

GIRLS' CRYSTAL

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It was impossible to toll the bells in the locked tower, yet loud and clear they rang out. What was the secret of the ghostly peal? That was the intriguing mystery which Noel Raymond, the famous young detective, set out to solve.

By PETER LANGLEY

CHAPTER I

THE GHOSTLY BELLS

NOEL RAYMOND slowed his car to a crawl, listening intently. Though muffled by the mist, it was a welcome and tuneful sound that reached his ears across the lonely moor; an unmistakable peal of bells, playing an old-world air.

"Must be near a village," decided the young detective, with a smile. "Thank goodness for that! I shall be glad to put up for the night."

Noel was tired, hungry, and stiff from hours of driving. He had hoped to reach London before nightfall, but the mist had descended on him suddenly and unexpectedly while he was crossing

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Blackmoor. He had taken the wrong turn and driven for miles over a bumpy, badly surfaced road.

The welcome sound of the bells suggested a church, and where there was a church there'd be an inn—and, with any luck, a meal!

He drove on, and suddenly he reached a break in the mist—a clear patch that enabled him to see in the distance the crumbling grey walls of some old building, covered thickly with ivy and lichen.

The musical clangour of the bells sounded nearer as the wind changed.

And abruptly the young detective stiffened, ramming on the brakes and bringing the crawling car to an abrupt halt.

"What on earth——" he ejaculated.

Racing towards him were two white-faced, girlish figures. Both were hatless, and wore macs over their walking skirts and blouses. They ran as though pursued by some unknown terror.

Leaping out of the car Noel ran to a near-by stile and watched the madly running girls.

"I say, what's wrong?" he asked as, gasping for breath, they reached the stile.

"The—the bells!" came the breathless reply.

The speaker was fair-haired, pretty, and apparently the younger of the two; her companion, dark and attractive, hurried forward.

"I'm sorry," she panted; "but—but Jill and I have had an awful scare. My name's Irene Carter; this is my chum, Jill Desmond. We set out to walk from the near-by town, but we got caught in the mist—and took shelter."

"In—in the old tower," breathed the fair-haired Jill.

"But what's all this about the bells?" Noel asked. "I heard 'em, of course—though they seem to have stopped now. I imagined there must be a church in the vicinity."

The dark-haired girl shook her head.

"We're miles from the nearest village," she explained unsteadily. "Those bells you heard—they were ringing in the old tower; but—but there's no one there to ring them!"

"Eh?" demanded Noel, startled in spite of himself. "Say that again, young lady."

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"Oh, I know it must sound absurd," she went on, "and you'll probably think we're both crazy. But—you tell him, Jill."

The fair-haired girl did so.

"Years ago," she whispered, "there used to be a peal of bells in that old tower; they were rung as a kind of curfew to guide travellers crossing the moor. But—but they've not rung for ages—since the owner went abroad.

"People won't go near the tower; there've been queer stories about it. But—but Irene and I never believed them. We recognised the tower when we took shelter there this evening—and we decided to explore the belfry. We couldn't see any bells; there was nothing to be seen except cobwebs— Ugh! Then—then, all at once that dreadful peal started—boom—clang—all around us. We—we just ran for our lives!" she added breathlessly.

"I don't blame you," Noel said. "It's certainly an amazing story. Look here—suppose you wait in my car while I scout round; there may be some perfectly simple explanation."

But both girls shook their heads.

"We'll come with you!" declared dark-haired Irene Carter. "Won't we, Jill?"

"Rather!" replied the younger girl. "I shan't be scared now we've got someone with us."

Noel's eyes gleamed approvingly.

"You girls have got plenty of pluck," he said. "Well, then, we'll explore together."

On the way to the gaunt old tower Irene explained hurriedly that she and Jill had come to Blackmoor with the purpose of visiting a chum of theirs, who had recently taken up a position as companion to an elderly lady who had come to live in the district.

The encroaching mist had prevented their finding the house.

"Lucille was expecting us," she added. "She'll be terribly disappointed."

