



Detective June's MOST THRILLING CASE

THE STOLEN KEY

By PETER LANGLEY

JUNE GAYNOR, schoolgirl niece of Noel Raymond, was furious when she heard the fantastic rumours which were being circulated about her uncle. Some of these suggested that Noel was in league with the Grey Falcon, a mysterious master-crook; others hinted that Noel was actually the Grey Falcon himself!

Eager to prove her uncle's innocence, June wanted to help him track down the master-crook, but Noel would not hear of it. Instead, he gave her a case of her own to tackle. This concerned an old play which the girls of the Upper Fourth at Port Craig College intended to revive. According to an ancient legend, disaster would overtake all who attempted to produce the play, and Julie Varmont, the leader of the Upper Fourth, had received a message ordering her to give up the project.

Disguised as Dorothy Whiteman, a new girl, June went to Port Craig, and on the door of the old refectory, which was used as the school theatre, she saw another threatening note—signed by the Grey Falcon. Her case and Uncle Noel's were connected!

Noel, disguised as a railway porter, visited June and told her that hidden in the main dressing-room of the refectory was a secret which would enable him to discover the identity of the master-crook. Excitedly June went to the Assembly Hall to get the dressing-room key, only to find the glass case, where it was kept, smashed and the key gone.

IN consternation June stared at the empty hook in the glass-fronted case on the wall. She had arrived too late. The key to the refectory dressing-room—the vital clue which Uncle Noel wanted—had been stolen. Once again the Grey Falcon had been too quick for them.

But how had the mysterious master-crook gained entrance to the college? It seemed incredible that he could have walked in, smashed open the case of keys, then walked out again without being seen or heard. A sudden suspicion flashed across June's brain.

Was it possible that he had a confederate at Port Craig College? Suppose one of the servants was in his pay! Suppose—

Her rioting thoughts broke off, for there came a rush of feet, followed by a chorus of surprised exclamations.

"Dorothy Whiteman, what on earth d'you think you're doing?"

"Golly, and who smashed the case?"

"There'll be a fine old row when the Head sees it!"

June had swung round on hearing the name by which she was known at Port Craig College.

And there, confronting her, was Julie, Lady Sue and a whole crowd of other Upper Fourth Formers.

June flushed, for it was obvious that some of the girls thought that she had been responsible.

"I didn't do it!" she ejaculated. "I found it smashed open when I came in here a moment ago, and Julie"—she turned to the plump, cheery leader of the Form—"the dressing-room key's gone!"

"What!"
In startled wonder the Upper Fourth Formers surveyed the double row of hooks, and they gaped as they saw that one of the keys was missing.

"Surely this isn't another of Cora Jarrold's mean tricks!" cried Julie.

"It must be," put in Lady Sue, her aristocratic cheeks red with indignation. "No one but she would want to stop us from using the dressing-room."

"Hear, hear!"
From all around came cries of agreement. Knowing that the Fifth Form were all jealous because it had been the Upper Fourth who had thought of the idea of reviving the legendary play, "The Casket of the Three Virtues," Julie & Co. were certain that it was their rivals who had been responsible for this latest set-back.

"What are we going to do?" asked Mary Twigg, her pretty face pale with dismay. "Some of our costumes are locked in the main dressing-room. That means, until we get back the key we can't rehearse properly."

"Don't worry," said Julie, her voice unusually crisp. "We'll get it back. Just wait until— Hallo, here she is!"

They all whirled as another crowd of girls entered the Assembly Hall. They were Fifth Formers, and at their head was their tall, bespectacled captain. Instantly Julie & Co. surrounded them, accusing them point-blank of having taken the key. Stormily Cora denied it, and June took advantage of the angry scene to slip away unnoticed.

She must report what had happened to Uncle Noel, whom she had left, disguised as a station porter, in her study.

She found the young detective still there, busying himself with her luggage. He listened in silence to what June had to tell him, and when she had finished he patted her arm, and

"Never mind, dear," he said. "It can't be helped. I must find some other way of getting into the dressing-room. I'm certain that something is hidden there."

He spoke quietly, but June sensed his keen disappointment. Her heart went out to him, for she knew how desperately important it was to him that he should end this case quickly. For only by solving the mystery and by capturing the Grey Falcon could he silence the cruel rumours which were being spread about him.

