

GIRLS' CRYSTAL ^{3^D}

Week
Ending
Oct. 30th,
1948.

AND "THE SCHOOLGIRL"



This Week Penelope Learns The Strange Story Of Glynn Tracy:—

Written by DOROTHY PAGE

MR. ASPELL'S STRANGE BEHAVIOUR

PENELOPE CARTWRIGHT, daughter of the headmaster of Harcourt Abbey Boys' School, joined a secret society known as the Grey Ghosts.

The society was out to fight the bullying senior master, Mr. Aspell, also known as the "Wasp," and to prove the innocence of Glynn Tracy, a boy who had been expelled.

Only Hugh Mason, leader of the Grey Ghosts, knew Penelope's real identity, the other two members, Bob Gower, and Harvey Doane, knowing her simply as the "Fourth Grey Ghost."

The Grey Ghosts were convinced that a secret room was hidden in the old belfry by Little Chapel. One afternoon, nearing dusk, as Penelope awaited Hugh near the school gardens, she saw, to her puzzlement, Mr. Aspell leave the school stealthily and make his way in the direction of—the old belfry!

AGOG with excitement and speculation, Penelope sped through the gathering dusk in the direction of the old abbey belfry. When she reached it she saw that the heavy oak door was open, and just beyond the entrance stood the tall figure of the senior master.

But what was Mr. Aspell up to?

Wonderingly, Penelope peered across at the belfry.

"The Wasp" was standing on tiptoe, and he seemed to have wedged the metal bar he had brought with him between two of the heavy granite blocks above the doorway.

It was so surprising that Penelope stared spellbound. Furiously the master levered at the bar, and at last there came a cracking sound. He stepped swiftly back, and two heavy blocks of stone came crashing down, rolling out of the doorway in a cloud of dust.

The dust cleared, and Penelope saw Mr. Aspell again. He was resting on the fallen stones and nodding his head as if in satisfaction.

Penelope was completely out of her depth, but immeasurably excited and intrigued. What would happen now?

Her bewilderment increased as Mr. Aspell showed no signs of further interest in the heavy blocks he had dislodged. He turned, hesitated, then vanished from her sight, apparently making for the circular staircase leading to the top of the tower and the bell loft.

"Well—" gulped Penelope, rubbing her freckled nose. "If that doesn't take the cake. Where do I go from here?"

Common sense told her to wait; but her distrust of Mr. Aspell and the love of adventure in her make-up urged her to investigate. She cast a cautious glance around, and jumped violently.

"Oh, Zimmy—"

Emerging from the ruins of the distant Little Chapel stole two cloaked and hooded figures. They paused cautiously and Penelope caught a distinct view of them through the trees.

"The Grey Ghosts!" she breathed.

By their build she instantly guessed that they were Nos. 2 and 3—Harvey Doane and Bob Gower. Excitedly she watched them and enlightenment came as the taller raised one robed arm and pointed in the direction of the belfry.

Hugh Mason, the leader of the school Secret Society, had been kept busy by Mr. Aspell, so he had sent his followers to investigate the belfry.

"Wizard!" Penelope thrilled. "Good old Grey Ghosts—"

Her sudden smile vanished; blank dismay replaced it. The two boys obviously hadn't the slightest idea that Mr. Aspell was in the tower.

Again she saw Harvey point, indicating to his companion the spot

where they would climb over the brick wall surrounding the belfry.

"Ouch!" groaned Penelope. "They'll walk right into 'The Wasp'—"

She acted impulsively, driven by her loyalty to the boys she had vowed to help. Although her identity was a secret from Harvey and Bob, and she wished it to remain so, that fact was forgotten in her sudden anxiety to warn them of the danger.

She raced silently forward, so silently, so swiftly in fact that she was ten yards only from the two grey-clad figures when they saw her for the first time.

The taller caught the shorter sharply by the arm. They made to turn.

"Stop!" gasped Penelope.

In relief she saw them check. She flew up through the dusk, and then something happened that took her completely by surprise.

The grey figures leapt to meet her, silent and swift, deft and active. They grasped her, whirled her up in strong arms, a firm hand falling across her lips to prevent her crying out.

Too startled to struggle immediately, Penelope felt herself rushed back into the ruins of the Little Chapel, down a flight of steps and over echoing flagstones. Abruptly she was placed down.

She rolled over—to hear the thud of a door closing, the bang of a bar being dropped in place. Then came Harvey's voice, low-pitched, disguised, calling to her:

"Sorry, Miss Cartwright. We had to do it. You won't be heard if you shout; but we'll see you're freed—as soon as we've done what we've got to do!"

Soft footsteps pattered away. Penelope sat up, gasping. Darkness cloaked her completely. Instantly she realised she had been locked in the cellar beneath the Little Chapel. She realised something else, something that made her want to kick herself in chagrin.

"Oh, you idiot, Penny! What else could you have expected! They don't know you're No. 4. They naturally thought you were just the Head's sneaky daughter, trying to trap them—"

Instead—she was trapped herself, with the two daring boys hurrying to the belfry, walking blindly into the hands of Mr. Aspell, the Grey Ghosts' greatest enemy!



A SHOCK FOR BOB AND HARVEY

Something near panic gripped Penelope. Her anxiety was solely for the two Grey Ghosts as she sprang to her feet and groped her way to

the door. She banged on it with her fists.

"Stop!" she cried. "Harvey—Bob, for goodness' sake stop! You're walking into a trap. This is No. 4!"

No answer. Nos. 2 and 3 had gone. "Oh, gosh!" she groaned. "They don't hear. They won't take any notice of my banging—"

She snapped short, anxiety sharpening her wits. Hands cupping her lips, she sent out a clear owl hoot—the call of the Grey Ghosts. Then she paused, listening, hoping against hope. Was that slow step returning? She feverishly banged once more on the door, calling:

"Bob, for goodness' sake listen—stop. Don't go to the belfry. You're walking into a trap—"

Ear pressed against the door, she heard distinctly quick footsteps, a rustle, then a low, wondering whisper from Harvey Doane.

"Bob, did you hear that? She gave the owl call! What the dickens—"

Penelope gasped in relief. Thank goodness she had checked them. She pressed her lips close to the door.

"Harvey—Bob, unbar the door, quickly!"

Silence in the darkness, before Bob spoke, his voice hoarse and agitated:

"She—she knows who we are, Harvey. We're sunk. But don't open. It's a trap—"

"Oh, Bob, you chump!" Penelope hissed desperately. "Don't you understand—I'm No. 4! Penelope Cartwright is No. 4—always has been! Hugh knows. I helped him to escape from the Clock Tower last night. Quick! The Wasp's in the belfry—I saw him, that's why I rushed to warn you."

An exclamation—and again silence. But this time slowly, almost fearfully it seemed, there came the grating of the bar being lifted.

Penelope sighed; her heart steadied, and even in that moment a grin twitched at her lips as she visualised the almost incredulous expressions the boys must be wearing. What a shock for them both!

The big door creaked open. Outlined against the pale light filtering into the ruins, she saw the two, grey-robed figures. They stood very still, staring through the slits in their hoods.

"Hallo, boys!" whispered Penelope, stepping out. "I thought I wouldn't be able to stop you."

Neither boy moved.

"Oh, gosh!" muttered Bob huskily.

"Oh gosh!"

"Mu—Miss Cartwright," stammered the taller boy; and for once there was no lazy drawl about Harvey's voice.

"You—No. 4! You can't be—but you must be, else you wouldn't know—"

he became incoherent. "Oh, ginger, I'm going crazy—definitely. I can't believe it!"

Penelope smiled.

"It's a fact, boys," she said. "I never wanted you to know. But to save Hugh last night I had to come out into the open with him. And—well, the same thing happened to-night with you."

"Gosh!" whispered Bob again.

"No. 4—a girl!" Wonderment and growing admiration combined in Harvey's voice. "I'm—I'm knocked for six. I want hours to sort this out!"

Penelope took command; she saw she had to.

"We haven't hours, Harvey—we may

have only minutes. The Wasp's over at the belfry; I'll tell you about him later. But he may have heard my shout. We've got to get clear."

She hurried forward through the ruins. The boys stirred themselves and slowly followed. As Penelope reached the open she looked across at the belfry. Through the trees she saw nothing, but she heard the bang of a door.

"Wasp's coming," she gulped. "We'll have to bolt. This way. He mustn't see us."

She raced through the trees, heading for a spot at the outer wall where once before she had climbed over. The two robed boys joined her, taking advantage of every scrap of shadow and cover the dusk provided.

The tall wall loomed ahead. "Let me help you," jerked Harvey, coming alongside.

"Thanks—I can manage," panted Penelope, and with a flying leap she caught the top of the wall and athletically drew herself up.

Her example was followed by the boys and as they paused there for a moment they heard the hoot of an owl. It came from the trees to their left.

"It's Hugh!" exclaimed Harvey, peering intently.

"Oh, good!" breathed Penelope. "Look, boys, we've got to talk. Will you wait for him here, and bring him to the clearing in the little spinney across the lane? If you don't hear an owl hoot from me you'll know it's safe and there's no one about. I don't want to be bossy, but is that O.K.?"

"O.K. it is," murmured Harvey. "Definitely."

She flashed them a smile and dropped into the lane. There was no one about. She sped across into the spinney on the far side. In the shade of the trees she paused and listened; the place was deserted.

"Phew!" she sighed, relaxing. "Hot while it lasted!"

She plomped down on a fallen tree in the clearing and regained her breath. Her thoughts raced; her dancing smile came and went.

"Well, all the Grey Ghosts know now," she murmured. "That may make it more dangerous for me—but I had to do it." She chuckled softly.

"Zimmy, were they surprised! And won't I have some news for them!"

She waited eagerly for the boys. They were some time, and she decided that Bob and Harvey were holding up matters by bombarding Hugh with questions about herself.

At last there were swift footsteps. Through the trees came the boys, Hugh in the lead. Bob and Harvey had their robes off now, tucked under their blazers.

"Hallo, Hugh! Hallo, boys!" said Penelope cheerily.

They paused. Bob and Harvey looked at her as if they had never seen her before. Hugh gave her a slow, admiring smile; a smile that broadened into a grin as he glanced at the other two.

"Meet No. 4, chaps," he said quietly. "I had the surprise last night, and I know how you're feeling! I needn't tell you now that it was Miss Cartwright who saved the day—as she's saved it for us before."

It was the fair-haired, sturdy Bob who moved first. He stepped forward almost uncomfortably, blue eyes fixed incredulously on her face.

"Miss Cartwright," he stammered, "Hugh has told us more, and—and looking back I'm beginning to realise things—"

His rugged face grew brick red. "I've said some pretty awful things about the Head's daughter! I didn't know—I'm sorry. Oh, gosh, when I think what you've done—"

"Please, Bob," said Penelope quickly, fushing herself, "I understand. Golly, I don't blame you a bit. In a way the things you said were a compliment to my acting, and—I think you boys have been grand."

She impulsively held out her hand. A grin split Bob's freckled face, and he gripped her fingers with a strength that made her wince. Harvey, his lazy eyes regarding her wonderingly, took his place. He removed his cap with

the easy grace that was part of his make-up.

"Miss Cartwright," he murmured, "like friend Bob I can't find the right words; but I've got to readjust all my ideas about girls—definitely."

The admiration in his voice and in the eyes of the other boys made Penelope's heart glow.

