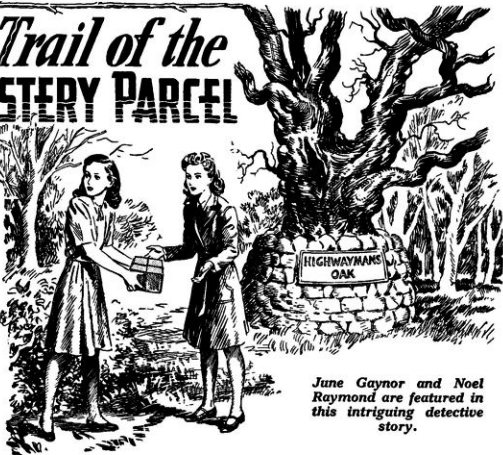


The Trail of the MYSTERY PARCEL

By
PETER
LANGLEY



June Gaynor and Noel Raymond are featured in this intriguing detective story.

CHAPTER I

THE FRIGHTENED GIRL

"Is that Mr. Raymond?"

The girl's voice, quivering with urgency, came across the wire.

"I am afraid Mr. Raymond is not in," said June Gaynor, seated at the famous detective's desk, telephone receiver to her ear. "But I am his niece, Miss Gaynor. If there is anything I can do——"

"There is! There is!" There was a note of desperate entreaty in the caller's voice now. "Come to Hampstead Heath at once. I will meet you by the Highwayman's Oak. Please come at once!"

"Very well, but what——"

June broke off, for the line had gone dead. The unknown girl had hung up.

Puzzled yet excited, June sat staring at the ivory-coloured telephone. What was the reason for the caller's agitated request, and why had she broken off the conversation so abruptly?

"I wish Nunky was here," June murmured. "This sounds like a serious case. But as he's out—well, I'd better go along on my own. I daren't keep that girl waiting. She sounded absolutely desperate."

Jumping to her feet, she quickly donned her hat and coat and ran out of her uncle's flat. Noel had gone to Scotland Yard, to consult Inspector Hanshaw about an outbreak of forged banknotes that was worrying the police.

Hailing a passing taxi, June drove to Hampstead Heath.

She knew the spot well that the girl had mentioned. Highwayman's Oak grew beside one of the lonely roads that intersected the heath, and around its trunk had been built a cairn of stones in memory of the once notorious highwayman whom legend reputed to have been buried there.

At the corner of the road, June stopped the taxi, and, telling the driver to wait, went hurrying across to the gaunt, leafless

tree that reared its dead branches in front of a small wood.

At first June thought the girl had not yet arrived at the meeting-place, then from behind the cairn of stones slipped a tall, slender figure, hatless and in a thin summer frock. There was something very furtive about the way she came hurrying forward, an oblong package clutched between trembling hands.

"Are you Miss Gaynor?" she asked agitatedly. June nodded, and the girl gave a gasp of relief. "Thank goodness! I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't turned up!"

June regarded her with sympathetic intentness.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "You can trust me, and I promise I will do everything I can to help you."

The girl's lips curved into a tremulous smile of gratitude.

"Oh, thank you. It is wonderful to know that I have a friend. Will you take charge of this?"

And she held out the brown paper package. Involuntarily June's hands closed around it, then she nearly dropped it, for it was surprisingly heavy.

"Goodness, what's inside?" she exclaimed.

But the other girl ignored the question. Instead, her fingers caught imploringly at June's arm.

"Lock it up where it'll be safe—and don't hand it to anyone except myself," she panted.

June smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry—I won't," she promised. "But why are you so scared? Won't you tell me what it's all about?"

The girl cast a look towards the wood, as if

frightened some eavesdropper might be lurking there, then she shook her brown curls.

"I daren't stop to explain—not now," she whispered. "We mustn't be seen together. But I will telephone this evening—about seven o'clock. It will be safe then."

And before June could utter another word she had turned and gone dashing into the wood, quickly to vanish from sight.

For a few moments June stood there, staring blankly, then she walked back to the waiting taxi. As she was driven home she surveyed curiously the parcel on her knees.



"I have come for the parcel," the visitor declared aggressively. "Fetch it at once!" But June did not intend to be browbeaten. "I'm sorry, but I cannot hand you anything without authority," she replied.