Noel nodded, and as they reached the tower he led the way to the ivy-grown, crumbling entrance.

"Let's go in," he said briefly.

They entered the tower, the two girls following closely at the young detective's heels.

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Noel switched on his torch, and the brilliant light revealed the bare flint walls and a flight of stone stairs that led up into the belfry.

"No sign of any bells up there," he remarked, as he directed the beam on to the cobweb-covered rafters high in the tower. "But we may as well go up and investigate——"

He approached the stairs, to come to a sudden halt, while a bewildered cry went up from his youthful companions.

For the way to the turret was barred by a massive oak door, studded with rusted iron nails and securely locked!

"Hallo, what's this?" demanded Noel, as he tried the door. "How did you young ladies get through here?"

"It—it wasn't shut when we came here!" gasped Irene.

"Perhaps one of you shut it behind you?" suggested Noel.

"We didn't!" declared Jill emphatically. "We didn't stop. It—it must have been shut after we left the tower."

Noel attempted to open the massive door, but it resisted his efforts.

"Queer!" he muttered. "That door didn't shut itself—and there's no wind."

The two girls were staring round apprehensively.

"Hadn't—hadn't we better go?" ventured Irene.

"What—without solving the mystery?" cried Jill protestingly.

Noel smiled grimly.

"If we're to fathom the mystery of those bells," he said, "there's only one thing for it. Do you girls mind waiting here while I make an attempt to reach the belfry?"

"But how—how can you do that?" gasped Irene.

For reply, Noel flashed his torch on a coil of mildewed rope that lay in a corner, together with several rusted iron bars and other litter that had been dumped there.

He bent quickly, picking up a stout iron hook.

"The very thing!" he declared. "Better stand back while I throw."

Securing the hook to the rope, he took careful aim and flung it up at the rafters. His first attempt went wide of the mark, but with the second throw the iron hook became firmly wedged between two of the great beams.

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"All right," said Noel tersely. "I'll call down to you if I find anything. You have a torch with you? Splendid!"

The young detective was no mean athlete, and with practised skill he commenced to ascend the swaying rope, hand-over-hand.

The rope creaked ominously as he neared the top, but Noel contrived to swing himself on to the beams.

Rising cautiously to his feet, he pulled out his torch and sent the brilliant finger of light probing into the gloom above.

At first he could see nothing except the ancient metal framework from which the bells had been slung; then, through a tangled veil of cobwebs and dust, he saw the bells themselves.

Motionless, corroded with rust, they hung there, surrounded by the useless machinery that had at one time operated them.

The bells, in years gone by, had been worked by an ancient clock—a clock that had long since ceased to function.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Noel huskily. "Those bells haven't moved for years!"

Yet both he and the girl hikers had heard the phantom peal!

Gripping the torch between his teeth, the young detective swung himself on to a higher beam.

He was now on a level with the boarded floor of the belfry, and within a few yards of the great bells. He could see now that they were fixed immovably by rust, and in two of them even the clappers were missing!

The young detective craned forward suddenly, his eyes narrowing. Lying beneath the bells, among the dusty rafters, was a scrap of white material—a wisp of cambric.

The young detective reached out to retrieve it, and a soft whistle escaped his lips.

It was a girl's handkerchief, and faintly scented. His first thought was that it had been dropped by one of the young hikers; then he remembered that they had not actually entered the belfry. They had only reached the top of the turret steps when they had been scared by the ghostly chimes.

Besides, the initials faintly visible in the corner of the handkerchief were certainly neither "I.C." or "J.D."

What was a girl's handkerchief doing up here, in the old belfry?

It was spotlessly clean, and, judging by the scent that still clung to it, it could not have been here for long.

The young detective stiffened suddenly, with a sharp intake of breath.

From somewhere below him came a girl's muffled scream.

"I say, what's wrong?" Noel shouted.

There was no reply, so hurriedly Noel went to investigate. He climbed down the swinging rope, but when he reached the ground there was no sign of the chums. He ran out into the open, and then gave a sigh of relief as he saw the two girls looking up through the mist.

