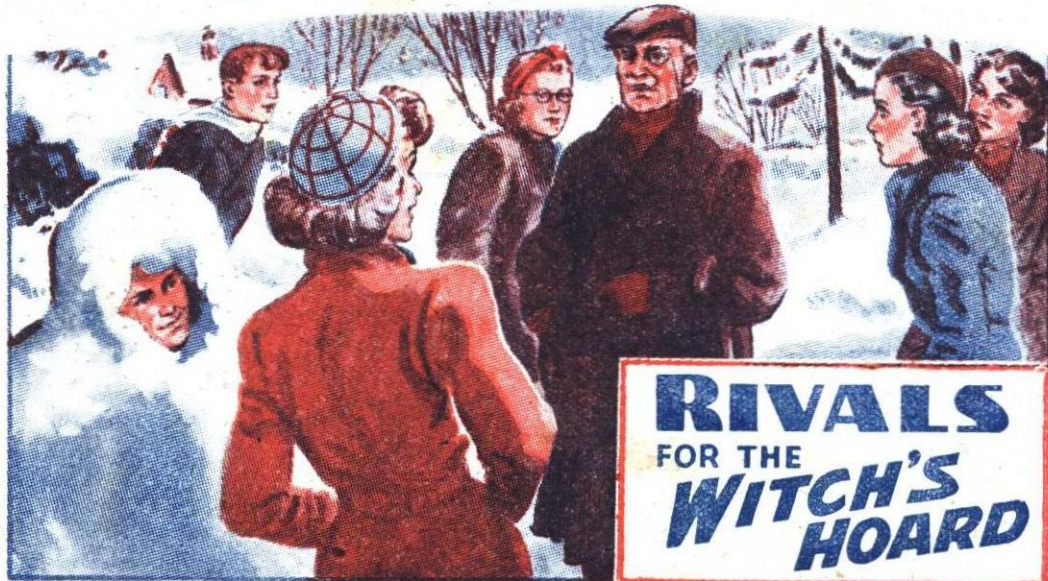


GIRLS' CRYSTAL³

Week
Ending
February
26th, 1944.

AND "THE SCHOOLGIRL"



RIVALS FOR THE WITCH'S HOARD

At all costs the Colonel must not discover that Vicky & Co. had been meeting Kennedy Vane!—By HAZEL ARMITAGE.

KEN VANISHES

VICKY KINGSWOOD and a cheery band of girl and boy chums were spending a wonderful winter holiday at Colonel Roberts' lovely home.

They were thrilled when they found a clue which led them to believe they were on the track of a treasure known as the Witch's Hoard, but when they set out to find it they had some really frightening experiences from someone dressed up as a witch.

Kennedy Vane, one of the boys, who was very likeable, even though he did behave rather oddly at times, told them that his uncle was the well-known detective, Humphrey Spence, now abroad, and that the witch, none other than a notorious crook known as "Ghostfingers," was after the Hoard and whom he was out to catch.

But the colonel thought it was Kennedy who was playing the part of the witch, and he sent him away from the Manor. Ken, however, made his home at Witch's Cottage, not far off.

Vicky & Co. had good reason to suspect Amanda Shorter, the colonel's secretary, of being Ghostfingers. They managed to see Ken, though the colonel had forbidden them to have anything to do with him. He asked Vicky to fix things so that he could get back into the Manor, just for ten minutes, Vicky promised. Just then the colonel and Amanda approached through the snow.

"KEN, quick, you must hide!" Vicky gasped.
"The colonel and Amanda are coming—"
"But where—where can he hide?" Betty Hunt cried.

There seemed no answer to that question for a moment; bleak and open, an unbroken expanse of snow-covered countryside surrounded the chums. Meanwhile, growing more distinct with every moment, approached the figures of Colonel Roberts and his secretary, heads bent against the storm, which was whirling the flying snowflakes into their faces.

And then, with a flash of inspiration, Vicky's gaze fell upon the piles of snow about three feet high which had been swept to the edge of the frozen pond. In an instant she had the idea.

"Ken—quickly; jump into the middle of one of those!" she cried. "Everybody else grab shovels and spades. We're making a snowman, see?"

"The brain of the girl!" Ken breathed.
But, as quick to follow the idea as Vicky to invent it, he had already jumped into one of the snow piles. A quarter of it was kicked away in his haste, but that did not matter. Feverishly now the chums whipped up the tools; in a second frantic activity had taken the place of general consternation. Up flew the snow, fast and thick. Ken, wriggling as low as possible in his encasing circle of snow, spluttered and gasped as it was flung into his face, on his shoulders, down his neck.

But he did not complain.
Meantime the colonel and Amanda were still coming on.

"Come on, finish it before lunch!" Vicky cried gaily for the colonel's benefit. "Whoops, won't we make this a fine snowman!"

"Won't we!" chortled Dick. "Ken, bob down, you idiot," he added in a hissing whisper.

Grimacing, Ken bobbed down. About him and on him the snow piled more thickly, though

Vicky was careful to leave one or two openings to enable him to breathe comfortably. He was completely, if lightly, covered when, with a grunt and a great flapping of hands, the colonel stepped into view.

"Hey, what's going on here?" he cried.

Vicky looked round. Then she smiled.

"Oh, colonel, fancy not seeing you!"

"What's the idea?" the colonel demanded.

"Idea? Oh, this—" Vicky laughed, though she signalled with her eyes to her chums to carry on with the work. "This is our snowman," she said. "We're making it so that we can have a bit of fun this afternoon."

"H'm!" the colonel said, and stared round.

"Where's Kennedy?"

"Kennedy?" Vicky asked in blank surprise.

"That young scoundrel Vane!" the colonel said, bristling. "He was here ten minutes ago."

"Who? Kennedy Vane?" asked Vicky incredulously.

"Vicky, don't pretend!" Amanda Shorter snapped peevishly. "You know Vane was here, because I saw him. You know you conspired with Frank Carlton to get me out of the way while you talked to him. Unfortunately for you," Amanda added, "I was clever enough to foil your plot in part by dropping off that wretched toboggan before it reached the bottom of the hill, and immediately I came back here and fetched the colonel."

"And Frank. What's happened to Frank?" Dick demanded.

"I don't know and I don't care," Amanda retorted. "I hope," she added, "he has tobogganed himself into the next county. Now where is Kennedy?"

The chums, gathering round now, looked mystified and questioning. Jim Roberts shrugged.

"Search me," he murmured.

"Egad, the fellow must be here if Miss Shorter says so," the colonel growled. "And if I find that he is after I told you to have nothing to do with him—"

He glared at Vicky. Suspiciously he glared at the others. Vicky gave a glance at the unfinished snowman, hoping to goodness that neither the colonel nor the secretary would notice the very visible shudder which passed through it. Poor Ken, she thought, how frightfully cold he must be feeling.

"But, colonel, surely if Ken had been here he'd have run off when he heard you coming?"

"Oh, so that's what he did?" the colonel asked suspiciously.

"He did not," Vicky retorted. "I was merely suggesting—" she added, and then gasped. "Oh, corks!"

For beside her there was a little thud as a portion of snow fell out of the snowman and a little hole appeared, through which a woeful eye regarded her.

The colonel snorted.

"Vicky, I am not asking you for suggestions. I want to know where that young scoundrel is?"

"Er—colonel!" Vicky gasped.

For the colonel's steps took him in the direction of the snowman. And at the same time another chunk of snow fell from off its top.

The colonel, fortunately, did not see. He went on, stopped, gazing across the untrodden snow before him. A very visible shudder shook the snowman.

"Humph!" he said at last. "Don't see any footprints this way."

He turned back, and, to the chums' petrified horror, stared at the snowman, wrinkled his nose, and then, as if desirous of expressing his feelings in some way or another, jabbed the end of the stick he carried into it. Vicky almost fainted then.

For the pointed end of the stick went right into the snowman. It must have touched Ken. But Ken, if he felt it, behaved admirably. Not a sound left the snowman.

The colonel made a grimace.

"Egad, looks as if you were mistaken, Miss Shorter, for once," he said.

"But—but I tell you—" Amanda cried. "Colonel, I protest. There is some new trick in this—"

The colonel shrugged. Vicky breathed a sigh of relief, until, with a horrible flop, another great chunk of the snowman fell on to the ground. A convulsive shiver shook it, and amid the shiver sounded a half-startled gasp.

"What was that?" the colonel said sharply. "It—it's only me!" Vicky cried. "I'm so c-c-cold I keep spluttering. Oh, colonel, please—let's go home!"

"Gad!" the colonel said in consternation, while the chums grinned. "Vicky, my girl—but b-r-r-r-r! Egad, dashed if I don't feel a chill myself. Here, come along, all of you!" he added authoritatively. "What are we standing here for in a snowstorm!"

With that he took the shivering Vicky's arm. Resolutely he turned towards the Manor. Amanda hesitated. Then Dick took her arm, and Jim dropped behind with Betty and Ivy, hiding their stifled laughter as the procession wended its way.

They reached the Hall. There Vicky was sent to get warm by the fire, and a quarter of an hour later they all tramped into the dining-room to do justice to lunch.

"I hope Ken's all right," Vicky whispered to Dick.

"Oh, he'll be back in his cottage now," he said confidently.

Outside the snow still continued to fall with unceasing monotony, and it was obvious that nobody thought of going out that afternoon. Vicky, remembering her compact with Ken to do her best to smuggle him into the Manor, was doing some deep thinking.

"Colonel, I've been thinking," she said after lunch. "It seems that we've all got to spend an afternoon indoors, so won't you show us some of your films? I just adore that one you took of the elephants in Africa. Oh, please, do let's all see it again!"

The colonel paused, flattered and pleased. A man of many parts was Colonel Roberts, and in his travels for specimens for his private museum a moving camera had accompanied him. Some of the films he had secured were entertaining, most of them just boring; but all of them were wonders of film-craft in the colonel's own eyes. It was the first time, however, he had been actually asked to exhibit them, and he puffed with pride and pleasure.

"It's an idea!" he agreed. "Gad, yes, an excellent idea—"

"And—perhaps we could improve upon it!" Vicky said enthusiastically. "I mean, couldn't we make it a sort of afternoon concert at home? Betty here can sing; Jim can do a few conjuring tricks, and Frank's just a wizard at paper-tearing. We might get the other guests to get up and do a turn, too," she added. "There's Mr. Vanquart, for instance. Isn't he a bit of a ventriloquist or something?"

The colonel thought. He thought, of course, of a concert with his own film as the star hit.

"Excellent!" he agreed. "Gad, yes, a great idea! And"—playing right into Vicky's hands—"there's no need why we should confine it to the guests. Let the staff come in, too; they've got nothing to do till tea-time. Hi, fetch the butler!" he roared. "Tell him to get my camera tackle and rig up the lights, and so on. Now everybody lend a hand and put these chairs in the hall. Gad, yes, we'll have a show all right—and what a show!"

The chums looked at each other and grinned. Then Dick, grabbing up two chairs, burst forward.

"All hands on deck!" he cried cheerily. "Whoa there! Positively the first performance of the Mountrest Marvels! This way for the ninepennies—"

"But, look here, I don't want a concert!" pouted one boy.

"It's not what you want; it's what you're going to get!" Frank grinned. "This is a command performance—the colonel's command," he added.

There was much shuffling, much bustling, with the colonel, pleased and important, rushing this way and that, lending an unhelpful hand here and bellowing useless orders there.

To make sure that nobody was left out, Vicky and Betty went the round of the Manor spreading the good news on every side.

Excitedly preparations were made. The raised dais at the far end of the hall was turned into a platform, the piano dragged forward, the colonel's film gear carefully erected. Two by two guests and maids took their places, with Vicky acting as usherette.

"Right. Everybody present?" the colonel boomed. "The concert will start with my African film—at special request. At the interval I'll show you the wonderful pictures I took of the ruins of Zimbabwe, and later on, egad, you shall see the natives working in the diamond mines of Kimberley. Right-ho, there! Out with those lights, please. Now watch. Ha, here's me! I'm walking through the jungle."

A suitable murmur of awe went up as the unmistakable figure of the colonel, clad in very brief shorts, and sun-helmet, with a dangerous-looking elephant gun under one arm, flickered on to the screen.

"I don't think they've got quite the best angle on me in that shot," the colonel said critically. "But watch now, where I level the gun—"

"And shoot the photographer, I suppose," Dick chuckled, fortunately in a voice that didn't carry, and the colonel, absorbed, carried on an enthusiastic commentary. All was quiet now, and Vicky, with mounting pulses, was thinking of Ken. She had posted herself at the door, and now, taking advantage of the darkness, she slid through it.

"Now for it," she breathed. Nobody was about. In the empty silence her own steps echoed as she made her way towards the stairs. She gave a quick glance round, and then, about to mount them, froze.

"Vicky, I thought you were at the concert," an unpleasantly suspicious voice rapped.

In swift dismay Vicky turned, too late, regretting that she had not noticed the absence of the colonel's secretary, Amanda Shorter. There, outside the door of the colonel's study, she stood.

"I'm—I'm just going to get a clean hanky," she said swiftly. "Er—aren't you going to see the concert, Miss Shorter?"

"I am not. I have work to do; we cannot all play," Amanda said sourly.

Vicky resumed her stair climb, and, reaching the corridor, went into her room. But she was anxious now; she did not trust Amanda, and definitely was not going to enjoy the prospect of the secretary being at large while Ken conducted his search in the Manor.

She got the hanky; went downstairs. From behind the closed door of the colonel's study came the click of a typewriter.

Vicky smiled mischievously. Creeping to the door she silently turned the key, which fortunately was in the lock. Then, leaving Amanda an unconscious prisoner, she walked back towards the hall, knowing very well that Amanda, in the study, would be listening to her footsteps.

She reached the door of the hall. Then swiftly, on tiptoe, she rushed back. With a wary glance at the study door, she stole up the stairs again.