"Zimmy, you'll—you'll embarrass me," she murmured happily. "Look, I'm only No. 4, but I do think perhaps we ought to be quick now and hear what I've learnt."

She looked at Hugh as she spoke. He nodded quietly and approvingly and indicated the fallen tree trunk. She sat down; they followed suit.

Penelope began speaking and they listened with tense interest, never taking their eyes off her face. She told how Harold Smecke had come to suspect her, and how Smecke had passed on his suspicions to Mr. Aspell. Hugh started at that, regarding her rather worriedly, but he did not interrupt.

She told of her conviction that the senior master had purposely kept Hugh busy so that he could not take action in their quest at the old belfry. Hugh leaned forward quickly.

"I wondered what The Wasp's game was!" he exclaimed. "I haven't had a free moment to-day—that's why I sent Harvey and Bob into action, arranging to join them as soon as I could. But tell me—why on earth do you think The Wasp was trying to keep us from the belfry? He can't know anything of our mission there for Glynn Tracy."

"I'm not so sure," said Penelope quietly. "Listen to this!"

She told them how she had followed the senior master, and of his strange activities in the belfry. The boys heard with swift, startled looks at each other.

"Good for you!" breathed Hugh. "But that's dashed queer. His actions don't make sense, and yet—I don't like it. The Wasp's tricky—cunning and—"

He paused, frowning. Instinctively they waited, looking at him.

"Only one thing for it," he added quietly. "We must act quickly. Later to-night the Grey Ghosts raid the belfry in search of the secret room!"

Penelope felt a thrill, leaning forward excitedly.

"Oh, wizard! But, Hugh—surely you can tell me now: what on earth do you hope to discover when we do find the secret room? How can it clear Glynn Tracy? There's so much I don't know about him either. Please—"

Hugh hesitated; he looked at her rather strangely, she thought.

"There's something else I've got to tell you," he said quietly. "But first—you're right; you should know what we're searching for. Listen then. Miss Cartwright—"

"Penny," prompted Penelope. "Please!"

He smiled.

"Penny—then. This is the story of Glynn Tracy."

Hugh explained.

Penelope waited breathlessly. Even Bob and Harvey, who must know the story, listened intently as Hugh began to speak.

"Glynn is my cousin, as you know. But you've never seen him, of course. He wasn't particularly good at sports. He was quiet, but a wonderful scholar—and the finest fellow I've ever known."

Silently Bob and Harvey nodded their complete agreement.

"The simplest way to describe Glynn," continued Hugh steadily, "is to say that he feared no one when it came to a question of right and wrong. He was a prefect, of course, and the juniors thought the world of him because he was always their champion against The Wasp's tyranny. The Wasp hated him; feared him, too, I think. They were always crossing swords—"

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The COWBOY WHO MYSTIFIED MERLE

By GAIL WESTERN

THE ARRIVAL OF PRINCE

ON the eve of the Gold Rider Trophy race which meant so much to the future of her home, Happy Valley Ranch, Merle Wascon was kidnapped. She was made prisoner in a lonely hut by a mysterious traitor on her ranch, who was a hireling of Nathaniel Garsten, a rascally neighbouring rancher.

As a result of Garsten's scheming, Larry Denvers, a young cowboy who was helping Merle, was wanted by the police. He managed, however, to rescue Merle, and sent her off to the rodeo stadium where the race was to start.

The competitors had to change horses half-way through the race, and Larry promised that he would get his horse, Prince, to the changing point in time. Merle took the lead from Celia, Rancher Garsten's daughter, but when she reached the half-way mark there was no sign of Prince, and Garsten declared that if the cowboy dared show up he would be arrested.

TO Merle it seemed that all hope of continuing the race had gone.

Unless Larry turned up with Prince she would have no horse to ride, for it was impossible to expect the tired Pommie to finish the course, even if the rules had allowed.

But even if Larry did try to keep his promise, the outlook was just as hopeless.

"Larry will be arrested and his horse confiscated," Merle told herself and gave a bitter sigh.

Having reached the half-way post first, it was infuriating to have to withdraw from the race; even more infuriating to know that now Celia Garsten would in all probability win the all-important Gold Rider trophy.

Dismissally she watched yet another competitor gallop up, swiftly change mounts, then go plunging on up the hilly road.

That meant that now four of her rivals were ahead of her.

With another heavy sigh Merle turned away, to find that Celia's father was still regarding her mockingly.

"Looks as if your pal has got cold feet," he commented. "Pity he's scared, for me and the sheriff sure would have liked to have seen him—and his boss!"

Merle glared at her tormentor, but before she could utter the hot retort that rose to her lips, there came a warning shout from behind.

"Hey, mind your backs there!" Swinging round, Merle saw a big motor horse-box backing down the gravelly side-road. Nathaniel Garsten gave a nod of satisfaction.

"That'll be Rupe David, come to collect Celia's spare boss," he commented, and went striding across to where a stable-boy was putting a blanket on his daughter's discarded mount. "Get a move on there," he barked.

While he helped to blanket up the horse, the driver of the horse-box de-

scended from the cab and began to walk towards the back, on the opposite side to where the rancher was.

Merle was about to turn away when to her surprise she saw the driver beckon her. She regarded him wonderingly. What could any of Garsten's men want with her? And then she stiffened, her heart beginning to pound, for, despite his slouch hat and rough looking wind-jacket, there was something very familiar about him. She stepped forward, and gasped as she recognised those steel-blue eyes that were regarding her from under the down-turned brim.

"L-larry!" The driver grinned. "Yep—I promised to come, didn't I? How do you like my new look? Rather natty, eh?"

And nonchalantly he patted his wind-jacket, as if disguising himself as one of Garsten's men was quite an everyday occurrence.

Torn between amazement and fear for his safety, Merle took a startled step forward.

"Larry!" she gasped again. "What does this mean? And where's the real Rupe David?"

That sardonic look of amusement she knew so well flickered in his eyes.

"I guess I had to leave Rupe behind," he said carelessly.

"But—but those clothes!" ejaculated Merle, still at a loss to know the meaning of the young cowboy's astonishing action.

Larry grinned again. "Oh, I borrowed them from Rupe. He wasn't exactly keen on the idea at first, but I guess I kinda persuaded him in the end."

And he rubbed his right fist with a reflective air.

At that moment there came a shout from the distance.

"Hey, hurry up and open up that horse-box!"

And Merle was alarmed to see Nathaniel Garsten come striding forward, leading Celia's spare horse. But Larry remained unperturbed. Quickly turning away his face, he waved a hand.

"O.K., boss," he responded gruffly.

While Merle stood there, apprehensive and bewildered, he calmly unhooked the double doors, drew down the wooden ramp and whistled. Next moment there came the clatter of hoofs and a magnificent black horse, already saddled up, came trotting out of the van.

Merle stared with wide, incredulous eyes. There could be no mistaking that thoroughbred.

"Prince!" she gasped.

Larry gave a cool nod, seemingly oblivious of the fact that only a few yards away Garsten was glaring in petrified fury.

"Sure thing, honey. I told you I'd get him here in time, didn't I?" he drawled.

"But—but——"

"No time for chit-chat. If you're goin' to win that race you'd best be on your way. Up you go."

Dazedly Merle took the reins he

smilingly held out to her, but as she swung herself up into the saddle there came a strangled bellow from the rancher and he came plunging forward.

"What trickery is this?" he roared. "That's Denvers' boss! You come off it, my ga'!"

His hand flew to the holster that hung at his belt. But he never got a chance to whip out his gun, for suddenly he found himself staring right down the muzzle of a revolver that had miraculously appeared in Larry's right hand.

"If you take a tip from me, pard, you'll stay right where you are," drawled the young cowboy, tipping back his hat.

Garsten pulled up as if shot.

"Denvers!" he choked; then, carelessly of the levelled gun, he raised his voice in a wild shout. "Hey, sheriff! Sheriff!"

What happened next Merle was not quite sure. She heard counter shouts, had a confused glimpse of Sheriff Johnson and a crowd of other men running forward, before Larry's hand came smacking down on the rump of the black horse.

Prince gave a startled squeal, reared then bolted, with Merle hanging on like grim death.

For the next minute or so she was busy getting the runaway horse under control, and when at last she could look back, it was to witness another amazing scene.

Larry had knocked down Nathaniel Garsten, had snatched something from the rancher's coat pocket, and was in the act of leaping astride Pommie.

Next moment he had gone plunging down the hillside, with bullets whistling over his bent head. The last Merle saw, as Prince whirled her round a bend, was the sheriff and his party making a mad dash for their own horses.

"They're going to chase him!" Merle told herself. "Oh, goodness. I—I hope he gets away! It was wonderful of him, turning up like that. I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to him."

Her eyes glistened as she thought of Larry's bravery and audacity, but in her heart was an awful fear. She could not forget those whistling bullets. Suppose any of them had hit Larry! Suppose—

With a desperate effort she forced herself to shut out the alarming picture that filled her mind. Her job was to concentrate on winning the race. It would be a poor reward for all Larry had done if she failed him now.

"We've got to keep our end up, boy," she whispered into Prince's ear. "Got to show Nathaniel Garsten that he's not going to have all his own way. Now—race, boy—race!"

Crouching low in the saddle, she sent Prince pounding on.

Far ahead, where the narrow trail twisted round in the form of a great horseshoe, a cloud of dust was rising to the sky. It marked the spot where three of the competitors were galloping head to tail, but beyond them again was Celia Garsten.

Despite herself, Merle felt a sudden doubt. With half the race over, could she expect even a magnificent horse like Prince to make up the leeway?



THE SHORT CUT

The latter half of the Gold Rider course had been specially chosen so as to test to the utmost the stamina of the horses and the nerve of their riders.

Although flags marked the one recognised trail that would like a snake across the steep hillside, competitors were not compelled to keep to it. If they liked, they could take any short cuts that appealed to them, though how terribly risky these short cuts were Merle quickly discovered.

Whirling round a rocky bend, she heard shouts coming from the bottom of the treacherous slope on her left. First aid squads were rushing to the assistance of two of the competitors who had tried to cut across the valley, only to come to grief.

Merle had a brief glimpse of two riderless horses careering about, of their disconsolate riders standing helplessly by, then she was round the bend and plunging precariously down a pebbly path.

Though she felt sorry for the two girls who had been thrown, yet she could not help feeling a fierce satisfaction.

Their mishap meant that now she had only two rivals ahead of her. And one of them she could see, racing over a ramshackle wooden bridge that spanned the mountain torrent fifty yards ahead.

"Come on, Prince—stick it, honey!" she panted.

Nobly the black horse responded. Reaching the bottom of the pebbly slope, he charged up the next hill and went rocketing over the bridge in chase of the white-bloused rider ahead.

For over a mile the two horses galloped on, the distance between them hardly changing, then the one in front began to falter. The grueling pace was too much for him.

Desperately Merle called to Larry's horse again.

"Now!" she gasped. They had reached a level stretch, and like the wind Prince flew. Faster and faster, until it seemed that the brown steed ahead was being drawn back by some invisible magnet. Only ten yards separated them—five—one. And now they were level.

"Stick it—stick it!" urged Merle, and then she cheered as Prince went galloping past, to round yet another rocky bend.

Only Celia Garsten to beat now! Despite the hold-up she had experienced, Merle was in the running. But how far ahead was the rancher's daughter? As Merle went speeding on, she peered about her anxiously.