Why, some people were suggesting that he was in league with the Grey Falcon! Others actually dared to hint that he might even be the elusive master-crook himself!

"Now don't worry, Uncle Noel," she whispered. "You'll beat the Grey Falcon in the end—I know you will! And I'll do everything possible to help you!"

But he shook his head at that.

"No—I can't let you run your pretty head into danger, June," he said. "I should never have suggested you should come here in disguise. I ought to have guessed that the two cases were connected, but—he broke off and they both stiffened, as they heard footsteps approaching along the corridor. "No time for talk now," he breathed. "Come to the old water-tower to-morrow before lessons. We'll decide then whether or not it's safe for you to stay here."

Abruptly his whole manner changed. Dragging off his peaked cap, he raised a respectful hand to his head.

"Thank 'ee kindly, missy," he said, once again assuming his role of porter. "And don't 'ee forget. If 'ee want any odd jobs done—ole Sam Bristow'll do 'em."

And with an earnest nod he grasped the empty trolley and began to trundle it across the room.

Turning, June saw the reason for this piece of play-acting. The door had opened, and standing there was Julie. The plump girl did not give the supposed porter a second glance. Agitatedly she beckoned to June.

"There you are!" she exclaimed. "I've been looking all over the place for you. Why did you slip away like that? Don't you know that it's time for Roll Call?"

"Sorry, I didn't realise," said June, and, turning, flashed the disguised detective a significant glance. "I won't forget," she said, referring, of course, to their appointment for to-morrow morning, not to his offer to carry out any odd jobs she wanted.

As the two girls hurried along the corridor, Julie made a wry grimace.

"Miss Tuft is marking the register this evening," she said, "and she made a rare old fuss when she learnt about the smashed case. She pooh-poohs the idea that anyone in the Fifth's taken the key. She's certain that it's either the Grey Falcon or a ghost that's at work, and she actually suggested we ought to give up our idea of producing the play."

June, realising how upset the usually light-hearted leader of the Upper Fourth was, flashed her a sympathetic smile.

"You didn't agree, did you?" she asked.

Stormily Julie shook her head.

"Not likely! It's all a lot of rot about the ancient warning! But Miss Tuft is as fussy as a

hen, and frightfully superstitious. I'm afraid if anything else happens—"

Julie broke off, as they entered the Assembly Hall, to find that by now the whole school had gathered there. The Upper Fourth mistress, register in hand, stood on the rostrum, striding agitatedly to and fro. At sight of June she stopped and made an exasperated gesture.

"So there you are!" she exclaimed. "Really, it's too bad of you to be late, Dorothy!" she cried. "Being a new girl is no excuse. Hurry up and get into your place. The register ought to have been gone through long ago. Really," she added, with another nervous gesture. "I hardly know where I am, with all this terrible ghost business. It's most unsettling, and goodness knows what will be the outcome of it."

She shook her head moodily and fussily began the Roll Call. As June waited for her own name her gaze kept roving across to the broken case of keys.

Why was the Grey Falcon so desperately anxious to prevent anyone from entering the main dressing-room in the refectory? What possibly could be hidden there?

It seemed impossible to guess, but June knew that it was vital that the secret of the locked room should be discovered as quickly as possible. Not only might Uncle Noel's future career depend upon it, but also the fate of the Upper Fourth's play. It was clear that if any further disturbing happenings took place in the college, Miss Tuft would do her best to persuade the headmistress to ban the production altogether.

Suddenly June's lips set into a firm, grim line. A daring thought had occurred to her.

"I've got a set of skeleton keys in my hand-bag," she told herself, "so why shouldn't I—"

An irate voice cut into her thoughts.

"Dorothy Whiteman, will you kindly wake up! I have called your name three times already. Really, I don't know what's come over everyone to-night!"

And June saw Miss Tuft gazing at her petulantly.

"Oh, sorry, Miss Tuft," she said hastily. "Present!"

But as soon as the Form-mistress had turned her attention to the next girl June's thoughts concentrated again on the exciting idea which was humming in her brain.