Less than two minutes later she had posted herself at the window of her room, the signalling lamp she had found in the wood the other day in her hand. And in the direction of the summerhouse came a sign of movement as she flashed the agreed signal to Ken.

The signal which meant: "All clear—come quickly!"

AFTERNOON ALARM



NO sooner had she flashed that message than a single answering flash came from the summerhouse. And dimly she saw a figure detach itself from the background of shadows.

"Ken," Vicky breathed, her heart bounding gladly.

Her mind flashed to her instructions. She caught at the window catches, unfastened them, then swiftly stepped back towards the door and poked her head outside it and listened. No sound save the indistinct notes of the piano in the hall, and fainter still a tiny, rhythmic clatter of a typewriter.

Vicky chuckled softly, as, closing the door, she rushed back to the French window and, unheeding of the snow which blew into her face, stepped on to the narrow veranda outside.

"Ken!" she called softly. "Chin-chin!" an answering voice returned from below. "Stand steady. I'm coming up."

She saw the shadowy figure below her approaching one of the pillars on which the veranda was supported. A grunt, a swift, shuffling sound, and the figure came bobbing towards her. In a few seconds Ken's face appeared over the veranda, and Vicky, with a gasp, helped him as he sprawled forward. Then swiftly she closed the window.

"Ken, are you all right?" "Apart from icicles instead of fingers!" he returned cheerily. With a grin he warmed himself in front of the heat-giving radiator, nodding approvingly. "A million thanks for all you've done," he said. "But tell me all, Vicky, how're things standing?"

Quickly Vicky told him—everybody was present at the concert in the hall, except Amanda who, unguessed by herself, was a prisoner in the colonel's study.

"Cute work," Ken said admiringly. "Y'know, Vicky, if I ever take this detective work up in earnest later on, I shall offer you a handsome salary to become my assistant. Brains will tell, what? O.K. now," he added cheerily, withdrawing from the radiator. "You scout along the corridor, Vicky, while I take a peep into the fair Amanda's room. It's there—"

"Do you mean," Vicky thrilled, "that you think you'll be able to prove whether Amanda is—"

"Ghostfingers?" he nodded. "Just that. But I don't want to be disturbed for ten minutes. Just see if the coast is still clear."

It was, Vicky discovered when, with heart drumming a little faster than usual, she peered out. Communicating that to Kennedy, she watched him as he slipped off towards Amanda's room and went in. She waited until she heard the door click back, and then edged away towards the stairs. As she did so she suddenly spun round with a gasp.

For a door on her right—the door of Ken's old room—suddenly opened, and there, standing on the threshold, a dustpan in her hand, was Amy, the upstairs maid.

Her big, penetrating eyes were full of surprise as they fastened upon Vicky, but, as usual, she did not speak.

"Godness, Amy, what a start you gave me!" Vicky laughed, forcing her voice to be natural. "I—I thought you were at the concert."

Amy shook her head. The glance she directed at her dustpan was obviously designed to convey why she was not at the concert. Then, with another disconcerting stare, she turned and whisked up the corridor.

Vicky gazed after her apprehensively. But she did not call, as she was tempted to do. Anxiously she watched, however, until Amy had whisked past Amanda's room and had turned to the right in the next corridor. Then she patted her chest.

"Phew!" she breathed in relief. She waited a moment. No sound came from

Amanda's room. What was Ken finding out? Supposing—

She jumped as the hall door downstairs opened and closed. Agitatedly she hurried towards the stairs just as heavy steps creaked upon them.

And then her heart fluttered. For, ascending the stairs, was the colonel himself.

"Colonel—" she gasped.

She rushed down as he, plodding up, paused. He frowned.

"Gad, Vicky, I thought you were in the hall—"

"I—I was, but I came to get a handkerchief," Vicky said. "Oh, colonel, you don't mean to say the film's finished?"

"First one is." He eyed her. "Betty is going to sing now, and I'm going to look for another film. I think I've got that lion-hunting one in my room and—gad, what's that?" he cried, spinning round.

For suddenly, from his own study, came a sudden terrific thump followed by a cry.

"I'm locked in! Let me out! Let me out—"

"Miss Shorter!" he cried in astonishment.

"Er—" Vicky gulped down something hard and dry in her throat. "She—she appears to— to have been locked in," she ventured.

"What's the matter, colonel, does the door—stick or something?"

"The door," the colonel snorted, "does not stick." He turned, frowning, as suddenly Vicky put a frantic hand upon his sleeve. "Hey, what's the matter?"

"Colonel, don't—oh, don't!" Vicky muttered.

"Hey?"

"It—it—" Vicky gulped, thinking only of Ken. Not by any manner of means were Ken's ten minutes up yet. If the colonel rescued Amanda, Amanda, suspicious, was bound to put two and two together and, with her guilty conscience at work, immediately guess. "I—"

she said desperately. "Colonel, it—it may be the witch—"

"The witch? But that's Miss Shorter!" the colonel cried, staring. "Gad, what's wrong with you, Vicky—"

"It—it may be the witch playing a game!" Vicky invented desperately.

"B'gad, I hope it is!" the colonel snorted. "I've got a game that will match it! Just let me get my hands on her—"

"Let me out!" came Amanda's furious voice. "I'm shut in. Vicky shut me in!"

"What?" the colonel bellowed. "Vicky—"

"That—that's non—nonsense!" Vicky muttered incoherently. "I mean, it's silly. It—it—oh dear! Colonel, be careful!" she wailed as he, with a snort, turned again. "Supposing—"

"Supposing fiddlesticks!" the colonel growled again, and, thoroughly ruffled now, stamped back down the stairs with a force that shook them. And Vicky, clinging to the banisters, cast a desperate look back.

But no sound; no sign of Ken.

She froze to the rail as the colonel, striding to the door of the study, turned the key. She became petrified when Amanda's furious face and form appeared in the framework. Then, before Amanda could open her quivering lips, there came from along the corridor a crash, a sound of scuffling steps, a heavy bump. The next moment came a vibrating scream in the voice of Amy, the maid.

"Help! Help! There's a burglar in Miss Shorter's room!"

"Oh, golly!" Vicky murmured in sick dismay.

"Burglars!" came Amy's voice. "Burglars—"

"Gad!" the colonel cried.

He turned, forgetful at once of Amanda. With a roar he came lumbering back up the stairs, shot past the dazed Vicky and raced on.

Amanda, following, glared.

"Vicky, you know something about this!" she accused.

Vicky just looked at her. Then, with need for action asserting itself, she, too, turned; in panic dread of what she might discover.

She found herself in front as they raced along the corridor. There was Amy, standing outside the door of Amanda's room, her mouth open, her eyes wide.

Without giving her a second glance, Vicky plunged into the room, the colonel and Amanda just behind her. For one second she gazed around her, then drew a breath of such relief that she was forced to stifle it for fear the colonel should hear.

Thank goodness! There was no sign of Ken. He had escaped, and the open window showed by which way he had gone.

"Now, then—now, then!" the colonel was muttering. "Why, bless my soul—what's been going on in here? An earthquake?"

For the first time Vicky realised that the room was in wild disorder, as if some wanton hand had been searching furiously, recklessly, unmindful of damage. Ken could never have been responsible for that, Vicky told herself. He was much too tidy—too fastidious.

From Amanda came a cry of outraged horror.

"Did you see anyone?" she demanded of Amy.

"Y—yes!" stuttered the maid. "It—I—I think it was a boy. I—I only saw his back view."

"A boy! And I know who that boy was!" Amanda cried in tones that vibrated with fury. "Kennedy Vane!"

"Hey?"

"Vane—yes!" Amanda's eyes seemed to shoot fire. "Vane did it—out of revenge. I sent Vane packing this morning, in the woods, and this—this is his idea of paying me out. Vicky, what do you know about this?"

"What should she know about it?" the colonel cried. "Why should she know about it?"

"Why?" Amanda asked. "Didn't she lock me in your study?"

Vicky stiffened.

"Have you any proof of that, Miss Shorter?" she asked.

"If it wasn't you, who else was it?"

"Oh, come, come!" said the colonel angrily. "Vicky might like the fellow, but you're not persuading me she's anything to do with this. Perhaps it was that young rascal himself who locked you up. Perhaps—"

But, gad, this is too much! This time he's gone too far—too far! Miss Fleet, he added as Trelorna, looking prettily surprised, came forward, and gave a gasp of indignant horror as she saw the state of Amanda's room. "Phone for the police!"

"Thank you, colonel!" Amanda snapped. "I was about to suggest that myself. Don't worry, Miss Fleet, I will phone for the police."

"But—but—oh, hold on! Please!" Vicky cried frantically. "Colonel, just—just wait a minute, please! We don't know for sure it was Kennedy."

"What? There's Amy's testimony—"

"But Amy says she never saw the boy's face."

"Yes, that's right," Jim Roberts nodded. He and the rest of the chums had been standing quietly in the background, not quite sure what was happening. "We don't want to make fools of ourselves, uncle."

There was a pause then. The colonel scowled furiously. Amanda bit her lip. Then suddenly she walked into the room. Clenching her hands, she looked round, and, with a sudden little shriek, pounced upon a metal article that glittered among the upset coals.

"Colonel, look. Here is proof!"

"Hey, what?"

"A school O.T.C. badge. It's Kennedy Vane's, and that proves that he's been here!"

In chilled dismay Vicky and her chums stared. But Amanda was right, of course. Without doubt that was Kennedy's badge, and without doubt it proved that he had been here.

"Don't miss a word of the next instalment of this enthralling serial."



The **CLUE** of the **MARBLE** **SHEPHERDESS**

THE HAUNTED TOWER

By PETER LANGLEY

"IT'S just village gossip, Mr. Raymond. I shouldn't take any notice of it."

Noel Raymond, the young detective, glanced down quizzically at the attractive face of his landlady's daughter. Though Esther Merle spoke with a smile, there was an undercurrent of uneasiness in her voice, and the quick glance she flung towards the trees almost suggested fear.

Noel instinctively followed the direction of her glance; just visible through the trees, silhouetted against the evening sky, were the grey, grim walls of a partially ruined tower.

"Gaston's Folly," murmured Noel thoughtfully, as he lit a cigarette. "The kind of name to suggest to the villagers that it is haunted, eh?"

He had come to stay at the little out-of-the-way village of Stillford for a brief holiday from his work. Rose Cottage, where Esther and her invalid mother lived, had proved an admirable retreat—a complete break from the bustle and excitement of life in town.

"You don't believe in ghosts, Miss Merle?" he asked.

Esther laughed.

"Goodness, no. I've got much more practical things to think about. Earning my own living, for instance," she added, looking at her watch. "That's a hint to get rid of me." Noel countered. "Well, I won't detain you any longer, Miss Merle. You've just got time to catch your train to Redwood. Don't you find night-work rather trying?"

"I do a bit," admitted Esther, avoiding his glance. "But I suppose I can't grumble. Well, good-bye, Mr. Raymond. I've left your supper ready on the table, and now I'll have to rush."

With a wave of her hand she darted away in the direction of the station; Noel stood watching her trim figure as she turned a corner. Then he glanced again at the ruined tower.

In the gathering dusk it certainly had an eerie, desolate appearance. No wonder strange legends had arisen around it. There was a story that it had been built years ago by an eccentric sculptor, who had met his end mysteriously in one of the deserted rooms. There were tales of strange things heard and seen at night.

The young detective stiffened suddenly as a curious sound reached his ears. It was the distant clack, clack of metal hitting stone.

The sound came from the direction of the "haunted" tower.

There was a pause, and then it was repeated. Noel dropped his cigarette in the road and trod on it, then his pulses leapt as a faint, eerie light gleamed suddenly behind one of the narrow windows high in the ivy-clad tower; a fantastic shadow was moving in front of the light, its arm rising and falling.

Then as abruptly as it had appeared, the light vanished.

Noel's eyes glittered with suppressed excitement. Esther Merle had been wrong. There was something in the old tower—something that demanded investigation.

The next moment the young detective had vaulted the low hedge and was sprinting through the trees towards the tower.

The light from his torch gleamed on the heavy oak door with its great rusted handle. He pushed it, half-expecting to find it locked, but to his surprise it gave to his touch, opening with a complaining creak of rusted hinges.

Cautiously Noel entered, flashing his torch on the winding stone stairs that lay in front of him.

He tried to recollect the position of the window in which he had seen the light—the fourth from the ground.

Up the winding stairs he climbed. As he approached the fourth floor from the ground, Noel walked more stealthily, holding his breath. The heavy door stood ajar, and a faint light came from within; but it was the pale light of the moon, creeping through the narrow, dusty casement.

Noel flung open the door and stepped into the room.

The room was empty—utterly deserted, except for himself.

The bleak stone walls were guiltless of any covering; there was no furniture except a rough wooden table or bench, left there apparently by some previous occupant.

Bewildered, the young detective stepped out on to the stairs, flashing his torch upwards. The stairs went no farther. There was a trap-door to the roof, but that was securely bolted on the inside. There seemed to be no possible means of escape except by the way he had come, and certainly no one had left the tower in the brief minute or so that had elapsed since the vanishing of the light.

Noel frowned. Had he imagined the whole thing—the strange light, the mysterious tapping? But, no, his imagination was not in the habit of playing tricks. There must be an explanation—if only he could nail it down.

With the aid of his torch he made a thorough search of the old tower, only to draw a blank.

As he halted at the foot of the stairs, perplexed and bewildered, there came unmistakably to his ears the strange sound that had first drawn his attention to the tower—the ringing sound of metal hitting stone.

Clack—clack—clack!

Noel clenched his hands, drawing in his breath in a sharp hiss.

Then the ringing sound ceased.

Silently the young detective leapt for the stairs, sprinting up two at a time. The door of the haunted room was closed. He flung it open, and it crashed back on its hinges with a shock that seemed to shake the tower.