"Which of you screamed?" he asked.

They stared at him, their faces rather pale.

"Neither of us screamed," declared Irene unsteadily. "It—it was someone else. It seemed to come from outside the tower."

Noel whistled softly, and he led the way round the outside of the tower.

Coarse, stunted grass and tangled briar surrounded it on three sides; but on the fourth side the ground was softer, almost a quagmire from the recent rain.

"Careful!" warned the young detective, flashing his torchlight over the ground. "Have either of you girls been round here?"

"No!" came the quick reply.

Noel dropped to his knee, examining a certain mark on the soft ground. His eyes narrowed.

"Footprints?" whispered Jill breathlessly.

The young detective nodded, his expression grave.

"A girl's footprints—high-heeled shoes, small size. She came this way within the last hour, judging by their clearness."

"What does it mean?" whispered Irene Carter. "Do you think those footprints are connected with that—that scream?"

Noel's expression was grim.

"Possibly," he replied. "And I've an idea, too, that they may be connected with the ghostly chimes."

"What—what do you mean?" gasped Jill, her eyes widening.

"I've examined the bells in the tower," said Noel, "and I'm convinced they have not rung for years!"

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"But—but we heard them!" exclaimed Irene. "You heard them, too——"

"Precisely!" cut in Noel gravely. "There's a bigger mystery behind those chimes than we imagined. Perhaps you can help me clear up one point. Do either of you own this?"

He produced the dainty handkerchief he had found in the tower. Both girls glanced at it curiously, shaking their heads.

"It's not mine," declared Irene.

"Nor mine," said Jill.

"Sure?" asked Noel, holding it out.

Irene took it, and immediately noticed the faint perfume.

"Parma violets," she declared. "Neither Jill nor I use scent. Why, there are some initials in the corner. 'L.M.' Oh!"

She started, staring at her chum, her face paling.

"Lucille's initials!" gasped Jill. "And—and she loves Parma violets!"

"Lucille?" demanded Noel sharply.

White-faced, both girls stared at him.

"Our chum, Lucille Marlow—the girl we were on our way to visit!" faltered Jill. "What can have happened to her? What can it mean?"

CHAPTER II

WHAT HAD BECOME OF LUCILLE?

THE young detective drew in his breath sharply as he encountered the startled, questioning glances of his two companions.

"You're positive that's Lucille's handkerchief?" he demanded.

"Positive!" declared Irene. "Please, where did you find it?"

Noel hesitated for an instant before replying; but he saw no good purpose in withholding the truth.

"In the old belfry," he said gravely. "Wait!"—as two horrified cries greeted his statement. "We mustn't jump to conclusions. The fact that Lucille may have visited the belfry recently doesn't really prove anything. She may not have been here this evening—and we've no grounds for supposing that that scream we heard was hers.

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"After all," he went on quickly, "we've heard some strange things to-night, including a peal of bells that doesn't exist. That scream may have been another illusion of the mist—the cry of a night-bird, for instance."

Noel spoke lightly to reassure the two girls; but it was quite obvious that neither was convinced.

"Something—something dreadful has happened!" declared Jill brokenly. "And it's connected with that horrid belfry!"



"Do either of you own this?" asked Noel. The two girls examined the handkerchief, then their faces paled as they recognised the initials. The handkerchief belonged to the chum they had come to visit!

"Wait a minute!" put in Noel crisply. "Where is your friend staying?"

"At—at a farmhouse," replied Irene haltingly. "Clisholm Farm. It's somewhere near here, but we lost our way in the mist. What can we do?"

Noel's hand rested reassuringly on her arm.

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"Don't worry," he said, "we'll find it, somehow, and probably we'll find your friend there, anxiously awaiting you. Suppose we start with the assumption that your friend had some reason for visiting the tower to-night, and that those footprints are hers. Quite possibly she has returned to the farm. Anyway, I suggest we go there and inquire."