They were nearing the end of the hills. The narrow path bent in a great final curve before shooting down steeply to the valley where Red Hill lay.

Away in the distance Merle could see the beflagged grandstands of the stadium. She could even see the excited, expectant spectators who lined the streets.

Her heart sank, for it looked as if all Prince's noble efforts had been in vain.

There was barely a mile to go before the town was reached, and then would follow only a single lap of the stadium. If she kept to the path she could never hope to overtake Celia in time.

But—suppose she took a short cut! As Prince whirled her on, she peered down over the saddle. On the right the path fell away almost sheer. For fifty yards the steep slope was covered with broken shale; beyond were great boulders and a maze of old tree-stumps.

It seemed madness for any horse to venture down that treacherous slope, and icy fingers seemed to grip her heart as she remembered the narrow escape of the two riders who had come to grief on a far easier short cut.

Yet it was her only hope, so pluckily she smothered her fears.

"Come on, honey—we've got to risk it," she murmured.

Prince tossed his head as he felt the tug on the reins, but after a moment's hesitation, he swung round and plunged over the lip of the path.

Next moment he was skidding and slithering through the shale, his front legs rigid.

Never had Merle known such a nightmare ride. Every second she expected the black horse to stumble and go crashing down to the rocks far below, but somehow he managed to keep his balance.

Dust arose in clouds. Broken shale shot up from under Prince's sliding hoofs. The whole world seemed to spin dizzily, and then at long last the steep part of the incline was past.

Now Merle could guide Prince between broken tree-stumps that rose like giant fangs from the hillside.

A few more agonising minutes before there came the sharp rap of hoofs on a metal surface. Safely Prince had gained the road at the foot of the hill. Successfully they had gained the valley and now were galloping along to where the curving mountain track joined the main trail.

Anxiously Merle peered ahead. Her heart leapt as she saw Celia still riding down the side-track.

Thanks to that perilous short cut Merle had saved many precious minutes.

"We'll beat her yet!" whooped Merle, crouching low in the saddle. "Come on, Prince, it's now or never!"



FIRST HOME, BUT—

Back in the packed stadium there was a tense, expectant hush.

Word had just been broadcast that the first of the competitors had been sighted, and excitedly the vast crowd waited for the rider to come swooping through the main gateway.

Who would it be? None asked the question more anxiously than the grizzled, rather white-faced man seated near the grandstand, his right leg stuck out stiffly in front of him.

Merle's uncle had arrived late at the rodeo and it was with grim, almost desperate eyes that he stared across at the entrance to the arena.

For so much depended upon the result of this grueling race.

Stephen Wason did not know exactly what was the strange secret which Sam Crogan, the eccentric old prospector, had left behind, but he did know that in some mysterious way it was bound up with the future prosperity of the ranch he and Merle loved so much. And the second vital clue to that secret was hidden in the Gold Rider trophy!

At last the silence was broken by a thrilled shout:

"Here they come!" "Gee, and there's two of them—racin' almost neck and neck!"

The whole crowd leapt to its feet and the shouts grew louder and more and more excited as two panting, dust-stained horses were seen thundering through the gateway.

One was Celia—the other was Merle. And a blanket would have covered both horses.

Merle sat easily and calmly in the saddle, but the rancher's daughter was wielding her whip furiously. It was obvious that her horse was beginning to flag.

Into the arena the rivals galloped, to speed for the first hurdle. Over it they soared, and then from one corner of the rails arose a wild, tumultuous roar.

"Miss Merle's taken the lead!" "Come on, Happy Valley!" "Happy Valley, for ever!"

It was Merle's own cowboys who shouted. All of them were gathered there—Slim Harris, the young foreman, Jake Binns, the horse-breaker, even Mammie, the negro housekeeper, and excitedly they cheered and brandished hats and scarves as they saw Merle's black mount flash in front of Celia's straining horse.

More savagely than ever Celia used

her riding crop, but it was in vain, and as Merle soared over another hurdle and went riding on she felt a sudden wave of exhilarating confidence sweep over her.

"We've done it, Prince!" she whispered. "Barring accidents, we've won!"

For she was a good three lengths ahead now, and forging farther in front with every second. Over the great pile of logs, over the last hurdle, and then Prince was sweeping round the bend to the grandstands.

Ahead Merle saw an official standing by the winning post, flag upraised. Like a whirlwind Prince hurtled towards him. One last burst of speed, then with a flurry of hoofs he was past.

Gasping, almost exhausted, Merle reined in, happier than she had ever been before in her life.

Despite that nerve-racking delay, she had won the race—and the all-important Gold Rider trophy.

"We've won, boy," she whispered to the panting Prince. "We've done it, thanks to you—and thanks to Larry."

Yes, thanks to Larry. If he had not brought Prince in time she could never have succeeded. And if Prince hadn't been such a game, gallant creature—

"You were wonderful," she breathed.

As she slid down from the saddle and fondly patted Prince, a cheering crowd surged around her while the Happy Valley cowboys nearly went crazy with joy.

She looked round for sight of her uncle, but in that excited throng it was impossible to make him out. She was enthusiastically escorted into the enclosure and across to the judge's box, on the shelf of which stood the coveted statuette of the Gold Rider.

It was with tear-filled eyes that she surveyed the trophy, for she could not forget that but for Larry's daring and help she could never have hoped to win it.

Where was Larry now? she wondered anxiously. Had he managed to escape from the sheriff's posse, or—

Then she was forced to smother her fears about Larry, for the judge had lifted up the Gold Rider, was holding it out to her.

As her hands closed on the statuette, Merle felt her heart give a thrilled leap.

Did the trophy really contain the other half of the map which old Sam Crogan had hidden? Was she at last to discover the strange secret she and Larry had dared so much to find?

Lost as she was in her thoughts, she was not conscious of the fact that her beaten rival had pushed her way furiously through the cheering crowds and was now standing only a few feet away, glaring savagely at the Gold Rider.

Her face scarlet with spite, Celia Garsten darted forward, one arm outstretched.

"I demand that that girl is disqualified!" she shrieked.

There was a hush. Merle, swinging round, gave an uneasy gasp as she saw the rancher's daughter glowering at her.

"You must be crazy!" she cried. "Why should I be disqualified? I won fairly."

"No, you didn't. You rode a stolen horse in the latter half of the race," shouted Celia, and fiercely she turned to the judge. "She's no right to that trophy," she asserted. "She would never have won if she hadn't been in league with that outlaw Larry Denvers—if she hadn't ridden the horse he stole!"

An amazed, wondering murmur went up and Merle went pale as she saw how everyone was looking at her, as she saw the grim, startled frown on the judge's face.

Eagerly Celia made the most of her opportunity. With a quivering hand she indicated the Gold Rider.

"I demand that that trophy is handed back!" she cried. "I demand that Merle Wason is disqualified!"

Don't miss the continuation of this tense scene in next week's chapters—the final ones of this fine serial.



THE BLUE LANTERN CAFE

JILL GARDINER, leader of a cheery band of girls staying in Switzerland for the winter sports, was very keen for some of them to pass the Havensburg Test.

Those successful would be invited to a romantic castle for the Venetian Ice Fete.

Girls had never gone in for the test before, and Max Kildare, the coach who was training the boys at the hotel, believed it was too difficult for them.

Jill met Hans Peterson, a strange, moody ex-guide, whom she was convinced had been unjustly accused of cowardice. She persuaded him to help her by coaching herself and her girl chums.

Jill began to suspect that Magda Beaumont, one of the Revellers, was working against herself and Hans. She saw Magda stealing furtively from the hotel, and, convinced that she was up to further mischief, decided to follow her.

"I'M certain Magda's up to something fishy, and I mean to find out what it is."

As Jill murmured the words, she slipped out of the hotel after the black-haired girl. A large horse-drawn sleigh was drawn up outside and Magda was in the act of clambering up to the front seat beside the driver.

Knowing that the sleigh plied between the hotel and the near-by town, Jill stared in dismay. Then, as she saw that there was still a spare seat at the back, she decided on a reckless ruse.

Drawing a pair of dark sun-glasses from her pocket, she slipped them on, then tied a scarf around her head, pulling it across her face as much as possible.

"Magda's never seen me in this coat before," she told herself as quickly she climbed into the vacant rear seat, "so even if she looks round she's hardly likely to recognise me in this disguise."

The driver cracked his whip and the sleigh glided over the snow. The sun glowed on the Alpine peaks, but for once Jill had no eyes for the thrilling sight, nor had she ears for the merry chatter of the rest of the passengers.

Was Magda on her way to meet that mysterious accomplice of hers? she was wondering.

When the picturesque shopping street of the town was reached the sleigh began to slow. Quickly Jill jumped down, and, crossing to a shop window, pretended to be interested in the goods displayed there. The glass acted as a mirror, and in its reflection she saw Magda descend from the now stationary sleigh and go hurrying up the street. Cautiously Jill followed.

After a few moments her quarry disappeared into the Blue Lantern Cafe. Jill, peering through the glass door, saw that the tables were

separated by ornamental screens and Magda was just slipping behind one of them.

Entering the cafe, Jill began to walk to the table where the black-haired girl sat, but suddenly she paused, then darted behind the cover of a palm that stood in a green-painted tub, for from behind the screen had come a whisper in a man's voice:

"Make sure Jill Gardiner never receives—to-morrow—intercept—in the wood."

Jill's heart leapt, and, convinced that Magda and her unknown companion had come here to plot, she darted forward. At least she would discover who the mystery man was! But, to her dismay, an apologetic, fussy little man suddenly barred her way.

"Mam'selle, a thousand pardons!" he cried. "But we are full up. Regretfully I must inform you that we have not room for another single customer."

"That's all right," said Jill. "I—I'm only looking for a friend."

Frantically she tried to dodge past him, but in doing so her sun-glasses slipped and fell to the floor, and as she bent to pick them up Magda looked round. The black-haired girl gave a startled gasp as she recognised Jill, and swiftly she whispered to her unseen companion. Then, leaving her seat, she hurried forward, a hypocritical smile on her lips.

"Jill, you poor dear!" she drawled. "Are they turning you away? I'm all on my own here, but they haven't got the brand of pastry I like, so I'm leaving. Take my place, Jill—do!"

With a wave of slim fingers, she was gone.

And when Jill reached the seat Magda had left she knew she had been outwitted.

For the opposite seat was vacant, too. Magda's elusive companion had slipped away through a conveniently placed side door.

Was it someone at the hotel? Someone whom she met, perhaps, every day?

The words she had overheard rang again in her ears.

"Make sure Jill Gardiner never receives—"

Never receives what? What were they planning to intercept?

Was it something that had a vital bearing on her great ambition? On her hope that she and her Alpine Revellers would pass the Havensburg Test with flying colours?

And still she hadn't enough evidence to challenge Magda openly. A few suspicions—a few muttered words. She could just imagine Magda's mocking tone as she would deny all knowledge of them.

"But, golly, I never even saw Magda till she came to the hotel a few days ago!" Jill told herself. "Why should she be working against me? Why should she and her unknown ally be plotting to intercept something that's meant for me?"

LEADER of the ALPINE REVELLERS

By ENID BOYTEN

And what could it be? Was it a message—a letter—a parcel?

"But I've often seen the hotel mail arrive in a special motor-truck along the high road," she mused. "Surely no one could intercept that! And, besides, they muttered something 'in the wood.'"

The baffling question throbbled in her brain.

But there was no answer!