On the threshold he pulled up sharply, incredulously, staring round.

The room was just as he had last seen it—with one exception. On the wooden bench, pale and eerie in the moonlight, stood a sculptured bust—the bust of a marble shepherdess.

"Dash it!" ejaculated Noel huskily. "That thing wasn't there before."

He strode up to the bust and flashed his torch upon it. It was a beautiful piece of work. Noel, who was something of a connoisseur of Art, drew in his breath in involuntary admiration.

"A marble shepherdess," he muttered. "Where have I come across it before?"

With a shrug he turned his attention to more vital matters. How had the bust come into the room?

With painstaking thoroughness he searched the room, examining the stone walls and the narrow casement.

Utterly baffled, he flashed his torch on the floor; then his eyes lit up. A clue, even though a slender one. Scattered on the floor were several irregular chips of marble.

Noel bent quickly to pick up one of the chips, comparing it with the bust. The marble was identical. He put the chip in his pocket, then taking out a powerful glass, examined the bust more closely.

"Gosh!" breathed Noel, grinning slightly at his own fancy. "Anyone would think the old sculptor Johnny had been at work—"

He broke off, his sharp ears detecting a slight movement behind him. Immediately on his guard, he spun round, to see a shadowy figure looming above him.

Noel's bunched fist shot out instinctively in self-protection, but it did not reach its mark. Vice-like hands grasped him, flinging him to the ground. His head hit the stone flags, and the young detective lost consciousness.

Minutes passed—or was it hours? Noel opened his eyes, sitting up unsteadily. His head was throbbing. The moonlight still streamed through the narrow window, throwing fantastic shadows on the stone floor. By its position Noel judged that he could not have been unconscious for long.

He stared instinctively towards the wooden bench. The marble shepherdess had vanished.

The young detective scrambled unsteadily to his feet, his eyes gleaming with a bitter chagrin.

Who had attacked him—and why? What had they done with the marble shepherdess?

Noel groped for his torch, but when at last he found it he discovered that the bulb had been shattered by his fall.

Quickly he took from his pocket a spare bulb that he always carried in case of emergency, and fitted it in. This done, he staggered through the door, then his eyes narrowed as he bent to pick up something that lay on the top step.

It was a girl's suede glove, and in the inside were the initials "E. M."

"Esther Merle," Noel murmured. "Then she's been here. But when—and why?"

ESTHER MERLE'S SECRET



DUSTY and dishevelled, a darkening bruise on his forehead, Noel let himself into the little rambler-covered cottage and hurried noiselessly to his room.

He was worried—worried about Esther Merle. How had her glove come to be in the old tower? She had given him to

understand—by her manner if not by actual words—that she had no interest in the place.

And yet she had seemed nervous; ill at ease. The ice-cold water in the basin cleared his thoughts. He would telephone Esther at her factory; ask her about the glove.

He was half-way down the stairs when abruptly he halted.

Someone was speaking on the telephone in the sitting-room, and it was not the invalid Mrs. Merle.

The husky, disjointed words came to his ears:

"All right—the mill-pond—at two to-morrow afternoon."

There came the click of the receiver hook. Noel sprang swiftly downstairs and switched on the light in the hall even as a dim figure stepped out of the sitting-room.

"Good-evening, Miss Merle!" he remarked cheerfully.

A faint cry escaped Esther Merle's lips as she halted.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You—you frightened me. I thought you were in your room."

Noel smiled dryly.

"And I," he returned, "thought you were at work. What has brought you back so soon?"

He noted the tremor of the girl's lips, the uneasy way in which she avoided his shrewd glance.

"I—I was given leave of absence," she replied. "I—I didn't feel well."

"I'm sorry to hear that," replied Noel. "I notice you've hurt your hand, Miss Merle. It looks as though we're both in the same boat—what?"

The girl looked up quickly, meeting his quizzical smile; then she noticed the ugly bruise on his forehead, and she caught in her breath sharply, her manner changing.

"Oh, you've had an accident!" she exclaimed. Noel grinned.

"Nothing to speak of," he replied carelessly. "Matter of fact, I decided to do a bit of ghost-hunting. In the old tower, y'know. Some chap there took a dislike to me—and socked me one."

He saw the girl draw back, the blood draining from her face.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You—you shouldn't have gone there," she added unsteadily.

"Then you do believe in the ghost?" demanded Noel.

The girl bit her lip, forcing a smile. "Don't be silly. It must have been some tramp. But your forehead—you must let me bathe it for you—please!"

Noel protested at first, but in the end he gave in. He wanted to question Esther without arousing her suspicions. He was convinced that she had been at the old tower that night. But why? Did she know anything about the strange things that had taken place there—about the marble shepherdess?

Of one thing the young detective was certain. Esther Merle, until this minute, had known nothing about the attack on him.

He sat back patiently in the big chair in the sitting-room while Esther fetched a bowl of water and a sponge and gently bathed his forehead.

Noel was watching the girl's slim, capable hands—artistic, yet roughened with work, and bearing several recent scars. One of her fingers had been hastily bandaged.

"I—I caught it—on a nail," explained Esther hastily, noting the direction of his glance.

Noel shook his head gravely as he stood up. "You ought to wear gloves," he said. "Oh, and that reminds me!" He slipped a hand

into his pocket, taking out a grey suede glove. "Is this yours?"

The girl started, her hand shaking as she reached out for it.

"Where—where did you find it?" she asked. "Matter of fact," replied Noel, "I found it in the haunted tower. Why? Is anything wrong, Miss Merle?"

The sponge had dropped from Esther's nerveless fingers. Her face was deathly pale as she looked up.

"How curious!" she said. "It's just like a glove I lost. But, of course, it can't be mine."

"She knows it's hers," thought Noel. "She's scared of something—scared to death. If—"

The girl rose quickly to her feet, picking up the basin.

"I—I'll just fetch you some coffee," she said breathlessly. "I won't be long."

With a scared glance across the room, she hurried out of the door.

Noel rose quickly to his feet, his eyes perplexed. As he crossed to the mantelpiece, he noticed something lying on the carpet.

A chip of marble.

Bending quickly, Noel picked it up, comparing it with one of the marble chips in his pocket. It was almost identical.

He stared round quickly. A few paces away was an old-fashioned walnut cabinet.

Esther's frightened glance had been turned in that direction. Hesitating only for a moment, Noel jerked open the doors.

A startled ejaculation escaped his lips.

Smiling at him in gentle mockery from the depths of the cabinet was the marble shepherdess.

Noel dropped to his knees beside the cabinet, his face suddenly drawn. What did this mean? The marble shepherdess here—in the cottage.

Noel drew out his torch swiftly, flashing it on the bust.

A noiseless whistle escaped his lips and his eyes gleamed. Swiftly he compared the bust with the marble chips—noting the darker shade of the marble in the former.

It was a different bust—though identical in every other respect to the marble shepherdess of the haunted tower.

There was a chipped inscription, barely visible to the naked eye, on the base of the pedestal. Noel had left his magnifying-glass in his room. There might be just time to fetch it before Esther returned.

He hurried upstairs and found the glass, returning quickly to the sitting-room. There was no sign of Esther—but there was a tray on the table, with coffee and biscuits.

Anxiously Noel crossed to the cabinet and flung it open.

The marble shepherdess had gone!

The young detective bit his lip and spun round: the curtains were flapping over the french windows.

With a vague uneasiness he could hardly explain, Noel switched off the light and jerked the curtains aside. The windows were wide open. The pale moonlight streamed into the little garden, revealing trim lawns and flower beds.

Noel raced down the narrow gravel path to the tiny orchard adjoining. As he passed through the gate, he halted, drawing back suddenly behind a tree.

A few yards away, working with feverish desperation by the light of a swinging lantern, was Esther Merle. The girl had a spade in her hands, and was engaged in digging a deep hole beneath one of the pear trees.

As Noel watched, she completed her task; and, turning, lifted up something that lay on the ground.

It was the marble shepherdess.

His eyes perplexed, the young detective watched the girl lower the marble bust into the hole, and commence to cover it with earth.

Noel turned and stole softly away. A possible solution to the baffling mystery had flashed suddenly on the young detective's mind—a solution that would explain Esther's presence in the haunted tower, her curiously

scarred hands—her present mysterious behaviour.

But if his suspicions were correct, then the girl was threatened by a peril more sinister than she had yet realised; and it was his—Noel's—business to protect her.

THE young detective was up early the next morning, and almost before it was light; he left the house on a mysterious errand of his own.

But he was back in his room when Esther brought in his breakfast, and yawning sleepily, as though he had just arisen.

Noel spoke lightly of taking a stroll into the neighbouring town, made some inquiries about the direction, and collected his hat and coat.

As he did so he heard Esther telling her mother that she was going to lie down and would not be going out till the afternoon.

The young detective's first visit was to the nearest call-box. He dialed a number, and a few moments later was speaking to the Redwood Museum—the curator of which was an acquaintance of his.

"Marble shepherdess?" came the quick reply. "Of course, Raymond, I know it. A very fine specimen—medieval. Only one known in existence. That's at Granby Manor—Baron Dupont's place. No, I'm afraid you couldn't see it. The baron's abroad and the house is shut up at present."

Noel thanked him, his eyes gleaming strangely as he rang off.

So there was only one marble shepherdess known—a rare and doubtless valuable piece of statuary, supposed to be in Granby Manor.

Yet he, himself, had already set eyes on two.

"I think," breathed the young detective softly, "that I begin to see daylight."

Hastily he dialed another number—this time the factory where Esther Merle was supposed to be working.

He asked casually for the girl.

"Miss Merle?" came the distant reply. "She's not working here now. She left a month ago."

"Thank you."

Noel replaced the receiver, a grave smile on his lips.

As he had thought, Esther Merle had lost her job a month ago—and yet she had been keeping up the pretence of going to work, and making enough money, somehow, to keep things going.

"She evidently didn't want her mother to worry," Noel told himself. "That's why she kept her unemployment a secret and acted as she did, but she doesn't realise what she's up against. Thank goodness I did that spot of ghost-hunting last night."

There was one more place of call he wanted to make—the haunted tower itself.

Very different it looked in the daylight—grey, desolate, but no longer sinister.

The young detective, however, was taking no chances.

As he approached the massive oak door, his hand closed on the butt of the revolver he had brought with him. The feel of it was reassuring when he recollected the strength of his late opponent.

Swiftly he mounted the winding stairs, till he was standing once more in the haunted room.

Somehow, both Esther Merle and his attacker had managed to obtain entrance to that room—and to leave it—without using the stairs. The young detective was determined to find the concealed entrance.

And there was no time to lose. It was vital that Esther Merle should not remain unprotected. She had announced her intention of going out that afternoon, and it was nearly midday now.

Noel set to work swiftly and methodically. He had already examined the walls by torchlight—and now he covered the floor inch by inch. Suddenly a gleam of satisfaction flashed into his eyes.

In one of the closely set flagstones was an iron ring.

The flagstone moved easily on a hinge, obviously recently oiled—revealing an iron ladder leading down.

Noel slipped through the opening, climbing swiftly down.

He had almost reached the bottom when one of the rusted rungs gave way suddenly beneath his feet.

The young detective sprang, saving himself by a miracle from an ugly fall; but, in jumping, he wrenched his ankle, and his torch was smashed to smithereens.

Winching, the young detective struggled upright—only to find that he could not put his left foot to the ground without a sharp, agonising pain, like the searing with red-hot wires.

He clenched his teeth, beads of perspiration breaking out on his forehead: He must get out of the tower somehow. Esther Merle needed his protection.

PERIL AT THE MILL-POND



IT was two hours later that, limping and dishevelled, Noel Raymond opened the gate of the little cottage.

The invalid Mrs. Merle opened the door to him herself. "Why, Mr. Raymond," she exclaimed, staring in surprise. "What ever has happened?"

"Never mind me," put in Noel, a trifle hastily. "Where's Esther?"

"Why, she went out about half an hour ago," Mrs. Merle explained.

Noel glanced at his watch, and his face paled. He remembered the girl's husky voice, speaking agitatedly over the phone:

"All right—the mill-pond—at two—"

Noel bit his lip, attempting to conceal his anxiety from the invalid Mrs. Merle. Making some excuse, he limped out into the road.

A group of local youths were lounging at the corner, one of them leaning against a cycle.

"Where is the mill-pond, boys?" Noel asked.

"Bout a mile away—in Farmer Grayland's meadow," came the answer.

Noel's lips tightened; he slipped his hand into his pocket, producing half-a-crown, which he handed to the cycle's surprised owner.

"I want to borrow your bike—for an hour," he said briefly.

A moment later he was crouched over the handlebars, speeding for his destination—the mill-pond!

"I DON'T care," said Esther Merle pluckily. "You can threaten as much as you like—but I'm not going to hand it over. You—you're just crooks."

An unpleasant scowl crossed the face of the man confronting her.

"It's a bit late for heroics, Miss Merle," he sneered. "The job's finished—and you've been paid for it. Now we want the original."

The girl's grey eyes flashed as she jerked open her handbag, and flung a purse on to the ground at his feet.

"There—there's your money," she gasped. "I came here to give it you back. Now, let me go."

The man laughed unpleasantly. "You can't do anything," he sneered. "We're alone here—"

"Note quite, my friend," drawled a smooth voice.

The rushes parted—and Noel Raymond stepped out, revolver in hand.

"Keep your hands above your head," snapped Noel, addressing the scowling man. "That's better. Don't worry, Miss Merle—I know everything." He smiled reassuringly at the white faced girl. "When that scoundrel employed you to make a copy of the marble shepherdess, he didn't tell you that he'd stolen the original from Granby Manor—and

wanted the copy to replace it before the owner returned."

"That—that's a lie," snarled the man. "You can tell that to the police later."

rejoined Noel calmly. "No doubt they would be interested to see the other stuff you've got hidden in the haunted tower—faked statuary, pictures—and the like."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You seem to know a lot," he sneered.