What could it possibly contain?

Something of great value, obviously. And it seemed just as obvious that the unknown girl feared lest it should be stolen. But why had she refused to confide in June?

"It beats me," June declared. "But perhaps Nunky will be able to solve the mystery when I get back."

When she returned to the flat, however, it was to find that Noel Raymond was still absent. She put the package down on his desk and was still puzzling over the morning's strange happenings when there came a ring at the door-bell. Eagerly she hurried out into the hall.

"That must be Nunky now!" she murmured. "He may have forgotten his latchkey."

But when she opened the door it was to find herself confronted, not by the young, athletic detective, but by a burly, middle-aged man wearing a belted overcoat and a black velour hat, from under the brim of which gleamed a pair of cold eyes. He greeted June with an aggressive frown.

"I have come for that parcel," he declared. "Fetch it at once."

"P-parcel?" stammered June, involuntarily recoiling, for there was something very threatening about the man on the doorstep.

He made an angry gesture:

"Don't attempt to bluff! I know my niece handed that package to you when you met her by the Highwayman's Oak. But it is all a mistake. She had no right to entrust it to you. Please give it to me at once."

June's heart began to thump. Surely this must be the man of whom the unknown girl had been frightened. Perhaps her fear that there had been an eavesdropper in the wood had been correct. Perhaps it was to prevent him from stealing the mystery package that she had handed it to June.

With an effort June forced herself to meet those glaring eyes.

"I am sorry, but I can't hand you anything without authority," she said steadily.

"But you must! I insist!" he shouted. June's cheeks flushed.

"You can insist as much as you like," she snapped, "but that won't make any difference. Now you must excuse me. I am busy."

And she made to close the door. But quickly the man thrust a foot in the way, and at the same time he seized her by the shoulder.

"You little fool, do you think I'm to be defied like this?" he hissed. "If you won't give me that package, then I must take it."

He made to thrust her aside, but she clung to his arm, shouting desperately for help. To her relief, at that moment a sleek, blue sports car came down the road.

The detective gave a startled shout as he saw his niece struggling in the doorway, but before he could reach the scene June's assailant had dashed down the steps, run across the road to where his own car was parked, and had driven off.

His face grim and concerned, Noel brought his sports car to a skidding halt and leapt out.

"My dear, you aren't hurt, are you?" he asked anxiously.

June shook her head.

"No, Nunky, but I've had the most extraordinary experience!" she gasped.

She related all that had happened, then led him into the study and showed him the mystery package. Keenly the detective examined it. He noted that the brown paper was ripped and crumpled in places; that the string around it looked as if it had been hurriedly tied. Then, as he lifted the parcel, he frowned at its unexpected weight.

"What *can* it contain, Nunky?" asked June.

The detective smiled.

"Goodness knows, June—lead by the feel of it. But we'd better lock it away where it'll be safe. Then we'll have to hurry or we'll be late for the theatre."

June had forgotten that Noel had promised to take her to a matinee, and she frowned as she watched him stow the package in his safe.

"But aren't we going to investigate the mystery?" she demanded.

He looked at her teasingly.

"We can hardly do anything until that girl rings up at seven o'clock. Now stop worrying, my dear, and come along. The package will be safe enough here until to-night."

A little reluctantly June left the flat, but once in the theatre she forgot all her fears and abandoned herself to the delights of London's most entertaining revue.

But the moment she and Noel returned home she darted into the study and opened the safe. The package was still there. Nevertheless, she knew she would know no peace until the unknown girl had telephoned and explained.

After an early dinner she and Noel seated themselves by the telephone, and as they waited for it to ring Noel related what had happened at his interview at Scotland Yard that morning.

It seemed that Inspector Hanshaw believed that the counterfeit banknotes had been forged by a convict who had escaped from prison several months ago and had never been traced, and he suspected that a young bank cashier named Richard Menton was in league with the forger. Menton, however, had also disappeared.

June only listened with one ear, for her thoughts were centred on the mystery package on the desk in front of her. It was not after seven o'clock. Why had not the unknown girl kept her promise and telephoned?

June's eyes widened. The packet which the mystery girl had asked her to guard contained nothing but stones!



