louise’s eyes opened wide with interest.

“Somebody set it on fire – on purpose, you mean, David?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

The young man leaned over and whispered in her ear:

“Clifford Hunter himself!”

Mary Louise gasped in amazement. “But why?” she demanded.

“To collect the insurance!” was the surprising reply.

And, turning about, David McCall went back into the boarding house.

## CHAPTER II

### *Clifford's Story*

“What did he say?” demanded both Jane and Freckles the moment David McCall was out of hearing distance.

Mary Louise leaned forward and lowered her voice.

“He said Cliff Hunter set the place on fire himself – to get the insurance. Now that his father is dead, the bungalow belongs to him.”

“How awful!” exclaimed Jane. “Do you believe that, Mary Lou?”

“No, I don’t – knowing Cliff as I do. Do you, Mother?”

“Certainly not,” replied Mrs. Gay emphatically. “It’s just David’s jealousy. He’s poor himself, and he has a sort of grudge against all rich people.”

“Maybe,” admitted Mary Louise. “David never did like Cliff, all the summers they’ve both been coming up here to Shady Nook.”

“I wish I could meet this young Hunter,” lamented Jane. “I’m keen to get a look at him.”

“Maybe he isn’t here any more,” remarked Mary Louise. “Since the bungalow is gone, where would he stay?”

“The Hunters are living over at the Royal Hotel, I think,” Freckles informed them. “Seems to me that’s what Larry Reed said.”

“Then Cliff will be over to see you,” observed Mrs. Gay confidently.

Her supposition proved correct: no sooner had the Gays returned to their own bungalow after supper than a motorboat chugged its way across the river and anchored at their dock. A moment later Clifford Hunter stepped out.

As Mary Louise had said, he was not a good-looking young man. His height was only medium, and he was so thin that even expensive tailoring could not make his clothes look well. But his big nose and his sandy complexion were offset by a pleasant smile and attractive gray eyes, which somehow made you feel as if you had known Cliff Hunter all your life.

“Hello, Mary Lou!” he called as he came towards the porch. “Heard you were here!”

He whistled a gay tune as he ascended the steps, and smiled.

“Not so homely after all,” Jane thought as she looked into his pleasant face. And his white flannels and dark blue coat were certainly becoming. They evidently did not wear sweaters at the Royal Hotel.

“Hurry up!” returned Mary Louise. “We’re dying to hear the news!”

“Yes, of course.” He shook hands with Mary Louise and her mother and was introduced to Jane.

“Sit down, Clifford,” urged Mrs. Gay.

The young man fumbled in his pocket and produced a pack of cards.

“In a minute, thank you, Mrs. Gay,” he replied. “But first – take a card, Mary Lou. I know some bully new tricks.”

Mary Louise burst out laughing.

“Haven’t you gotten over that fad yet, Cliff?” she asked.

He regarded her reprovingly.

“Don’t talk so lightly about my profession!” he said. “I’m going to be a magician. Now – I’ll explain the trick. You can look at the pack –”

“Oh, but we want to hear about the fire,” interrupted Mary Louise.

“Take a card!” was his only reply.

There was nothing to do but humor him. Jane was delighted: she loved card tricks and listened eagerly. But Mary Louise was more interested in the burning of the bungalow.

At last, however, Clifford sat down beside Jane on the couch-hammock and began to talk.

“You saw the ruins?” he inquired.

“Yes. But nobody over at Flicks’ seemed to know how it happened.”

“Most amazing thing you ever heard of! It was last Saturday night. I had four fellows from the fraternity here for the week-end, and about nine o’clock we all piled into the boat and went over to the Royal Hotel to dance. There happened to be a bunch of girls staying there that we knew, so we were sure of a swell time. The whole gang from Shady Nook went across too – the Reed family, the Partridges, the Robinsons – practically everybody except the Flicks. So you see Shady Nook was deserted.

“We danced till around twelve o’clock and had something to eat. Then the fellows suggested we all get into the launch and go for a ride. Mother was game: she went along too, and so did a couple of the girls. By the time we took them back to the hotel and came home, it must have been two o’clock.”

“Hadn’t you seen any flames?” interrupted Jane. “From the river, I mean?”

“Not a flicker! But we had been motoring in the other direction, and you know the hotel isn’t right across from our bungalow, so we shouldn’t have been likely to notice when we were dancing. What wind there was blew the other way.”

“Even when you reached your own dock, didn’t you smell smoke?” demanded Mary Louise.

“Yes, we did then. But the flames were all out. The bungalow was gone – but the trees hadn’t caught fire.”

“That was queer,” remarked Mrs. Gay. “Unless somebody put out the fire.”

“Nobody did, as far as we know,” replied Clifford. “But it was out all right. And the bungalow gone, all but the foundation stones!”

“What in the world did you do?” asked Jane.

“Went over to the Partridges’ – they’re the people who live next to us on the other side,” he explained to Jane. “Fortunately they were still up, but they hadn’t noticed the smoke for the trees; they had been at the dance themselves till about one o’clock. Well, they gave Mother their one extra bedroom, and we fellows slept in the living room. That was O.K., but it was pretty ghastly, losing everything at once. Especially the clothes and things that belonged to our guests. If it was going to happen, I don’t see why it couldn’t have burned down when we didn’t have any company.”