THE REVELLERS GET BUSY

That haunting question was still in Jill's mind next morning, but there was so much to do that it was forced into the background.

Eagerly Rosemary, Brenda, and her other Alpine Revellers gathered round after breakfast.

"Say, Jill, we're meeting Hans at ten, but what's the programme?"

"Is it ski-ing? Or skating? Or what?"

The air fairly buzzed with questions.

Only Magda was unusually silent, studying Jill with that mocking gaze of hers.

"We'll take our skis," Jill told them, "because Hans said he'd try to fix up some special ski-ing practice—different from what we had last time. And, golly, if we don't want to be late we'd better roll along! On your way, girls!"

Ten minutes later they were marching in the glorious winter sunshine to keep their rendezvous with their boy coach.

And as they rounded a clump of snow-laden bushes they gave gasps of surprise and delight at the attractive scene which met their eyes.

Seven ponies were standing in a group on the crisp snow, tossing their heads so that the silver bells on their gaily coloured harness jingled merrily.

And there beside them stood the sturdy figure of Hans Peterson, his brown hair ruffled by the breeze, that odd smile on his rugged face as Jill sped towards him.

"Hans! How marvellous!" she greeted him. "I knew that ski-joring was part of the test, but I didn't think you'd be able to fix a practice so soon."

His deep-set eyes gazed at her gravely.

"I can fix things, Jill—for my friends!"

For his friends! Jill knew a sudden inward glow at those words. It was a comforting thought that she had won the friendship of this Swiss boy, even though he had been so moody and difficult at first. She was certain he would see them through the Havensburg Test. He would give them just the coaching and training they needed, in spite of the plotting of Magda and her unknown ally!

Such were Jill's thoughts, while her chums fondled and petted the ponies.

"Can I have the chestnut, Hans?" Rosemary cried. "He's a beauty!"

"And the grey seems to have taken a fancy to me!" giggled Suzie Millard. "He keeps nuzzling my neck. He's

almost as plump as I am, so I suppose he's got a fellow-feeling for me!"

Hans, as usual, wasted no time. He was soon showing them how the ponies could tow them along on their skis.

"You see, I hold the pony's long reins in my left hand," he explained. "And in my right I hold the traces that are fixed to his collar. Watch how I manage him."

He set the pony cantering in a wide circle, towing him easily and swiftly on his skis. When he had showed them how to guide and manage the ponies, they tried their hand at ski-joring. Under Hans' expert tuition the Alpine Revellers made rapid progress and at last Jill turned eagerly to the Swiss boy.

"How about a race, Hans?" she asked.

"Sure! Dandy idea!" Brenda, the American girl, agreed. "Let's try some speeding!"

The Swiss boy nodded, shading his eyes with his hand as he gazed ahead. "I'll fix you a mark," he said. "A winning-post."

To their left a snow-covered slope swept up towards the mountains. To the right, farther on, a dark pinewood dipped into the valley.

As they gazed ahead they could see a small dark figure, still high up on the slope, ski-ing down towards the dark wood below.

"That will be the ski postman," Hans muttered, almost to himself.

Jill caught the words, and suddenly she drew in her breath with a startled gasp.

"The—the ski postman?" she echoed. "But I thought all the mail was delivered in those little motor vans. I've never heard of the ski postman."

Hans gave his odd little chuckle. "Perhaps not, Jill! Because there's never been one till to-day," he explained.

"They've just opened a new airport over that mountain range, and the quickest way to get the air-mail down here is by ski postman. He's bringing the air-mail for the first time, and no doubt he'll cut through the pinewood over there."

Through the wood!
Jill's mind flashed back to those muttered words she had overheard in the Blue Lantern Cafe.

"Make sure Jill Gardiner never receives . . . intercept . . . in the wood . . ."

Instinctively Jill turned towards Magda.

And for once that attractive girl betrayed herself.

She seemed to have forgotten the ponies and the ski-joring. She was gazing at that distant figure with a look on her handsome face that made it hard and calculating.

Frantic thoughts crowded swiftly in Jill's brain.

She had discounted the idea of a letter being intercepted, because those mail vans running along the high road seemed so safe and secure.

But suppose there was an air-mail letter for her, carried by the ski postman on this new route. Wouldn't that dark pinewood be just the spot to ambush him and secure the mail-bag? Was that the reason for the intent, calculating look on Magda's face?

So far Jill had mentioned her suspicions to no one. Those muttered words in the crowded cafe had been so vague, it had seemed best to keep them to herself.

Now, however, she burst out impetuously.

"Hans! I've just remembered something. That ski postman—"

She had been about to confide in the boy guide, to ask his help in stopping that postman at all costs before he reached the wood. But Magda, once again, was too quick for her.

That shrewd girl must have realised, from Jill's tone, that she suspected something—that she had overheard something in the cafe and was now putting two and two together.

Unseen by the others, Magda gave her pony a spiteful cut with a stick.

The startled animal reared up with a squeal, and other ponies took fright too, plunging and shying.

Cries of alarm broke from the girls, and Hans whirled round to calm the panic-stricken ponies.

No time to explain now! No chance to call on Hans for help, for every second was precious.

"I've got to do something myself!" Jill panted.

Desperately she shook the reins of Rikki, her black pony.

"Rikki! Hurry! Away! Away!"

The lively little pony, already startled by the squeals and stampings around him, needed no second bidding. He started off with a rush that nearly swept Jill off her feet.

The silver bells jingled madly as Rikki's hoofs hammered on the snow. Jill swerved from side to side, fighting to keep her balance, as swiftly they raced on.

Hans and the others, still trying to calm the ponies, were left behind.

"I've got to stop that ski-er!" Jill panted.

But could she? He was near the foot of the slope now, and would cross her trail at right-angles as he glided into the wood.

"Stop! Stop!" Jill shouted.

But it wasn't easy to make herself heard in that breathless rush, with the pony's hoofs drumming on the hard snow and the bells jingling wildly.

If only she could reach the entrance to the woodland track ahead of the postman!

Her heart sank as she saw she had failed. The postman, with the mail-bag strapped on his back, glided across the trail and entered the wood with hardly a glance at her, probably thinking she was just a reckless young holiday-maker out on a ski-joring trip on her own.

"Rikki! We'll take a risk!" Jill cried. "In amongst the trees, boy!"

She tugged at the pony's right-hand rein, so that he swerved in amongst the trees, at an angle that might enable them to cut across the ski postman's path. It was risking a smash, as she swerved desperately to avoid the tree trunks, but it was the only way.

"Stop!"
With all the force of her lungs, Jill shouted again and again. The snow was softer here, muffling Rikki's hoofs, so that her cries seemed to echo more loudly.

And suddenly the postman realised something was amiss and braked sharply, bringing himself to an abrupt halt.

Something else happened almost at the same moment.

A heavy branch crashed on the trail just ahead of the ski-er. Had he kept going he would certainly have tripped over it, falling with stunning force. And Jill's straining eyes made out a dark figure hovering uncertainly behind the bushes.

On the spur of the moment she tried a breathless ruse.

"Come on, boys!" she yelled. "Gerald! Tony! Dick! The ski postman's being ambushed. Hurry to the rescue!"

What with the noise Jill and Rikki made, it sounded as if a whole party were rushing to the postman's aid.

That dark figure, foiled in his attempt to take the ski-er by surprise, turned and fled.

The postman, who had snatched up a stout cudgel to defend himself, turned gratefully to Jill as she came up more slowly with Rikki.

"Mam'selle! You have done me a great service!" he exclaimed. "Had you not shouted I should have tripped over that branch. Look! Some miscreant has sawn it almost through and fixed a rope so that he could pull it down just at the right moment to trip me. Then, no doubt, he would have pounced on my mailbag. But thanks to you and your gallant comrades—"

He peered over Jill's shoulder, expecting to see a party of boys. And Jill's brown eyes twinkled merrily.

"I'm afraid I haven't any gallant

comrades," she chuckled. "Calling out those names was just a ruse to scare away that ambusher, whoever he was. But, please, come out of the wood. It isn't safe, and he might attack again."

The ski postman nodded. "Right, mam'selle! I will take the longer way round this time, and report this matter to the police."

Though she felt sure the ambusher had taken to his heels, Jill didn't breathe freely again till she and Rikki and the postman were safely out of the open.

It had all happened so swiftly that there was no sign yet of Hans and the other ski-jorers.

"If ever, mam'selle, I can do you a service, in return—" the postman cried, still bursting with gratitude.

Jill caught his arm.

"But you can!" she exclaimed. "I'm expecting an important letter by air-mail, and—please!—I'd like to have it now."

For a moment he hesitated. "It is against the rules, mam'selle, but—in view of your great service—how can I refuse?"

Jill's heart thumped as he unslung his mailbag.

"The name's Gardiner—Jill Gardiner," she told him, her voice quivering a little.

Could there be a letter for her? A letter so important that an attempt had been made by her enemies to intercept it?

It wasn't a large mail. With straining eyes Jill watched him flip through the little bundle of thin air-mail letters. Until, when he had almost reached the end—

"Voilà! It is here! Miss Jill Gardiner, High Gables Hotel."

With a flourish he handed it to her, then fastened the mailbag again, saluted and ski-ed off.

Excitedly Jill gazed at the letter. "It's got a London postmark," she mused in surprise.

Jill was all alone in the world. She had never known her parents, never known any relatives at all. And though she had a number of friends in the north of England, she didn't know anyone who would be likely to send her an air-mail letter from London.

Yet here it was, and a cunning attempt had been made to intercept and steal it. Would it explain why Magda and her unknown ally had been doing their best to sabotage the Alpine Revellers from the start?

"Who can it be from?" she asked herself. Then she chuckled. "If I read it I'll soon find out, I suppose."

Her pulses quickening, she slit the written letter that was surely of such vital importance to her.



A STARTLING SURPRISE

A jingle of silver bells. A swift drumming of hoofs. Gay shouts and laughter.

Jill never had a chance to read the letter then! Round the bend came the little cavalcade of ski-jorers, for Hans had evidently calmed the ponies and got the girls going again in fine style.

"So there you are, Jill!" cried fair-haired Rosemary. "Fancy Rikki running off with you like that!"

"And, for pete's sake, don't read your letters now, Jill!" said Brenda. "We're going to have that race we were talking about, and it'll sure be a thrill!"

With a laugh Jill popped the envelope and the letter into the pocket of her ski tunic. However important it might be, it would have to wait till she got a quiet moment to herself.

Yet she couldn't resist a steady look at Magda. A challenging look! "Somebody," she announced, "tried to trip that ski postman in the wood. Rotten trick, wasn't it! Luckily it didn't quite come off!"

And Magda, clever actress though

(Please turn to page 47.)



The MERRYMAKERS AFLOAT

By DAPHNE GRAYSON

BURT FINDS A CHAMPION

"ONE, two, three, four—" said Sally Warner, wrinkling her pretty nose thoughtfully. "You're coming on, Sally," said Don Weston solemnly. "Keep on at that rate, and you'll be able to count up to ten in another year or two."

"Chump!" replied Sally, with a smile. "This is no time for your so-called wit. The election takes place on Saturday, and we've still only got four names for the committee. We want another—"

"Better put me down twice," suggested Johnny Briggs grinningly. "I'm as good as two men any time. But what about Tubby Winwood?"