Why shouldn't she try to open the locked door with her skeleton keys! Of course, that would mean going to the old refectory during the night, for she did not want anyone to know of her venture—not even Uncle Noel, for he would not approve if there was any risk of his niece running into danger.

"But there can't be any danger," June told herself. "It'll be safe enough, and— Her grey eyes gleamed excitedly. "Yes, I'll do it!" she murmured, and her pulses raced at the thought of the coming adventure.

What a thrill it would be! And how grand if when she met Uncle Noel to-morrow she could hand over to him the valuable clue which lay hidden behind that locked door!

JUNE'S NEW DISCOVERY



THE dormitories at Port Craig College were divided off into small cubicles. June's eyes glistened more than ever when she discovered that. Now there was no risk of her secret visit to the old refectory being discovered, she told herself.

After lights out she lay as patiently as she could on her bed, waiting for the rest of the Upper Fourth to fall asleep. At last the muffled whispering died away and silence engulfed the long row of cubicles. The clock on the school tower hammered out eleven o'clock, and June threw back the blankets and groped for her shoes.

She had not bothered to undress, so it only

took her a minute to put on her shoes and to don a hooded macintosh—a wise precaution in case she were seen flitting about the school.

Adjusting the hood well over her face, she picked up the sling hand-bag containing her detective outfit, and stole out of the dormitory.

At the end of the corridor there was a window giving access to a fire escape. Rather to her surprise it was open, so clambering over the sill, she went tip-toeing down the iron staircase.

It was a lovely night, with a harvest moon flooding the college grounds with ghostly light. Not a soul was to be seen; not a sound to be heard.

Despite herself June caught in her breath as the ancient refectory loomed into sight. It looked so stark; so forbidding—silhouetted as it was against the moon.

She remembered the eerie stories which she had heard about it, and her heart leapt to her throat as she heard a stealthy sound amongst the trees.

Scared, she looked round, half-expecting to see the spectral figure of Sir Richard de Coreville, and then she laughed. It was a big black cat which roved there.

"I'm as bad as Miss Tuft," she murmured, chuckling as she thought how agitated that nervous mistress would be if she were here in her shoes.

Hurriedly she ran on down the winding path. The rusty iron latch scraped gratefully under her thrusting fingers; creakingly the great oaken doors swung open, and the musty blackness of the refectory confronted her.

For a moment June hesitated, again knowing a moment's uneasiness as from out of the inky darkness there came ghostly sounds, and then angrily she took a grip on herself.

"It's only mice," she murmured. Taking a tighter grip on the sling of her hand-bag, she stepped boldly into the refectory, only to pull up abruptly, her heart thudding again.

What was that? The sound of ghostly footsteps; an eerie whispering! The sounds seemed to come from the stage. Nervously June took another step forward, her gaze riveted on the narrow opening between the half drawn velvet curtains, and then she stopped again, the blood draining from her face, her whole being concentrated on the apparition which had suddenly loomed into view.

The spectral figure of a knight! A knight clad in doublet and with a rapier protruding from under the hem of the green, strangely glowing cloak he wore.

"Oh, golly! S—Sir Richard de Coreville!" The words rose to June's lips, but she found herself incapable of uttering them. As if petrified she stood there, and then she gasped, for as magically as it had appeared, the spectre had vanished.

For a moment or two she stood there, wondering if she had been dreaming, then recklessly she went running forward.

But her heart was pounding as she neared the stage. Suppose that strangely garbed figure had been the master-crook—the Grey Falcon himself!

As she remembered Uncle Noel's grim warning June could not suppress a shiver. It was not pleasant to know that she might be here alone with the Grey Falcon—out of reach of any possible help. Yet she had no thought of retiring. For Uncle Noel's sake, if for no other, she must discover all she could.

Reaching the footlights, she pulled aside the velvet curtains, and then she gasped, that uneasy look once again filling her eyes. For the stage was empty. There was not a trace of that unexpectedly youthful figure in the glowing cloak.

With a gasp, June climbed on to the stage, peering around.

"It's uncanny," she whispered to herself. "Where—"

Her voice trailed away, for from out of the darkness had come a soft chuckle. To the tensed June it seemed to have a ghostly, mocking quality about it. She felt the hair on the nape of her neck bristling, and then angrily she squared her shoulders.