“Yes, that must have been embarrassing,” agreed Mary Louise. She was thinking of David McCall’s accusation – that Clifford set the bungalow on fire himself to get the insurance – and it seemed absurd to her. He certainly would have chosen a more convenient time.

“What did you do the next day?” she inquired.

“Mother and I went to our New York apartment, and the fellows went home. I put in a claim for the insurance, and after we had bought new summer outfits, we came back here and took a suite at the Royal. We expect to stay there all summer.”

“Why not Flicks’?” was Mary Louise’s next question. “Everybody goes there.”

“That’s just why we didn’t. They’re so overcrowded, and Mother likes plenty of room. We sure get that at the Royal. The hotel’s practically empty; I don’t see how poor Frazier can pay his taxes.”

“He charges too much,” said Mary Louise. “If he’d be content to make a small profit, the way Mr. Flick does, he’d probably fill his hotel.”

“Well, it’s an expensive place to keep up. Mother feels sorry for him, so she’s entertaining a lot to bring him some business.”

“I don’t feel sorry for him! I don’t like him. Remember that time we wanted to give an entertainment for the Red Cross and he tried to charge us fifty dollars for using his dining room? So we held it outdoors instead!”

Clifford nodded. “Yes. But he says he’s poor.”

“So poor he can’t pay his waitresses a living wage! Hattie Adams – you remember, Jane, the girl who waited on our table at Flicks’? – said he tried to pay her two dollars a week and excused himself by telling her she’d make a lot on tips! She gets ten at Flicks’!”

“A man like that deserves to fail,” agreed Jane.

“To get back to the subject of the fire,” said Mary Louise, in her usual practical way whenever there was a mystery to be solved, “what is your idea of the way it started, Cliff?”

“I believe it was just an accident,” replied the young man. “Maybe it was some tramp or those kids. You know the Smith boys and a few others. Not the Reeds, for they were at the Royal. But they’re all full of mischief. Maybe they were smoking corn silk in our garage.”

“Oh, I hope not!” exclaimed Mrs. Gay, for her son played a great deal with the Smith boys.

“Tell Freckles to snoop around a bit and keep his eyes and ears open,” suggested Clifford. “Maybe he’ll learn something. He’ll enjoy being a detective.”

Mary Louise smiled; the young man did not know that she had proved herself a very good detective earlier in the summer.

“What does your mother think?” she inquired.

Clifford frowned.

“Mother’s suspicious. She believes there’s been dirty work. Actually thinks the place was set on fire – on purpose! By Ditmar.”

“Ditmar! Who is he? I never heard of him.”

“Probably not. But you soon will. He’s a young architect who used to plan a lot of houses for my father before he died. You know the two new bungalows that were put up here this year – beyond Flicks’?”

“I heard there were two. But we haven’t seen them yet.”

“Well, Ditmar drew plans for them both. And he and his young wife live in one of them.”

“I see. But why would your mother suspect Mr. Ditmar of setting fire to her cottage?” asked Jane.

“That’s easy,” replied Mary Louise. “So Ditmar would get the job of designing a new one! But that seems dreadful. Is this man the criminal type, Cliff?”

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

“How can anybody tell who is the criminal type nowadays, when every day we read in the newspapers about senators and bankers stooping to all sorts of despicable tricks?”

“True,” agreed Jane. “And is your mother going to rebuild?”

“It wouldn’t be Mother – it would be I who would do it,” explained Clifford. “Because Dad left the place to me, and all this land up here at Shady Nook that hasn’t been sold yet. But I don’t expect to do anything for a while. Mother’s comfortable at the Royal, and I don’t mind. Though I do like the people at Shady Nook a lot better.”

“Oh, well, you can come over as much as you like,” said Mary Louise.

“Which is just what I intend to do! And that reminds me, one of the things I came to talk to you about: a swell shindig for Monday night!”

“Oh, what?” gasped Jane in delight.

“A party down on the island. Everybody goes in some kind of boat – naturally – all dressed up. I mean, the boats are to be all dressed up, you understand. With a prize for the best decorated of each kind. Then we’ll have a feed and play games.”

“That’s great!” cried Jane enthusiastically. “What’ll we go in, Mary Lou? The canoe?”

“I thought maybe you girls would come in my motorboat – ”

“And lose the chance of winning a prize?” interrupted Mary Louise. “Thanks just the same, Cliff, but I’ve got an idea already.”

David McCall was coming up the porch steps just in time to hear the refusal, and he grinned broadly. This was just as it should be, he thought, looking possessively at Mary Louise.

Tall and dark and handsome, David McCall was indeed a contrast to Clifford Hunter in appearance. But Jane had already decided that she did not like him. Nobody twenty-two years old had any right to be so serious, even if he had been supporting himself for five years!

Mary Louise was a trifle embarrassed as she greeted him, wondering how he and Cliff would get along together. But Cliff spoke to him cordially.