"Tubby hasn't the time to spare for committee meetings," chuckled Don. "He's always too busy in the café, keeping up his strength. Got any suggestions, Fay?" he added, turning to fair-haired Fay Manners, the fourth member of the Merrymakers.

Fay had been staring abstractedly at the large notice in the Merrymakers' club-room aboard the Ocean Star, otherwise known as the Floating College, en route for Australia. That notice announced the forthcoming election for club captain between Sally, the present captain, and Carmenita Pascali, the fiery Mexican girl. She gave a start as her name was mentioned. Then for some reason a slow flush ran up into her cheeks.

"As—as a matter of fact," she said hesitantly and a shade defiantly, "I was going to suggest Alec Burt."

"Alec Burt?" Sally's voice rose incredulously as she stared at her chum. "Fay, are you serious?"

"If she is she's crazy," said Johnny bluntly. "Alec Burt—that sneaking rotter! That—that—"

"All right, Johnny!" put in Don. "Don't explode. Fay was only joking."

He looked smilingly at Fay for confirmation of that statement, but the smile vanished, his jaw dropped as Fay, growing ever redder, firmly shook her head.

"I am not joking," she said flatly, but dropping her eyes as she met Sally's wide-eyed look of amazement. "I—I don't see any reason why Alec shouldn't be as much help on the committee as anyone else—"

"I can think of plenty of reasons," said Johnny truculently. "I'll tell you just a few of them when I've got a couple of days to spare. Anyway, why this sudden interest in Burt?" he added suspiciously. "Come to think of it, I believe I saw you in the café with him this morning. Though it seemed so fantastic I just didn't give it another thought."

"And supposing I was in the café with Alec?" asked Fay, her lip trembling a little. "Is that any business of yours?"

There was a stunned silence in the club-room. In utter bewilderment

the crowd gathered there stared at the girl who had just asked that question. Sally shook her head dazedly. It couldn't be Fay uttering these words! Fay, their chum, who had always been looked upon as Johnny's special girl-friend. It was fantastic. Like the rest of the Merrymakers, she had never had any use for the weedy, sneaking Burt, one of Carmenita's special cronies and a leading light in the so-called smart set.

"Fay," said Sally gently, "I don't understand—"

"That's just the point, Sally," put in Fay. "You don't—and you never have tried to understand Alec. He's got more character than you give him credit for—"

"Sure he has," put in Linda Powell dryly, "and all of it bad."

"Well, whatever you say," finished Fay with an aggressiveness foreign to her gentle nature, "I nominate him for the committee." And she wrote his name on the nomination paper pinned to the notice-board.

"Well, thanks—thanks a lot," said a voice from the doorway, and into the room walked Alec Burt himself, a smirk on his pale, crafty face. "Didn't think you meant it, Fay, when you told me this morning you were going to do this. You're a nice kid!"

And in a patronising manner he patted Fay's shoulder.

"Look here, Burt—" Johnny began thickly.

"Oh, pipe down!" snapped Burt. "Let's get out of here, Fay," he added. "I want to talk over that little job you're going to do—and I'd like to go where the atmosphere's a bit more friendly."

"All right, Alec, I'm coming," Fay said loudly.

There was a loud gasp from the company. Sally, utterly and completely bewildered, darted forward.

"Fay, you're not really going!" she cried. "There's so much to do before the election. And you said you'd help me with the posters later on. I just don't understand."

For a moment Fay hesitated, staring into Sally's beseeching face with a strange look in her eyes. Then with a convulsive little movement she jerked her arm away from Sally's grasp.

"I—I'll be back soon, Sally," she said in rather a choked voice. "I'll help with the posters, don't worry."

There was a snigger from Burt as she said that, then together the two of them quitted the room. In the few seconds after they left there was complete silence, then a babel of voices arose. In desperation Sally clapped her hands over her ears.

"Please," she said, "I know it all seems peculiar, and I'm as much in the dark as you are. But there must be some explanation. I'll find out what Fay's up to when she comes back to help me with the posters.

Until then—let's get on with what we've got to do, shall we?"

"O.K., Sally," said Don gruffly, while Johnny just nodded, still too hurt and bewildered to trust himself to speak.

Gradually the room settled down again, becoming immersed in their various tasks to help Sally in her electioneering campaign. But though Sally had stopped the outspoken comments she had not, she knew, stopped the wondering whispers about Fay and her peculiar behaviour.

What was the explanation for that, she wondered, with a tight feeling of anxiety at her heart. It just didn't make sense that Fay, gentle, kind-hearted Fay, should suddenly push her friends aside for the sake of friendship with Burt and Carmenita and their unpleasant set.

Somehow the heart seemed to have gone out of the Merrymakers' work. There were sighs of relief when eventually Sally looked up again.

"I—I expect Fay will be waiting for me in the cabin to help with those posters," she said. "I must get them out to-night. See you later, ship-mates."

And with a wave of her hand she hurried from the room, almost running to the cabin which she shared with Fay, and in which they were going to get out the large, eye-catching posters telling everyone to "Vote for Sally."

Eagerly she turned the handle of the door. Now she'd find out from Fay just what peculiar game she had been playing with Alec Burt—and why she had been playing it. Of course, there was some simple explanation—silly to have allowed herself to get so upset and unhappy.

"Fay—" she burst out as she hurried into the cabin. And then she drew up sharply, her face falling with disappointment.

For the cabin was empty. Rather disconsolately she seated herself at the improvised table, opened up the vivid poster paints.

But the task to which she had eagerly looked forward in Fay's company had lost its interest now she was alone.

Eventually Sally could stand it no longer. She slipped from her chair, peered out into the corridor. A sudden muffled burst of laughter reached her ears. It came, she fancied, from the empty cabin at the very end of the corridor.

Curiously she made her way along there. The door, she noticed, was ajar, as if someone had just gone in or out, and she wrinkled up her nose distastefully as a sudden waft of stale cigarette smoke came to her nostrils. More curious than ever, she pushed open the door a little more and peered in. And then she stood stock-still, staring in frozen horror.

For there was Carmenita sprawling back on some cushions, a cigarette in a long holder between her lips. Beside her sat Alec Burt, also with a cigarette drooping from his mouth. Around the floor sprawled several of their cronies, giggling together in the blue, smoke-filled air.

But it wasn't that sight that held Sally so rigid with shocked disbelief. It was the sight of the fair-haired

girl squatting on the floor, paintbrush in hand—a girl who puffed and choked over the cigarette she held.

"Nice work, Fay," applauded Alec Burt. "If Sally has a better poster than that I'll eat my hat! But I wonder what she'd say if she could see your handiwork? She'd be as mad as two cats."

Fay gave a short laugh as she straightened up, held the poster aloft. Sally could see the bold lettering: "Vote for Carmentita!" done in Fay's unmistakable style—done, indeed, in almost the same way that she and Sally had drafted for Sally's posters.

But as Sally stared in sick horror Fay took another puff at her cigarette, staring across at Alec Burt.

"Who cares what Sally would say?" she said contemptuously. "I told you I'm sick of that crowd. I'm sick of playing second fiddle to Sally. From now on I'm one of your crowd, and Sally & Co. don't count."



FRIENDSHIP IN DANGER

How she got back to her cabin Sally didn't know. As if in the grip of some horrible nightmare she tottered along the corridor,

with a trembling hand opened the door and sank down in the nearest chair.

Fay, a traitor to her friends! Fay, who had shared so many joys and perils with her three chums! It wasn't—it couldn't—be true! Yet Sally couldn't argue with the evidence of her own eyes, couldn't discredit what she herself had heard.

She had seen that poster which Fay herself had painted, calling upon everyone to make Carmentita captain of the Merry-makers' Club. She could still hear Fay's words ringing through her head—"I'm sick of Sally & Co. They don't count!"

What had they done to Fay to make her feel like that? It was by her own, not by her chums' wishes, that Fay was not more in the limelight. She had always preferred to follow where Sally led. And Sally, knowing that, had respected Fay's feelings, had behaved, to her in an almost protective fashion.

And all this time, unsuspected by any of them, Fay must have been cherishing a grievance against her chums; must have been yearning for the limelight; must have been—Sally shivered a little, but resolutely faced the thought—must have been secretly jealous of Sally herself and the leading part she took in the students' affairs aboard ship.

"Oh, Fay, Fay!" she muttered brokenly to herself. "If only you'd told me before instead of hiding it away inside yourself. But you gave no sign—"

She felt the hot prick of tears behind her eyelids, a dull, heavy throbbing in her temples. But above all was the deep and spreading bitterness within her at the way Fay had acted. Fay, the girl she had looked upon as a very beloved sister, had deliberately gone over to the enemy camp.

Mechanically Sally was painting her own posters while these thoughts were whirling in her mind. She was just finishing the last one when the door burst open. An icy numbness seemed to envelop her as she heard Fay's voice in shamed apology behind her.

"I'm awfully sorry I'm late, Sally. I—I'm afraid I got rather tied up with something else."

"Really?" Sally made a desperate attempt to keep her voice composed.

"I—I suppose you're pretty mad with me," said Fay in crestfallen tones. "You've every right to be, of course, but if we get stuck into the posters right away we should get finished off."

With a shaking hand Sally put down her paintbrush, bit fiercely at her trembling lips. There was so much she wanted to say to Fay, but she couldn't, aren't trust her voice. She knew she would break down.

"The posters are finished," she said gruffly. "I—I shan't have to bother you at all."

"Bother me! Oh, Sally, you know it's no bother—" Fay's reproachful voice trailed away as Sally turned a look of bitter hurt upon her. Her already strained-looking face turned even paler as she saw the condemnation in Sally's eyes. "Sally," she cried sharply, "surely you don't think I'm not interested in your posters any more just because I'm late—"

A mirthless smile twisted Sally's lips. "Don't try to pretend, Fay," she said. "I know just how much your interest is worth."

Fay flinched as if from a blow. "But, Sally," she cried agonisedly, "you don't understand—"

"Don't I?" Sally's voice rose sharply on a cracked note. "Perhaps I understand more than you realise, Fay. But I can't talk about it now—I can't! It—it's too horrible."

"Sally, please don't look at me like that. Oh goodness! I must explain. Please listen to me—you must let me tell you everything—"

"I know everything I want to know," choked Sally. "I don't want to hear anything else. Oh, leave me alone—leave me alone!"

And with her face suddenly working, she clutched the posters in her arms, pushed blindly past Fay and rushed out of the door, almost knocking over Don and Johnny, who were just entering, in her headlong flight.

In utter consternation the two boys stared after her flying figure, then they turned to stare accusingly at the white-faced Fay.

"You've been upsetting Sally," said Don gruffly. "Gosh, I've never known you two quarrel before. What's the idea, Fay? Don't you like Sally any more?"

"Oh, Don, of course I do," said Fay in a quavering voice.

"Well, you've got a funny way of showing it," replied Don, shaking his head unhappily. "I'm dashed if I know what's come over you, Fay. You seem like a stranger suddenly."

"I'm—I'm the same old Fay—"

"Oh, no, you're not," contradicted Don sternly. "The old Fay would never have upset Sally at a time like this, when she's already got more than enough problems to cope with."

"But I was trying to explain," faltered Fay, gazing beseechingly at the two boys, "and Sally wouldn't listen. You see—"

"Weston—Briggs! Head prefect wants you in his cabin at once!" called a voice from outside.

"Right!" replied Don. And with another puzzled, worried glance at Fay he turned away.

But Johnny hesitated a moment longer. His boyish face turned a little red.