"Enough to put you where you'll be safe," returned the young detective. "It was a clever idea of yours to persuade Miss Merle to use the old tower for her work. The sound of her chisel helped to scare away curious villagers, and made your plans safer—"

The girl screamed suddenly, starting forward.

"Oh, mind," she gasped. "Look behind you."

Noel spun round, flinging up his arm instinctively, but too late. Two burly ruffians flung themselves at him from behind, bringing the young detective to the ground.

"Truss the young fool up," snapped the saw-toothed leader. "He's meddled once too often. He can have the pleasure of watching us while we persuade Miss Merle to tell us where she has hidden the original of the marble shepherdess."

A scream escaped the girl's lips as one of the ruffians caught her by the arm. Noel struggled furiously.

"One minute," he called hoarsely. "I'll tell you where the bust is hidden. It's buried in the orchard under the old pear tree."

An unpleasant laugh escaped the lips of the crook.

"Good enough!" he snapped. "We'll take the girl with us—to confirm the story, Gaspard. You, Phelps, had better stay here and guard this smart fellow."

Laughing harshly, the two men departed, with Esther between them.

Noel lay motionless, his muscles taut. From beneath his half-closed eyes he was watching the other man who had been left on guard. The man was cleaning out his pipe with a penknife.

Suddenly the young detective emitted a hollow groan.

"What's the matter with you?" the man demanded scowling.

"There's something—something I must tell you," breathed Noel.

The man stepped forward with a frown, bending over the young detective's recumbent figure.

In a flash Noel acted. His pinioned legs shot up—hitting the other in the chest and flinging the man backwards. The next moment the young detective was on his knees, wriggling to the man's side.

The other was breathing heavily, half-stunned; the open penknife lay on the ground at his side.

Noel contrived to get the knife between his teeth, a few minutes' desperate work and he had cut his bonds. Swiftly he tied up his guard's ankles and wrists—and limped away through the rushes to where he had left the borrowed cycle.

"THIS is the place, Gaspard," snapped the saw-toothed man. "I'll keep the girl covered while you dig. Get a move on!"

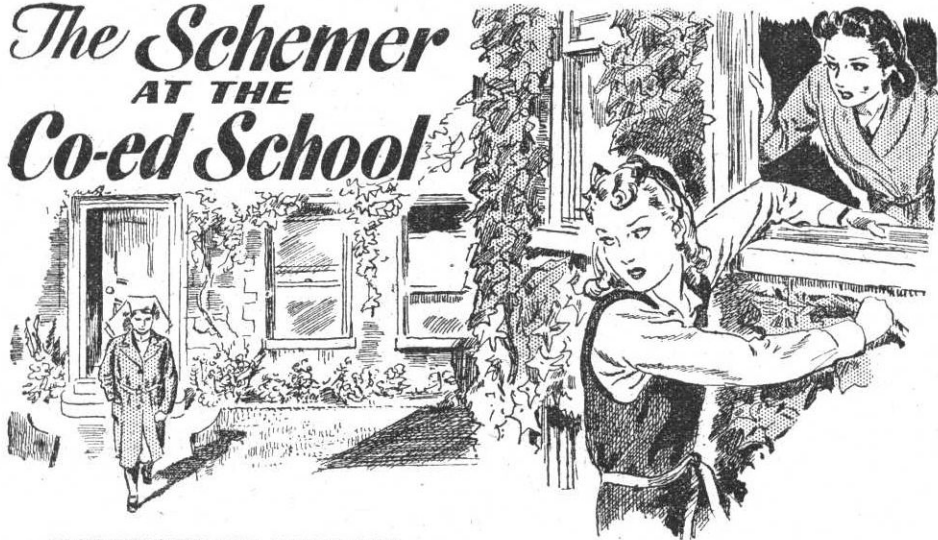
Her face pale, her grey eyes wide with horrified dismay, Esther Merle watched the man digging for the marble shepherdess—the priceless bust that she had buried there.

True—as Noel had said—when she had gladly accepted the commission to make a copy of the "shepherdess" she had not dreamt for an instant that there was anything nefarious behind the offer.

The suggestion that she should work in the old tower had fitted in with her plans—for she was anxious, above everything, to hide the fact of her dismissal from her invalid mother.

(Please turn to page 397.)

The Schemer AT THE Co-ed School



JOAN RECALLS THE BLUE ROOM

VALERIE KING gazed up with shining eyes to that window, high up in the school sanatorium. Her chum, Joan Selby, had vanished out of sight—now—skipped back into bed again. But this note she had dropped was marvellous news.

Val read it again:

"Must see you at once. Remembered something vital.—JOAN."

It meant not only that Joan was getting better, her memory returning since that severe fall which had given her concussion. That was wonderful enough. But it meant also that Joan was recalling now the dramatic discovery which had led her to rush off alone to the old Manor House, and which had ended in her accident.

"Must see you at once!" Joan said. That was going to be a ticklish problem, for Joan had been strictly forbidden all visitors! Val swept her eyes up and down the ivy-clad wall, and knew there was no other way but to climb up to the window.

Dared she risk it?

It was worth any risk, Val told herself tensely, if she could expose at last the schemer who was cheating and plotting against Joan's happiness. All in Rossmere Co-ed School had made a hero of Jack Warrington. All were being fooled and deceived by him. Val had been deposed as sports captain of the Fourth, and Warrington elected in her place. And she had seen enough, and so had Joan now, to know that Warrington was a clever rogue who had come to Rossmere with a deep and secret purpose of his own.

Now was the time to hear what Joan had to tell her—now, before Warrington dreamed that her memory was returning, before he had time to devise some new trickery.

Val gazed warily across the school grounds. No one was about. All were still at breakfast, except for the nurse on duty inside the sanatorium. Impossible to dodge her by going in through the door. So here was the only way.

Val took a firm grip on the ivy, and next

By ELISE PROBYN

second she was swinging herself up the face of the wall, hand-over-hand.

It was a perilous climb. Val had accomplished it on other walls of the school more than once—but here the ivy was alarmingly weaker.

Half-way up she paused for breath, took another harassed glance across the still-deserted grounds, then doggedly began the next stage of the climb. It was a dizzying ordeal, incredibly higher than it had looked from the ground. She heard the twigs of the creeper snapping ominously—and then she heard a shaky voice just above her.

"Val!"

Joan was at the window. Val beamed up at her in breathless joy, and with a last precarious effort she clutched at the sill and dragged herself into a more or less safe perch. "Val, I—I wouldn't have thrown you that note if I'd known you'd take a risk like this!" Joan gasped.

"Never mind about me, Joan," breathed Val. "Sure you're feeling better, dear? Well enough to talk?"

"Of course I am!" insisted Joan, though she was obviously not quite herself yet. "I had to see you, Val!" she rushed on. "It isn't much I can tell you. But I believe it's going to be fearfully important. I've been thinking and thinking—"

"Not overtaxing yourself, Joan?" Val put in uneasily.

"No, no! Listen, Val. There isn't much time. Nurse might pop in at any moment!" And Joan went on breathlessly: "You remember the key you found outside the wall of the Manor, where I fell? The blue key, I called it, because of its blue ring?"

"Rather! I'm hanging on to it like I'm hanging on to this sill, Joan!" Val said with a quick catch of breath.

"Well, I kept saying to myself—Blue key, Blue key—and then all in a flash something came back to me," Joan said rapidly. "I

remember I was hurrying somewhere, I was in a boat, and I was looking for a place called the Blue Room!"

Val gave a little gasp of excitement. "And it was the Manor you went to, Joan! You must have discovered that key somehow, and found out that it fitted the lock of a room called the Blue Room! That room's somewhere in the old Manor! Not a doubt about it!" Val panted. "I wonder what could be there—what it was that made you rush off alone like that to explore?"

"I think," Joan said, her eyes bright and uncertain, "I think I must have heard Warrington say something about a Blue Room. It must have been something vitally important, but for the life of me, Val, I can't remember any more!"

"Doesn't matter, Joan! What you've told me is going to be vitally important all right!" breathed Val. "I've got the key, and now I know exactly what to do and where to go!"

"You'll go and search the Blue Room yourself, Val?"

"Won't I just! I was going to have a prow around the old Manor, anyhow, and see if that key fitted any lock there. Now you've put me straight on to the bullseye, Joan—the Blue Room! I'll go along there this afternoon—directly after lessons!"

"And you'll let me know all about it, somehow, the minute you come back?"

"Trust me, Joan!"

"Oh, how I shall ever be able to lie in bed till—!" And then Joan's eager voice broke off in smothered horror. "Val! Oh—oh, you'll be seen! L-look! Matron's coming!"

Val hazed down from her dizzy perch and her heart froze with dismay.

Out from the staff breakfast-hall came the school matron! She was walking briskly across the path, making straight for the school sanatorium. She had only to glance upwards and she would see Val clinging to this lofty window-sill!

Val hung there in anguish. It would mean at least that she would be gated for the rest of the week! It would spoil everything! Stop her going to the Blue Room, stop her seeing Joan any more, leave Warrington a clear field and time to be on his guard—

And then happened one of those marvellous strokes of luck!

Matron had forgotten something. Perhaps her keys or her handbag. Under the anxious eyes of Val and Joan, she turned in her path and walked back into the breakfast-hall!

Val's relief was almost agony. She didn't even wait for Joan to get her breath back.

"Saved, Joan! That's an omen of luck! See you this evening—with the big news!" she gasped.

And she was slithering recklessly down the creeper before another shock could arise.

Lessons that day were a drawn-out eternity to Val. The morning seemed long enough. The afternoon was even worse.

From one corner of her eye she watched Warrington working calmly at his desk. Not even Warrington would have been quite so calm had he known of her approaching errand to-day, thought Val with a thrill.

What dark mystery was he harbouring in the old Manor House? Why had he planted that shady boatman, Clem Barney, there as caretaker? What was their secret? What was the secret of the Blue Room? She would know before Warrington sat down to his tea to-day, she told herself resolutely.

Three o'clock—three-thirty—whole years seemed to drag on. Then at last the Form-master stood up.

"The Form may dismiss!" he said.

Val was the first to slip out of the room. She ran up to her study, tossed her books on to the table, changed her shoes, then hurried out again, down the stairs.

She pushed past the little crowd in the hall. For the thousandth time she felt breathlessly

for the key in her pocket. And then a voice called to her. Warrington's voice:

"Val! I say, Val, you're not going out?"

"Yes!" she said, without turning.

"But you can't go out now!"

And then his hand came behind her, catching her shoulder.

"Do I have to ask your permission—" she began.

"Haven't you seen the notice board?" he interrupted.

Val's eyes flashed to the board, and she saw there a notice in Warrington's writing, signed by himself as Form sports captain. The first notice he had written since he had won the captaincy from her.

"I've called a special practice to-day, for our sports fixture against Abbeylea next week!" he pointed out. "Can't hope to lick Abbeylea unless we go into hard practice. We're having an early tea, Val, then I want everybody to turn out!"

"But I can't! I've got something else to do!" Val cried.

She knew he was suspicious now. She saw his face change uneasily, and she relished it, for he couldn't follow to spy on her—he was committed to the practice he himself had called.

But Warrington knew a slyer trick than that.

"I say, everybody, Val's jibbing!" he called to the others in dismay. "She says she's not turning out for the practice to-day! Tell her she must. Tell her I'm relying on her for the biggest events—long jump and high jump. Tell her—"

His voice was drowned in the clamour that broke out. Val found herself surrounded by the indignant team, and she knew now that it was going to be a bitter choice. Either she must fall into even deeper disfavour with the Form—or she must forego her vital errand to the Blue Room!

WILL SHE BE IN TIME?



"YOU'RE not going to let us down like this, Val King!"

"You've let us down badly enough by getting Joan Selby laid up!"

"You're trying to cut the practice because you want us to lose!"

Val had known they would say this. So had Warrington! She looked at him standing there with mock anxiety, mock appeal on his face, and she realised she would have to give in.

"I know you don't like me, Val—I know you've got no interest in the sports now I'm skipper," he said in hurt tones; "but I do think you might consider the team. We've only got a week to train before we meet Abbeylea. You happen to be our star in the high jump and the long jump and I'm banking on you to coach up the others. If you're not going to turn up to practice to-day—well, I might as well cut it out!"

"No, no!"

"You've got to turn out, Val King!" Every voice was raised against her. Val didn't trust herself to look at Warrington, but she knew she had no choice.

"All right," she said, tight-lipped, "I'll turn out!"

She was walking abruptly away, but Warrington gave her a smug pat on the shoulder.

"That's the spirit, Val!" he said. "Four-thirty in the playing fields!" And he added magnanimously: "You can skipper for me if I happen to be a little late!"

Was that a piece of mockery, Val wondered, or was it meant? She didn't think any more about it at the moment. She walked off to the dining-hall and swallowed down some tea, fuming inwardly at the way her plan had been baulked. She could have been on her way now

to the Manor, to make her exciting search of the Blue Room, and, whether by luck or design, Warrington had also made plans and had balked her.

Then—just after she'd been up to her study to change into sports things—Val caught a glimpse of Warrington through the corridor window. It wasn't yet four-thirty, but he was walking in a great hurry across the playing fields. He was making for the gate—for the woods that fringed the river!

Val remembered in a flash his remark that he might be late. Why? What was he up to? She didn't stop to think. She darted out through the door, and she sped after him like a shadow, keeping under cover of the bushes.

Those bushes led from the side of the playing fields right down to the woods. Val could see Warrington's figure, only a little way in front of her now. And then suddenly she saw another figure waiting furtively in the woods.

It was the caretaker from the old Manor House. It was Clem Barney!

Val's breath came faster. Warrington was meeting his accomplice—his paid helper! She crept closer to them. She hid herself behind the trunk of an elm, ears strained to hear what they said.