“Hello, Dave,” he said. “Sit down. I’ve got a brand-new trick. You take a card – ”

Jane giggled. How could anybody help liking a boy like Cliff?

“Don’t let’s waste our time on card tricks,” was David’s reply. “The light’s fading. We ought to be out on the river. Or in it, if you prefer,” he added, addressing Mary Louise.

Clifford, disappointed, put his cards away.

“You can show me all your tricks tomorrow,” whispered Jane sympathetically. “I love them!”

“It’s a date!” exclaimed Cliff eagerly.

Mary Louise stood up, to conceal her nervousness at the sharp way in which David had spoken.

“O.K.,” she said. “Let’s go somewhere. Where?”

“In my motorboat?” suggested Cliff.

Everybody agreed, and the arrangement proved satisfactory, for the boat was large enough for Jane and Cliff to be together at the wheel, and David and Mary Louise off in another corner. Silky sat upright in the middle of the boat, as if he believed he were the chaperon and it was his sacred duty to keep his eye on everybody.

The evening passed pleasantly, for the stars were out, and the breeze over the river delightfully cool, and the boat itself in perfect condition. Even David forgot his grudge against rich young Hunter and under the magic spell of the night joined happily in the singing. Mary Louise, however, insisted that they come home early, for though they hardly realized it, both girls were tired from their long trip.

“It’s been a glorious day!” exclaimed Jane, after the boys had gone home, and the girls were preparing for bed. “I’m crazy about Shady Nook.”

“I think it’s pretty nice myself,” returned the other, with a yawn. “If only poor Cliff’s bungalow hadn’t burned down.”

“Tell me,” urged Jane, “which boy you really like best – Cliff Hunter or David McCall or Max Miller?”

Mary Louise laughed.

“I don’t know. Max, I guess. Now you answer a question for me: Who do you think set the Hunters’ bungalow on fire – Cliff himself, or that Mr. Ditmar, the architect, or the kids?”

“There you go!” cried Jane. “Being a detective instead of a normal girl on her vacation. Who cares, anyhow? It doesn’t hurt anybody but the insurance company, and I guess they can afford it.”

“Oh, but I’d like terribly to know!”

“Well, don’t let’s waste our wonderful month being detectives,” pleaded Jane.

“But it may be important,” Mary Louise pointed out. “If it was done intentionally, there will probably be more fires. Don’t forget – our cottage is next door to Hunters’!”

Jane opened her eyes wide in alarm.

“I never thought of that,” she admitted.

“I’ve got to think of it,” said Mary Louise. “Daddy is trusting me to look after things, and I can’t fall down on my job. Nothing like that must happen.”

“What can you possibly do about it?”

“Investigate, of course.”

“How?”

“I’ll begin by talking to Freckles tomorrow and see whether he’s found out anything from the boys. Then I’ll make it a point to meet Mr. Ditmar – and follow up every clue I can get hold of.”

“You would!” yawned Jane as she crept sleepily into her cot.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Ditmars*

“Freckles!” exclaimed Mary Louise as she entered the kitchenette of the bungalow the following morning. “Where are you going?”

The boy grinned mysteriously.

“Can’t tell you that, Sis,” he replied. “It’s a secret.”

“But I wanted to talk to you. And it’s only a little after eight o’clock.”

“I know, but I’m a busy guy. Important affairs!”

“With whom?”

Freckles hesitated; then he decided to tell part of his secret.

“The fellows up here have a secret band. It’s called the ‘Wild Guys of the Road.’ I was initiated last night.”

Mary Louise burst out laughing. She couldn’t help it. “The ‘Wild Guys of the Road!’” she repeated. “Regular hold-up men?”

“Well, not exactly,” replied her brother. “But we’ve got some exciting adventures on.”

“Who is the leader?”

“Robby Smith. He’s got some swell ideas.”

Mary Louise’s eyes narrowed.

“Does burning people’s houses come into his plan?”

“Gosh, no! We’re not really bad, Sis. We wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“Do you make fires at all?”

“Sure we make fires. We’ve got to cook our camp meals, haven’t we? And have our ceremonies.”

“I see.” She was thinking. “And sometimes those fires spread farther than you want them to?”

“No, course not! Now, don’t you go blaming us guys for Hunters’ bungalow burning down!”

“I’m not blaming *you*, Freckles – you weren’t even here. But I’m not so sure about those Smith boys. They are pretty wild, once they get started. Remember the time they locked that little boy in the boathouse and almost left him there all night?”

“Gee whiz, Sis! They wouldn’t have left him there. They just wanted to scare him.”

“I’m not so sure. They’re spoiled kids. I wish you wouldn’t play with them.”

“Now, Sis, don’t be silly! Everybody’s in the gang together. I’ve got to play with the Smith boys or else stay home by myself.”

With a yell of good-bye for his mother, the boy was off.

Mary Louise and Jane sat down to their breakfast. Mrs. Gay, who had eaten hers with Freckles, came in to talk to them.

“What have you on the program for today?” she inquired.