"Fay," he mumbled hesitantly, "you—you're not really fond of that Burt rotter, are you?" There was an appeal in the look he gave Fay which caught at her heart. "I—I mean, we've been pretty good friends. If—if I asked you not to go around with him any more—well—" He came to a halt.

Pleading was utterly foreign to his nature. Only Fay knew how much it cost his pride to make that appeal.

"I—I'm sorry, Johnny, I—I can't make that promise. You see—"

"I see nothing," blurted out Johnny. "But I guess from now on our friendship's finished, Fay. If you prefer him to—to—well, go with Alec Burt—and welcome!"

Those bitter words were spoken more in hurt pride than anger. But as he strode through the doorway, his chin out-thrust truculently, Fay winced.

"Johnny," she cried tremblingly, "please wait! Let me explain—I can make you understand if you'll only listen—"

Slam! That was the door behind Johnny. Fay quivered as if from a physical blow. Then suddenly her face crumpled, and in an agony of despair she threw herself on her bunk.

"Oh, Johnny!" she sobbed. "If

only you'd let me explain! It's awful—awful! But I've got to go on. I must see this thing through whatever happens!"



THE WORST BLOW OF ALL

For some minutes Fay lay on her bunk. Then suddenly she drew herself upright, dabbing almost roughly at her streaming eyes, impatiently pushing back the hair from her forehead.

"Fay Manners," she said severely, but with a pathetic tremble in her voice, "this won't do. You've got to pull yourself together. If Burt were to see you like this you'd spoil everything—"

As she thought of the sneaking Burt a look of bitter dislike crossed Fay's tear-streaked face. This horrible break with her friends was all his fault—his and Carmentita's. And it had come about all through Carmentita's ambition to become leader of the Merry-makers' Club.

Fay recalled again that conversation she had overheard a few days ago between Burt and Carmentita. Burt had been showing Carmentita a sheet of notepaper, his ill-natured face alight with triumph.

"See," he had said gloatingly, "a piece of Sally's notepaper, with her signature at the bottom."

Fay had started at that. Sally, frantically busy with her electioneering, had signed several sheets of notepaper so that Fay, who was dealing with all the correspondence in connection with the election, could type the letters and send them off straight away without having to trouble Sally again.

There were letters to various members of the club, one to Professor Willard and one to Senor Gonzalez—a school governor who was at the moment in the ship's hospital with a slight touch of sunstroke—telling them when the elections were taking place. Somehow Burt had got hold of one of those sheets of paper.

But Burt's next words filled Fay with horror.

"You know what old Gonzalez is like. Never gives anyone a chance to explain. Well, I've written a letter on this paper and addressed it to the old boy. But the joke is, I'll pretend it's a letter written by Sally to one of her friends. I've put in a few choice bits about what an interfering old busybody Gonzalez is, and so on, and he'll think Sally, in her rush, put the letters in the wrong envelopes—"

"Alec—but you are clever!" Carmentita had given a shriek of delight. "He will look at the letter, fly into a fury, and say Sally is not a proper person to be leader of the club. That will give me a walk-over."

"That's it. And the more she tries to explain, the more furious he'll get. But come on, Carmentita. Let's get the letter tucked away somewhere until I send it on Saturday morning. Can't risk anyone finding it."

And the ill-natured, scheming pair had hurried off, leaving Fay shaking with fury and anxiety. Her first impulse had been to tell Sally and the boys. Then she had decided against it. Sally had enough worries already. And if she told Don and Johnny they would go after Burt and stormily demand the letter back. They wouldn't get it, and Burt, of course, would be put on his guard.

No, Fay had decided, she'd got to get that letter back on her own. And to do so she'd got to become friendly with Carmentita & Co. and learn where the letter was, even if it meant puzzling her own chums for a time.

But she had little thought when she had made that resolution just how desperately hard it was going to be to carry it out; just how hurt and upset it was going to make Sally & Co. She hadn't dreamed it would

(Please turn to the back page.)

The CASE of the TWO IMPOSTORS



By PETER LANGLEY

ROSINA SCORES FIRST

REMEMBER our old enemy—the "Jackdaw"?

June Gaynor started involuntarily, as she looked up from her work to encounter her uncle's glance. "The Jackdaw!" she exclaimed. "Surely he's still in prison—"

"He gave the warders the slip," said Noel Raymond, "and escaped during that heavy fog some weeks ago. It's thought that he managed to smuggle himself on a plane bound for South America. Inspector Clifford, who originally handled the case, has sent me a full report—and certain detailed plans that were found in the scoundrel's possession at the time of his getaway. You'd better lock them in the safe."

June glanced curiously at the bulky envelope that Noel passed to her. She had vivid recollections of the audacious trickster, known as the Jackdaw, who had baffled the police for months—and who might never have been caught, but for a tell-tale, nervous tapping of his foot.

"Are the plans important now, nunky?" she asked.

"They might be," replied Noel, with a grim smile, "if they happened to fall into the hands of any other crook. The Jackdaw was a master planner—as well as an adept at disguise. Those papers give a list of likely houses to be burgled, together with details of windows, doors, and so on. An astute rogue could put that information to profitable use—"

He broke off, as there came a peal at the front-door bell of their flat. June went to answer it.

A slim, attractive girl stood rather nervously on the threshold. She was simply dressed, and wore her dark hair in a fringe that accentuated the youthfulness of her slightly freckled features.

"Please—does Mr. Raymond live here?" she asked. Then, as the girl detective nodded, she added impulsively: "You must be June Gaynor! I'm Ruth Clifford. Daddy wrote to Mr. Raymond, I believe—"

At that moment Noel came to the door of his study.

"Miss Clifford?" he asked, "Not Inspector Clifford's daughter, by any chance—"

The girl's face lit up, and she nodded eagerly. June smilingly held open the door.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," said Noel, as he waved his visitor to a chair. "June and I were just discussing your father's letter. By the post-script I gather that he has recently retired—"

"Three weeks ago," replied the girl. "Daddy needed a rest; his work was beginning to worry him—and then there have been those threats—"

"Threats?" echoed Noel, raising his eyebrows. "He mentioned nothing about them in his letter."

"He wouldn't, of course"—the girl's attractive face clouded—"he pretended to make light of them though I know they've been preying on his mind. That's why I persuaded him to send you those papers for safe-keeping."

A sudden gleam of interest crept

into the detective's eyes, and June glanced instinctively towards the sealed envelope.

"You've come to consult me—on your own account?" asked Noel, shrewdly. "You're worried about your father?"

The girl's lips trembled. Then, meeting the famous detective's reassuring smile, her words came out with a rush.

For the past fortnight, it seemed, ex-Inspector Clifford had been receiving anonymous messages—all written in the same hand—threatening some misfortune unless he agreed to hand over his private records, including the Jackdaw's plans. First he had treated them with contempt; then, as the messages became more insistent, he made an effort to catch the anonymous writer—but the trickster had been too smart for him.

"He—he wouldn't let me call in the official police," said Miss Clifford. "He was afraid his old colleagues would laugh at him. In desperation, I decided to act behind his back, and came up to town on a supposed shopping excursion—but really to see you!"

Noel whistled, and June's grey eyes were alight with sympathy.

"You don't happen to have one of the letters to show me?" asked Noel.

The girl nodded eagerly. She opened her hand-bag and passed him a crumpled sheet of notepaper.

"I took it out of daddy's desk before I came away," she admitted.

Noel raised his eyebrows sharply, as he scanned the few elegant lines written across the mauve, slightly-scented paper:

"Inspector Clifford.—This is my last warning! Unless you send the papers to the address I gave you, harm will come to you—or yours!"

The note was unsigned—but a startled expression flashed into the detective's eyes.

"June—come here," he said tensely. "That writing—that elusive scent! Don't you recognise them?"

June examined the scented paper—the elegant handwriting.

"Nunky, I believe this was written by—"

"There is only one other crook as clever—even cleverer—than the Jackdaw," cut in Noel quickly. "One audacious person who could make full use of those plans. I mean—Rosina Fontaine!"

The young visitor's eyes widened. "I've heard daddy mention her," she said quickly. "The girl of many disguises! But he always declared that the Jackdaw was the cleverer of the two. Surely Rosina wouldn't dare—"

"Rosina would dare anything!" declared Noel. "Exactly what did you

want me to do for you, Miss Clifford?" The girl flushed.

"I thought—I hoped you might come down to our cottage, and see daddy—"

Noel glanced at his watch, and reached for a time-table.

"There happens to be a fast train at twelve-thirty," he said. "We might just catch it—"

"Mr. Raymond—you mean that?" Her face radiant, the girl started to her feet. "I don't know how to thank you! Do you think we could get that train? I asked the taxi to wait, but—"

"I'll see to that, Miss Clifford," Noel promised. "June—lock up the safe, and pack the usual things. We'll be away till to-morrow—or perhaps longer. It all depends on Rosina!"

He hurried downstairs to hail the taxi, while June, her pulses racing with excitement, hastily slipped the bulky envelope and other private papers into Noel's safe, securing the steel door with its intricate combination. There was always the chance of the flat being burgled while they were away.

"I think your uncle's wonderful!" breathed Ruth. "I've been so worried—"

Her voice trembled, and, to June's dismay, she swayed. The girl detective sprang forward to steady her.

"I—I'm sorry," whispered the girl. "It must be reaction. I'll be all right—in a minute. Some water—"

June darted out into the hall, and hurried into the little kitchenette to fill a tumbler with water. As she returned, a few minutes later, she met Noel who had just come in.

"The taxi's gone, June," he said.

"I'll have to phone the rank for another. Hallo!"—he smiled faintly as he caught sight of the glass of water—"someone thirsty?"

"It's Ruth, nunky—she feels faint," explained June.

Noel strode quickly to the study door and turned the knob. A startled gleam flashed into his eyes.

"June—it's locked!" he rapped. "Did you lock it?"

"Of course not!" she gasped. "Ruth must have—but it doesn't make sense—"

"June, did you lock that envelope in the safe?"

"Yes, nunky," said June, her mind in a whirl. "Just before Ruth came over faint. Why—"

Noel did not reply. Drawing back, he threw his whole weight against the door. It crashed open, thudding back on its hinges.

A bewildered cry escaped June's lips.

There was no sign of Ruth Clifford—but the window giving access to the

fire escape gaped wide, the curtains flapping in the breeze.

Then she saw at what Noel was pointing, and her heart jumped. The safe she had locked now stood open, its contents scattered over the carpet—but the bulky envelope had gone.

"Ruth Clifford!" muttered Noel bitterly. "She took us both in neatly, June. That girl must have been Rosina herself in disguise—and she's got away with the Jackdaw's plans!"



WHO TOOK THE DIAMOND?

"Nunky—I'm sorry!" June gasped. "It was all my fault. I ought to have suspected, when she pretended to faint. She must have watched me operate the combination—"

Noel patted her arm. "Come to that, my dear, I ought to have seen through her ruse about the taxi—but Rosina hoodwinked us both, by one simple trick. By showing us that fake threatening message, and allowing us to guess the identity of the writer, she immediately threw all our suspicions on Rosina, the daring girl crook—while Inspector Clifford's 'daughter' won our sympathies!"

"What can we do, nunky? Do you think we can stop her—"

"Impossible!" jerked Noel, staring out of the window. "She must have had a taxi waiting in the mews—and she'll be well away by now. The question is—what immediate use does she intend to make of those plans?"

