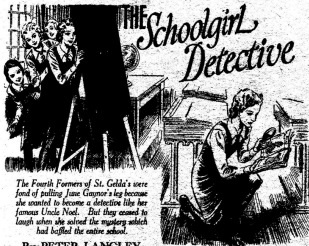


GIRLS' CRYSTAL

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THE Schoolgirl Detective

The Fourth Formers of St. Gelda's were fond of pulling June Gaynor's leg because she wanted to become a detective like her famous Uncle Noel. But they ceased to laugh when she solved the mystery which had baffled the entire school.

By PETER LANGLEY

CHAPTER I

THE TORN SCHOOL BOOKS

IN her neat handwriting June Gaynor made a cryptic entry in her note-book :

"No. 1. The Clue of the dog-eared Atlas."

Under this she jotted a few comments, reading them over with thoughtful satisfaction.

"That puts the case in a nutshell," she murmured. "I don't think Uncle Noel himself could have made it clearer !"

A momentary twinkle crept into June's vivacious grey eyes as she glanced affectionately at the framed portrait on the study table.

The signed portrait of her famous detective uncle.

Her uncle sometimes teased her about her ambition to follow in his footsteps ; but, recognising her keenness, he had gone out of his way to teach her many of the important secrets of his profession.

And June had proved an apt pupil !

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Naturally quick-witted, and of an inquiring, restless turn of mind, she seized every opportunity to put her theories into practice.

Not that there was very much chance at her boarding-school. St. Gelda's, under the firm yet kindly rule of its headmistress, Miss Branson, was a well-ordered and pleasant school where everything went with clockwork smoothness.

Yet recently things had happened to upset the ordered routine; and though other girls made light of the curious happenings, June scented a mystery!

June frowned thoughtfully at her uncle's photograph, and then spoke aloud as though addressing him.

"It's like this, nunky," she said, cupping her chin in her hands, and referring to her carefully-kept note-book. "Someone has been making a raid on the school books, especially atlases! They've not been stolen; they've just been taken out of lockers and left lying about, most of them torn and mutilated. The girls believe that a japer is responsible, but I'm convinced that it's no ordinary jape. Vera and the others can make fun of me if they like—but I stick to my opinion!"

She rose to her feet, a determined gleam in her eyes, and crossed to a cupboard. Opening it, she brought to light several torn and mutilated books, including three atlases.

Spreading them out on the table, she took from a private drawer a small yet powerful magnifying-glass—a parting gift from her uncle.

The next few minutes she spent in examining the battered covers and torn pages of the school books.

"They haven't just been torn in a haphazard way," she murmured, her eyes gleaming. "The trickster seems to have had a method! And there's something else, too. Whoever did it was careful not to leave finger-prints; an ordinary japer wouldn't have thought of that! I've only got one clue to go on, apart from that—the clue of the dog-eared pages——"

June broke off, hastily concealing the magnifying-glass, as there came footsteps in the corridor. The door burst open to admit a merry trio of schoolgirls.

Dark-haired Vera Maitland, June's study-mate, was accompanied

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by Lucy Derwent, the tomboy of the Fourth, and elegant Madge Carter.

The three girls halted in the doorway, attempting to look serious.

"And how is the young detective progressing?" asked Vera. "I trust we are not disturbing the train of thought!"

June smiled good-naturedly; she was used to having her leg pulled about her hobby. Her chums refused to take her seriously.

"That's all right," she said. "Come in—make yourselves at home."

She perched herself on the corner of the table, glancing from one to the other.

"Is this just a friendly call or"—and her eyes twinkled merrily—"have you come on business?"

"Goodness," drawled Madge. "She actually reads our minds! Yes, dear girl—we have stumbled on a little mystery."

"Bewildering mystery," added Vera gravely. "When I went to my locker, a few minutes ago, I found—this!"

She held out a crumpled sheet of notepaper, which June took in a matter-of-fact way and closely examined.

The paper bore some kind of cryptogram, scrawled in pencil, in an obviously disguised hand. The message was signed flamboyantly: "The Avenger."

"Ah!" said June thoughtfully. "You say you found this in your locker, Vera?"

"Under a pile of books," said Vera. "I can tell you, it gave me a turn. What do you make of it, June?"

June was conscious of three pairs of eyes watching her with suppressed eagerness.

Her own grey eyes were inscrutable, though her lips twitched faintly at the corners.

"I should like time to think this over," she said. "Perhaps you would leave the paper with me? I'll have a word with you after prep."

"That's awfully kind of you," said Vera gratefully. "It's jolly worrying, receiving a queer thing like that!"

"I'll do my best to solve it," promised June gravely. "I can't say more."

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The three girls departed and June, waiting till their footsteps receded, took the crumpled scrap of paper across to the window and examined it in the fading light.

There was a faint twinkle in her eyes as she detected a certain familiar perfume—a scent indulged in by elegant Madge Carter! A smudged finger-print in the corner aroused her interest.

Examining it more closely, it proved to be a trifle sticky.

"Lucy always did like sweets!" she murmured. "And the writing looks strangely like Vera's. The mystery deepens. Let us see if we can solve the message."

To June, practised at solving really intricate codes, the task was a simple one. A mere substitution of a few letters—the re-arranging of a few words—and the message lay before her:

"Six o'clock—the lecture-room—without fail!—The Avenger."

The message was transparently a jape—and no great powers of deduction were needed to guess at its authors.

June, in spite of her detective ambitions, was a typical schoolgirl at heart—and always ready for a lark.

Momentarily putting aside the more serious problem that had occupied her, she glanced at her watch. It was ten minutes to six, and rapidly growing dark. June had already made up her mind that by six she would be in the lecture-room!

The "lecture-room" was one of the smaller classrooms—used, as a rule, only by the seniors.

June approached it by a devious route, and looked round cautiously before entering. The lecture-room appeared to be deserted.

Her eyes twinkling, June concealed herself behind the door—and waited, her senses keenly alert.

At this time in the evening, most of the girls would be in their studies—collecting their books, or hastily swotting up their prep.

June glanced towards the window, and stiffened suddenly.

In the gathering dusk she saw a light winking—once, twice, three times. A signal?

Barely had the thought entered her head when she heard footsteps approaching the door.

June tensed herself. Now to give the japers a little of their own medicine!

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The door opened stealthily—or so it seemed to June. She sprang suddenly from her hiding-place, grabbing the girl who had entered in the semi-darkness by the shoulders.

A stifled gasp was torn from the newcomer's lips as she started back, knocking against a shelf and sending a pile of books sliding to the ground. Then a chill of dismay swept over June as she recognised that voice. It was Norah Brent, the new head prefect of St. Gelda's!

With a stifled ejaculation, Norah switched on the light, glaring at the luckless junior.