“Oh, the usual things,” answered her daughter. “Tennis with the bunch this morning, and I suppose everybody will go in swimming about eleven o’clock. David is coming over to talk about fixing up our canoe for the contest tomorrow night.”

Jane coughed nervously.

“I – uh – sort of promised Cliff I’d go in his motorboat, Mary Lou,” she said. “Would that be all right?”

“Sure it’s all right,” agreed her chum. “It’ll be even better, because the less weight we have in our canoe, the more decoration we can put on. And there’s a prize for each type of boat, you know.”

“Then I shan’t be competing against you if I go in Cliff’s launch?”

“Oh no, we are in separate classes.”

After the girls had finished washing the dishes for Mrs. Gay, they started off for a little walk, with Silky at their heels.

“Why not stop for the Reed girls?” suggested Jane, mentioning the twins who lived in the cottage on the far side of the Gays. “I’m crazy to meet them.”

“You’ll meet them when we go swimming later on,” replied Mary Louise. “But just now I want to go in the other direction. To call on the Ditmars.”

“The Ditmars?” For the moment Jane had forgotten who these people were, for she had heard so many new names the night before.

“Yes. Don’t you remember? The young architect that Cliff told us about. The man Mrs. Hunter thinks set her bungalow on fire.”

“Oh, yes, of course! In other words – a suspect.”

“That’s right,” agreed Mary Louise.

“But how can we call on him if we don’t know him?” asked Jane.

“We’ll find a way!”

“Oh, sure we will!” teased Jane. “Trust the girl detective for that!”

“Sh! Please don’t call me that in front of anybody, Jane. If people think I am snooping, they’ll shut up like clams and won’t tell me anything.”

Although there were only eight cottages at Shady Nook, the distance from the Reeds’ on one end to the Ditmars’ on the other was over a mile. Cliff’s father, Mr. Hunter, who had planned the little resort, knew that even in a small friendly community like this, people still liked privacy, so he had left a small strip of woods between every two cottages.

The girls walked along slowly, Mary Louise pointing out the bungalows as they passed by.

“That’s where the Hunters’ was, of course,” she said to her chum. “And now we’re coming to the Partridges’. Next is Flicks’ Inn.”

“Yes, I remember this much from last night,” nodded Jane. “But that’s as far as we got. Are there many cottages on the other side of Flicks’?”

“Only the Smiths’ and the two new ones. The Smiths don’t actually live on the river road, and you can’t call their place a cottage. It’s really the grandest house around here. Much bigger than the Hunters’ was. They have three children and a lot of servants. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are usually off traveling somewhere, and even when they’re here, they don’t eat at Flicks’.”

“So we can’t count on them for any fun?”

“No. Freckles plays with the boys, but except for that, we never see them.”

A little farther on, the girls came to the two new bungalows, set right in the heart of the woods. They were both perfectly charming; it was evident that young Mr. Ditmar was an architect with both taste and ideas.

“Don’t you love it?” whispered Jane, as the two girls approached the Ditmars’ rose-trellised bungalow. “It looks like ‘Honeymoon Cottage’ in a jig-saw puzzle!”

“I understand the Ditmars are practically a bride and groom,” returned Mary Louise... “Oh, there she is, in the garden! Pretty, isn’t she?”

An attractive young woman in a pink dress looked up as the girls came nearer. She smiled pleasantly.

“Good-morning,” said Mary Louise. “You are Mrs. Ditmar, aren’t you? Everybody knows everybody else here at Shady Nook, so we’ll introduce ourselves. This is my chum, Jane Patterson, and I’m Mary Louise Gay.”

The young woman nodded cordially.

“I’m awfully glad to meet you both,” she said. “This is a friendly place – I like it a lot. If only my husband did – ”

“Doesn’t Mr. Ditmar like Shady Nook?” asked Mary Louise in surprise.

“No, he doesn’t. But I guess it’s just because he hasn’t enough to do. You know how men are when they haven’t any work: full of gloom.”

“Well, things will be better this fall,” remarked Jane optimistically.

“I don’t know,” replied Mrs. Ditmar. “At least – for architects. Their work comes slowly. It was fine all spring, while Horace had this bungalow to build, and the Robinsons’ next door. But now he can’t get a thing.”

“Maybe the Hunters will rebuild,” suggested Jane openly.

Mrs. Ditmar shook her head.

“We did hope so. We went over to see them at the Royal Hotel soon after their house burned down, but Mrs. Hunter wasn’t very nice to us. She almost acted as if it were our fault!”

Jane suppressed a giggle and muttered under her breath, “The plot thickens.”

“Oh, I guess she was just all upset,” remarked Mary Louise nervously. “She’ll get over that.” She smiled. “Anyway, you don’t have to be gloomy, Mrs. Ditmar. Can’t you get your tennis things on and play with us this morning?”

“Thanks awfully, but I don’t think I had better leave Horace here alone.”

“Bring him along!”

“He wouldn’t come. No, I better not. But perhaps I’ll see you in swimming later on in the morning. It’s awfully nice of you girls to be so friendly.”