He opened a drawer in his desk, taking out a notebook.

"Fortunately, I copied the list of houses for possible reference," he added. "I see that most of them are in Inspector Clifford's own district. I wonder—"

His eyes glistened. "June, we'll take a chance!" he added. "In any case we must get in touch with Clifford, to tell him what's happened. He may be able to give us some information. We've lost that fast train—but there's another in an hour. I'll wire him, for a start, and we'll be down there by tea-time."

"Has Inspector Clifford really got a daughter, nunky?" asked June, as they took a taxi to the station.

Noel nodded. "He mentioned her in his letter—said she was due to come back from Ireland. That's why her unexpected arrival didn't arouse my suspicions, in the first place. And her superb disguise and acting did the rest."

The famous detective lapsed into thoughtful silence during the remainder of the journey; while June had plenty to occupy her mind.

It was late afternoon when they reached the picturesque little cottage where Mr. Clifford lived. The ex-inspector's burly figure was at the door to greet them.

"Come in, Mr. Raymond—and you, too, Miss Gaynor!" he exclaimed heartily. "I was surprised to receive your wire. What can I do for you?"

Noel encountered the other's shrewd scrutiny, as he shook hands. "He had only met Inspector Clifford on one previous occasion, when they were both on the trail of the notorious Jackdaw."

Reluctantly, the young detective broke the news, after their host had ushered them into a pleasant little parlour, where a fire crackled in the grate and the table was laid for tea.

The inspector took the blow better than Noel had expected. After one explosive ejaculation, he calmed down, and listened in growing amazement, as Noel described the visit of his supposed daughter.

"That beats the band, Mr. Raymond!" he grunted. "I thought the Jackdaw was pretty smart at disguise—but this Rosina seems to have got him beaten to a frazzle. Pretended to be my daughter—and took you both in with a fake message? Just wait till I tell Ruth!"

He chuckled grimly—and then his expression became suddenly serious.

"But those plans, Mr. Raymond—d'you suppose the daring girl will be able to use them?"

"You can depend on Rosina to find a way," returned Noel. "I take full blame for what has happened, and it's up to me to repair the harm. I've come here in the hope of catching Rosina—with your help!"

The inspector whistled, and sat bolt upright.

"Give me the chance, Mr. Raymond! But I've never met the girl. I wouldn't know her—"

Just then there came a light footstep in the passage, and a welcome clatter of tea-things.

"Ruth!" called the inspector.

"Coming, daddy!" came the cheerful reply.

The door opened to admit the owner of the pleasant voice, a teatray grasped in her hands.

"My daughter, Ruth," boomed the inspector proudly. "Ruth, my dear—you've heard me speak of the famous Noel Raymond and his charming young partner, Miss June Gaynor."

As Noel rose to greet the newcomer, a look of wonder crossed his face, and he heard June's sharp intake of breath.

For the girl facing them was the living image of the clever trickster who had visited them at the flat!

So incredible was the likeness that for a moment the young detective could hardly believe that he was not face to face with Rosina herself, in disguise. The fantastic idea was banished by the girl's cheerful, friendly smile, and the look of beaming pride on her father's bluff features.

"Daddy's often spoken of you," she declared, as she shook hands warmly. "He says that you were the only man that dreadful Jackdaw really had cause to fear."

Noel laughed. "Your father flatters me, Miss Clifford. I've come to him to-day to admit a failure—and to ask his help."

Inspector Clifford intervened to explain what had happened. His daughter's attractive face flushed indignantly.

"What a horrid trick! But how could that dreadful girl make up like me, if we've never met—Oh!" She broke off, a startled expression crossing her face. "Daddy—don't you remember? The other night, when you thought you saw a face peering through the parlour window—"

"Probably a trick of the light," grunted the inspector.

"I wonder!" put in Noel, slipping a hand into his pocket. "Would you know this face again, inspector?"

An excited ejaculation escaped the other's lips as he stared at the beautiful oval face with its taunting lips, and its frame of sleek black hair.

"That's the girl!" he exclaimed.

"And that's Rosina!" snapped Noel. "It's clear that she's been around here—waiting her chance to get hold of those plans. Do you remember what you were talking about, when you noticed her face at the window?"

The inspector scratched his head, but Ruth nodded eagerly.

"I remember, daddy! We were talking about the big wedding reception to be held at Rookfield Grange this evening—"

"Pardon me, Miss Clifford," interjected Noel. "Inspector—your daughter has got something there. 'Rookfield Grange' is one of the names that figures on the Jackdaw's list—and it is only a few miles from here. I was going to check up on this list, anyway—and I suggest we start with the 'Grange.' I'll put the owner on his guard—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Raymond!" said the inspector, tapping his foot excitedly. "Isn't this a good chance to catch the daring girl crook—red-handed? I know I've officially retired from the Force, but I'd be glad to lend you a hand—and Ruth's often begged to be allowed to take part in

a case. A wedding reception would be something in her line—"

"Oh, daddy—please!" begged Ruth eagerly. "I'd love to help—if Mr. Raymond would let me?"

Noel raised his eyebrows, and suddenly smiled.

"It would be poetic justice if Rosina was caught by the girl whose name she so daringly borrowed," he murmured. "All right, Miss Clifford! Between us, we'll put a stop to Rosina's audacious game!"

RUTH CLIFFORD'S freckled face was agog with excitement as she and June stepped from Inspector Clifford's little car, on the drive of Rookfield Grange. The big house was brilliantly lit, and sounds of gay laughter and talk mingled with the strains of an orchestra.

Noel had gone ahead to make arrangements with Mr. Renville, the wealthy owner, whose daughter's wedding had taken place that afternoon.

The reception was in full swing as the girl detective entered with Ruth. June's card granted them immediate admission by the watchful plain-clothes man who had been posted at the doors.

It was clear to June that every precaution was being taken. Just then she caught sight of Noel, who was chatting to their host, and he came over to them with a smile.

"Where's the inspector?" he asked. "Daddy's waiting outside," explained Ruth, smiling. "He thinks that the best way of catching a burglar is to patrol the grounds!"

Noel chuckled. "He may be right. Anyway, come into this room and see the presents!"

June gasped, and Ruth stared in speechless admiration, as he led them across to a rope, guarded at either end by a watchful plain-clothes man. A few feet behind the rope was a long table spread with the dazzling wedding gifts of silver, gold and jewellery.

The centre-piece that took June's breath away was a solitary diamond ring in a velvet-lined case.

"That is the Renville diamond," said Noel. "It is worth not a penny less than five thousand pounds. A rich prize for Rosina—if she could lay her hands on it!"

"But she couldn't, could she?" asked Ruth. "I mean, it's so well guarded. The windows are shuttered; there are men at both doors—and the guests can't get within a yard of the table—"

"You don't know Rosina!" declared June. "It's almost uncanny, the way she acts. We've known her to find her way into a locked room under circumstances that you would think impossible. No, I'm afraid even this is not really safe from Rosina."

"She may even be here now," agreed Noel gravely. "You can't—"

"Oh!" gasped Ruth, grabbing June by the sleeve. "Look—over there, by the door! I thought I saw a shadow moving—"

Noel crossed swiftly to the door. And just then came a sudden, stifled scream from Ruth as the brilliant overhead lights were extinguished without warning. Through the inky darkness sounded a girl's amused laugh—followed an instant later by a hollow thud.

"Who's there?" rapped Noel, grasping for his torch. "Are you girls all right?"

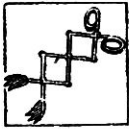
"Yes, nunky!" came June's reply, as she reached out in the dark to slip a reassuring arm round her companion's shoulder.

The gleam from Noel's torch stabbed the darkness, flashing on the faces of the two girls, and sweeping towards the gift-laden table.

A horrified cry escaped June's lips. Among the orderly array of glittering presents was now a significant gap.

The priceless Renville diamond had vanished from its case!

Rosina, the audacious, had not laughed without cause.



THE ALIBI

"Nunky, how did Rosina do it?" gasped June, her mind in a whirl. "And where is she now?"

Noel did not answer. He stepped over the rope and picked up the empty velvet case.

The thing seemed impossible—even for the elusive Rosina. There were only the three of them in the hall, apart from the plain-clothes men, one of whom had departed to inquire about the lights.

The shuttered windows were securely fastened, and the highly polished floor behind the rope bore no trace of footprints.

"I've an idea how Rosina worked part of her trick!" Noel declared, turning. "She can't have been standing far from you girls at the time. Just about here, in fact," he added, taking up his stand near the rope.

Ruth caught in her breath sharply. "Then she—Rosina—must have been standing close behind me!"

Near Ruth was a carved oak chest. Noel bent swiftly to raise the lid. Something gleamed in a dusty corner, and with a satisfied ejaculation Noel snatched it up.

"Tongs!" he jerked. "Expanding tongs—as I suspected! They could be operated from here, and tossed into the chest afterwards. That was the third we heard."

"Of course!" whispered Ruth, with a slight shudder. "But to think that she was standing so close—she might almost have touched me—"

Noel looked at her sharply, just as the lights blazed up.

"Suppose, Miss Clifford," he said slowly, "you are Rosina!"

"Oh!" breathed the girl, shrinking from him. "I—I don't understand—"

"Don't you?" Noel swiftly caught her wrist. "You were the only person who could possibly have used these tongs—apart from June! And I can vouch for my own niece—"

"Nunky!" exclaimed June. She was completely bewildered. "Ruth's been with us all the evening. Rosina couldn't possibly have changed places with her since we left the cottage—"

"I wonder!" returned Noel, still keeping a hold on the girl's wrist.

"Rosina's a past-mistress in disguise—and she took us in this morning. Unless she has made herself invisible, and slipped through a solid wall, she must be in this room at the moment!"

Ruth was sobbing. "Mr. Raymond—you can't think that I'm that dreadful girl! I don't know what daddy would say—"

Noel's eyes glistened, as there came a booming voice from outside.

"Here comes the inspector, now!" he said. "He can decide this matter, once and for all. At least he'll know his own daughter from a stranger, however cleverly she may be disguised."

"Daddy!" called Ruth brokenly. The burly inspector halted in the doorway.

"Ruth—what's the matter?" he demanded. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm sorry, Clifford," said Noel. "I'm afraid I've got a shock for you. I've reason to believe that this girl who came into the house with us is Rosina Fontaine—masquerading as your daughter!"

With a startled ejaculation, the inspector strode across the room, seizing the girl by her shoulders and peering closely into her tearful face.

"Raymond—you're crazy!" he exclaimed angrily. "This girl is my daughter—and, what is more, Rosina has given you the slip! I found this note pinned to your coat, hanging in the hall."

The young detective took the slip of paper.

"Au revoir, Noel!" he read. "Thanks for the diamond! Give my love to June and Ruth Clifford."

"Yours ever,"

"ROSINA."

"You see?" demanded the inspector, tapping his foot angrily on the floor. "Rosina's fooled you—again! And you owe my daughter an apology."

The detective stiffened. A strange look crossed his face. He held out his hand to Ruth.

"I've been a blind fool, Miss Clifford," he said. "But now I know the real truth of it all—in the nick of time!"

June suddenly cried out in amazement.

For, instead of shaking hands, Noel jerked the bag from the girl's grasp and tossed it across to June. At the

same moment he spun on his heel, seizing the inspector by the wrist, just as the latter swiftly jerked a revolver from his pocket.