"June Gaynor!" she exclaimed, her face crimson with anger. "What absurd tomfoolery is this!"

"I'm sorry," repeated June, with a would-be disarming smile, "it was a lark. I thought you were one of my chums."

Norah sniffed, though her manner relented slightly. Norah was not a popular prefect with the juniors for her new position had given her an air of superiority.

"You nearly startled the life out of me," she declared. "You juniors are too fond of such tricks. How long have you been here?"

"Only a few minutes," replied June, rather surprised at the question.

"Umph," replied Norah doubtfully. "Well—I'll let you off this time with fifty lines. But next time I catch you fooling around I shall report you to Miss Branson."

June was pleasantly relieved, and grateful. She had expected a stiffer punishment. Norah was not such a bad sort, after all.

"Oh, thank you——" she began impulsively.

The prefect waved aside her thanks.

"And pick up those books before you go," she added. "You'd better hurry, or you'll be late for prep."

With a final glance round, she left the room.

June, her face rather flushed, bent to pick up the scattered books. There was a faint glint in her eyes.

"Just wait till I see those japers again!" she thought.

Then her eyes narrowed, and a soft whistle-escaped her lips.

Among the scattered books was an atlas—a very old atlas, bound in calf.

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The covers were twisted, and several of the pages had been torn ; others were dog-eared.

" Phew ! " breathed June, sitting back suddenly on her heels.

This was no jape. She recognised the handiwork of the mysterious destroyer !

But, in this case the damage was more extensive. The lining had been torn away from inside the front cover ; and on the gummed side of the lining was a faint impression of a drawing—something that had been pasted between the cover and the lining !

As June examined it more closely, through her magnifying-glass, an excited ejaculation escaped her lips.

She was looking at an old engraving of St. Gelda's School !

After all, there must be something behind the apparently senseless destruction of school books—something deep and mysterious !

CHAPTER II

CAUGHT BY THE HEAD !

JUNE's thoughts were interrupted by a stifled burst of laughter. In a moment she was on her feet, gripping the atlas tightly as she stared towards the blackboard.

From behind the board came three juniors, helpless with laughter. Vera, Lucy and Madge !

June regarded them accusingly, her face slightly flushed.

" So you've been hiding here—all the time ? " she accused.

Vera nodded, stifling her laughter.

" June—you were priceless ! " she gasped. " The way you jumped out on Norah ! It was too bad about the lines—but we'll help you write them, won't we, girls ? "

" Rather ! "

" Just a minute ! " put in June, a curious expression in her eyes.

" Let me get this clear. When you faked that cryptogram, did you know that Norah would turn up like that—and catch me ? "

" Goodness, no ! " rejoined Vera, dabbing her eyes. " We meant to jump out on you ourselves—but it turned out even more priceless than we had expected. You're not angry, are you, June ? "

June shook her head, a strange smile on her lips.

" Skip it ! " she said cheerfully.



"June Gaynor!" exclaimed a stern voice. "Kindly inform me what you are doing in my study at this time of night?" June swung round, to find herself confronted by—the headmistress!

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The three pranksters departed in high spirits; June followed thoughtfully, with a final backward glance towards the window.

"I wonder!" she murmured.

At prep. June found it almost impossible to concentrate on Latin exercises; her mind was in a fever of excitement. Once she was reprimanded by the mistress in charge for dreaming instead of doing her work.

It was a gentle reprimand; for Miss Marple, the visiting Latin mistress, was a gentle and inoffensive little lady.

There were rumours that her family had once owned property in the neighbourhood, and that Miss Marple had taken up teaching to meet financial troubles.

June flushed slightly at the reprimand, murmured an apology, and turned her attention to her book.

But Latin verbs were very far from her thoughts.

At the very first opportunity she took out the torn atlas, to study the strange picture—or chart—impressed on the cover.

Half of it appeared to be missing; but June could make out a wing of the school and part of the grounds—including the ruined lodge that had recently been pulled down for the site of the new hockey pavilion.

June studied it with intent curiosity, forgetful of time; it was with a start that she realised that prep. was over and that the room was emptying.

She remembered that she had fifty lines to write for Norah, before supper!

With a sigh, June put aside the atlas—as her three chums bore down on her, offering their help.

"Four into fifty makes twelve and a half lines each!" declared Vera gaily. "Many hands make light work."

"What's up with you this evening, June?" asked Vera a few minutes later. "You're not your usual sparkling self!"

"The young detective isn't on form," remarked Madge, with a wink. "She hasn't even detected that we've already written her fifty lines for her!"

June pulled herself together.

"I'm sorry, girls," she said, as she gathered up the papers. "I'm

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afraid I've been wool-gathering! Thanks awfully for helping. I'll take the lines along to Norah now."

The head prefect was in her study, mounting snapshots. Norah was an enthusiastic photographer, and her collection of nature-studies adorned the study walls. Her camera, in its case, lay on the table beside her.

She looked up with a slight frown of annoyance at the interruption, but her expression cleared as June handed her the lines.

She flicked them over hastily, nodding approval. She was not sufficiently observant to notice the difference in the handwritings.

"Very good," she murmured. "We'll say no more about your little escapade. You may—hallo, what's the matter?" she asked, for suddenly June had crossed to the window, pulling back the curtains.

June smiled apologetically.

"I'm sorry; I thought I heard something. It was probably my imagination."

Norah frowned slightly.

"You're letting your detective hobby run away with you!" she declared.

June made no response to the rebuke, but she could not rid herself of her suspicions that all was not well at St. Gelda's, and that night she found sleep impossible. She lay awake in the dormitory, long after the other girls had ceased their drowsy talk. Her brain was keenly alert.

As she lay there listening to her chums' soft breathing, another sound reached her ears.

Someone was moving about downstairs! There was a muffled crash.

In a moment June was out of bed, every nerve tingling. Slipping on her dressing-gown, she crept out of the dormitory and down the stairs, her ears straining for the slightest sound.

Then she heard the stealthy movement again; it came from the headmistress' study!

June's thoughts worked like lightning. She knew that Miss Branson and everyone else was in bed. It was past midnight. Who, then, was in the study?

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Plucking up her courage, June approached the door and flung it open.

A cold breeze swept across the room, and June could see that the curtains were flapping at the open window. The pale moonlight streamed across the carpet, reflecting on the open glass front of a book-case.

So that was the sound she had heard!

June clenched her hands, her heart thumping. Her first thought was that burglars had entered; but a swift glance round convinced her that no ordinary intruder was responsible.

The room contained valuables of many kinds: silver cups, ornaments and curios. Miss Branson possessed a splendid collection of antiques, which she had taken over at the time the school had been purchased.