“We’ll look for you in the water, then... And, by the way, you’ll come to the party on the island tomorrow night, won’t you?”

Again the young woman refused.

“No, we really can’t afford that. It’s two dollars for the supper, you know, and besides that; we’d have to hire one of Mr. Frazier’s canoes.”

“Couldn’t you borrow one?” suggested Jane.

“No – I’m sorry – Horace refused to go.”

Mary Louise sighed, as if to say how thankful she was that she wasn’t married to a grouch like that. So the girls said good-bye and walked slowly back to their cottage.

“She can’t be over twenty, if she’s that,” surmised Mary Louise. “I certainly feel sorry for her.”

“So do I,” agreed Jane. “Do you really think her husband is guilty, Mary Lou?”

“I don’t know. He sounds queer.” She lowered her voice: there did not appear to be anybody around, but you never could tell, with all those thick trees to conceal possible eavesdroppers. “And if he believes it’s his right to have work, he may try burning other cottages. That’s what worries me.”

“Well, he surely wouldn’t pick on yours, Mary Lou,” was Jane’s comforting assurance. “He’d select somebody’s who was rich – like the Smiths’, or some place that was absolutely necessary, like the Flicks’.”

The girls were passing the inn at this moment, and as they looked up they saw David McCall in his tennis clothes coming out of the door.

“I was over at the bungalow looking for you girls,” he said. “The Reed girls are on the court, but they wouldn’t let me play until I found a partner. So please hurry up!”

“O.K.,” agreed Mary Louise. “Walk back with us, Dave. I want you to tell me why you think Cliff Hunter set his own bungalow on fire – at such an inconvenient time. When they had company, I mean.”

David smiled knowingly.

“That’s his alibi, of course. What did he care about those four fellows? It didn’t hurt them. You see, Mary Lou, I’m an insurance agent, and I’m up to all these tricks. The Hunters’ place was insured for ten thousand dollars, and if it had been offered for sale, Cliff couldn’t have gotten more than a couple thousand at a time like this.”

“But the Hunters are rich,” objected Mary Louise. “They don’t need the money.”

“Everybody needs money. And I happen to know that Cliff wants to go around the world this fall.”

“He wouldn’t give up college?”

“No. There’s a college course in the bargain. They study and travel at the same time. It costs a small fortune.”

“I don’t believe he set that bungalow on fire,” announced Jane. “He’s too honest. He just couldn’t do a thing like that!”

“Besides,” added Mary Louise, “we have another suspect.” And she told David what she had just learned about Horace Ditmar.

“I’m just as sure that Ditmar didn’t do it as you are that Cliff Hunter didn’t,” replied David when she had finished.

“Probably nobody set it on fire,” concluded Jane. “Just an accident. Let’s forget it. Come on in, Mary Lou, and we’ll put on our sneaks. We’ll be ready in a minute, Dave.”

True to their promise, the girls returned a moment later, with Silky at their heels, and all three young people made their way to the tennis court. There was only one court at Shady Nook – which the boys themselves had made – but there was another across the river on the hotel grounds. However, nobody ever seemed to mind waiting or taking turns, so the crowd usually stayed together.

Jane was introduced to the Reed twins, who looked and dressed so exactly alike that she had not the faintest idea which was Mabel and which was Sue after a couple of minutes had elapsed. Then there were three other young people who were staying at the inn for a short time, besides David McCall and themselves. To her dismay, Cliff Hunter did not come across the river to join the party.

The whole crowd went in swimming about eleven o’clock, and here their elders joined them, with some of the younger children. Not Freckles, however, or the Reed boys or the Smiths: they had gone off hiking for the day. Again Jane did not see Cliff Hunter, and she was giving all her attention to a young man named Stuart Robinson, who lived in the new bungalow next to the Ditmars’, when she heard her name shouted from the shore.

“Jane! Oh, Jane!”

Raising her head from her swimming position and treading water, she peered towards the shore. It was Cliff Hunter – but not attired in a bathing suit.

“Come on out!” he called.

Jane swung into the crawl, and reached the young man in a couple of minutes. He was grinning broadly.

“Take a card,” he said.

Jane burst out laughing. “How can I?” she asked. “I’m soaked.”

“Oh, that’s all right. I’ve got plenty of packs. This is a swell trick. I’ve been studying it all morning.”

Jane dropped down on the grass and listened to his trick. The young man was enchanted. She stayed with him until Mary Louise literally dragged her back into the water.

“How anybody could believe Cliff Hunter guilty of a despicable crime,” she said later to her chum, “is beyond me. He’s as innocent as a child.”

“I hope so,” returned Mary Louise. “Time will tell.”

## CHAPTER IV

### *Another Fire*

Everybody at Shady Nook worked all day Monday on the decorations for the boats. Everybody, that is, except Mr. and Mrs. Flick and a few of the older people, who were preparing the food for the supper on the little island that night. Jane was helping Clifford Hunter paint pieces of wood which were intended to transform his launch into an auto-giro, and David McCall and Mary Louise picked flowers and leaves all afternoon to make festoons for her canoe.