As the minutes passed by June began to get more and more worried, and at last she could restrain herself no longer.

"Nunky, she's not going to phone!" she burst out. "That can mean only one thing—she's being prevented! That awful man who threatened me must have stopped her getting in touch with me!"

Noel's eyes narrowed. The same grim possibility had occurred to him. Involuntarily his eyes went to the mystery package, then, rising to his feet, he took a penknife from his pocket.

"Nunky, what are you going to do?"

"Open the parcel, June. If that girl is in danger, then we must track her down without delay, and this package is our only clue."

As Noel spoke, he sliced through the string, and June's heart began to thump as he pulled away the broken paper, revealing an oblong cardboard box.

What was inside ?

"It must be something of tremendous value," June murmured. "Otherwise——"

She broke off, her eyes rounding incredulously as Noel lifted the lid. She hardly knew what she had expected the box to contain, but certainly not this. In startled amazement, she stared at its contents.

"Stones!" she gasped. "It's full of stones—ordinary stones!"

CHAPTER II

AT HIGHWAYMAN'S OAK

FOR a moment June thought she must be dreaming. It seemed so fantastic that anyone should ask her to guard a box of flint-like stones; even more fantastic that anyone should try to steal them.

As, utterly baffled, she sat there, the detective emptied the stones out on to the desk and proceeded to examine them, one by one, through a magnifying glass, but obvious it was they were only what they seemed to be. He next turned his attention to the box, and finally to the crumpled brown paper.

No message was written there; no name or address—nothing that could explain the mystery. Only one slight clue did Noel find, and that was the label on the box, which showed it to have originally contained a pair of girl's shoes.

His eyes gleamed as he saw that the retailer had a Hampstead address, and swiftly he started to re-pack and re-tie the package. Still dazed by the shock she had received, June started at him.

"Nunky, what can it mean?" she gasped. "I'm sure that girl wasn't a hoaxer!"

Noel's face was grim as he answered.

"I agree with you. This is no hoax. That girl's in danger," he declared.

"But why? Surely no one would threaten her just for the sake of a box of stones!" June protested.

"Not for a box of stones—certainly. But another explanation occurs to me. Come along, June. The sooner we track down that girl the better."

And tucking the box under his arm, Noel led the way out of the flat to where his sports car was parked at the kerb.

June got in beside him. As the detective let in the clutch, she asked a puzzled question.

"But where are we going, Nunky?"

"To the Highwayman's Oak."

"The—the Highwayman's Oak?"

"Yes—I've an idea that that girl doesn't live far away from there. This shoe box obviously belongs to her, and it's got a Hampstead address on it. Besides, it's been raining on and off during the day, so no girl would go far without a hat and coat, and you say our unknown friend wore neither. And then there's another thing—but I'll explain about that later."

And Noel concentrated on his driving. In less than half an hour they had reached the heath, and very sinister and eerie the great tree, with its background of woodland, looked in the faint moonlight.

Noel halted the car, and took from his pocket one of the flint-like stones he had not re-packed in the box with the others and examined it keenly.

"I'm pretty certain I'm right," he muttered.

Opening the door, he got out and strode across to the cairn built around the foot of the tree. White and ghostly it showed in the glaring headlights of the car.

Wondering what the detective was up to, June joined him, and as she approached he turned with a smile.

"I thought I recognised those stones," he commented. "They are an unusual type of flint. Look!"

He pointed, and June gave a gasp, as she saw that there was a gap in the stones that formed the rounded top of the cairn.

"Why, I do believe those stones in the box came from here!" she exclaimed.

"Exactly. And that fact's very illuminating, my dear."

June stared harder than ever. What could Noel be driving at?

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Just try to imagine what happened, June. That girl phoned presumably from her home. She must have known then that she was going to ask you to guard that box for her. But apparently it was not packed then. Apparently she only filled it when

she got here. Doesn't that suggest anything to you?"

While June pondered the question, he took a torch from his pocket and, switching it on, turned the beam on the damp ground. Plainly revealed there were girlish footprints. They led towards the wood.

"Come on, June—our luck's in!"

Excitedly June followed him. The trail led along a narrow winding path through the wood. As they neared the other side they caught a glimpse of light through the trees, and Noel's eyes glinted with satisfaction as he saw it.