Nothing appeared to have been touched except the book-case; as June approached it her keen eyes noticed something caught up in the latch.

It was a scrap of rich silken material, curiously woven.

As June examined it more closely she discovered that it bore a faint smear of paint—green paint!

Her pulses quickened, and a gleam of excitement shone in her eyes.

She remembered that several of the school outbuildings had recently been painted—including the pavilion!

Carefully she removed the tiny scrap of silk, slipping it into her pocket.

No one in the school, she was convinced, possessed a dress made of material like this.

She surmised that someone had tried to reach into the book-case and had caught the hem of a sleeve against the latch.

June tried a little experiment. Placing her elbow on a level with the latch, she found that her hand just reached the middle shelf.

On that shelf, wedged between a number of books, stood a quaint carved idol of Indian origin.

Could the mysterious intruder have been reaching for that?

Overcoming a momentary hesitation June took down the quaint image, turning it over in her hand.

"A clue!" she exclaimed in delight.

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She had made a discovery—a startling, unexpected discovery. But ere she could verify it, a footstep sounded in the passage and the door was thrown open.

June turned with a little gasp as a dazzling light shone into her eyes.

In the doorway stood the austere figure of Miss Branson, the headmistress of St. Gelda's, and behind her was a number of senior girls.

"June Gaynor!" exclaimed Miss Branson, her voice cold and ominous. "Kindly inform me what you are doing in my study at this hour of night! And what is that in your hand?"

CHAPTER III

JUNE'S TRIUMPH!

"I AM waiting, June!" Miss Branson snapped.

June gulped, wondering how much to disclose. She had very little tangible evidence to support her surprising theory.

"I—I came down, Miss Branson, because I heard a sound," she replied.

"Really!" The headmistress' tone was biting. "Does that explain why I find you in my study, at midnight, examining my curios?"

June crimsoned, finding herself in an unpleasant quandary.

"The book-case was open, Miss Branson. I suspected that—that someone had been meddling with your things."

"You should have informed your dormitory-prefect if you heard a sound," the Head declared. "You know that it is strictly against rules for juniors to come downstairs after lights out. I cannot permit regulations to be flouted in this fashion."

"I'm sorry, Miss Branson," said June. "But I'm certain that someone tried to enter your study."

"Nonsense, child!" The headmistress stared around. "Doubtlessly the window was insecurely fastened and blew open. That was the sound you heard. It was your duty to have informed someone in authority, and I shall have to punish you."

June grimaced, but she knew that, having taken the law into her own hands, she must take the consequences.

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But she felt positive that the discoveries she had just made were both connected with the torn atlas.

For the moment June decided to keep her discoveries to herself till she could obtain proof.

To-morrow was a half-holiday. That would be her chance. There was a certain trail she intended to follow up without delay.

As Miss Branson moved to close the window, June made a swift examination of the idol, confirming her previous suspicions.

The image, though apparently solid, was actually hollow—an ornamental snuff-box similar to one that she had seen in her uncle's collection.

The fact might be significant or it might not. But, coupled with the scrap of material she had found on the door and the smear of green paint, June believed that it might prove a valuable link in the mystery.

If only she could find the spring that opened it——

But just then the headmistress turned from the window, a frown on her face.

"Now, June," she said tartly, "you will kindly return my curio to where it belongs and get back to your dormitory. I shall tell you your punishment to-morrow. Go!"

Reluctantly June obeyed, but there was a gleam of determination in her eyes.

To-morrow afternoon she would make certain of her facts!

An insidious plotter was at work in the school, causing suspicion and uneasiness.

The climax came the following lunch-time.

A valuable folio of Shakespeare belonging to Miss Branson was found torn and mutilated in the grounds!

It was the school porter who made the discovery, and the entire school was at once summoned before the angry headmistress.

She questioned the girls individually, to discover whether any of them had been out of their dormitories on the previous night.

Finally she sent for June.

Her face was grave.

"You have assured me, June," she said, "that you know nothing about the torn folio, and I am ready to accept your word. The

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fact remains that you were the only person who visited my study after lights-out——”

“ Miss Branson,” burst out June, “ on my honour——”

“ Wait,” interrupted the headmistress coldly. “ I am not accusing you ; I am merely stating facts. There have been a series of these malicious acts of destruction, and I am determined to put a stop



“ Quick ! ” cried June. “ You musn't be seen ! ” And as the Indian girl climbed into the chest she hurriedly closed the lid on her.

to them. If you can throw any light whatever on the matter, it is your duty to tell me.”

June hesitated, her hands clenched.

“ I can't say anything yet,” she replied steadily. “ But if you'll give me time——”

“ Time ! ” interjected the headmistress. “ For what ? ”

“ For investigation,” replied June, meeting her gaze steadily.

“ I have a certain theory I want to put to the test.”

Miss Branson frowned impatiently.

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"I have no time for these absurd 'theories,' as you call them, June. It has occurred to me, too, that ever since you began this ridiculous investigating you have been in trouble. Your conduct has been highly suspicious, and I cannot let it go unpunished. You will remain in detention this afternoon while your school-fellows are at hockey. That is all I have to say for the moment."

She dismissed June with a peremptory nod.

Rather pale, June left the room, but there was a determined glint in her grey eyes.

The detention meant that she would not be able to carry out certain investigations on which she had set her heart.

But she was not beaten yet!

She sought out Vera Maitland, her japing chum.

"Vera, I'm in detention this afternoon——" she began.

"Oh, I say—hard luck!" exclaimed Vera sympathetically.

June shook her head impatiently.

"Will you do me a favour?" she asked.

"Of course! What is it?"

A faint twinkle crept into June's eyes.

"Vera, be a sport and help me," she said. "I want a tiny scrap of paint—from the pavilion door. Scratch a morsel from the keyhole—or somewhere that won't be noticed."

Vera stared at her chum blankly.

"Are you serious?" she gasped.

"Never been more serious in my life," declared June. "Bring it along to the study, after tea."

Vera departed, shaking her head wonderingly.

June, meanwhile, collected her afternoon task from Norah Brent, the prefect in charge. When she had done it she turned her attention to the torn atlas—and its vital clue.

After studying it for some moments she made her way cautiously to the music-room—the window of which overlooked the playing-field and the distant pavilion.

There was no one in the room, but as June entered her sharp eyes noticed something lying on the desk.

A coloured silk scarf!

Her heart gave a violent bound as she snatched it up, revealing

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a jagged tear. Swiftly she compared it with the scrap of silk material she had found in the headmistress' study on the previous night.

They were identical !

June's thoughts were racing ; but there was no time for surmise. She heard footsteps approaching the room.

The owner of the scarf !