"I do think Freckles and those other kids might have helped us," she remarked as she tied on the last cluster of sunflowers.

"Oh, we didn't need them," returned David, smiling. He had enjoyed having Mary Louise to himself all afternoon.

"It's five o'clock now. We'll have to hurry and wash and dress. Don't forget supper at Flicks' is half-past tonight."

The young man nodded. "I'll be ready, Mary Lou."

Mrs. Gay's voice interrupted them from the inside of the bungalow.

"Has anybody seen Freckles?" she called.

"Not since this morning," replied her daughter. "I tried to get him to help us, but he said he was off for the day with his gang."

"Yes, I know that. I gave him some lunch. But he ought to be home by now."

"He'll probably be along in a minute."

But he did not come. David went back to the inn, and Mrs. Gay and the two girls dressed for the picnic, but still Freckles did not appear.

"We can't go off and leave him without any supper," said Mrs. Gay. "Because Mrs. Flick is going to close the dining room and lock up at six-thirty."

"If we could only phone the Smiths," sighed Mary Louise. "He's probably over there with the boys... Suppose Jane and I run over?"

"It's too far. It will make you late for supper."

"Not very late. We'll hurry. Come on, Jane. We'll be back in ten minutes. But you go on down to the inn, Mother, and order the dinner."

Mrs. Gay nodded, immensely relieved. What a comfort Mary Louise was! You never had to ask her to do anything for you.

The two girls hurried away along the private road beside the river, past the Flicks' and the Robinsons', then turned up the hill to the Smiths' house beyond. It was Jane's first sight of the imposing-looking place at close range. She exclaimed in admiration.

"What a marvelous house! They must be awfully rich!"

"They are," replied Mary Louise. "But they don't appreciate this place a bit. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are hardly ever here at all in the summer. Those two boys just run wild. There's a nurse to look after the little girl – she's only four years old – but the boys do pretty much as they please and boss the servants around. That's why Mother and I feel worried about Freckles when he's with them."

A sedate-looking butler answered the girls' ring at the door.

"No, miss," was his reply to Mary Louise's question, "the boys haven't been here all day."

"Did they expect to go to the picnic tonight on the island?"

"Yes, miss. Steve, the chauffeur, was to take them."

Mary Louise sighed. There was nothing she could do.

"Well, if my brother comes back here, will you please send him right over to the inn?" she asked. "And tell him to hurry."

The girls turned away and started back. "It's going to spoil Mother's evening," remarked Mary Louise disconsolately.

"Oh, he'll be sure to turn up soon," returned Jane reassuringly.

"I know, but even if he does, he won't be able to get to the island. All the boats at Shady Nook are being used. Even the rowboats. Everybody's going except the Ditmars."

"Poor Adelaide Ditmar!" sighed Jane. "Imagine missing all that fun just because of a grouchy husband! I'm glad I'm single."

Mary Louise laughed.

"All men aren't alike, Jane. You know Cliff Hunter would never miss any fun. Or Max or Norman," she added, mentioning their two best friends in Riverside.

Mrs. Gay looked up hopefully as the girls entered the inn, but her expression changed immediately. She could tell from their faces that they had not been successful.

After supper was over, all was bustle and excitement as the people got into the boats and pushed them out into the river. There were six canoes, four rowboats, and three motorboats, all decorated beautifully or fantastically, according to the taste of the owners. Three prizes were to be awarded for the cleverest boat of each type, and everybody was to vote on the style in which he or she was not competing. Mary Louise and David McCall stepped into their flower-covered canoe; Mrs. Gay joined the Partridges in a rowboat, and Jane waited for Cliff Hunter's motorboat to come puffing across the river. It arrived at the same time as the Fraziers' rather seedy launch, and Jane was introduced to them and to Mrs. Hunter.

"You'll walk away with the motorboat prize, Cliff," called Mary Louise to the young man at the wheel. She lowered her voice. "Poor old Frazier's launch is pathetic, and Stuart Robinson's is just funny!"

"I hope the prize is a deck of cards," returned Cliff. "Mine are wearing out."

Mary Louise laughed and dipped her paddle into the water. Her canoe did look pretty, and it was a heavenly night. If only Freckles were there!

The boats began to move off, the launches puffing ahead, the canoes gliding gently behind them, and the rowboats progressing more ponderously. Somebody began to play a ukulele, and gay voices took up the tune.

The island, a small oblong strip of land, was situated about two miles down the river from Shady Nook. Several years ago someone at the resort had discovered it, and everybody had taken a hand at fixing it up for picnic purposes. There was a glorious stone fireplace, and a large spot had been cleared for dancing and games. Seats had been scattered about, and a couple of board tables had been erected near the fireplace. Tonight the whole island was alight with Japanese lanterns, giving it a gay and festive air.

When the last rowboat had finally reached its destination, the crowd all gathered together on the grass near the shore to record their votes. The two Robinson boys went about collecting them.

Mary Louise was sitting close to her mother, watching her intently.

"The Reed boys aren't here either," whispered Mrs. Gay. "I was just talking to Mrs. Reed, and she said she hasn't seen Larry or George since morning. But she doesn't seem much worried."