They got into the car and, directed by the girls, Noel drove to Clisholm Farm where Lucille Marlow was staying. In answer to their knock, a grey-haired, bluff-featured man—evidently the farmer, by his attire—opened the door.

"Pardon me," said Noel pleasantly—"is this Clisholm Farm?"

"Right!" replied the other. "But what might be your business?"

Noel indicated his youthful companions.

"These young ladies have called to see a friend of theirs—Miss Lucille Marlow. Unfortunately they were delayed by the mist. Is Miss Marlow in?"

The farmer stared.

"Well, I'll be danged!" he remarked. "Miss Marlow was here right enough, but she left this mornin'. Went off to Lunnon."

"Eh?" demanded Noel, stiffening. "To London, you say?"

"But—but she was expecting us!" protested Irene, her voice shaking. "We wrote to say we'd be coming."

The farmer scratched his head in some perplexity.

"Better step in a moment," he remarked, holding open the door. "I'll call my wife."

In the firelit parlour Noel and the girls were greeted by a buxom, stolid-faced woman, whom Farmer Hodges introduced as his wife. She confirmed her husband's story.

"The young lady had only been here a few days, sir, when she packs her bag and starts off for London. She was employed as companion to Mrs. Lakington, an invalid lady who's staying here, and, between you and me, I think the loneliness was getting on her nerves."

"Miss Marlow seemed nervous, then?" asked Noel quickly.

"Well, she seemed kind of jumpy like, if you know what I mean."

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Mrs. Hodges glanced at her husband. "I think it was the old lady's fault for talking about those bells."

Noel started, with a swift glance at the young hikers.

"Bells?" he repeated. "What bells?"

Farmer Hodges coughed, frowning at his wife.

"It's just an idea the old lady's got—about some bells that are supposed to ring on the moor on misty nights," he said gruffly. "There's nothing in it, of course. Maybe she's heard the bells ringing from Dailsham Church, five miles away; but she talked about them to Miss Marlow till the poor girl began to start listening for 'em."

A querulous voice sounded from the adjoining room.

"Bells?" it echoed. "Who is that talking about the Blackmoor Bells? I heard them ring this evening, and they'll ring again at midnight. Mark my words!"

Noel took an involuntary step towards the door, but the farmer's wife barred his way, with a warning gesture.

"It's only Mrs. Lakington," she whispered. "The old lady has just retired for the night; we mustn't disturb her. It's really very sad. Her husband used to own the old Blackmoor Tower; but he lost his money and died abroad. The old lady still imagines she can hear the bells that used to ring there."

Noel's blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"And who owns the old tower now?" he asked.

Farmer Hodges shrugged.

"Danged if I know. The Council, maybe. There was some talk of having it pulled down, as it's nothing more than an eyesore these days."

The young detective changed the subject.

"And you say Miss Marlow started for London this morning? Did she leave an address?"

Mrs. Hodges shook her head.

"She said she'd write and let us know where she was staying. The poor girl seemed very queer and upset."

Noel glanced at his two young companions, who were listening in anxious bewilderment.

"In that case," he said, "I think we'd better push off. It'll

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take some time to get to the nearest town, in this mist. No doubt Miss Marlow will be writing to her friends from London."

They left the farmhouse. Farmer Hodges going with them as far as the car. Noel saw the two girls snugly ensconced in rugs at the rear, shook hands with the farmer and climbed into the driving-seat.

He drove cautiously for a few hundred yards—and then he pulled up; the thickening mist hemmed them in on all sides.

"Wait here!" he breathed tersely. "I shan't be a minute."

He sprang out of the car and vanished into the mist.

The two girls waited anxiously, discussing their absent chum, and the mystery of the phantom chimes. Noel was back again within three minutes; there was a glitter of excitement in his eyes.

He pulled something from his pocket; it was a girl's slim leather handbag, the wrist-strap broken.

"Recognise it?" he asked.

"It's Lucille's!" gasped Irene, paling.

"Where—where did you find it?" demanded Jill.