"You shouldn't waste your time coming here, Barney—not to-day of all days!" came Warrington's voice, urgent and exasperated. "Haven't you done what I said?"

"You bet your boots I have, skipper!" came Barney's voice, hoarse with feeling. "The sooner this part of the job's out of my hands the better I'm going to like it!"

"Then why—"
"I came to tell you that the move comes off at six!" Barney went on, and Val could hear a profound note of relief in his voice. "Six o'clock! Just above an hour from now! Then we're clear of the worst, that's what I say. The Blue Room won't have any more tales to tell!"

Val's heart pounded against her ribs. What was she hearing?

At six o'clock the Blue Room would have no more tales to tell! No more secrets, no more evidence that might betray Warrington's shady game! Was that what Barney meant? Val seethed with dismay as she heard Warrington say with an angry laugh:

"You've been scared stiff by a couple of girls, just because one of them was smart enough to get the key of the Blue Room from me! Pull yourself together, Barney! What good's the key to either of them? You ought to have known I'd act quicker than they could—for my own sake even more than yours. The sooner you get the job done now the better for us both!"

"It'll be done sharp at six, no two ways about that!"

"Right! And afterwards, Barney"—Val heard a measured threat in Warrington's voice—"just forget all you ever knew about the Blue Room, understand?"

"I get you, skipper!" gasped Barney.
They had parted now. Val pressed herself tight against the tree, her heart thudding. Warrington passed within a couple of yards of her. But the trunk was stout and he didn't see her.

His steps had scarcely died away when Val heard her name shouted across the playing fields.

"Val! Val King! Where is she? Has she walked out on us after all?"

It was the team who were shouting for her. Every impulse was tugging Val to rush off now to the Manor—now, before six, before the secret was effaced for ever from the Blue Room. But she dared not go yet. Dared not go back on her word to the team. She must attend the practice for a little while—then seize her chance to escape at the very first moment.

Taking a circuitous way back behind the bushes, Val joined the team on the field, just

as they were getting to the end of their patience.

"At last!" they exclaimed. "Thought you were letting us down after all, Val!"

"Where's the skipper? I don't see any sign of him yet," said Val.

"Here I am! Here's me!" a voice called.

And Warrington came striding out of the pavilion, just as if he had been there all the time.

Everyone gathered round him. Val tried desperately to make some show of enthusiasm. All the others were keyed up with excitement—longing to beat Abbeydale in the sports and make up for their defeat in the swimming contest. Warrington was arranging the events now for the practice; singling out the runners, the jumpers, choosing relay teams and fixing handicaps.

Val gazed tensely about the field. Her own part in the practice would be mainly jumping—high jump and long jump. Both, the jumping-posts had not even been fixed up yet! If only Warrington would get on with this item first— But he was arranging the three-legged race now. She dared not let him see her impatience. He would suspect immediately.

"Val, will you take the stop-watch? Val, will you act as umpire? Val, will you watch this race from the finishing-post?"

For an endless time Val found herself at Warrington's beck and call. It was after five already! Long after five! And still the jumping hadn't begun—the posts were not even up!

"When am I going to come in, Jack?" she asked him at last, trying to hide her suspense.

"Oh, the jumping?" he said carelessly. "No hurry, Val! You don't need the practice these others do."

"But I want to get moving—I'm sick of watching everybody else!" protested Val.

"O.K.! We'll start you next." The long jump!" said Warrington.

For the next ten minutes Val led the long jumping. She was the envy and admiration of all. Praise was shouted to her where before she had heard only taunts. She was far and away the best long jumper in the team, and, as patiently as she could, she gave the others some brisk coaching.

"Now, Jack, shall we get straight on with the high jump?" she was asking Warrington almost immediately.

"Better leave that till later, Val!" he said airily. "It's the star number. I want to give plenty of time to it, because it's our biggest chance of beating Abbeydale!"

"Val's going to win the high jump for us all right. If only she's up to her top form!" everyone said.

"Only if she has proper support from you other people," Warrington told them.

And, to Val's chagrin, he went on now with the relay races. Did he suspect that she was seething to get away? Or was it just that he was taking no chances? The clock was creeping round towards five-thirty. Val's heart hammered, and she knew that if she didn't escape soon it would be too late to investigate the vital secret of the Blue Room!

Her eyes went towards the store shed at the back of the school house. Then something moved into her gaze, a wild impulse seized her, and she blurted out quickly:

"I'll go and get the jumping-posts from the shed!"

"We're not ready yet, Val—" Warrington began.

But Val was gone. She was darting through the bushes towards the store shed. It wasn't the shed she was watching. It was a moving object that was just preparing to back out of the yard. It was the laundry van! And its return journey was half-way towards the old Manor House!

One leap Val took, and she landed neatly on the tailboard of the van. The bushes hid her from view of Warrington and the team. Out through the gate rolled the van, and with

a gasp of triumph Val settled herself down amongst the bobbing laundry-baskets.

She knew she would have to face a bitter reckoning from the team for deserting them like this. But she was on her way to the old Manor! Would she be in time to probe the mystery of the Blue Room?

IN THE BLUE ROOM



THE van had crossed the river—it was over Rossington Bridge! Somewhere in the distance Val heard the chimes of a church clock. The quarter chimes. It was a quarter to six!

She took a flying leap from the tailboard. Next moment she was running like a hare through the long woodland path to the Manor.

Gradually, through the trees, she glimpsed the gables of the old Manor. Nearer, nearer they drew. The house took clearer shape. She could see the gates now. She clenched her fists and doubled faster.

Then all at once she gained a view of the bedraggled drive. A car stood there, a black, closed car. Val caught one breathless glance of Clem Barney jumping into the driving-seat. Then the car started up. It sped out of the drive, it flashed through the gates of the Manor, and was gone.

All Val saw was the dark shape of that car and its heavily-blinded windows.

What did it mean? Was she too late? Had Clem Barney already removed his guilty secret? Or had she caught him in the middle of his task, and arrived just as he had left the Manor clear for her to search?

Wild hope bounded in Val's veins. She rushed in through the gates. She wrenched at the rusty old handle of the Manor door, and, to her joy, it opened. She stepped, panting, into the dark and deserted hall.

Now for the great discovery which Joan had so nearly made—now to find the Blue Room!

Taking the key from her pocket, Val hurried tremulously up the big, dusty staircase. A strange caretaker, indeed, was Clem Barney! The place reeked of dust and neglect. It reeked of something mysterious, sinister. The whole atmosphere was ghostly and uncanny.

Val's steps, echoing hollowly, brought her to the upper corridor. She gazed about her in the gloom, and was astonished to see what a huge, rambling place it seemed from the interior. Corridors branched off in all directions, closed doors faced her on every side.

Which of these rooms was the Blue Room?

The first door she touched was unlocked. She threw it open. Gaping at her she saw a great empty room which had been grand in its time. Now it was just four walls hung with cobwebs, derelict, decayed.

She tried the next room, she tried every room in the corridor. All were unlocked, all were but dilapidated shells like the first.

Val shivered involuntarily, and began a quick search of the next corridor.

In and out of the musty passages she went, searching room after room. Some contained a few old relics of furniture. But there was no sign that anyone had entered them for years.

A deepening sense of dismay grew upon Val, as she went from wing to wing of the forsaken old Manor.

Where was the Blue Room? Where could it be? If only Joan was here! If only Joan could remember more, and perhaps give her some other clue which would lead her to that room! But Joan wasn't here! And at any moment Clem Barney might return!

Val redoubled her search feverishly. She went down the dark staircase again, took a quick, but forlorn peep into each of the downstairs rooms, then groped about till she found at the end of the hall another and narrower staircase.

Did it lead only to the same rooms that she had already explored?

No! Hope rising again, Val found herself in a different wing of the Manor. It was darker here. The corridor turned off at sharp and disconcerting angles, and its few windows were all heavily shuttered.

Val bumped round another awkward angle. Then a dull glimmer of light met her eyes. A bluish light!

She gazed up with a start and saw an oblong fanlight over one of the doors. Through that fanlight she could see a ceiling.

Her heart thumping, Val tugged at the handle of the door. It didn't budge. The door was locked!

In wild excitement she thrust her key into the lock and gave it a turn. The door opened! She smothered a cry. She was gazing into a room whose walls, carpet and sparse furniture were all of a deep blue.

The Blue Room!
That much was obvious at a glance—but Val's excitement drained now to stark dismay.

What was there here save blue walls and a few prim bits of furniture? Where were its secrets? Had Clem Barney already accomplished his task? Was that the meaning of his flight in that heavily-closed car? Had she come too late?

Val knew it with dread as she stepped inside.

Yes, this room was different from the others! The difference dawned upon her now as she stared about her in dismay. There were no cobwebs here, no dust or neglect. The room had been well cleaned out. Recently cleaned out!

The sight mocked Val. That rascally caretaker had done his work well in this room—because here he'd had something to hide, to fear! He had cheated her by just a few short minutes! His secret—Warrington's secret—was gone now! In Barney's own words, the Blue Room had no more tales to tell!

Val wandered here and there in a fever of disappointment. She flung open the cupboards, the wardrobe, the drawer of the table—all were empty. She gazed about her from ceiling to floor. The blue pile of the carpet was disturbed as if some heavy object had been dragged out through the door—and here again the trace of it could only be seen because it had been recently done!

Val turned to go out, sick with defeat. And then, jammed against the wall by the door, a small, shiny object attracted her gaze.

It was a watch—a gold wrist-watch. It lay half-buried between the wall and the edge of the carpet.

Val stooped quickly and picked it up. The glass of the watch splintered in her hand. It had been cracked; it had had a fall—a recent fall, too! It had caused the watch to stop, and the hands pointed to ten-to-six!

In queer perplexity Val turned the watch over. It wasn't the kind of thing that Clem Barney would wear. She snapped open the gold back. Then her eyes gaped—she was reading an inscription engraved there:

Presented to J. H. WARRINGTON by his Form-mates of ST. DAVID'S for the Record HUNDRED YARDS SPRINT."

It was Warrington's watch! Presented to him by his old school. But—

Val gazed again to the floor in slow bewilderment. How could Warrington have dropped his watch here? Warrington was at Rossmere skipping the sports practice. He couldn't be in two places at once. Yet here was his watch, and it had been dropped in this Blue Room only a few minutes ago! At ten-to-six!

Val's heart hammered with curious excitement. What could it mean?

What mystery is tied up with Warrington and the Blue Room? Be sure not to miss the exciting chapters of this story in next Friday's **GIRLS' CRYSTAL**.

The Merry-makers in Arizona



A JOB FOR THE BOYS!

NOW, there's absolutely no need to worry. The boys will be able to manage perfectly, won't you?" And Sally Warner smiled confidently at her two boy chums.

"Sure, we'll be all right," asserted Don Weston boldly. "Pretty poor look-out, eh, if a couple of hefty chaps like us can't look after ten little kids for a few minutes without there being a riot."

"We-ell!"—Johnny Briggs' tone was far from confident—"I'm not so sure. Of course, I know they're nice little kids and all that," he added hurriedly. "But, shucks, even nice little kids can manage to make themselves the dickens of a nuisance when they really try."

"Not if you adopt the right manner with them, old man," replied Don in a superior way. "Now, go along, you girls; you get off. We'll go along to White Gables this afternoon and keep the flag flying until you arrive."

"Good lads!" beamed Sally. "We'll join you as soon as possible."

And, with a cheery wave of her hand, she sent the car spinning forward.

"See you later!" called Fay Manners cheerily. "Me, too!" cried Muriel Ashe. "And thanks, boys—terribly much!"

The two boys stood watching. Don still beamed confidently, Johnny rather ill at ease, until the car disappeared from sight. Then they slowly made their way back to the ranch-house.

"Poor old Muriel!" murmured Don sympathetically. "I'm glad we were able to help her out."

Johnny nodded rather dubiously. Not that he wasn't just as anxious to help Muriel as Don was, but his coming responsibility was weighing very heavily on him. He wasn't used to looking after children, and if anything went wrong Muriel, he knew, would get the blame for it. And if Muriel incurred Mr. Taylor's displeasure, then that would be the end of his helping her with her musical career.

Actually, it had been Sally's idea to entertain some young children from the local orphanage, and Mr. Taylor, the owner of White Gables, a large house on the outskirts of Dixon, had offered the use of his lovely home for the afternoon, making only one condition.

That was that Muriel Ashe, a girl who was renowned in Dixon for her marvellous handling

Don and Johnny thought it would be an easy task to look after the high-spirited kiddies—but they quickly discovered their mistake!

By DAPHNE GRAYSON

of small children, and a girl whom Mr. Taylor was helping tremendously with her musical career, should have complete charge of the party. And if anything went wrong, he had stressed, it would be Muriel's responsibility. Particularly, she must be sure the children did not enter his study upstairs.

Muriel had willingly agreed to this, confident that the children would obey her implicitly. Then this morning a telegram had come, telling Muriel that her fiancé was leaving America for a time, and asking her to come and say good-bye to him. Poor Muriel had been frantic until Sally had come to the rescue by offering to drive her to the town where her fiancé was staying and bring her back to White Gables in time for the party. Meantime, the boys could look after the children until the girls arrived.

It had all sounded terribly simple, and Johnny's sense of uneasiness had abated somewhat by the time the boys set out that afternoon.

He was almost happy as the two boys turned in at the gates of White Gables, gazed appreciatively around at the trim grounds. Then, like magic, the smiles disappeared, giving place to looks of horror.

For, instead of allowing Don and Johnny to arrive first in the way Don had planned, the place was already alive with children. And the children, gloriously happy in this sudden freedom from adult supervision, were having the time of their lives.