"Freckles must be all right if he's with the whole bunch," Mary Louise assured her. "Nothing much could happen to five boys together."

Mrs. Gay forced herself to smile.

"I'll try not to worry, dear... Oh, listen! Mr. Robinson is going to announce the winners!"

The jovial-faced man, Stuart's father, stepped forward.

"First prize for rowboats goes to Sue and Mabel Reed," he said. "Come forward, girls, and get your prize. It's a box of tennis balls."

The twins, dressed exactly alike in blue dimity, came up together, bowing and expressing their thanks.

“The prize for canoes – to Mary Louise Gay,” continued Mr. Robinson. “More tennis balls!” David McCall clapped loudly, and everybody else joined in the applause. Mary Louise was a general favorite at Shady Nook.

“The prize for motorboats goes to my son Stuart for his funny-looking contraption!”

Everybody clapped but Jane; she was terribly disappointed. She didn’t see why Cliff’s clever idea hadn’t taken the honors. But glancing at the young man she could detect no resentment in his face. He was a wonderful sport.

After the prizes had been disposed of, the games began, and continued until dark. Almost everyone joined in the fun – even the middle-aged people. All except a few who were helping Mrs. Flick prepare the refreshments, and Mrs. Hunter and the Fraziers, who were too stiff and dignified.

“How do you like Mrs. Hunter?” whispered Mary Louise once when the two chums found themselves hiding side by side in a game.

“Kind of stuck up,” replied Jane. “But she’s better than those Fraziers. He’s positively oily!”

“Didn’t I tell you? I wouldn’t stay in his hotel if our bungalow burned down – no matter how much money we had.”

“Mrs. Hunter seems to like him. But I think it’s Frazier who put the idea into her head that Ditmar set her cottage on fire. Because I heard him say to her, ‘I wonder whose place will burn down tonight. Ditmar stayed home!’”

“Oh, how awful!”

“Sh! Oh, gosh, we’re caught! Why must girls always talk?” lamented Jane.

The moon came up in the sky, making the night more enchanting, more wonderful than before. The games broke up, and Mrs. Flick called the people to refreshments.

“Sit with me, Mary Lou,” urged David, jealously touching her arm.

“We must find Mother,” returned the girl.

“She’s over there with Mrs. Hunter and the hotel bunch. You don’t want to be with them, do you?”

“Not particularly. But I do want to be with Mother and Jane and Cliff. So come on!”

David closed his lips tightly, but he followed Mary Louise just the same. Mrs. Gay made a place for them, and the young couple sat down.

“You’re not still worried, are you, Mother?” asked Mary Louise as she passed the chicken salad.

“I’m afraid I am, dear. If we could only see Shady Nook from here, perhaps the boys would flash their lights.”

“They’re surely all right,” put in Mrs. Hunter consolingly. “They’re big enough to take care of themselves.”

“I’ll say they are,” remarked Mr. Frazier. “I caught them cutting my yew tree to make bows. There’s nothing they can’t do!”

Mary Louise regarded the hotelkeeper with contempt, thinking again how stingy he was. Anybody else would be glad to give the boys a branch of a tree!

“So long as they don’t set anything on fire,” observed Cliff lightly.

“Oh, Cliff!” exclaimed Mary Louise in horror.

David McCall nudged her meaningly.

“Criminals always try to cover up their crimes by laying the suspicion on somebody else,” he whispered. “But only a cad would blame innocent children.”

Mary Louise cast him a withering look. She was beginning to despise David McCall.

When the whole party had eaten all they possibly could, somebody started to play a ukulele, and the young people danced on the smooth grass that had been worn down by so many picnics. Nobody apparently wanted to go home, except Mrs. Gay. Finally Mrs. Reed, beginning to be anxious about her own two boys, seconded the motion for departure.

“Let’s give the rowboats twenty minutes start,” suggested Cliff Hunter. “And the canoes ten. We’ll beat you all at that!”

“If our engines don’t give out,” put in Stuart Robinson doubtfully. He never felt confident about his ancient motorboat.

“Suits me fine!” cried Jane, realizing that the arrangement gave her twenty extra minutes to dance.

The rowboats pushed off, and ten minutes later Mary Louise and her mother and David stepped into their canoe. It was a light craft, built for speed, and both she and David were excellent paddlers. In no time at all they were leading the procession.

It was David’s sharp eyes which first detected signs of a disaster.

“There’s a fire at Shady Nook!” he cried breathlessly.

“Oh!” gasped Mrs. Gay in horror, and turning about swiftly, Mary Louise thought that her mother was going to faint. But she didn’t; she pulled herself together quickly and sat up very straight.

“It’s true,” agreed Mary Louise, her voice trembling with fear. Suppose it were their own cottage – and – and – Freckles!

The canoe rounded the bend in the river and came within full view of the little resort. The Reeds’ house was visible now – yes – and the Gays’! Thank heaven it was unharmed!

“It’s either the Partridges’ or Flicks’,” announced David. “And my bet is that it’s Flicks’. I was expecting it.”