Swiftly, noiselessly, June concealed herself in the big cupboard used for stationery. Breathless with suspense, she watched through the crack of the door. Someone had entered now and was bending over the scarf. Then June saw who it was !

Only by an effort she bit back the stifled cry that rose to her lips.

For the owner of the scarf was—gentle, inoffensive Miss Marple !

June clenched her hands, her mind in a whirl ; for the moment all her theories had been brought tumbling to the ground.

Miss Marple was the owner of the scarf ! Miss Marple—the little visiting mistress, beloved of all the juniors—had she broken into the headmistress' study the previous night ?

June thought quickly. She remembered suddenly that Miss Marple was very fond of reading ; she spent hours in the school library.

There was one book in particular that she seemed attached to ; an old history of St. Gelda's.

June spent the next two hours in the library. There was a glitter of excitement in her eyes when she joined her chums at tea.

" Did you get that paint, Vera ? " she whispered.

Vera nodded, and produced a screw of paper—containing a few scrapings of dark green paint.

June's face lit up as she examined it.

" I thought as much ! " she breathed.

" You might let me into the joke," complained Vera.

" Wait till to-night," June whispered. " I may need your help ! "

After the other girls were asleep that night, June kept watch at the dormitory window.

At length her patience was rewarded ; a light flashed among the trees close to the pavilion.

June bent over Vera, shaking her into wakefulness.

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"You know what I told you," she breathed. "Now's the time! Hurry."

Vera, still half asleep, scrambled out of bed and commenced to dress.

Together the two girls crept downstairs and out of the door that led to the quadrangle. Here they parted—June to make her way quickly across the playing-field towards the pavilion, Vera to carry out the instructions already given her.

The pavilion was in darkness, but the door proved to be unlocked. Abruptly June flung it open—flashing her torch.

There came a stifled cry—and she sprang forward, her hand falling on the shoulder of a crouching, girlish figure—a girl whose dusky features and picturesque attire proclaimed her as belonging to the East!

"Oh!" whispered the girl, staring at June in terror. "Please—who are you?"

"I might ask you the same question," said June, "but I fancy I know the answer! I found a letter in an old book in the library; it had been used as a book-mark by Miss Marple. It referred to 'Wana'—an Indian girl, the daughter of an old servant of her family."

The girl nodded, her lips trembling.

"I—I am Wana," she admitted.

"And you tried to steal the Indian idol from Miss Branson's study!" accused June. "Don't deny it, Wana; I know you were there last night. You wore your mistress' scarf."

"It wasn't to steal!" whispered the girl brokenly. "I swear it wasn't to steal. I only wanted—to look at the idol."

"Did Miss Marple know what you were doing?"

"No—no!" The girl broke down. "She would have been very angry. You will not give me away——"

"Hist!" interjected June warningly.

Footsteps were approaching the pavilion; June heard voices—the headmistress' voice, and Norah Brent's!

"Quick!" she breathed. "You mustn't be seen—here, hide in this!"

She threw open the lid of the sports chest, bundling the girl inside and closing the lid.

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The next moment Miss Branson and the prefect entered the pavilion.

"June!" exclaimed the headmistress, her voice shaking. "So it was you! The Indian idol has been stolen from my study—and a girl was seen to run towards the pavilion."

"The thief is here now, Miss Branson," June said quietly. "I have been waiting for this moment."

She took a step towards the chest, then, turning suddenly, she snatched at the camera-case slung on Norah Brent's shoulder.

"What's the idea?" gasped the prefect, pale with anger.

For reply, June wrenched open the case—producing the Eastern idol!

There was a moment's tense silence; then Norah broke down suddenly, commencing to sob.

June raised the lid of the sports-chest, revealing the picturesque figure crouching there.

Just then there came hurrying footsteps, and Vera burst into the pavilion almost dragging after her little Miss Marple.

"Wana!" exclaimed Miss Marple. "I was afraid something dreadful had happened to you."

"Will someone kindly explain?" demanded the headmistress.

June, with a glance at the sobbing prefect, held up the Indian idol.

"This," she said, "is the explanation. At one time it belonged to Miss Marple's family—but was sold when St. Gelda's School changed hands.

"It is mentioned in a book in the library—a book that belonged to Miss Marple's father, for at one time St. Gelda's belonged to Miss Marple's family. The book also mentioned a treasure supposed to be buried in the grounds."

"I had often heard of it," said Miss Marple tremulously, "but I believed it to be a rumour."

"Wana had other ideas," said June. "She had read the book—and she had seen a picture of the idol. She believed it might contain a secret. For Miss Marple's sake she decided to make sure. She was right!"

As she spoke, June unscrewed the head of the idol—drawing out a torn, faded scrap of paper.

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"The other half of the treasure-chart!" she exclaimed with satisfaction. "One half was hidden in an old atlas. Norah stumbled on the truth by accident, and destroyed a number of old books in her attempt to find it.

"I think someone else was in the plot—possibly her brother, who is staying in the village. He used to signal to her at night. I don't think that Norah will deny it."

The wretched prefect made no reply.

Miss Branson, her face very stern, led the sobbing girl away.

"Come," said June, glancing at the bewildered Miss Marple. "We're going to find your treasure!"

They found it, with the aid of the chart, hidden behind the pavilion on the site of the old lodge.

June was the heroine of the hour, and later her chums plied her with questions.

"How on earth did you suspect Norah in the first place?" they demanded.

"I noticed," June explained, "that the books—apart from being torn—had the corners of the pages dog-eared by someone who had turned them over in haste.

"That was one of Norah's little habits! Especially when she was agitated or in a hurry. I noticed it when I took her those lines. It was always the bottom corner of the page, because Norah was left-handed!"

"Phew, fancy spotting a little thing like that!" cried Vera. "You certainly did use your brains!"

And admiringly she and her chums regarded the schoolgirl detective.





It was a very ordinary umbrella, old and shabby, but Noel Raymond, the famous young detective, knew that it contained an astounding secret!

By PETER LANGLEY

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WHO SHADOWED NOEL

"**B**y Jove! What a foul night!" Noel Raymond spoke with feeling. The rain trickled down in a stream from the brim of his hat; it dropped from the bottom of his raincoat on to his trousers; it spattered on the streaming pavement.

A real December "drencher."

The young detective had been caught in it near London Bridge station.

"And not a taxi in sight," bemoaned Noel with a wry grin.

Bump!

Someone had come round the corner from the opposite direction at speed, and the ferrule of a down-held umbrella had prodded him forcibly in the shoulder.

"Whoa—steady!" he cried.

He paused then. With a little startled cry from its holder, the umbrella had whisked up, and the light from a nearby street-lamp illuminated a freckled face, a tip-tilted nose, auburn hair under a brown felt hat, and two very wide and startled blue eyes.