There were children chasing each other over the smooth lawns, racing over the neat flower-beds. There were boys and girls perched on the stone pedestals of the fountain, dabbling in the water, attempting to divert the spray in order to make each other as wet as possible. And as Don and Johnny watched, in growing apprehension, Don gave a shout, leaped from his horse, and hurtled across the lawn just in time to grab one small boy who was about to fall head-first into the goldfish pool. And Johnny, following Don, gave a yelp of dismay as he saw three or four of Mr. Taylor's prize goldfish lying on the stone coping round the pool, gasping feebly.

Quickly he pushed them back into the water, while Don, turning the small boy he held the right way up, stared down at him.

He was a sturdy, red-haired youngster, and, thrusting his hands into his diminutive pockets, he scowled aggressively up at Don.

"What did you want to do that for?" he asked in an injured way. "I was only fishin'."

"You were very nearly bathing, old chap," said Don. "And, by the way," he added worriedly, "can't you collect the rest of the party together?"

For a moment the small boy hesitated, staring at the boys in a guarded sort of way.

"O.K.!" he said obligingly, and gave an ear-splitting yell.

The other children ceased whatever they were doing as if by magic; in a trice had gathered round Don and Johnny, all talking shrilly.

"Now," said Don, beaming around, "supposing we all get acquainted. First, what's your name?" he asked the red-haired boy.

"Victor," replied the boy stolidly. "Wot's yours?"

"Oh—er—you'd better call me Uncle Don! And this is Uncle Johnny."

"O.K.!" replied Victor obligingly. "And this is James, and this is Phyllis, and this is Rosemary," he added, with a negligent wave of his hand. "Well, and wotta we gonna do now?" he added rather resentfully.

Johnny and Don just looked at each other. Quite frankly, the possibility of having to entertain the children had not occurred to them. They had had an idea that they would merely have to supervise the removal of little hats and coats; perhaps point out a few of the garden's beauties.

"What would Muriel have suggested, do you think?" Don hissed at Johnny.

"Er—well, something quiet, I should say," Johnny said vaguely.

"We don't want no quiet games!" spoke up the sharp-eared Victor.

"I don't really blame them, either," Don said, under his breath.

But, all the same, he was worried. He quite realised that kiddies wanted to let off some of their superfluous energy on a day like this, which was a red-letter day in their young lives. But he did wish he'd asked Muriel and Sally for a little more advice first. They'd have been able to suggest an energetic game that wouldn't do any damage to the grounds, he felt sure.

"Don, this is awful!" Johnny muttered, thinking desperately, and feeling rather uneasy as the children fastened their demanding eyes first on one boy, then on the other.

"I know. But, look here, we'll have to do something," Don said, behind his handkerchief, making a pretence of wiping his nose. "The girls must have got delayed somehow. It won't be for long, I'm sure. So—so what do you suggest, children?" he asked, removing his handkerchief, and deciding that this question was a stroke of genius on his part.

"I guess we'll try a bit of baseball," spoke up Victor, who seemed to be the self-appointed leader of the party. "We're pretty good bashers."

"Victor, no, not baseball!" cried Don, then blushed vividly as he realised how much like an old maiden aunt he sounded. "I—I mean, we just can't—not here, with all that glass about."

"Well," suggested Johnny, "let's go indoors and think of something."

This suggestion was definitely unpopular; but, without waiting for further argument, the two boys hustled the children into the house and into the large room on the ground floor which had been set aside for them.

"There!" said Don, as if he had achieved a great triumph. "Now I'll just get some pencils and papers—"

"Don't bother, old chap. I'll get them," cried Johnny, with desperate eagerness.

They leaped for the door simultaneously, met

with a tremendous crash, and staggered back, to collapse ungracefully upon the floor.

For the first time, as the boys glared unspeakable things at each other, the children's air of hauteur dissolved. A shriek of laughter rang out.

"Gee, that was dandy!" shrilled James. "Do it again, Uncle Don!"

Johnny glared at the children, then at Don. He was just deciding to make a dignified exit when a piercing cry rang out, for all the world like the whistle of a train as it emerged from a tunnel. Johnny leapt almost a foot into the air.

"Great gosh, what's that?" he cried, clapping agonised hands to his ears. "Turn it off, someone, whatever it is! It's deafening me."

"That's Emily," said Victor, with quiet pride. "She does that most all the time. She wants her tea; she's hungry."

"Well, she can't have her tea!" snapped Don frantically, who was wondering how much longer Sally and Muriel would be. "Johnny, for goodness' sake get that kid off the top of the piano! Wow! Look out!" he yelled, making a frantic grab at a small girl who seemed intent upon taking a nose-dive over the back of the settee, and catching his head a sharp crack against the marble mantelpiece as he did so.

Almost stunned, he staggered to the nearest chair, while Victor, idly swinging on the curtains, eyed him meditatively.

"Guess you'd better have tea," he said casually. "Emily's goin' to cry again."

As if in answer to his words, the whistle-like cry rang out again.

"Stop her!" Don moaned in a beaten voice. "I'll do anything—but just stop her!"

"Shut up, Emily!" said Victor authoritatively. The cry ceased like magic. "Now we'll have tea," he said brightly. "And I'll take everybody for a look round upstairs while you're getting it."

"No!" bellowed Don and Johnny simultaneously.

Victor's eyes gleamed.

"Why, what's up there?" he asked interestedly. "Anything int'resting?"

"No!" said Don violently.

"Yes!" said Johnny forcefully.

"Oh!" The angelic look returned to Victor's face. "Well, we'll just stay here and play something quiet like you said."

"Very well," said Don. "Now, there's plenty of building blocks here, and marbles and things. What about building Uncle Don a nice big house while he's getting tea—eh?"

He smiled, though there was no heart in it. Victor nodded; settled himself on the floor. The other children followed suit.

In relief, the two boys quitted the room, taking one last backwards glance at the peaceful little crowd.

"Gosh, Don, this is getting me down!" Johnny puffed. "I wish it was time for them all to go home!"

"Same here," nodded Don. "But we've got to stick it, old man. Sally wanted the kids to have a good time, and we did say—"

"That's right."

Determined, but still worried, they marched off into the kitchen. For a while they worked in silence, getting the food together, revelling in the air of quiet peace that filled the house. Then Don jerked up his head.

"Thought I heard a noise upstairs," he said uneasily.

"Now, now, old man, you're letting your imagination run away with you!" chided Johnny. "No need to get suspicious—Wow!"

A loud thump from above interrupted his remarks. Eyes wide with horror, the boys gazed at each other, then like arrows tore from the kitchen; ascended the stairs three at a time. Then Don paused, his eyes wide with dismay. For from the direction of the study came that old, familiar train-whistle cry, but somehow strangely muffled.

With his hair standing on end, he dashed towards the door, swung it open, and then gave a strangled croak. For there was Victor, dancing around brandishing a heavy ebony ruler, while on the floor lay Mr. Taylor's huge Persian vase. On the floor also lay Emily—or the rear part of Emily. Her head was fixed in the top of the vase. And while Don stood there, petrified, Victor darted forward; raised the ruler on high.

"Out of the way, Uncle Don!" he yelled. "Emily wanted to see what was inside this ole vase, and she got her head stuck. Stand back, 'cos I'll have to bust the thing before she can get unstuck!"

And, with a dervish-like yell, he leapt forward; brought the ruler swinging down.

VICTOR GOES EXPLORING



FOR a second Don stood transfixed; then, with a peculiar croak, he literally hurtled forward, one hand outstretched.

Crack! His croak changed to a wild yell of anguish as the ruler caught him fair and square across the knuckles.

"Wow!" he yelled, dancing around in agony, grabbing hold of Victor's collar with one hand and trying frantically to stuff the other hand in his mouth. "You—you—!" he spluttered. "Ow! My hand! Oh, gosh—"

"It wasn't my fault!" roared Victor, quite reasonably. "Gee, you stuck your fist in the way! You couldn't expect me to know you were going to put your hand right in front of my ruler, could you? I mean—"

"Shut up!" spluttered Don, his head reeling from the blow and from the piercing shrieks still coming from the interior of the vase.

"Look here, old boy," came Johnny's quietly reproachful voice from the doorway. "Is this quite the time to entertain Victor with Indian dances? I know you only want to amuse the kids, of course, but poor little Emily will smother if you leave her in that vase much longer."

And, with an air of quiet efficiency that reduced Don to fuming speechlessness, he deftly twisted the vase, released Emily, gave her a paternal pat, and placed the vase on a small table by the door.

"There!" he said primly, with a proud beam at Emily. "Uncle Johnny's made everything better."

"If Uncle Johnny had had one of his hands bashed practically to a jelly perhaps he wouldn't be so sickeningly efficient!" blazed Don. "Oh, gosh! Where's Sally? Where's Muriel? We've got to get these kids downstairs again. You know old man Taylor said they musn't come up here. And that vase"—he gave a shudder—"that Victor child nearly busted it! Do you realise what that means? Mr. Taylor would have been hopping mad. And if he gets mad with Muriel he won't help her with her music any more."

"Gee, you're right!" Johnny's tone was suddenly grave. "Musn't let old Muriel down. We simply must keep the flag flying till she comes. Let's have tea, anyway. Perhaps they'll gorge themselves so full they won't be able to move," he added hopefully. "I'll go and get it," he said, leaving the room.

"O.K. I'll round 'em up," replied Don, still nursing his injured hand. "Downstairs you go, Victor—and you, Emily!"

In stiff dignity, the two small people marched out of the room. Don following them up behind. But their dignity dissolved at sight of the polished banister-rail. With loud whoops, they dashed towards it, seated themselves astride, and, despite Don's wildly warning yells, swooshed down with yelps of joy.

Johnny, still full of quiet conceit about the neat way he had managed his end of the affair, unfortunately happened to be passing along

the hall at that moment with a large dish of trifle in his hands. One of Victor's flying heels caught him in the back of the neck.

With a lurch Johnny sprawled forward, somehow keeping the dish intact in his hands. But the rug on the polished floor was too much for him. Down he went; with a horrid squelch buried his face in the creamy trifle.

The sight of Johnny's dripping face was too much for Don, furious as he was. He gave a smothered yelp of laughter. Victor glanced reproachfully at Don, walked gravely forward, and solicitously helped the spluttering Johnny to his feet.

"I don't think it's very fair to laugh when Uncle Johnny has an accident!" he said reprovingly to Don. "Sides, Emily wanted trifle. I 'spect she'll cry now it's spoilt."

As if in answer to an invitation, Emily, who had been watching the scene, obligingly let out her piercing shriek.

"Trifle!" she shrieked. "I want trifle! Uncle Johnny's eaten it all!"

"I haven't had any of it—only the bit that got pushed into my mouth accidentally!" roared Johnny, disgustedly wiping the stuff off his face. "And, for goodness' sake, turn off that awful yelling!" he roared.

Emily shrieked the louder. It was Don's turn to assume an air of superiority.

"Thought you knew how to handle kids, old man!" he said irritably. "Another thing, you can hardly expect them to eat that trifle after you've been washing your face in it!"

"Want trifle!" belowed Emily, and opened her mouth for another shriek.

The other children, ripe for mischief, and overjoyed at Johnny's predicament, joined in her chant, banging on the table with their spoons.

And suddenly through the minds of both boys shot the same hair-raising thought. Supposing Mr. Taylor should return at this moment while the children were making all this din, and no Muriel present! He'd be furious, naturally. Probably would have nothing further to do with the girl. Somehow the children had got to be quietened. But how? It seemed that everything they did just went wrong deliberately. That such things ever happened to girls they just couldn't believe. Never again, Don vowed, would he offer to look after a horde of healthy youngsters.

"Quiet!" he roared, in an effort to make himself heard above the din. "Be quiet! We'll get you some more trifle—we'll get anything you like if only you'll be quiet. If you're not quiet you won't get anything at all!"

An uncanny silence descended instantly. Don gave a start of surprise, then smirked. Gosh, maybe it wasn't understanding you needed to handle children; maybe it was just a forceful personality!

"Come on!" he said in a lordly way to Johnny. "Let's get them some more trifle."

A dead silence prevailed as he disappeared, followed by a sticky and miserable Johnny. But, nevertheless, despite his discomfort, there was a strange gleam in Johnny's eyes, the shadow of a smile on his face.

"I guess I ought to tell you," he said quietly, "that there just isn't any more trifle."

Don ran a distraught hand through his hair; glared round the kitchen.

"What are we going to do?" he bleated. "My hat, if they don't get any trifle—"

Frantically he raced round, flung open the refrigerator, all the cupboards, pulling forth all he could see in the shape of food. Then dubiously he eyed the collection—a dish of pink custard, a chocolate mould, a jug of cream, and another of rather runny ice-cream.

Uneasily the two boys eyed it; then, as the murmur rose from beyond the door, a reckless light sprang into Johnny's eyes.

"Mix it all together," he said daringly. "Stir it around a bit—you know, to make it frothy—then tell 'em it's a new kind of trifle."

"Great idea!" approved Don. "Anything to keep them quiet."

He grabbed a large dish, carried out Johnny's suggestion, then very dubiously stood back to eye the resultant concoction. He gulped slightly, shuddered. Then, with a do-or-die expression on his face, boldly lifted the dish and stalked off towards the dining-room.

With every eye upon him, he placed it upon the table; waited uneasily for loud wails of protest. But no protest came. The eyes of the children lit up. Faces wreathed in smiles, they fell upon the dish. In a matter of seconds the dish was empty. Suddenly Victor sat up with an odd look on his face.

"Golly, I feel a bit funny inside!" he informed the horrified boys, and, dropping his head in his hands, he gave a hollow groan.

Next moment he had hurriedly quitted the room.

The remainder of the children, seeing their sturdy leader so afflicted, set up a wail.

"Crumbs, do something before they start off again!" cried Don frantically. "Johnny, climb into that hearthrug and play bears with 'em or something," he pleaded, pointing towards the huge bearskin that lay on the floor, "while I go and see what's happening to Victor!"

"I won't!" yelled Johnny, backing in horror away from the rug. "I simply won't—not for anybody!"