"There's a house over there," he commented. "And unless I'm mistaken that's where our unknown friend lives. Carefully now. If that man who threatened us has prevented her from telephoning there may be danger."

June's heart was thumping as cautiously she tip-toed out of the wood and down the narrow lane beyond. Yet in her eyes was still that puzzled look. What amazing secret could possibly lay behind this mystery? Why should the frightened girl have asked her to guard a box of valueless stones? Despite Noel's cryptic words of a few moments ago, the whole affair still seemed fantastic and baffling.

The lane led straight to the house, and parked in the entrance gateway was a dark Sedan car. June's heart missed a beat as she recognised it. It was the car in which the man had made his escape from Noel's flat.

"Then he is here!" she whispered. "That means we were right. It was he who prevented that poor girl from telephoning." Agitatedly she clutched at her uncle's arm. "Nunky, what are you going to do?"

Noel laughed, and nodded down at the package he had tucked under his other arm.

"Why, walk straight up and inquire for the young lady," he replied coolly. "After all, we've got a good excuse for paying her a visit. We've come to return her parcel."

As he spoke the detective led the way up the short carriage drive. Breathlessly June followed him.

Noel beat a loud tattoo on the knocker and hardly had the echoes died away than footsteps sounded in the hall. The door swung open and dimly they made out the portly figure of a manservant. Nonchalantly Noel returned his inquiring gaze.

"Good evening. We wish to see the mistress of this house," he announced.

The manservant seemed taken aback.

"You mean Miss Daphne Haines?" he muttered.

Noel nodded.

"Exactly. We have urgent business with her."

"But—but she's not in. She isn't expected back until the morning."

June was quick to note the servant's hesitation, and she clutched excitedly at her uncle's arm.

"He's fibbing—I know he is!" she cried.

Noel nodded, fists clenched as he eyed the manservant.

"Stand aside!" he ordered. "My name's Noel Raymond and I don't intend to stand any nonsense. Where is Miss Haines?"

"Yes—where have you and your rascally master got her hidden?" demanded June. "Where—"

But that was as far as she got, for unexpectedly a door in the hall opened and a tall, slim figure emerged.

"James, what is going on here?" she demanded, then she stopped, as she saw the two visitors. "Miss Gaynor!" she exclaimed. "And you—you must be Mr. Raymond."

"But I thought—" gasped June, and then broke off, completely surprised at seeing the girl she had imagined was a helpless prisoner.

"Yes, I am Noel Raymond," he smiled. "My niece and I must apologise for intruding, but when you didn't telephone we became worried."

"Yes, we thought you were in danger!" blurted out June.

"Danger?"

The girl seemed either startled or bewildered. It was impossible to say which. Noel's eyes never left her face, and with a swift movement he produced the oblong parcel.

"So we thought we had better bring along this," he declared.

Daphne Haines gave a gasp at sight of the brown paper package, but before she could speak footsteps sounded behind her, and a grim, sardonic voice spoke.

"So you have realised your mistake, have you, Miss Gaynor? Well, better late than never."

And into view walked June's caller of the morning. As he stepped forward he held out his hand.

"I'll take charge of that," he announced, but there came a cry of protest from June. She was completely mystified by the discovery that Daphne Haines was, apparently, not in any danger after all; yet she thoroughly disliked and mistrusted the man at her side.

"No! Don't let him have it!" she gasped.

"But I want him to have it."

It was Daphne who spoke and June stared at her blankly.

"You—you want him to have it!" she exclaimed.

The other girl nodded.

"Of course. It belongs to him. I had no right to take it. Please"—she turned to Noel with an appealing smile—"please let him have it at once!"

CHAPTER III

NOEL'S INTRIGUING DISCOVERY

JUNE was speechless. This extraordinary change of front completely baffled her. Only Noel remained unperturbed, and it was with a quizzical smile that he regarded the girl.

"If that is your wish then there is nothing more to say," he said, and he held out the package.

With surprising eagerness the man at Daphne's side snatched it, and June's mystification deepened. Why should he be so desperately anxious to gain possession of a box filled with useless stones?

Clutching the parcel, the man beckoned to the servant who still stood glowering by the front door.

"Now that I have the package there is no reason to detain you," he told Noel.