The young detective smiled grimly.

"In a shed at the rear of the farmhouse; I noticed a trail of footprints leading there. The point is, your friend obviously changed her mind about going to town. Either that, or something prevented her."

He jerked open the bag as he spoke and produced an unused return ticket to London!

In addition to the usual girlish trifles there was a card bearing the name of a London solicitor, and a scrap of paper on which had been scrawled:

"The Bells—six o'clock."

"But what—what does it mean?" faltered Irene, her voice shaking.

"I'm not certain yet," rejoined Noel grimly, "but it was just about six when we heard those bells in the tower, and according to old Mrs. Lakington they will ring again at midnight."

His eyes narrowed as he stared at the crumpled scrap of paper.

"Tell me," he jerked, "did your friend strike you as being of a nervous disposition?"

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" Goodness, no ! " declared Irene. " Lucille was just the opposite ; always too daring, and ready for any adventure."

" I thought as much," said Noel. " Look here, young ladies, I think you'd better leave this matter in my hands. If you'll give me your address I'll get in touch with you just as soon as I have news of your chum. Meanwhile, I should try to forget about those bells."

" But how can we ? " demanded Jill reproachfully. " We're staying at Dailsham, only five miles away. We'll be listening for them all night and thinking of poor Lucille——"

" I promise you that I'll come and see you, or send word, before dusk to-morrow evening," put in Noel. " In return, I want you to promise me something." His voice became suddenly grave. " Neither of you must venture near the old tower on your own ; you understand ? "

The girls looked in surprise at his gravity, but they gave him their assurance.

Noel drove them as far as Dailsham and left them outside the private hotel where they were staying.

Then, turning his car, he drove back across the mist-bound moor.

A DISTANT church clock had boomed the half-hour after eleven ; its muffled notes barely reached Noel's ears as he extinguished the lights of his car and set out on foot towards the old tower.

Grimly forbidding it loomed in the surrounding mist. Cautiously he entered it, flashing his torch around him. Everything appeared exactly as he had left it. The door to the belfry was securely shut ; the rope he had used still dangled from the beams overhead.

The young detective glanced at his watch and grimly prepared to wait. But nothing happened, so he decided to act. Crossing to the dangling rope, he gripped it in both hands. Then a curious sense of impending danger made him pause.

What was wrong ? In a flash he realised the truth. The end of the rope seemed nearer to the ground than when he had last climbed it.

He stared up into the gloom and gave the rope a sudden, violent jerk.

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There was an ominous snapping sound—and the heavy rope fell with a clatter, coiling itself around his feet.

With a sharp intake of breath, Noel bent to retrieve the end; then he whistled softly, and a cold shiver ran down his spine. For the rope had been partly severed by a sharp knife—leaving only a couple of thin strands that would have snapped under his weight.

Only by a miracle had he escaped a nasty accident.

The young detective clenched his hands; and then, with startling abruptness, even his ominous discovery was swept from his mind.

For a distant clock was striking midnight—and barely had the first stroke sounded through the mist than a deafening clamour echoed from the dark belfry overhead.

Noel, recollecting those motionless, useless bells, felt cold beads of perspiration break out on his forehead.

He sprang to the door of the belfry and wrenched at it—but it resisted all his efforts.

Only one other course was left to him—a dangerous, reckless course.

But the young detective did not hesitate.

Racing out of the tower, he glanced up at the ivy-grown wall.

A moment later he was scaling the wall, making use of every crevice and niche in the crumbling stonework.

It was a breath-taking climb that might have daunted even a trained athlete, but the young detective's nerves were taut as steel, as he made his way slowly towards the turret.

The clamour of the phantom chimes was almost deafening; it seemed to beat around his ears, like mocking laughter.

With a final desperate effort, he reached a narrow window in the turret, and squeezed through it.

For a moment his senses felt stunned by the crashing of the bells; with an effort he pulled himself together, groping for his torch.

The brilliant beam split the darkness, and Noel's glance turned instinctively towards the bells.