"What a chump I am!" she exclaimed. "It's coming from down below! That trap-door! That explains the vanishing trick!"

Tip-toeing across the stage, she knelt beside the trap-door which had already been the innocent means of giving the girls of the Upper Fourth one scare that day.

Cautiously she pressed down on it, and as without a sound it swung downward she caught in her breath. For instantly the darkness was sliced by a widening band of light, and plainly now she could hear voices—not one, but two.

The suspicion which had come to her in the Assembly Hall returned, and excitedly she peered down into the cellar.

Was it possible that the Grey Falcon had a confederate?

She pressed down the wooden trap-door a little farther, and then her eyes gleamed, for there was two persons in the room below, seated on upturned packing cases, their backs to the trap-door.

The light of a solitary candle flung flickering shadows on the walls, but it was strong enough for June to see that one of the seated figures was the missing "knight." Its companion was a thick-set man in rough tweeds, and like the bogus cavalier, a crape mask concealed his features.

It was this man who was speaking, and eagerly June craned forward, determined not to miss so much as a single word.

"Don't worry about Noel Raymond," he was saying. "Before the week's out the police will be hunting him—not the Grey Falcon!"

With difficulty June suppressed a horrified gasp. What further treachery was the master-crook plotting against her uncle?

The figure in the eerily glowing cloak leaned forward.

"Good! And there's no need to worry about those schoolgirls either. I'll soon fix them. Look—I've got both keys already."

And with another chuckle the bogus cavalier held out the missing keys.

June gasped, for that voice had been too high-pitched to be a man's. Then it was a girl who was the unknown enemy of the Upper Fourth Dramatic Society! Her suspicions had been right. The Grey Falcon had an accomplice in the college, though whether she was one of the girls, or a servant, it was impossible to say. That mask and cavalier costume made a perfect disguise.

The man seated opposite her guffawed his approval.

"Good!" he ejaculated. "The Grey Falcon will be pleased when I make my report, but first I want some information from you. I've been ordered to make a complete check-up."

He lowered his voice, and recklessly June pushed the trap-door farther down, pushing her head and shoulders through the opening in an effort to catch what was being said. She was disappointed to learn that neither of the conspirators below were actually the master-crook himself, but she was certain that she was on the verge of even more exciting discoveries.

"Golly, won't Uncle Noel be surprised when I see him to-morrow!" she breathed. "Won't he be thrilled when—"

She finished with a wild, involuntary cry, for in her eagerness to eavesdrop she had unwittingly placed too much weight on the trap-door.

The next moment utter disaster overtook her. For the trap-door swung wide open, and June, precariously perched as she was, got no chance to recover her balance.

Another horrified shout left her lips, then she felt herself falling headlong down the

cellar steps, to land with a bone-jolting thud almost at the feet of the Grey Falcon's two confederates!

THE MISSING KEYS



WHAT happened next was to June like a scene from some awful nightmare.

Dunly she realised that the two conspirators had leapt to their feet; vaguely she was aware that the girl in the cavalier's costume was screaming; then strong fingers bit into her

shoulder and she felt herself hoisted to her feet.

Through the slits of his mask, the man glared down at her still hooded face.

"A spy, eh?" he growled. "Well, the Grey Falcon will know how to deal with you."

June made no comment. She could not have spoken if she had wanted to. The shock of her disastrous fall had left her dazed. All she was aware of were those piercing eyes; of the deadly plight in which she found herself.

As she stood there, helpless in the unknown's iron grip, the girl in the glowing cloak took a step forward.

"Who is she?" she demanded shrilly. "Push back that hood, I can't see her face in this light! If I'm to carry out my work it's essential that I should know her identity. Let me—"

Angrily the man whirled on her. "Hold your tongue!" he snapped. "Do you want to give away your own identity?"

The girl in the glowing cloak tossed her head.

"Of course I don't," she retorted. "I only want to find out who she is."

And she stepped forward, meaning to pull the hood from June's head. But quickly the man pulled her back.

"You do as you're told and clear off."

"But—"

"Be quiet, I say. Leave me to deal with this little spy. Don't worry, she won't get a chance to interfere with your plans."

And he gave a husky guffaw that sent an icy shiver running down June's spine.