"My niece is tired and would prefer not to discuss this unfortunate business."

"Yes—yes," broke in the girl. "I feel so ashamed at having caused you both such trouble, but if you send in your bill uncle will see that you are paid. Now—please go."

Noel instantly made for the open door. June felt a strange reluctance to leave the house, but her uncle beckoned, so slowly she followed him, out of the house and down the drive. Not until the lane was reached did she give vent to her pent-up feelings.

"Nunky, I still don't trust that man!" she burst out. "And I believe that girl was putting on an act! She only said what she did because she's terrified of him. I'm certain she's in danger!"

"And I agree with you, June," Noel said gravely.

"Then why were you so ready to leave the house?" June gasped.

"Because if we are to help that girl we must first discover where the original contents of that package are hidden."

"The—the original contents?"

"Yes, my dear. The box did not originally contain stones. No one would take the trouble to safeguard such a worthless package as that. When Daphne rang you up she no doubt intended to entrust you with the real object, but on the way to Highwayman's Oak she suspected she was being followed, so took out the contents of the box, hid them, and substituted stones. If my guess is right, she hoped her uncle would think the real package was in our custody and therefore what she had hidden would be safe."

"But—but why should she want to trick him? And what could have been in the box originally?" asked June in bewilderment.

Noel shook his head.

"I may be in a better position to answer those questions when you have phoned Inspector Hanshaw at Scotland Yard," was his unexpected answer.

"Inspector Hanshaw!"

"Yes, June. He's in charge of the counterfeit banknote case, you know, and I want you to ask him for fuller details

of Richard Menton, the suspected bank cashier who's disappeared. If I'm not mistaken, there's a surprising resemblance between him and Daphne Haines."

June drew in her breath in a startled hiss.

"You think that—that there may be a connection between those forged notes and this case?"

Noel nodded.

"Certain of it—and I've a shrewd idea that when we've found the original contents of that mystery package we'll have solved both cases," he declared. "Now listen to me, my dear. This is what I want you to do."

He gave her his instructions and the now excited June listened attentively.

"You can take the car," the detective concluded. "I shan't be needing it for a bit."

"Why, where are you going?" demanded June.

Her uncle chuckled.

"I want to do a little prospecting," he declared, a twinkle in his eyes. "That Highwayman's

Oak rather took my fancy, and I'd like to take another look at it!"

June nodded slowly.

"I get it, Nunky! You think Daphne Haines hid the original contents of that parcel somewhere there?" she said.

Noel gave another nod.

"It seems reasonable, doesn't it, my dear? We know she got the flints from the cairn, so it is probable that she hid whatever she took out of the parcel at the same spot."

Together he and June walked back

through the wood. The sports car was still parked beside the kerb near Highwayman's Oak, and when Noel had seen his niece off, he turned and thoughtfully surveyed the gnarled, dead tree and the stone cairn.

Where was the most likely hiding place for whatever the shoe box had originally contained?

Taking his torch out of his pocket, Noel switched it on and let its bright light rove over the pile of stones, then up the broad trunk of the tree.



June gave a cry of protest as Daphne's uncle stepped forward to take the parcel, but to her surprise his niece looked appealingly at Noel Raymond. "I want him to have it," she declared. "Please let him have it at once."

Suddenly his eyes gleamed. Just above the top of the cairn was a jagged hole. The Highwayman's Oak was hollow.

Stepping forward, he thrust his arm into the hole. For a few moments his down-stretched hand groped about in the deep cavity, then a triumphant gasp escaped his lips, for his fingers had closed around a square metal object.

"Got it!" he ejaculated with satisfaction. "This is what Daphne Haines hid!"

Withdrawing his arm, he turned his

torch on the object he had found. It was a tin cash-box, and attached to it by an elastic band was a piece of note-paper. Pulling it free, he held it in the beam of light, and his eyes gleamed again, as he saw that it contained a message, written in a hurried, masculine hand.

"Dear Cousin,—Please hide this where it will be safe. Above all keep it from your uncle and his partner, Silas Higgins."

At the end of that brief note appeared two initials—"R. M."

"Richard Menton," Noel murmured. "So he and Daphne Haines are cousins, eh?"