“You were expecting it, David?” repeated Mrs. Gay in consternation. “What do you mean by that?”

“Because Cliff Hunter holds a big mortgage on Flicks’ Inn,” replied the young man. “It means ready cash for him.”

“Don’t be absurd!” commanded Mary Louise. “How could Cliff have anything to do with it when he was with us all evening?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of a bribe, Mary Lou?” he asked.

The girl did not answer. The increasing noise of the engines behind them told them that the motorboats had caught up with them. Everybody knew about the disaster now; Mrs. Flick was crying, and Mr. Flick was yelling and waving his arms wildly, calling upon everybody to help him.

He was out of his boat first – he happened to be riding in the Robinsons’ launch – and he dashed madly through the trees that stood between his inn and the river. In his excitement, he almost knocked over a small boy carrying a pail of water from the river.

“Freckles!” cried Mrs. Gay, in a tone of both relief and fear: relief that her child was safe, fear that he had had something to do with the fire. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to save the trees,” explained the boy. “The inn was gone when we got here, but us guys kept the fire from spreading.” He looked up proudly, as if he expected a medal for his bravery.

“I don’t believe a word of it!” thundered Mr. Flick. “I believe you boys set the place on fire. And now you’re trying to lie out of it!”

“I wouldn’t put it past ’em,” muttered Mr. Frazier, at his side. The Fraziers had landed at Shady Nook instead of crossing to the hotel’s shore.

“Tell the truth, boys!” urged Mrs. Gay, for by this time both the Smiths and the two young Reeds had joined Freckles.

“We came along here about dark,” said Larry Reed, who was the oldest of the group, “and smelled smoke. Course, we investigated. The inn was gone. But the ashes were still smoldering, and there was smoke coming out from the bushes. So we ran over to Gays’ and to our house and got buckets and carried water from the river. It’s about out now.”

“You’re sure that’s the truth?” demanded Mr. Reed.

“On my honor, Dad!” replied the boy solemnly.

“Did you see anybody in the woods or around Shady Nook?” inquired Mrs. Flick.

“Yeah. A big guy who looked like a tramp from the woods – it was too dark to see his face – and a funny-looking woman in a gray dress with a big pitcher under her arm.”

“Together?” asked Mary Louise.

“No. The big guy was in the woods. And the woman was running along the road that leads to Four Corners.”

“Nothing but a made-up yarn!” denounced Mr. Flick.

But the fire was really out; there was nothing anybody could do. Frazier suggested that the Flicks and their guests come over to his hotel, and the latter accepted. But the Flicks, realizing that this was not a real invitation, that the hotelkeeper would present them with a bill later on, chose to stay with the Partridges. So at last the group dispersed for the night.

Mary Louise, however, was so exasperated with David McCall that she never even answered his pleasant “Good-night!”

## CHAPTER V

### *Freckles' Story*

“What in the world are you doing?” asked Jane when she came out on the porch the following morning to find her chum studiously poring over a notebook. “You must think school has begun!”

Mary Louise looked up.

“It’s harder than school – but it’s more fun,” she replied. “I’m working on the mystery of the fires.”

“Mystery? You really don’t think the Flicks’ Inn was just an accident?”

“No, I don’t. If it were the first fire, I might believe that. But with the Hunters’ a week or so ago, the whole thing looks sinister to me. I’m frightened, Jane. Ours may be the next. We haven’t any insurance to speak of. Besides, something dreadful might happen to Mother. People are burned to death sometimes, you know.”

“Yes, that’s true,” replied Jane seriously. “But what are you going to do?”

“Treat it just like a case, as I did Dark Cedars. List all the possible suspects and search the neighborhood for desperate characters.”

“Such as gypsies?”

“No, not gypsies. They wouldn’t have any motive this time. But somebody must have a motive – unless it’s a crazy person who is responsible.”

Jane’s eyes opened wide.

“That’s an idea, Mary Lou! There are people like that – crazy along just one particular line. They feel they simply have to light fires. Firebugs, you know.”

“Incendiary is the correct term, I believe,” said Mary Louise.

“Oh, so you’ve already thought of it and looked up the word!”

“Yes, I’ve thought of it. Who wouldn’t have? It’s the first explanation that jumps into your head when you hear of a fire. They say lighted cigarettes start them too, and small children.”

“Small children? But not boys as big as Freckles and the Smiths?”

An expression of pain passed over Mary Louise’s face.

“I’m afraid everybody suspects the boys. Especially Mr. Flick... I’m going to call Freckles now and ask him just exactly what he did yesterday. Then, if you’re interested, Jane, I’ll read you all my list of suspects.”

“Sure I’m interested. I love to play the part of Watson to the great Sherlock Holmes Gay!” Mary Louise stuck out her tongue.

“Don’t be so fresh!” she said, but she was pleased and flattered to be called Sherlock Holmes.

Freckles, eating a bun and followed by Silky, came leisurely through the screen door. Mary Louise asked him to sit down and talk to her.

“Can’t long,” was the reply. “Have to go see old man Flick.”

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