"Want Uncle Johnny to be a bear!" wailed Emily.

Johnny turned to flee. But by now the clamouring crowd surrounded him. Don, taking unfair advantage of his position, flew up the stairs. Then he gave a bellow.

"Victor! Come out of that room! Didn't I tell you not to go in there? You only pretended to be ill just to get up here again."

He bounded forward; made a grab at the cheekily grinning Victor, who was in the act of entering Mr. Taylor's study. Victor, with a chuckle, leapt lightly aside. Don, unable to stop himself, cannoned forward. The door swung open with a crash. It was followed by a heavy thud, an ominous tinkle. With hair standing on end, Don peered fearfully into the study.

There, on the floor, lay the enormous vase, knocked from the table by the impact of the door. But in falling it had hit against the bookcase. A large piece had been neatly chipped from the top, and now lay in two portions on the floor.

And as Don stared, in growing horror, he gave a little groan. What would Mr. Taylor say to this? And what hopes would Muriel have of placating him when he saw, this damage?

A LUCKY BREAK

"I'M sorry, old man, but it's the only thing to do. You've simply got to keep the children quiet while I stick that vase together."

Don's voice was determined. "But why should I?" Johnny asked plaintively. "Why have I got to crawl about dressed in a mangy bearskin?"

"Now, come on, Johnny! Be a sport!" Don wheedled. "There's no time to lose in arguing. The old man may be back any minute now, and you don't want him to be mad with Muriel, do you?" He paused; glanced towards the children. "Besides, I know the kiddies will be as good as gold if you play bears with them—won't you, children?"

"Yes, Uncle Don," replied the children obediently.

"There you are," said Don, as if clinching an argument. "It won't take me long to stick it. Can't think why Mr. Taylor made such a fuss about the old thing, anyway. Can't be worth more than a couple of dollars," he added, eyeing the vase disparagingly. "Now, come on, Johnny!"

"All right. I'll do it," mumbled Johnny. "But, remember, it's for Muriel's sake, not for

anybody else. Oh, gosh, I'm going to look such an idiot!" he moaned, shuddering as Don scooped up the rug.

"You look fine, Uncle Johnny!" encouraged Victor. "Bags first ride!"

"Ride!" screamed Johnny. "No, that's too much! Don—"

The rest of Johnny's words were drowned in the shrieking clamour that rose among the children as they pushed and shoved each other in an attempt to climb on his back. Don, sorry for Johnny, but relieved at the way he had managed to occupy the children's attention, quietly grabbed the vase and sneaked out of the room.

But once out in the kitchen he almost forgot Johnny and the children in his feverish anxiety to get the vase together again before Mr. Taylor returned. Not, in Don's opinion, that the vase was worth mending. But there was no accounting for taste. If Mr. Taylor liked this hideous thing around the house, that was his business. Lucky job it hadn't been anything valuable that had got broken; just too bad for everyone if it had been.

Anxiously he glanced at the clock; gave a little whistle. Then, very carefully, he fixed the mended piece of china to the main part of the vase; held it there for a few minutes, then stepped back. He gave a satisfied beam. Only upon the closest inspection could the mend be seen.

Delightedly he picked it up; started for the door. Now, if only Muriel would come before Mr. Taylor returned everything would be all right. A series of groans came to his ears as he approached the room where the children were playing, then a yell of pain.

"That's the finish!" roared Johnny, straightening up and flinging off the bearskin. "I've been kicked, trodden on, and clawed. But when it comes to almost pulling off my hair to keep yourselves on my back, then I quit!"

He glared at the children, wincing at the yells and wails that arose. Then, with a shrug, he turned; caught sight of Don.

"You've done it!" he shouted jubilantly. "It's finished—and I needn't be a bear any more? Oh, that's great! Get it upstairs quickly, Don, before anything else happens. Out of the way, you kids!"

And, all feverish anxiety, he cleared a way to the staircase for Don; hovered round like an anxious hen as Don began to ascend. Then suddenly he gave a jump.

"Don, buck up!" he hissed, his face suddenly becoming anxious. "I can hear a car. It's probably Mr. Taylor. Hurry!"

Don, staggering under the weight of the vase, attempted to hurry. And at that same moment there came a scuffling sound at the top of the stairs—Victor and his chum James, locked in what seemed to be a fight to the death, came into sight on the landing.

"Look out!" roared Johnny.

"Out of the way!" shrieked Don. Too late. The small boys, advancing too near the staircase, missed their footing. Next moment, still clutching each other, they hurtled downwards, while Don stood paralysed below them.

Next moment he, the boys, the vase, and Johnny lay in a tangled heap on the hall floor. And as they stared in horror at the smashed remnants the front door of the house swung open.

Hardly daring to breathe, Don glanced upwards. Then his woebegone face suddenly lit up.

"Muriel!" he yelled. "Oh, gosh, you've come! And Sally—and Fay! Thank goodness you're here!"

"Doesn't help much now, old man," put in Johnny gloomily, gazing despairingly at the shattered vase. "Oh, help! Shut up, can't you?" he roared to the quarrelling children.

For the two small boys had not allowed a trivial thing like a fall downstairs to stop their fight, and the rest of the children, bored



by their inaction of the last few minutes, had joyfully joined in.

Muriel took in the situation at a glance. Though her face whitened a little as she saw the shattered vase, she gave the boys a sympathetic look, then hurried forward.

"Children!" she called. And at the sound of her voice the fight ceased as if by magic. For a moment the children stared unbelievably, then in a glad surge thronged around. "Now be quite quiet, all of you!" ordered Muriel. "Just let Auntie Sally and Auntie Fay see how good you can be. And I think perhaps I can find some candies in my bag."

The children beamed, gazed trustfully, adoringly up at Muriel. But Muriel, her face drawn and scared, looked towards the boys.

"That vase," she murmured. "Oh, how awful! How did it happen?"

"It was an accident," mumbled Don. "I guess nobody was really to blame. But we'll get him another. It couldn't have cost more than five dollars at the very outside."

"Five dollars!" Muriel gave a choked little laugh. "Oh, goodness, it's all my fault! It was so unfair to you two to leave everything to you, but I didn't know the train would be late. And now—"

"The boys didn't mind, Muriel," put in Sally, with a smile at her two dishevelled-looking friends. "And the vase can be replaced."

"That's the point—it can't!" Muriel's voice shook. "I know it doesn't look very marvellous, but—but Mr. Taylor had to pay five-thousand dollars for it."

"Five thousand dollars!" Don's voice squeaked incredulously. "You—"

He broke off, spun round with a groan as the door opened again. With a ghastly sinking feeling inside them he and Johnny watched, shuddered as Mr. Taylor entered the hall.

"Well, well!" he beamed cheerily. "How's the party going? My word, Muriel, you certainly know how to keep the children in order. I couldn't have left the place in better hands. And how—"

Then, as if becoming aware of the tenseness of the atmosphere, his voice broke off. He glanced sharply towards the spot where Don and Johnny were standing, then a horrified look sprang into his eyes. With one leap he had reached the spot where the vase lay, smashed, was grovelling about among the remnants.

Don and Johnny, desperately upset, broke into voluble explanations, waited miserably for the old man to hurl recriminations at them. He straightened up, still holding a piece of the vase in his hand. There was a steely look in his eyes, his face was grim. But amazingly the look he turned upon the boys was almost paternal.

"Five thousand dollars," he grated—"that's what I agreed to pay for this vase! I've already written the cheque out. Well, it's a lucky job I haven't sent it. And it's even luckier for me that you boys came here this afternoon and broke that object."

"Lucky?" stuttered Johnny. "You—you mean you wanted it broken?"

"I didn't think so at first," smiled Mr. Taylor. "But if it hadn't been broken I shouldn't have discovered for some time that it was only a very clever fraud—not a genuine article at all. And to think I've been along this afternoon ordering some more curios from that scoundrel. My boys, I owe you a debt of thanks. How ever can I repay you?"

Don and Johnny exchanged looks. The strained weariness went out of their faces, their shoulders straightened, their old boyish smiles reappeared.

"Just let us go and catch up on a bit of rest in those swell hammocks down by the pool," said Johnny brightly. "That's enough reward for me."

"Me, too," grinned Don. "And if you really want to do us an extra special favour, don't

let any kids come near us again this afternoon!"

And, grinning cheerfully, they marched out of the house.

(End of this week's story.)

You'll be reading another delightful story featuring the light-hearted Merry-makers in next Friday's **GIRLS' CRYSTAL**.

THE CLUE OF THE MARBLE SHEPHERDESS

(Continued from page 388.)

With anguished gaze she watched the ruffian bend and lift a heavy bundle from the hole; she watched him fling back the sacking that covered it—to disclose not the marble shepherdess, but a box filled with stones.

At the same instant the bushes parted—and Noel Raymond stepped into the orchard, followed by two burly policemen.

"There are your men, officers," he remarked cheerfully. "Sorry to disappoint you, Gregory, but I dug up the marble shepherdess myself, and, at the moment, she is safe in the village police station."

He turned to the white-faced, tearful Esther.

"Come into the cottage, Miss Merle," he said gently. "There's a friend of mine coming to see you—a well-known sculptor. I think that he wants to offer you a job as his assistant."

"His what?" exclaimed Esther, a bewildered expression on her face. "Did—did you say his assistant?" she gasped.

"Yes," smiled Noel. "If you would like to be."

"But—but," stuttered the girl, "I can't do that. I'm not good enough. Besides—"

"Besides what?" chuckled Noel, as he took her arm and led her through the orchard in the direction of the house.

"Well, are you sure you're not doing it because you think I'm out of a job for the moment?" asked Esther, flushing.

"Of course not," the young detective returned. "I know a bit about sculpting, and I can see that you've got real talent."

The delightful girl's eyes shone.

"I love the work," she admitted, then she turned laughing eyes upon Noel. "It seems you know a little of everything," she teased.

"Oh no, young lady, not everything. I admit I was puzzled by this mystery of yours at first," grinned Noel, as he opened the garden gate.

"But you were marvellous, Mr. Raymond, I can never thank you enough for putting an end to the story of the haunted tower."

"One minute, though," added Noel, smiling down on the girl's delighted face. "There are still two points that are puzzling me. Why did you hide the bust on my first visit to the tower?"

"I—I didn't know who you were," replied the girl, a little shamefacedly. "You see, my job was a secret."

"One more point," said Noel. "When did you first suspect that your employer was up to no good?"

"When you told me about the attack on you," replied the girl.

Noel patted her shoulder approvingly as he led her indoors.

"You're a plucky girl, Miss Merle," he said. "You deserve to succeed in your new profession. And, by the way, I'm going to be your first customer. I want you to make me a small model of the marble shepherdess. I'd like it on my mantelpiece—as a keepsake!"

(End of this week's story.)

THE DISAPPEARING SCHOOLGIRLS—that is the title of next Friday's detective story in which Noel Raymond turns Science Master in order to solve a startling mystery.



LOYAL to the ELUSIVE OUTLAW



REDSCARF'S INNOCENCE

JUST for a moment Kit Stanforth was completely taken aback at the unexpected appearance of Maurice Hatway and his sister Zena.

But only for a moment!

In the next she realised for the first time that she had right on her side, that in her hand she held the proof of Hatway's villainy.

"You—you villain!" she panted.

"Drop that bag!" Hatway snarled. "If not—"

That was all he said. For suddenly dramatic things were occurring. Moonflower, Kit's faithful little Red Indian friend, had stepped back, with one sweep of her wiry arm had swept the lamp from the desk, plunging the office into darkness. Simultaneously, Kit, dropping the bag, set up a shriek:

"Help! Help! Help—"

There came a cry from Maurice Hatway, a furious mutter from his sister Zena. Then from outside came a shout—scurrying feet.

"Beat it, Zena!" came Hatway's hissed voice.

Kit jumped forward as the door slammed and the lock clicked on the outside—too late. Breathlessly she turned just as Moonflower, having picked up the lamp, struck another match. Instinctively Kit's eyes went to the bag, and her heart jumped in thankfulness to see that it was still there. Then there came a thunderous bang at the door.

"Open up! What's going on in there?" a voice shouted.

"It—it's uncle!" Kit gasped. "Uncle, the door's locked—on the outside!"

There came an exclamation of amazement from Andrew Mackenzie. Then as the lamp flared up again the lock snicked back. With an expression of angry astonishment on his features, Andrew Mackenzie, the factor of Musquash Trading Post, stood staring at his niece.

"Kit—you! You have dared to come back and—"

"Yes, I have dared," Kit said, facing him boldly. "And I hope when you've heard what I have to say, uncle, that you'll be glad. Uncle, I came back to prove Redscarf's innocence."

"Innocence? That rogue—"

"He's not a rogue, and I can prove it," Kit asserted, and, stooping, fung open Maurice Hatway's bag. "Uncle, take a look at this—these things, and take a look at these letters with them."

With a dazed, incredulous look in his eyes the factor glanced into the bag. Then he frowned; then he stooped. Almost dazedly he took out one of the watches, and a bag full of gold nuggets stamped with a name. His face wore an expression almost of awe as his eyes met those of Kit again.

"This—this was the stuff Redscarf was supposed to have stolen from the stage-coach when he was outlawed," he gasped. "Kit, how did you get hold of it?"

In words fewer than she would have thought possible, Kit explained, telling her uncle her own and Moonflower's and Redscarf's adven-

tures from the day she had been sent away from the trading post. Her uncle's face was a study while he listened.

"And to think," he muttered—"to think that I have trusted Hatway, and that sister of his all this time. To think after this that I could ever have suspected Farraday—yes, and taken a big hand in trying to hunt him down. But, say, wait a minute, Kit, my girl! I can't get hold of all this at once. Where is Redscarf, did you say?"

"A prisoner in the hands of the Cherokee Indians," Kit replied. "The Indians are sending for the Mounties to arrest him."

"And you—what do you intend to do?"