And abruptly the chimes ceased—the shuddering echoes still ringing through the tower.

A startled, incredulous ejaculation was torn from Noel's lips.

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For not only were the great bells motionless—fixed and immovable in their coat of rust and cobwebs—but lying huddled on the rafters beneath one of the bells was a slight, girlish figure—her face pale as death, her eyes closed.



"Is Miss Marlow in?" asked Noel. The farmer shook his head. "She's gone to London," he replied. Noel's companions gasped with surprise. The mystery had taken a startling turn.

CHAPTER III

PERIL FOR THE GIRL HIKERS

IN one bound Noel reached the girl's side, bending over her. A sigh of relief escaped his lips as he discovered that she was breathing.

He was convinced that this was Lucille Marlow—the girl hikers' missing chum! But what was it that had caused her to come here? Then his eyes narrowed abruptly, as he knelt at the girl's side, flashing his torch on to the bells.

He had observed another significant and amazing fact.

The huge clappers of three more of the bells were missing—as though spirited away by a ghostly hand!

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In only one bell now—the great tenor bell—was the massive clapper still in position, shrouded in cobwebs and dust.

Noel whistled incredulously as he raised the girl in his arms.

The unconscious girl alone might have explained the mystery; but even if she regained consciousness, it would be dangerous to question her in her present weak state.

For the moment, the bewildering mystery of the phantom chimes must remain a mystery; Noel's immediate problem was the unfortunate girl.

How could he get her safely out of the belfry?

Noel's active mind wrestled in vain with the problem, as he set to work to search the belfry. Then a delighted cry escaped his lips as he opened an old wooden chest.

Buried beneath a quantity of copper wire and a number of tools—surprisingly free from rust—he discovered a rope-ladder!

Anxiously he tested it, and decided that it would bear the double weight. Slinging it from the beams, he descended cautiously, the unconscious girl in his arms.

With a sigh of relief, he reached the ground, and carried the unfortunate girl to his car.

From a case under the seat, he took out a first-aid equipment, and skilfully administered restoratives.

The girl revived a little under his treatment, but she was still partially dazed.

She seemed only capable of one thought, and she repeated it over and over again:

“London—I must go to London—to-morrow too late—the bells!”

She lapsed once again into a heavy swoon.

Noel thought quickly. With any luck, he might reach London within two hours—but the girl was in no fit state to travel.

He remembered a friend of his—a doctor—who owned a nursing-home a few miles from Blackmoor. He would take the girl there, and obtain his friend's expert advice before proceeding farther with his inquiries.

An hour later Noel received his friend's verdict.

“The young lady's condition is not actually serious—but she is

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suffering from shock and exhaustion, and it would certainly be dangerous to question her. Complete rest is necessary for at least twelve hours."

Noel frowned.

"Well, it can't be helped. I'll leave her in your care, old man," he said, "while I push on with a few investigations. By the way, can you send a messenger over to Dailsham first thing in the morning? Two friends of Miss Marlow's are staying there, and I want to set their minds at rest."

"Certainly!" promised his friend. "Leave it to me."

Noel scribbled the message, addressing it to both girls:

"Don't worry! Your friend safe. Will explain when I see you. On no account leave hotel till I arrive."

The young detective rested for a few hours at his friend's house; then, as the mist was lifting, he continued on his way to London.

His anxiety on account of the missing girl having been partially set at rest, his whole mind was concentrated on the mystery surrounding her—the mystery of the phantom chimes.

How could the bells in the old tower have pealed out when not one of them had moved?

Why had Lucille Marlow visited the tower?

And what part in the mystery had been played by the invalid Mrs. Lakington, whose family had owned the tower?

It was to solve this part of the mystery that Noel was visiting London.

The address in the girl's handbag provided him with a possible clue.

At nine o'clock promptly he was at the solicitor's office, only to discover that that gentleman was absent on an important case and would not return till after lunch.

The young detective contained his impatience as best he could, realising that every hour might be vital—if Lucille Marlow's disjointed words meant anything.