For a moment the bogus cavalier stood there, biting her lip. Obviously she was curious to see who their captive was, and yet she realised that she must obey her companion's order.

"All right," she said, "but don't forget—if you let her slip through your fingers, you'll have the Grey Falcon to reckon with."

And with another inquisitive backward glance at June's hooded figure she crossed to the steep stairs and quickly ascended them. Pulling down the spring-operated trap-door, she climbed up out of sight, and next moment her slippers' feet could be heard pattering across the stage.

Though her heart was pounding, pluckily June strove to brace herself to face whatever ordeal lay before her. To her surprise, her captor relaxed his grip on her shoulder; nor did he speak.

Half a minute went by—a minute—and still he stood there silently. June could bear the suspense no longer. Desperately she regarded him.

"Well," she burst out, "what are you going to do with me?"

Still the man in the mask said nothing. His head was cocked to one side. His whole attention seemed to be concentrated on listening. It was almost as if he had forgotten her presence!

June could not understand it, but, as she realised how absorbed he was, she felt her pulses begin to race, and softly, stealthily she started to edge towards the stairs. Perhaps there was a chance for her even yet!

She had gained the bottom step, was just about to make a wild dash up to the trap-door, when suddenly the unknown relaxed his tensed muscles and laughed.

"It's all right, June, the danger's past," he said. "There's no need to escape now."

June stood as if turned to stone. Dazedly she stared, hardly able to believe her own eyes.

"That voice! It bore no resemblance to the one which had threatened her a moment ago. Surely—"

She blinked again, for the man in the mask had given another laugh.

"Sorry if I scared you, June, but it was the only way. I daren't risk that girl getting suspicious."

With an effort June found her voice. "Uncle Noel!" she gasped.

And, torn between amazement and relief, she hurled herself into his arms. As he gave her an affectionate hug, she gazed at him in baffled wonder.

"But what does it mean?" she asked. "What are you doing here in disguise? How did you manage to make that girl think you were an accomplice of the Grey Falcon?"

Noel smiled, but there was a look in his eyes which showed how greatly he was feeling the strain of what was proving to be his most difficult and worrying case.

"That was fairly easy," he said. "You see, although I don't know the identity of the Grey Falcon, I've managed to track down several of his men, and when I learnt that one of them had a secret appointment here in the refectory—well, I just decided to take his place."

"But—but where is he now?" questioned June, still dazed by the shock of it all.

"Trussed up in the old watch tower—feeling pretty sorry for himself," was the reply. "Now it's your turn, my dear. What brought you here? It was very naughty of you to disregard my warning, you know. You might have run into serious danger."

June bit her lip.

"I know, but I was only trying to help—really I was. You see, I thought I might be able to open that locked door with my skeleton keys."

The detective shook his head.

"Not a chance. I'm afraid, my dear. I took a look at that door after I left you earlier on, and there's no skeleton key ever been made which will open that lock."

June gave a dismal sigh.

"It looks as if I've completely put my foot into it," she said glumly. "Not only have I been wasting my time, but I've spoilt all your plans. If I hadn't come blundering down here—"

But Noel Raymond interrupted her gently.

"No need to reproach yourself, my dear," he said. "Actually I discovered quite a lot before we were interrupted."

June looked up eagerly.

"The identity of that horrid girl in the cavalier costume?" she asked.

Noel shook his head.

"No—not that—but I've managed to confirm several suspicions, and if only I can discover the secret of that locked dressing-room—"

June's grey eyes were full of distress.

"Uncle Noel, I am sorry! Thanks to me tumbling down the stairs, you didn't have a chance to get the key."

To her surprise he grinned.

"Oh, yes I did. Our unknown friend was so frightened that she let both of them drop. Look!"

He pointed, and June gave a startled look as she saw lying there on the dusty floor, two large, intricately-designed keys. Excitedly she made a swoop for them.

"Oh, goody!" she cried. "Then come on, uncle! Don't let's waste another minute. I'm simply dying with curiosity to see what really does lie behind that locked door!"

And, clutching the precious keys, she went racing across to the stairs.

What secret can the dressing-room contain that is so vital to the mysterious Grey Falcon? Be sure not to miss a word of next Friday's splendid chapters of this serial in the **GIRLS' CRYSTAL**.