"Oh!" gasped the girl tremulously. "Oh dear, I'm sorry!" She gulped, hesitated, cast a swift glance behind her, and then looked strangely intently at Noel. "You're getting terribly wet!" she burst out.

Noel raised his eyebrows.

"It won't hurt me," he smiled, wondering a little at the girl's flustered attitude.

"Take my umbrella!"

Staggered, the young detective stared down into her imploring little face.

"But really!" he protested, half laughing. "I couldn't dream——" and then broke off in bewilderment as the girl jammed the umbrella handle into his hand.

"Oh, please—please—you must take it!" she cried desperately.

"But—my dear young lady——"

"You *must* take it—I'll call for it. Where do you live? I can't explain now——"

Noel's hand automatically closed on the umbrella, and at the same moment his brain worked swiftly. This girl feared something, and fantastic though it seemed, it was essential to her that he took the umbrella.

"Here," said Noel, "is my card."

With a gasped: "Oh, thank you!" the girl leapt past him and dashed away into the rain-swept gloom.

He made to rush after her, and then hesitated. Obviously she did not wish him to follow.

But why on earth should she force the umbrella upon him? His thoughts were broken by a pounding of swift feet coming up the road before him, in the direction whence had appeared the mystery girl.

Noel looked up.

A short, heavily built, moustached man in dripping ulster and Homburg hat bore down upon him, breathing heavily.

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"Excuse me," he panted, "have you seen—a young girl with an umbrella? She was dressed in tweeds."

Noel looked at him, instinctively distrusting and disliking the thin face, the loose lips, the pale shifty eyes and, for the second time that night, acted upon a second's impulse.

"Yes," he answered shortly, and indicated a road opposite, which was at right angles to the one which the young stranger had actually taken. "About two minutes ago," he added, turning. "Good-night."

And Noel walked on up the road, wondering what it could all mean. Obviously the man was after the girl. But where did the umbrella fit into the affair?

It was a good umbrella. The handle was of light-stained wood and rather heavy. But there was really nothing unusual in its appearance.

"Well, if the girl goes to my flat I'll find out," decided Noel.

And then he heard the sound of footsteps following him. Were they the footsteps of the man who had just inquired the mystery girl's whereabouts?

"Now, why is he following me?" muttered Noel, his eyes narrowing. "Before, he was obviously hurrying to catch up with that auburn-haired girl. But now——"

The young detective drew in his breath sharply.

Supposing the man had noticed that, although he was carrying an umbrella, his shoulders and hat were soaking wet? In that case the fellow might suspect whose umbrella it really was——

"By Jove!" he breathed. "Was the man more interested in the umbrella than the girl? Here's a pretty little mystery!"

He strode through the downpour, seemingly oblivious of the hurried footsteps not far behind him. Now Noel turned into a busy thoroughfare.

At the far end of the street, on the opposite side, was a large restaurant, and with a glint in his eyes Noel made for it.

Suddenly he looked round. It was to see that the man in the ulster had also begun to cross the road. Noel stopped, pretending to look in a shop window. Instantly the man behind also came to a halt.

His suspicions now crystallising into certainty, the young detective continued on his way, making straight for the restaurant.

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"For little Auburn Hair's sake," decided the young detective, "there are two things to be done. One, to prove definitely that the fellow behind is after this perfectly ordinary umbrella; two, to stop him following me and thus getting in touch with the girl."

Noel's face was a trifle grim as he turned into the well-lighted restaurant. "Little Auburn Hair" needed help. And she should have it!

The restaurant was crowded, and Noel had to make do with a table at which a man already sat. He slid the umbrella into a stand which encircled a pillar beside the table, hung up his raincoat and hat, and ordered coffee.

He shot a swift glance towards the door.

"Ah!" murmured Noel.

For through the swing doors at that moment, with a swift glance round, had hurried the man in the black Homburg and ulster.

Noel watched him, saw the fellow walk down to a table behind his own and half hidden behind another pillar.

Noel's coffee came. He drank it slowly. But he was alertly watchful. By turning his head slightly, he was able to keep an eye upon his quarry.

And that man's gaze was continually turning in the direction of the young detective—or rather in the direction of the umbrella Noel had placed in the stand!

Then it was the umbrella the fellow was after!

Noel shot a glance at the man seated opposite him, and was satisfied with the man's evident engrossment in his newspaper. Then his gaze flickered to the fellow who had followed him. At that moment he was being served by a waitress.

It was the moment Noel needed. Swiftly he reached behind him for the umbrella. His subsequent actions were hurried but smooth, and he finally leant back again with a slight smile.

Five minutes passed.

Then footsteps behind told Noel that one of the customers was leaving. From the corner of his eyes he glimpsed a damp ulster. The footsteps paused just behind him, and at once passed on.

Noel did not look up until the fellow in the ulster was passing

through the swing doors; he then saw that the man was carrying an umbrella, held closely to his side.

And that umbrella had been taken from the stand behind Noel!

The young detective grinned—broadly.

"Waitress—my bill, please," he called, and on receiving it he rose and reached for an umbrella that reposed in a stand upon the other side of the pillar.

His table companion looked up.



Molly was certain that her aunt and uncle had realized that the supposed Frenchman was Noel Raymond in disguise, but Noel himself seemed oblivious of the fact. "Let us have a nice walk," he said.

"Pardon me," he snapped. "You have my umbrella."

Noel looked down at the damp umbrella, and gently shook his head.

"I think not," he murmured. "I'm quite sure that this is the gamp I brought in with me."

The man grabbed at it, stared, and then his angry expression altered to one of bewilderment.

"Why—er—yes," he muttered. "This is not mine, although very much like it. But——" and he stared down at the umbrella stand. "Why, I put the thing there, I'm sure. Where on earth——"

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"Perhaps some other customer took it by mistake," suggested Noel gravely. "Undoubtedly he'll bring it back——"

And shaking his head, he walked from the table, knowing perfectly well that another customer *had* taken it—the man in the ulster!

For Noel had switched over the two umbrellas, so that the man in the ulster had taken the wrong one.

Noel turned towards a public call box just outside the swing doors, and got through to his flat. Parker, his manservant, answered, and replied to his query with:

"Yes, a girl of about sixteen, very wet, has just called."

"Good!" exclaimed Noel. "Stoke up a good fire; give her towels and things, and one of my dressing gowns; also a hot drink and anything to eat which she needs. Got that?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Tell her everything's all right," continued Noel. "I'll be back just as soon as I can grab a taxi."

Parker opened the door to him.

"The young lady—a Miss Molly Travers—is in the sitting-room, sir," he informed Noel. "She's having hot milk, and I have given her your green dressing gown."

Noel patted him on the shoulder.

"Good, Parker," he said.