"Take all this to the Mounties and prove that they'll be arresting the wrong man," Kit swiftly told him. "But, uncle, we shall need transport. We— Uncle"—she broke off—"am—I forgiven?"

"Forgiven?" He shook his head. "Lass, don't talk about that. If there's any question of forgiveness, it should be me asking you to forgive. Maybe I'll do that at the proper time, but, meantime, let's get all this cleared up. Get a sled and a team of dogs. Hurry like anything to the Mountie post and tell Jim Logan, if he's there, all you know. Meantime," he added grimly, "I guess I'll round up that skunk Hatway and his precious sister, so's to have 'em ready for handing over when you come back."

He hurried away with that. The next moment his strident voice could be heard roaring all over the Post.

"We're winning at last, Moonflower," Kit breathed happily. "Now, you keep guard over this bag while I go and harness up one of the sleds."

"Plenty good. I watch," Moonflower grinned. "This good work, Missy Kit."

Kit agreed. Her heart beating jubilantly, she felt that she had never experienced happier moments in her life as through the darkness she rushed towards the kennels. Greater still was her joy when she heard the glad howl of Tracer, who sensed her long before she reached him, and the next moment was laughingly fending off the great dog as he rose on his hind legs and rapturously smothered her face with his tongue.

"Down, Tracer. Later we'll have fun," she said. "I've come back—for good and keeps this time, and we'll never be parted again."

Tracer barked again, and set the tether line of dogs in pandemonium. Then, with the assistance of one of the Indian trappers, Kit got out one of the sleds; with Tracer in the lead, the dogs were harnessed, and the sled driven back to Hatway's hut. Another three minutes and the bag was loaded on, and, with Kit wielding the whip, she and Moonflower were mushing out through the stockade on the trail to Fort Maynall.

The cold wind cut into her face; frozen little particles of snow rushed beneath the fur of the parka she wore. Moonflower, behind her, hummed a fantastic little tune, showing that she too was happy.

And then all at once there came a shout ahead. A light twinkled.

"Hallo! Somebody else's on the trail—coming this way," Kit said. "Ahoy, there!" she shouted. "Who are you?"

"Gosh, is that Kit Stanforth?" came a howl through the darkness, and Kit's heart leapt again. For the voice was that of Jim Logan, the young Mountie.

Then there loomed into view another sled—an eight-dog team, with three fur-covered men on it and tall Jim Logan mushing alongside, swinging a lantern in his hand. His face expressed his pleasure as he saw her.

"Gosh, Kit, this is a treat!" he said. "You've had me worried stiff since the day that rascal Redscarf went off with you at the railroad station. But, say, what are you doing on this trail—and Moonflower, too?"

"We were just coming to give you some thrilling news," Kit laughed. "But, say, where are you going?"

"Can you guess?" Jim grinned. "Oh!" Memory suddenly flooded back to Kit, causing her to frown. "You—you don't mean to the Cherokee camp?"

"Say, you know something!" Jim said. "Yes, that's where we're bound for—to arrest Redscarf. The Cherokees have got him, so I guess this'll mean promotion for me this time."

"I think you've got another guess coming to you, Jim," Kit laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you, but Redscarf's not your man, after all. Uncle's got the rascal you're after, and his name's not Redscarf, either. Look at this," she added.

She flung open the bag as Jim shone his light on it. He jumped as he saw the contents.

"Gosh, Kit, this is the stuff we've been looking for! Where did you get it?"

Again Kit explained. The Mountie's face was full of stupefaction.

"Then—then this means Redscarf is innocent and Hatway's the real thief?"

"That's it," Kit laughed; "and if I'm not mistaken, uncle will have caught him by this time. So what do we do now, Jim?"

"We'll all go back to the post," Jim snapped. He turned to the men in the sled.

"Take this bag back to Fort Maynall, Simkins. You, Jennings, and you, Cranshaw, come with me. Gosh!" he added, as the exchange was effected. "Who'd ever dream of it all turning out like this? I'm sort of glad, Kit, all the same. I always did have a sneaking feeling for Redscarf, and, if only because you're so fond of him, I'll be pleased to shake him by the hand and beg his pardon." Now let's get after this other double-crosser."

With Jim mushing at the side of the sled, they returned to the post. And there they pulled up as Andrew Mackenzie himself rushed out to meet them.

"You're too late!" he cried lugubriously. "Hatway and Zena have gone—went half an hour ago, heading for the Cherokee camp. And from all I hear, Kit, they've gone there to get that chart from the Cherokee chief."

THE STOLEN CHART

KIT STOOD still for a moment. She had completely forgotten her father's precious chart in her jubilation over the prospects of Redscarf's release. But, obviously, Hatway and Zena valued that chart above all else. Obviously, had Kit taken time to think about the matter she would have known that to secure the chart would have been their first step.

"But what is this chart?" Jim Logan wanted to know. "I guess I don't understand."

"It was a chart left by my father," Kit informed him. "It was covered with funny old Indian signs. Only Goodheart, the Cherokee chief, could read those signs. And Goodheart

did, but he insisted that he would read them to only one man—Redscarf. It was for that reason that Redscarf risked his liberty; and only Redscarf, incidentally, knows what was on the chart which is still in Goodheart's hands. But come!" she cried frantically. "There's still time. Goodheart won't let that chart go, I'm sure, unless I'm there. We may catch them arguing the point at the Indian camp itself."

"Good idea, Kit," Jim Logan said at once. "Factor, we're off. Coming with us?"

"I guess I'll wait till you come back—or follow later," Andrew Mackenzie said. "Good luck, folks!"

Jim nodded. The sled turned round. With Jim on the tailboard now, it once more whisked out of the stockade and into the snow-covered tundra. More thickly, more steadily the snow was falling, and there was a new and more threatening note in the whine of the wind, the sign of a blizzard near at hand. Anxiously Jim looked up at the sky.

"Guess we're in for a real howler," he said. "Hope we reach the Indian camp before it breaks."

Kit nodded. But she was not really worrying. Every minute now took her nearer Redscarf—Redscarf who soon would be free; whose innocence was proved; who could join her in the last hunt for the secret which the chart might reveal.

The sled ploughed its way through ever-deepening snow. On, on they went. The journey would have seemed endless to Kit had she not been buoyed up by those pleasant thoughts of hers; but at last the challenge of the sentry at the entrance to the Indian camp brought the sled to a halt. They were allowed to sweep through, and, entering the tribal square, pulled up outside Goodheart's painted tepee. It was then that a grave-faced elder approached.

"What be your mission?" he inquired. "Goodheart. We want to see Goodheart—at once!" Kit cried.

A sudden spasm passed over the elder's face. "I regret." The Indian bowed his head. "Goodheart cannot be seen because he lies in his tepee very sick. Your white friends, Paleface Hatway and his sister, paid him a visit at the height of the moon. Cruelly they struck down our brave Goodheart, stole from him a certain chart, and then escaped."

In horror, Kit gazed at him. Jim Logan whistled.

"Heck, why didn't I ever guess that Hatway was a guy like this?" he said. "I'm sorry about Goodheart," he said to the elder. "but I believe you have a prisoner here whom I've come to collect—the outlaw, Redscarf. Let him be brought."

"As you say," the elder acknowledged. He clapped his hands.

From nowhere, it seemed, four braves stepped. A quick order was rapped, and, turning on their heels, they sped away. Kit looked up at Jim.

"Thank goodness you're here, Jim," she said. "The Indians will do anything for you—"

"Well, we like to keep good friends with them," Jim Logan returned. "I shall have to explain to them about Redscarf."

Kit bit her lip. "Oh, Jim, supposing we're too late to catch the Hatways—"

"We'll beat them yet," Jim said confidently. "Redscarf will help. According to you, he knows where that chart leads to, and he can be our guide; so don't worry, Kit. As soon as Redscarf comes—"

Kit laughed. In the snow she stamped until suddenly there was the sound of running feet once more. Dimly the braves loomed up in the dark.

"But Redscarf—where is he?" Kit demanded. The tallest bowed his head.

"I regret, paleface," he murmured. "But the outlaw Redscarf is no longer here. He—has escaped."



THE BLIZZARD



"ESCAPED!" echoed Kit, and for a moment stared at the brave. Somehow that had been the last answer she had expected. "But, of course, he doesn't know what we know!" she cried. "He doesn't know that his innocence is proved—that he is a free man."

She gazed at Jim, who shook his head. Then suddenly Moonflower, hanging back a little, stepped forward.

"Missy Kit, Moonflower sorry!" she said humbly.

"You—but why?"
"I—Moonflower hung her head—"I say nothing, but to-day, when Redscarf talk to chief, I knew he would be taken back to Fort. So I went there, eluding the sentry, who had no cause for vigilance. I hid in Redscarf's fort a rope—"

"'Twas by a rope he got out," the brave said.

"I—I sorry—" Moonflower faltered.
Kit's answer was instinctive. She caught the little Redskin by the arm and tenderly hugged her.

"Silly, Moonflower, why should you be?" she asked. "His innocence was not proved when you did that, and—and you did it for the best. But, oh, I wish you had told me before! I wish— Jim, what are we to do?" she asked frantically.

Jim Logan pursed his lips.
"Only one thing, I guess. Redscarf has probably made for his hideout. I guess you'll know where he is, Kit. We'd best go there—"

But in a second Kit rejected that plan.
"Jim, it would take us all night. And all the time we're doing that, where are Hatway and Zena? Even now they must be miles away. Even at this moment they might have discovered the secret of the chart. Jim, we've got to forestall them somehow."

Jim Logan put a worried hand to his forehead.
"We'll just have to see Goodheart, that's all," he said firmly. And he turned towards the tepee.

But the elder again barred his way.
"No enter," he said solemnly. "Goodheart not be seen. He sick."

"Maybe we can make him better," Jim said. "Anyhow, we're going in." And, nodding briefly to Kit, he stepped into the tent. And Kit, her heart thudding now, stepped after him.

A tallow lamp flared upon the floor. It shone on the white, majestic face of the old chief, who lay on a rush bed, stretched out. A bandage was round his head, and from beneath it trickled a stream of crimson. Kit's heart knew a soft compassion.

"Oh, Goodheart!" she murmured.
"Let me handle this," Jim said. And, drawing a flask from his pocket, uncorked it, and then, motioning to Kit to raise the old chief's head, poured some of the liquid between his lips.

Goodheart spluttered a little, and then looked up.

"My friend—you come?" he murmured.

"The outlaw—"
"I'm not after the outlaw," Jim said. "I'm after a bigger scoundrel. Goodheart, can you talk?"

"Talk plenty, but head bad," Goodheart said.
"What is it you want to know?"
Jim nodded to Kit.

"Hatway has stolen my chart," she said. "Hatway means to rob me, and Redscarf has gone. Goodheart, you know where that chart led to. Hatway has gone there, and we must follow. Goodheart, where has he gone?"

The eyes of the chief fell upon her wonderingly.

"Chart—him contain mighty big secret.

Who finds secret become rich," he said. "Gold-mine."

"A—gold-mine! But—but where?"
"Klondike Pass. Thirty, forty miles to south-west," he murmured. "Rock in pass f. s. out like wolf-head, and there mine is to be found. Plenty gold," he added. "Much gold—but plenty peril."

Kit's heart jumped. A gold-mine! That was what her father had found—that was what he had kept a secret! And now in a flash she remembered, and, putting two and two together, began dimly to realise what had happened in the past.

It was four years ago, when she was still a boarder at school, that her father had spent a long holiday near the Klondike Pass. She remembered his return, his suppressed excitement. She remembered him saying that one day they would be rich; that one day, when she had left school, she must go with him; as he had important work near the Klondike Pass.

He had said no more then, perhaps deeming her too young to share the secret; only on his deathbed had he tried to tell her something more, and then, unable to utter a word, had pressed the chart into her hands.

She found Jim's eyes looking into hers.
"Seems your pop made a rich strike, Kit," he said. "I guess it won't be hard to locate the wolf's-head rock. I know the Klondike Pass. But, say, why did your father never tell you about this? I guess he must have filed a claim."

The reply to that observation came from Goodheart himself.

"No claim ever filed. Man who has chart and gets mine, claims mine," he said. "Paleface Hatway go to claim mine."

There came a shrieking from outside, a sudden rattle like machine-gun bullets on the tough skin of the tepee as Jim jumped to his feet.

"So that's the game, is it?" he asked. "Hatway's out to find your father's mine and stake a claim before anyone else can get it. Kit, I guess we've got to move."

"But—but what about Redscarf?" Kit cried.
"Reckon we'll just have to manage without him," Jim said. "Come on."

He bent down. His fingers touched those of the chief, who smiled. Then he strode towards the flap.

"Goodheart, thank you!" Kit said tremulously, and for a moment she gripped the old chief's hand. "We'll never forget you for this—never!"

"Then do you hurry," Goodheart smiled.
"Once the Paleface Hatway file the claim your chance is lost. Go!"

Kit turned. At that instant Jim threw open the flap. A shrieking gust of wind rushed in, bringing with it a load of scurrying flakes. They blew Kit back and caused her to rock on her heels. Jim, turning, caught her. Holding her arm tight, he forced his way outside. And then for a moment they stood dazed and bewildered by the fury which smote them.

The voice of a thousand furies filled the darkened air. From every side arrow points of frozen snow rushed down and beat upon them, making them stagger in its fury. The first blizzard of the Arctic winter had arrived.
"Jim!" Kit gasped. "Jim!"

His voice, though a shout, reached her in a croaked whisper:

"Kit, we're beaten! We can't make it! Neither dog nor man could live in a blizzard like this. We've just got to wait."

A groan of despair broke from her lips. Wait! Wait now—when already Maurice Hatway and Zena would be half-way towards their goal and the fortune of which they were meant to rob her!

Be sure not to miss next week's exciting chapters of this serial in the GIRLS' CRYSTAL.