Thoughtfully he studied the message again. It was clear now why Daphne had tried to trick her uncle. Thanks to Richard Menton's warning, she mistrusted him. It was clear also why she had asked Noel to give her uncle the fake parcel. She had hoped that he would be satisfied that it contained the tin cash-box.

But suppose her uncle, or his partner, decided to open the package—as surely they would?

Noel's face grew grim.

He hurriedly turned his attention to the tin box, pulling at the lid, but it was securely locked.

What could it contain? And why had the young bank cashier the police were hunting confided it to his cousin's care?

Noel did not know, but he was convinced that the contents of that box held the key to the whole mystery. Taking a bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket, he tried first one, then another in the lock, working with desperate haste, for he was convinced that Daphne Haines was in danger.

Suddenly he gave a triumphant gasp. One of the keys had slipped snugly into the key-hole. He made to turn it, but before he could unlock the box there came a startling interruption.

From behind came the sound of stealthy footsteps, and swinging round Noel glimpsed a slim, black-bearded figure emerging from the trees. The faint moon-

light gleamed on the revolver the intruder was carrying.

"Hand over that box, Mr. Noel Raymond!" came the harsh command.

CHAPTER IV

DAPHNE HAINES' ORDEAL

THOUGH Noel was startled and dismayed, he allowed no trace of his alarm to show on his face. Calmly he surveyed that threatening figure.

"Who might you be?" he asked.

The bearded man showed his teeth in an impatient snarl.

"Never mind who I am—hand over that box," he ordered.

Noel, however, made no attempt to obey. He continued to regard keenly the man with the gun, and his eyes gleamed as he noticed a queer-looking mark on the hand that held the weapon.

"At a guess I should say you are Silas Higgins," he said slowly. "At least, that is what you call yourself."

"What do you mean?"

The man took an angry step forward. Calmly Noel pointed to the outthrust hand that held the gun.

"That tattoo mark on your hand gives you away," he declared. "Awkward things, tattoo marks, you know. You can disguise your features by donning a false beard, but when it comes to tattoo marks—"

He broke off, for involuntarily Silas Higgins had looked down at the mark on his hand. For a split second his attention was diverted from Noel. That was what the detective had been scheming for, and instantly he hurled the tin box.

It caught the bearded man over the knuckles and with a howl he dropped his gun. Instantly Noel hurled himself forward. In a flying tackle, he brought his captor crashing to the ground, and next moment they were rolling over and over, struggling fiercely.

But to Noel's dismay his adversary had abnormal strength. Though taken by surprise, he slowly but surely began to get the better of the fight, and suddenly he gave a heave which put him on top.

Desperately the detective strove to

wriggle free, but the other man was sitting astride him, and powerful fingers were at his throat.

"So you've guessed my secret, have you, Noel Raymond?" he hissed. "Guessed why Dick Menton passed that box to his cousin, eh? Well, little good it'll do you!"

And while he kept one hand on Noel's throat, he groped with the other for the fallen gun.

Meanwhile, back at the house, Daphne Haines was staring tensely at the package her uncle, Lionel Jabez, was still clutching.

Though as yet he had made no attempt to open it, she was still scared that he might do so.

To her relief, however, Jabez showed no inclination to open the package. Instead, he tucked it under his arm and caught the girl by the arm.

"Come on, my dear—let us go to the kitchen," he bade. "There's a fire there, and the sooner the contents of this little parcel are destroyed the better."

She caught in her breath. Had she misjudged her uncle? Could it be that, after all, he was actually out to help her cousin and herself, as he had always declared, ever since he had first discovered that Dick had handed her the tin box for safe custody?

"Then—then the box Dick gave me really does contain proofs of his guilt?" she gasped.

"Of course. What else could be in it, my dear?"

A little uncertainly she followed Jabez into the kitchen, then, as he crossed to the furnace and poked the fire into a blaze, a look of hope crept into her eyes. Once the parcel was burnt her uncle would be satisfied. That would mean she could retrieve the tin box from Highwayman's Oak and discover if it really did contain evidence which would prove that Dick Menton was connected with the passing of forged banknotes.

Excitedly she watched him put down the poker, then hold out the oblong parcel. But before he could thrust it into the heart of the flames there came an unexpected interruption.

The door opened and in hurried James, the portly manservant.