Parker coughed, looking reproachfully at the umbrella his master carried, which was dripping water on the hall carpet.

Noel smiled.

"No, Parker. I'm not letting this out of my hands," he said very decidedly. "I have an idea it's important."

And leaving the manservant, allowing himself a rare, surprised uplifting of the eyebrows, he tapped on the door of the sitting-room and entered.

"Auburn Hair"—or, rather, Molly Travers—a glass of milk in her two hands, looking very diminutive in Noel's best dressing gown, was seated in an easy chair before a roaring fire.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, as Noel entered, and leapt to her feet. Her gaze dropped to the umbrella in his hand, and "Oh!" she exclaimed again, on a note of relief. "You've still got it!"

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"The umbrella in person, young lady," Noel assured her with a smile. "Sorry I've been rather long, but"—and he watched her keenly—"a short gentleman in an ulster and black Homburg seemed anxious to have it——"

"My uncle," she breathed. "Did he follow you here?"

"Your uncle?" murmured Noel in surprise.

She bit her lip, and then burst out:

"Oh, Mr. Raymond, could you help me? I—I've heard of you. You see, I was going to daddy's lawyers about it, but now——" She smiled gratefully. "You've been so splendid that perhaps—perhaps——"

"Perhaps I could come to the rescue?" Noel finished with a grave smile. "Now don't worry," and he gently pushed her back into the easy chair. "I promise you I'll do everything I can. Just sit there and tell me all about it."

She nodded.

Noel lifted the umbrella. He eyed her quizzically.

"This is the real mystery, I gather?" he ventured. "It is very important to you and—apparently—to your uncle, is it not?"

She nodded swiftly.

"As I imagined," smiled Noel. "Now—what is its secret?"

She gave a little bewildered smile, and spread her hands.

"That—that's just it," she faltered. "I—I don't know."

CHAPTER II

NOEL IN DISGUISE

"**W**ELL, well," smiled Noel, "that's not very helpful. Here we are both chasing round protecting an umbrella—and neither of us knows why it needs protecting!"

Molly Travers flushed a little as she looked back at him.

"It—it does sound absurd, doesn't it?" she confessed. "It was silly of me to put it that way, because, you see, I do know that it is something to do with daddy's money, and when I heard aunt and uncle——"

Noel held up a protesting hand.

"Molly—Molly, you're ending before you start," he said. "Now——" and he slipped out his cigarette case, lit up, and smiled

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at her encouragingly. "Now, Molly," he repeated, "start right at the beginning. I shan't interrupt again!"

"First of all, my father, Harvey Travers, was a scientist. Daddy was quite well known, very clever, but just a little—eccentric. He *did* have funny little ways. But," and her face softened, "he was a dear."

With an encouraging nod from Noel, Molly continued.

For the last three years she had been staying with a distant relative in France. She had no mother now, and her father, absorbed in his work, had felt that she was not having the good time she ought to have. Hence the trip to France where there were young companions.

Early this year Harvey Travers had died rather suddenly—heart failure. Molly had returned to England to find that her aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Streetley, had moved into her old house, made the funeral arrangements, and taken on the legal matters.

Harvey Travers had left the house, a very small sum of money in the bank—in fact, all his worldly possessions—to his young daughter. The curious point was that, although seemingly very well off when alive, no trace of his fortune could be found.

"I—I did not think of the money," said Molly. "It was such a shock losing daddy like that. But my aunt and uncle said they would look after me, and—and, oh, it may seem ungrateful, Mr. Raymond," she burst out. "But I couldn't like them. They seemed so sly, so furtive. They were always prying around amongst daddy's things——"

Noel leant forward and patted her hand.

"I have seen your uncle," he said gently. "And I think I can understand. But go on, Molly——"

"Well, two weeks ago," she told him, "I overheard them saying that daddy must have left his money somewhere in the house. They knew that he never put much in the bank."

"I see," murmured Noel. "In short, this pretty pair, feeling confident that there was money somewhere, intended to get hold of it—although it is rightfully yours."

"Yes. And this afternoon they were terribly excited. My uncle Seth had found a paper in the back of daddy's old desk. And I

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heard him say to my aunt that the secret of the money's hiding place was in the old umbrella daddy always used to carry."

Noel's blue eyes flashed to the umbrella lying on the table.

"Go on," he prompted quietly.

"Well, when I heard that," continued Molly hesitantly, "I felt furious. To think that all they thought about was getting daddy's money! So I dashed up to the attic. I knew daddy's umbrella was there. I couldn't see anything funny about it, so I thought I'd bring it up to daddy's old lawyers. I slipped out of the house, but they must have seen me go."

"Your uncle followed you, eh? And you knew he was following when you bumped into me."

"Yes," she muttered. "You don't think I've done wrong?"

Noel rose, and smiled down into her anxious face.

"I think you've been very plucky, and"—his face grew stern—"between us we're going to outwit your aunt and uncle. Now——"

He turned and lifted the umbrella. He gazed at it thoughtfully, then looked at Molly and smiled.

"Come into my laboratory. If there is any secret contained in this umbrella we'll very soon find it!"

But that was where the young detective was very much mistaken!

In the laboratory Noel examined every bit of the umbrella with a magnifying glass. The handle was made in one piece. He tapped it for any sign that it might be hollow—in vain. He even probed along the length of polished wood with a very keen little lancet, but it soon became evident that the handle could not possibly contain anything. It was just solid wood.

Again Noel used the magnifying glass, scrutinising every inch of the handle, the metal frame, the black silk covering, for sign that something had been written or scratched on. But there was nothing.

At length he laid the umbrella down, completely baffled.

"Molly," he said slowly, "I can't understand this. There is no trace of anything unusual. And yet—there *must* be something according to what you overheard." He paused and looked at her keenly. "That letter your aunt and uncle found must have been meant for you, Molly. And, obviously, it explained the secret. But you did not hear about that?"

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"No. You see, I just rushed to get the umbrella."

Noel frowned thoughtfully.

"But your aunt and uncle must know the secret," he murmured.

"Though how there can be any secret here is beyond me!"

Slowly he lit another cigarette. Baffling indeed! Was there a mistake here? Had Molly's eccentric father written the letter and then changed his mind? But, no—the aunt and uncle apparently were quite convinced of the umbrella's importance. Then what was the secret?

"Molly," said Noel suddenly, "are you afraid of your aunt and uncle? Honestly now."

She looked at him wonderingly, and then shook her head.

"No," she answered definitely. "They don't frighten me. They're just—sort of—of furtive, nasty people. But why, Mr. Raymond?"

"Because I want you to go back to your home now, Molly," said Noel slowly. "It would be better, I think, and if you're not afraid of what they may say—O.K. then. But the point is—I don't wish you to tell them anything about me—or that I have the umbrella. Molly—what will you say if they ask you where it is?"