Mr. Guthrie, the solicitor, returned at three o'clock, and Noel was immediately shown into his office.

The solicitor listened earnestly to the young detective's story.

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"Amazing!" he ejaculated. "I cannot explain the so-called phantom chimes—nor the part played by the girl. I can only tell you that Mrs. Lakington's husband was a client of mine, and that he expressed a wish on several occasions that the bells in the old tower should continue to be rung, even after his death.

"I rather believe that he left a sum of money to someone for that express purpose—though I cannot be sure of this."

Noel sprang suddenly to his feet, his eyes glinting.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "I'm beginning to see daylight. If that person neglected the trust, and then realised that the old gentleman's wife was returning to England—no! There must be some bigger motive behind it than that. Tell me, is that tower very old?"

"It dates back to the Civil Wars—Cavaliers and Roundheads," explained the solicitor.

Noel snapped his fingers.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed excitedly. "At least, I'm almost certain I'm right. I can see an astounding motive, though I still can't understand how the scoundrel worked the dodge. Look here, I want you to come down to Blackmoor with me this evening."

The solicitor protested at first; but after Noel had outlined his startling theory the other proved only too willing to fall in with the plan.

They were delayed on the road, and it was nearly late afternoon by the time they reached the little town of Dailsham, on the outskirts of the moors.

Noel drove at once to the hotel and, leaving the solicitor in the car, hurried to the reception desk.

"There are two young ladies staying here," he said. "Miss Carter and Miss Desmond. Will you please tell them that Mr. Raymond has called."

The clerk glanced up at the board behind him.

"Sorry, sir; the young ladies went out over an hour ago. They said something about going across the moors."

Noel caught in his breath sharply.

"But didn't they get my note!" he demanded. "It was sent by hand this morning."

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The clerk made hurried inquiries, and in the end it was found that Noel's note had arrived, but had never been delivered owing to the carelessness of a page-boy!

"It seems that the young ladies left a message for you, sir," explained the clerk apologetically.

With a muttered ejaculation, Noel hastily ripped open the envelope.

"Dear Mr. Raymond,—As we haven't heard from you, Jill and I have decided to visit the old tower in the hope of finding some trace of Lucille.—Sincerely, IRENE CARTER."

The blood drained from Noel's face as he glanced sharply at the clock. It was nearly twenty to six—and at six o'clock the phantom chimes were due to ring again!

Noel sprinted madly from the hotel and leaped into his car.

"What's the hurry?" demanded his companion.

"It may be life or death!" jerked Noel between his teeth.

"**A**RE—are you scared?" whispered Jill, holding tightly to her chum's arm.

Irene Carter shook her head pluckily, though her face was rather pale.

"Not me! Are you?"

"No!" declared Jill defiantly. "After all, what if the bells do ring? They can't hurt us. And we've got to do something about poor Lucille. I do think Mr. Raymond might have kept his promise and sent word to us."

Irene nodded, her hand tightening on her friend's arm.

Together they entered the gloomy tower. Jill gave a violent start.

"Irene—look!" she breathed. "The door to the turret—it's open!"

The two girls stared half-fearfully towards the open door leading to the belfry.

"Come on!" whispered Irene. "We must think of Lucille."

Hand-in-hand they mounted the turret stairs, peering fearfully ahead. A moment later they were standing in the dark belfry.

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Something had gone wrong with Irene's torch—it flickered out as they reached the top of the steps. The pale light that crept through the turret window revealed the great, rusted bells, surrounded by cobwebs.

The girls clung together instinctively as a shadow moved in the darkness.

Then—crash! Clang!

The deafening peal burst around them, even as the shadow leaped towards them, revealing itself as a hooded figure, its eyes gleaming malevolently.

The phantom of the bells!

A choking scream was torn from the girls' lips.

And at the same instant there was a ringing shout. Another figure swung itself through the window, landing on the shoulder of the hooded menace and bringing the scoundrel to the ground.