"Stop! Don't burn that parcel!" he cried. "That girl's tricked you, boss!"

"Tricked me! How?" Jabez demanded.

The manservant scowled.

"A quarter of an hour ago Higgins phoned through," he declared. "He said he was convinced that that parcel doesn't contain young Menton's box and he said he was going in search of it."

"What!"

Lionel Jabez, his cold eyes glittering with startled surprise, wrenched at the string around the parcel. Helplessly, Daphne watched him tear off the brown paper, and lift the lid. A furious shout escaped his lips as he saw the pile of flints.

Suddenly terrified, the girl made a dash for the door, but the manservant rushed forward and grabbed her by the arm.

"No you don't," he snarled, while her uncle strode forward, a look of malevolent rage on his face.

"Where is that confounded box?" he demanded. "Where have you hidden it? You little fool, do you think I'm going to prison because of your meddling?"

"To—prison?" Daphne faltered.

"Yes—to prison—and Higgins, too," he snapped. "There's no reason why you shouldn't know the truth now. That box contains, not the proof of your cousin's guilt, but evidence which will clear him! Higgins is the counterfeiter the police are looking for. Actually, he's an escaped convict. That beard he wears is false. Young Menton—confound him—suspected his secret, and he locked the evidence he found in that box."

Daphne's heart gave a jubilant leap. For a moment she forgot the danger she was in. She could only realise that Dick was innocent, as she had always believed.

Her uncle, his cold eyes never leaving her face, continued harshly:

"Menton didn't breathe a word of his discovery. He decided to wait until he had unearthed the rest of the gang. The young fool never suspected the truth—that I was the brains behind those forged notes."

"Y-you!" whispered Daphne in horror.

"Yes, me. And Menton, you may be interested to know, didn't disappear voluntarily. Actually, he's a prisoner in one of the cellars of this house—and there he'll stay until I've got that box and destroyed the evidence. Come on, what have you done with it? I'm not standing for any nonsense."

As he spoke, Jabez slowly drew a revolver from his pocket.

But there came another unexpected interruption. The door leading to the garden opened, and in the dark doorway appeared a black-bearded figure, his face shaded by the down-turned brim of his hat.

Jabez, swinging round, gave a surprised gasp.

"Higgins!"

The shadowy figure in the doorway chuckled.

"Yes—it's me. I've just come from a tussle with Noel Raymond. He's a tough customer, but I managed to fix him."

Daphne's face went deathly white. All hope had gone now. As she stood there, full of despair, her rascally uncle looked eagerly across at the man in the doorway.

"What about the box?" he asked.

The bearded man laughed.

"I've got it safe and sound," he replied, and from his pocket he produced the tin cash-box.

A horrified gasp escaped Daphne's lips, while Jabez darted excitedly forward.

"Good man! Let me have it!"

The bearded man handed over the box, but as the exultant Jabez's fingers closed over it, Higgins suddenly lunged forward.

His right fist shot out, and Jabez, taken completely by surprise, gave a bellow as the blow caught him right between the eyes. Down he dropped, the revolver clattering to the floor with him.

Before the startled Daphne or the equally stupefied manservant could move, the newcomer had dived forward and snatched up the gun, and with a light laugh he levelled it at Daphne's captor.

"Stay where you are," he ordered. "The game's up!"

Wonderingly Daphne stared at him, bewildered by his sudden change of voice.

"Who—who are you?" she breathed.

"You—you can't be uncle's partner."

The man with the gun laughed. "Quite right, my dear," he agreed. "I encountered the real Higgins at the Highwayman's Oak, and after a pretty strenuous fight I managed to get the better of him and left him tied up there."

As he spoke he pulled off his false beard and Daphne gave another gasp, as she recognised his clean-shaven features.

"N-Noel Raymond," she whispered in delight.

The detective chuckled.

"Exactly—and here, unless I'm much mistaken, comes June, guiding Inspector Hanshaw and his men to the house. Don't worry, my dear," he added, with a reassuring smile. "All your troubles are over. We'll soon have young Menton free and the contents of that tin box will completely establish his innocence."

Noel proved a good prophet, and ten minutes later Daphne, tears of joy in her eyes, was happily greeting the cousin she had risked so much to help.