Her eyes momentarily flashed.

"Why, that it is no business of theirs," she said with spirit. "After all, it was daddy's umbrella—and it is mine now."

"Grand, Molly!" applauded Noel. "Then you can leave matters in my hands. I can assure you I'm following up this strange business straight away, and you'll soon hear from me again. In the meantime, if you need help quickly, or hear anything important, get in touch with me straightaway by 'phone. But, in any case," he added, "I shall be seeing you again very soon."

Tri-i-ng, tri-i-ng.

As Noel let himself into his flat early next morning the telephone's urgent summons met his ears. The young detective had been out since eight o'clock on mysterious business. He lifted the receiver.

"Mr. Raymond?" breathed a low, excited voice.

Noel started. His face grew anxious.

"Molly!" he exclaimed. "What's happened?"

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"Oh, I'm quite all right," her distant, whispered voice reassured him. "They were furious last night—but I just said nothing. But listen, please, because I'm 'phoning from home in the library, and one of them might come along——"

"Quickly then, Molly."

"I heard them speaking together this morning," came Molly's eager voice. "I only caught words now and then, but by what they said I'm certain the umbrella must be used to measure out a



Molly whirled round with a startled gasp as she heard a rap at the window. It was to see Noel Raymond clinging to the sill. He had not gone away after all.

certain distance on the floor of daddy's laboratory which will reveal the hiding-place of the money. Will you come down with the umbrella? Perhaps I can let you into the house and——" Her voice broke off, and then came swiftly, urgently: "I must stop. Someone coming. Good-bye."

A distant click signified that Molly had hung up.

Drayton House was a rather rambling old building, set in about four acres of ground, and for many years had been the residence of the Travers.

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Now up the weed-grown drive to the front door stepped briskly a young man who, judging from his attire and general appearance, was a foreigner. A Frenchman, most people would have labelled him.

He knocked, and a moment or two later the door was opened by Molly's uncle—Seth Streetley. The young Frenchman beamed at him.

"Ah, ze house of Ma'm'selle Molly Travers!" he exclaimed, flourishing the long, thin parcel he carried. "I am Monsieur Leroux. Ma'm'selle Molly and myself became great friends when she was in France, so now zat I come to England I visit her. She is in—yes?"

Seth Streetley nodded, though there was a curious glint in his eyes. He seemed fascinated by the visitor's little black moustache, then his gaze went to the parcel he carried.

"Yes, Molly is in," he replied. "Please step inside. This, my dear," he added for the benefit of his wife who had entered the hall, "is a friend of our niece."

"A very great friend!" exclaimed the Frenchman, then, as he caught sight of Molly standing on the stairs, he dropped his parcel and went running forward. "Bon jour—bon jour!" he cried, grasping Molly by the hand; then, as she stared at him in surprise, he winked. "I'm Noel Raymond," he whispered. "Follow my lead."

He felt the girl stiffen, then she nodded. The disguised detective turned to the pair down in the hall.

"Zere is so much to talk about!" he declared. "Ma'm'selle and I may walk in your garden—yes?"

Mr. Streetley flashed a look at the long, thin parcel which lay on the floor, gave his wife a meaning glance, then smiled.

"Why, of course," he said.

"Good—good!" cried Noel, and tucked his arm through Molly's. "Zen let us go and have ze nice walk and ze nice talk."

He led her out into the garden, and when the front door had closed behind them, Molly gazed rather ruefully at the young detective.

"Oh, Mr. Raymond," she gulped, "I don't want to—to underrate your skill, but—but I'm certain uncle's seen through your disguise."

To her surprise Noel chuckled.

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"I shouldn't let that worry you," he said. "Now listen, Molly. That business about the umbrella being a measure—I think you were meant to overhear that. I think your aunt and uncle used it as a method to get the person in possession of the umbrella down here with it. Because after all if they suspected that the money was hidden in the laboratory they could search, and it would only be a matter of time before they found it."

"Oh!" Molly gasped. "Then—then it was a trap. They fooled me. Oh!" And a fresh thought struck her with sickening force. "You brought the umbrella down," she breathed. "It was in that parcel in the hall?"

Noel nodded.

"But don't you see?" cried Molly urgently. "I'm sure they suspect you. They'll suspect that parcel—its shape. They'll get the umbrella——"

She broke off. A voice had hailed them.

"Molly—will you come here a minute, please?"

Mr. Streetley was standing on the steps of the house.

Molly hesitated, casting an agonised look at Noel. He nodded.

"Trot along, Molly. And remember," he breathed, "the game isn't lost yet."

She bit her lip and then hurried back.

"Monsieur Leroux" watched her go, smiling strangely. He saw Streetley beckon her into the house. Her uncle stepped in behind her, suddenly paused and turned.

A gloating smile appeared on his lips as he stared down the drive at Noel.

"I don't know who you are, my friend," he called harshly, "but your absurd disguise didn't deceive me for a moment. Many thanks for returning the umbrella. But if you don't leave these premises instantly I shall call for the police. And I don't think," he added sneeringly, "that they would give any credence to any wild story about an umbrella you might care to tell them!"

And he stepped inside and banged the door.

Noel leapt forward, went dashing up the drive. Then he paused, shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and, turning, shambled limply down the drive, his whole attitude betokening complete and utter defeat.

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But once in the road and out of sight of the house, Noel surprisingly straightened. In fact, more amazing still, he chuckled.

"Not a brilliant disguise," he murmured, "but one which has served excellently." His grin broadened. "My retreat must have impressed them that I'm finished with, but——"

His smile vanished.

"I've got them where I want them!"

CHAPTER III

THE SECRET CLUE!

In her room on the second floor of Drayton House Molly Travers sat at a little desk by the window.

Her fingers were thrust into her auburn hair, her eyes fixed apathetically upon the opposite wall.

She had been dragged, protesting vigorously, up to her room by her aunt and uncle, and there locked in. The precious pair had been exultant, confident that the money which should come to Molly was now within their grasp.

The actual money did not concern Molly tremendously, but the thought that her unscrupulous, greedy aunt and uncle were deliberately robbing her roused fury in her spirited young being. And then there was Noel—Noel who had done so much to help her.

As Molly thought again of that very obvious disguise, of the way the young detective had been bowled out, she gave a sad sigh then turned with a gasp, for there had come a sharp rap on the window.

Clutching at the window-sill, smiling through at her, was Noel Raymond, now undisguised.

She leapt to the window and whisked up the bottom half. Noel climbed through and coolly brushed himself down.

"Nice climb up the ivy, Molly," he remarked. "And here we are again."

She stared at him.