Noel Raymond's voice bellowed above the deafening clamour.

"All right, you girls—stand away!"

He leaped to his feet, leaving the hooded figure lying motionless on the boards.

Noel whipped a clasp-knife from his pocket and, reaching up, slashed at something that glimmered faintly among the cobwebs.

There was a flash, and the peal of bells miraculously ceased.

In the almost deathly silence that ensued, Noel strode over to the two girls, his face rather white.

"All right?" he panted.

They nodded speechlessly as they clung together; then, fearfully, they glanced towards the huddled figure on the floor.

"Yes, that's the scoundrel who caused the trouble," said Noel grimly.

He bent forward, snatching off the other's hood—and revealing the dazed, twisted features of Farmer Hodges!

"I thought as much," declared Noel.

He crossed to the old chest in the corner of the belfry, and, lifting out the coils of wire and tools, he raised the false bottom.

Beneath it was a curious contraption, consisting mainly of a black cylinder, similar to a gramophone disc.

"The 'ghostly chimes,'" explained Noel grimly. "They are

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recorded on that disc. Amplified many thousands of times, they were carried by loudspeakers into the roof of the belfry. You can just see the loudspeakers from here, if you look closely.

"The contraption is simple enough, though expensive; but Hodges was playing for big game. Come on, you scoundrel!"

"So you see the scoundrel's game, Mrs. Lakington?" said Noel, later. He was speaking to the invalid lady. "You came to England expecting to hear the bells—the bells your husband had paid Hodges to look after during his lifetime.

"The farmer had neglected his trust. The old tower had gone to rack and ruin, and the carillon was useless.

"When he learnt of your return, Hodges became panicky. He paid a hurried visit to the tower, to see if he could put the bells into action, but they were past repair. It was during this visit that he stumbled on something even more startling—something that made it essential that your suspicions should not be aroused.

"So he faked the peal of bells, hoping to lull your suspicions until he had completed his task—the task of removing the clappers from the old bells."

"But—but why?" demanded the old lady in bewilderment.

Noel nodded to the two girls. They left the room, to return a moment later carrying something between them.

The giant clapper from one of the bells!

"Those were no ordinary clappers," said Noel, smiling dryly. "They were made during the Civil Wars—by one of your husband's ancestors; and they were specially cast in order to hide the family fortune from the enemies. See!"

Taking out his clasp-knife, he scraped the point along the ancient bell-clapper. The dark coating came away, revealing the dull glint of gold!

The two girls stared in wonderment.

"Why, it—it looks like gold!" exclaimed Irene.

"It is solid gold!" declared Noel.

"Mr. Raymond"—the old lady stared at him in tearful bewilderment—"this will mean so much to my family. How can I ever thank you?"

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"Please don't thank me," put in Noel quickly. "All thanks are due to the very gallant young lady who saw through Hodges' game and set out to investigate—on your behalf. At present she is in a nursing-home, recovering from shock. But for her two plucky young friends here, she might never have been found.

"Lucille followed Hodges to the tower and kept watch on him, but the farmer discovered her and, realising his danger, locked her in the belfry.

"I suppose he did that to prevent her going to London to visit the solicitor?" queried Irene in a thrilled voice.

Noel nodded.

"Yes, I've no doubt he found out her plan. His idea, of course, was merely to keep her locked up until he should have found the gold clapper. After that, he would just have cleared off somewhere where he was unknown."

"And what was it that made poor Lucille collapse, Mr. Raymond?" asked the old lady.

Noel spoke soothingly.

"The shock, combined with the deafening pealing of the bells, temporarily broke down her nerves. These two young ladies are accompanying me to the nursing-home, to visit their friend. May we take a message from you?"

"A message—yes," declared the old lady unsteadily. "And a reward!" She looked across at the chums. "My dears," she said, "I don't know how ever I shall be able to thank you for all you've done."

The two girls smiled.

"Don't thank us," they chorused. "Thank Mr. Raymond. It was his cleverness that solved the mystery."