Noel placed his hands upon her shoulders and smiled down into her bewildered, agitated face.

"Molly," he said, "you're thinking that as I've made an awful mess of things—what can I do to help now. That's it, eh?"

She flushed awkwardly.

GIRLS' CRYSTAL ANNUAL

" You—you've been splendid, Mr. Raymond, but——"

He chuckled.

" And you're being splendid now, Molly," he told her sincerely. " Trying to spare my feelings. But listen." And then he spoke slowly and very distinctly. " Molly, I wanted your uncle and aunt to see through my disguise. I wanted them to think that your helper had made a complete mess of things, had gone off defeated, leaving them to proceed with their work with no fear of interference."

" But why?" she gasped. " They've got the umbrella——"

" On the contrary," cut in Noel, chuckling. " They've got one I bought early this morning, one which I took a great deal of trouble to make quite sure was almost exactly similar to your father's!"

His smile broadened a little at her expression.

" Listen, Molly. I could find nothing peculiar about your father's umbrella, and yet we knew that your aunt and uncle could find the secret. So I decided to make them show me the secret without putting the real umbrella in danger—and at the same time convince them that they had nothing to fear from me. In short, at this moment they are completely off their guard. Do you know where they are?"

" I—I saw them go into daddy's laboratory, but——"

" And that's where I'm going now," said Noel. " Your aunt and uncle are going to reveal the secret to me without being aware that they're doing it."

Molly's eyes sparkled.

He turned towards the door. Instantly Molly's face fell.

" They locked me in," she cried. " Oh, how can you——"

Noel was unperturbed. He looked at the door, and then eyed her with mock severity.

" You should know, young Molly," he told her, " that a detective has to be a bit of a burglar at times. Watch!"

And he withdrew a key ring from his pocket on which were a number of delicate little steel instruments. He inserted one in the lock and cautiously felt for the wards. A moment later—a click.

Noel turned the knob, and the door opened!

GIRLS' CRYSTAL ANNUAL

"Showing the use of a pick-lock!" He bowed smilingly. "And now, hold tight until I return. I don't think I shall be long."

Three minutes later he slipped back into the room.

"What happened?" breathed Molly. "Did you see them? Did they see you? What were they doing? Where are they now?—"

"Whoa!" laughed Noel protestingly. "Your aunt and uncle"—and his face was hard suddenly—"are now prisoners in the laboratory. I locked them in, although they don't know it yet," he added grimly. "They were too busy with that broly I bought this morning—"

He broke off and looked towards the brick grate. Paper, wood and coal were laid there.

"Molly," said Noel gravely. "It is pretty nippy. We'll light a fire."

And with this amazing statement, one that left Molly dumb-founded, he crossed the room. Drawing a box of matches from his pocket, he struck one and applied it to the paper. It flared instantly—the wood began to crackle.

"Good," he murmured. "No, Molly," he chuckled at her dazed look, "I'm not mad. You see, I watched your uncle and aunt through the half-open door of the laboratory, and they seemed intent upon burning that umbrella I brought down. So I thought we might try the same idea."

She shook her head helplessly.

"I don't understand a bit, Mr. Raymond," she confessed. "But if you—"

"But if I know what I'm doing, O.K. then, eh?" enquired Noel smiling. "Thanks, Molly. Now watch."

He unbuttoned his long raincoat and groped inside under one armpit. Then, with a sudden gesture, he whipped out—

"Daddy's umbrella!" gasped Molly.

"In person," Noel agreed. "And now—"

He clicked it up, eyed the fire for a moment, and then nodded.

"Good enough," he decided.

He advanced to the fire. Holding the umbrella with its open silk covering towards the flames, he slowly began to twirl it.

Molly watched fascinatedly.

GIRLS' CRYSTAL ANNUAL

"This is what your uncle was doing," Noel smiled over his shoulder. "But I'm afraid he won't find what we—ah!" Eagerly he leant forward, peering intently at the black silk in one spot. "Look, Molly! It's coming——"

She craned breathlessly over his shoulder. Wider became her eyes. Her lips parted. For——

The heat from the fire was having a curious effect on part of the umbrella silk. It was bringing out letters—words!

"Here is your father's secret, Molly," said Noel quietly. "A type of invisible writing which would only respond to heat. Clever, because umbrellas seldom get heat, eh? Now—the words——"

"Oh, it—it says——"

"A loose floorboard under the chest in the hall," Noel read slowly from the small, neatly formed letters which had appeared in red on the black silk. He looked into Molly's wide eyes and smiled. "And that's where we shall find your father's little fortune, Molly!"

He led the way downstairs and, almost quivering with excitement, Molly followed him. Between them they managed to remove the heavy chest in the hall, then the girl gave an anxious gasp.

"What—what's that?" she faltered.

She nodded in the direction of the stairs, and Noel grinned as he heard a furious hammering coming from the direction of the laboratory.

"Don't worry—that's only your precious aunt and uncle," he said. "They've just realised that they're locked in."

Dropping to one knee, he ran his fingers over the floor where the oak chest had stood, and, locating the loose board mentioned in the message on the umbrella, he levered it up.

Eagerly Molly craned over his shoulder.

"Is—is anything there?" she asked, then gave a thrilled cry as she saw a black japanned box lying in the cavity that the young detective had disclosed. "It must contain daddy's money!" she exclaimed.

And she was right.

When the box was opened it was found to be packed tight with wads of five-pound notes.

GIRLS' CRYSTAL ANNUAL

At that moment there came another savage hammering from upstairs, followed by a medley of furious shouts. The Streetleys, unable to break down the door, were yelling for assistance, but Noel paid no attention to the row they were making. Straightening up, he looked thoughtfully at Molly, who was holding the open box in her hand like one in a dream.

"Well," he said slowly. "There's one more little problem. It is unthinkable that you should stay here with your aunt and uncle. And so, until we can make arrangements otherwise, how would you like to stay with a very charming young cousin of mine?"

Molly's flushed face, her sudden delighted smile, was answer enough!

"Grand," said Noel. "Then we needn't stay here any longer. That precious pair," he murmured with a grim smile, "can break their way out. They have no hold on you. Come on."

He marched to the front door, whipped it open, and then paused. Rain was pelting down from the sky!

Noel grimaced, hesitated, and suddenly grinned. He turned back towards the staircase. Molly, the japanned box under one arm, stared in wonder.

"Mr. Raymond!" she gasped. "Surely you're not going to let Aunt and Uncle out?"

Noel chuckled.

"Not likely! I'm just going to get your father's umbrella, Molly."

"My—my father's umbrella?"

The girl seemed more bewildered than ever, and Noel with another chuckle pointed to the pouring rain.

"Yes," he said, "we'll need to use it once more, after all!"