While the plain-clothes men came racing across the room, the detective snatched off the inspector's grey wig—revealing a close-cropped head of dark hair. There was a swift struggle, and a pair of handcuffs snapped home.

"It's—the Jackdaw!" cried June. "That tapping foot—I might have guessed—"

"Hold that girl, constable!" shouted Noel. "She's Rosina!"

But in the confusion the daring girl crook had made her escape—leaving behind her handbag, with the priceless diamond inside.

"The two cleverest rogues in England joined forces to outwit us, June," said Noel grimly, after the scowling Jackdaw had been led away.

"The Jackdaw badly wanted that diamond, and Rosina threw in her lot with him. They knew that Inspector Clifford held the detailed plans of the house, and they undoubtedly deceived him away—possibly by a false telegram, purporting to come from his daughter in Ireland. They rifled his cottage—only to find that the plans had been sent to me."

"So—Rosina came to London to collect them?"

Noel nodded grimly.

"She got what she was after—but she didn't expect us to follow so quickly. Warned by my telegram that we were on the way, the precious pair of rogues concocted a daring scheme. Instead of making the risky attempt of breaking into the house, they hit on the brilliant idea of obtaining entry as our colleagues. While Rosina carried out the actual theft, the Jackdaw worked the lights and stood by in case he was needed—ready to provide her with a perfect alibi."

June drew a deep breath. "We've caught the Jackdaw, nunky, and saved the diamond—but Rosina has got away. I wonder—"

"We'll see her again," put in Noel with a grim smile. "That charming young lady can never keep out of trouble—for long!"

(End of this week's story.)

MYSTERY AT THE PETS' SHOP is the title of next Friday's Noel and June story. You will read the strange part played by a pet bird.

LEADER OF THE ALPINE REVELLERS

(Continued from page 42.)

she was, couldn't hide the momentary gleam of baffled spite in her eyes as she realised what must have happened.

Then, shaking her brown curls, Jill was in the midst of the ski-joring practice again.

"Okay! Line up, Revellers!" she cried. "Hans will start us!"

The bells jingled. The hoofs drummed. There were thrills and spills as they sped along, until all too soon it was midday, when the Swiss boy had promised to return the ponies to their stables.

"But you'll be back this afternoon, Hans!" Jill exclaimed. "At three. We've still got loads to learn, you know—and you're the one who's teaching us."

His deep-set eyes rested on hers for a moment.

"I'll be back, Jill!"

Leaving the boy guide, Jill & Co. made their way back to the hotel. As they neared it there came a laughing shout from behind the snow-laden bushes.

"Look out, chaps! Here's the enemy!"

"Down with the girl rivals!"

And a shower of snowballs whizzed out at Jill and her Alpine Revellers.

They were being hurled by Tony, Gerald and the other boy guests at

the hotel, who were also training hard for the Havensburg Test with Max Kildare as their coach. Max, it seemed, had gone off to town on private business this morning and the boys had been out on their own.

"Up, the Revellers!" Jill rallied her forces. "Show these lads we can snowball, as well as ski and skate. Yoicks!"

The snowballs flew thick and fast. Magda, dodging one of them, tumbled against Jill and they fell sprawling, while plump Suzie tripped over them both, and it was some moments before they could sort themselves out.

"Don't give way, girls!"

"Stand fast!"

How the battle ended no one ever knew, for a bell in the near-by hotel warned that it was time to get ready for lunch, and there was a general rush indoors.

Jill lingered behind.

"Now for it," she breathed. "Now for the letter!"

And then, as she felt in her tunic pocket, a gasp of dismay broke from her.

The letter had gone!

She hadn't put it back in the envelope; she had carefully placed both letter and envelope separately in her tunic pocket and buttoned it securely. Now the button was undone and only the envelope remained in her pocket.

It didn't seem possible that it could have fallen out, though she searched frantically in the snow. And then

suddenly a suspicion—almost a certainty—dawned on her.

"Magda!" she breathed.

She remembered how that girl had fallen against her and they had tumbled in a heap on the snow.

"Magda stole it!" Jill gasped. "She saw me put the letter away and she must have deliberately fallen against me to give herself a chance of sneaking it. I thought she gave me a queer look as she ran back into the hotel. Oh, Jill, you utter dunderhead—why weren't you more careful!"

And now, after all her efforts, she was left with an empty envelope. She drew it out, her face a picture of dismay.

Then she caught her breath. For that thin air-mail envelope wasn't quite empty. There was an enclosure in it, besides the type-written letter which Magda had managed to secure. A half sheet of paper which Jill now grasped with trembling fingers.

She hadn't lost everything. Something remained, and it might give a clue as to why the plotters had been so anxious to secure the letter.

With wide-open eyes Jill unfolded it.

Then, as she scanned it, a cry of amazement left her lips.

What is written on the sheet of paper? And why is Magda plotting against the Alpine Revellers? There are more surprises and thrills in next Friday's grand instalment.

THE FOURTH GREY GHOST

(Continued from page 38.)

He paused, clenching his hands. "Then came this robbery business," he said huskily. "No need to go into details. I only learnt about it during the hols.—I learnt that old Glynn had been kicked out of Harcourt. It—it knocked me badly. I just packed a bag and travelled north to where Glynn lived. I had to see him—tell him I couldn't believe it—"

Hugh went on to tell how he had reached Glynn's home, to be received icily by Glynn's uncle, with whom he lived. A stern, rather narrow-minded man, he had bitterly upbraided Glynn when the news had come. There had been a row—and the boy had left home.

"Oh," gulped Penelope; she felt her eyes moist. "Poor Glynn; he wasn't given a chance. Hugh—what did you do?"

"I managed to trace him—and found him in hospital! He'd started work in a factory, he had got an awful blow on the head, saving another chap from a block falling from a crane!"

Penelope involuntarily bit her lip. "Glynn was delirious. He seemed to recognise me—but only vaguely. He kept talking and worrying about his excursion—about The Wasp, who had produced the evidence that got him thrown out—"

His voice now very low, Hugh went on, telling of disjointed sentences of Glynn's, in which the words: "I was not guilty—secret room in the school—the proof is there—find the secret room" kept on recurring.

"I don't want to talk about this much more," said Hugh unsteadily. "But the upshot was that he was on the danger list for weeks. Even now he's not fully recovered. I've written

to him, you see—and the awful thing is that he seems to have lost his memory. He can't help us in our quest."

He fell silent, and Penelope, feeling rather shaky inside, drew a long breath. All now was so clear.

"Oh, Hugh," she whispered. "I—I understand. I feel awfully proud to be able to help. To think of Glynn—well, we've just got to find that secret room!"

Hugh straightened. He stood up.

"Thank you, Penny," he said quietly. "I knew you'd feel as we do. Yes, we've got to find that room—quickly. I'm worried about The Wasp and his strange game. He hated Glynn, remember. But I can't believe he knows what we're after. It's baffling."

He paused. Penelope jumped up herself.

"But the Grey Ghosts will beat him!" she cried fiercely. "Hugh—what is the plan for to-night?"

He hesitated, glancing at the other two. They seemed to guess what he was thinking, for they nodded gravely. Then Penelope realised herself.

"Hugh—you can't leave me out! I—I won't be left out. I'm No. 4. I had this out with you last night."

He looked at her steadily. "Look, Penny, you're more under suspicion than any of us, except possibly myself. All of us think you're pretty grand. Because of that we hate to think of you running such a risk. But this I'll promise you. You shall know our plans when I've made them. Listen. You have my robe. Can you meet me with it in an hour's time at the gate of your garden?"

"Yes, of course. I can smuggle it out. But, Hugh—"

"Penny," he said quietly, "will you leave the last decision as to what happens to-night with me? You said just now you're No. 4; well— a slight smile crossed his lean features—"after

all, I'm the leader of the Grey Ghosts."

An answering, warm smile touched Penelope's lips. She nodded reluctantly.

"O.K., Hugh, but—please find me a part. I want to help Glynn! And now—I think I'd better get back. Daddy might start wondering."

Bob and Harvey quickly rose. Their caps came off. She flashed them a smile and darted away through the spinney.

What a tumult of thoughts were in her mind as she began to hurry back towards the Head's house. The story of Glynn Tracy had moved her deeply, and involuntarily she looked back towards the old belfry where was hidden the proof of his innocence. As she did so she gave a startled gasp, for two figures were making towards the old tower. It was dusk, but she could not mistake them. Her father—

—and Mr. Aspell!

"Daddy and The Wasp—going to the belfry! What—"

Softly, on tiptoe, Penelope sped through the dusk, slowing when she drew near the belfry. From the doorway came her father's sharp tones.

"This is a most disturbing discovery, Aspell."

She stiffened, listening intently. She heard the senior master's answer, and clearly detected the ring of satisfaction in his voice.

"It is indeed, Head. I suggest quick action should be taken."

Penelope's uneasiness and perplexity grew, and she felt a chill of dismay as her father spoke again:

"I completely agree, Aspell. The belfry must be put out of bounds. I shall immediately give orders to have it locked and barred, so that it is impossible for any member of the school to enter!"

What a blow this is to the Grey Ghosts' plans! But why has Penelope's father come to this startling decision? See next Friday's dramatic instalment.

THE MERRYMAKERS AFLOAT

(Continued from page 11.)

mean the breaking of their friendship.

That was why, desperate at the way things were going, she had made up her mind to tell them everything, only to find that they had reached a point when, it seemed, they would not even listen to what she had to say.

Fay's mouth quivered again as she thought of that, then her lips set resolutely. The only way she could make Sally & Co. listen to her now was to produce that letter.

"And—quickly!" she told herself. "So that I can clear up this awful mess. Burt and Carmenita haven't spoken about that letter again—in front of me anyway. Perhaps they're not sure of me yet."

She clenched her hands hard. "I wonder if it's in Burt's cabin? I'll look there. I—I just must do something."

She hurried out. But as she approached his cabin she suddenly halted, her face dropping in dismay. For Burt was still in his cabin, and he was talking to Carmenita. What was more, he was talking about Fay herself.

"It's astounding," he was saying. "I never thought we'd see the day when Fay would come over to our side."

"But can we be sure?" asked Carmenita anxiously. "that she is really one of us now? She is to be trusted?"

"That we're going to find out right away," said Burt, with an unpleasant chuckle. "See this banner—Vote for Carmenita!" It's the one Fay herself painted."

"Well?" asked Carmenita. "Well, we're having an election parade on deck after dinner. I'm

taking one side of the banner; we'll ask Fay to carry the other. If she refuses, then we'll know her change around isn't genuine. Smart, eh?"

Fay shrank back against the wall, her hand pressed to her mouth, her eyes suddenly enormous in her pale face. She couldn't—couldn't do that!

But if she didn't, then she'd break her last link with Burt & Co. She'd lose her last chance of learning where that letter was hidden!

No, she'd got to do it! Somehow she had to find the courage, the nerve to carry that banner. And before her heart could fail she tapped on Burt's door, peeped in with a desperate attempt at a bright smile.

"I say," she said, with pretty appeal, "when you have your election parade do you think I could help carry the banner? If it's not asking too much?"

Her heart leapt as she saw the look the two conspirators exchanged, saw the complete trust in their eyes as they eagerly nodded.

But later, on deck, how desperately difficult it was not to hurl that hateful banner to the ground, to turn and fly.

She wanted to sink through the deck for shame as she saw the contempt in the eyes of her friends, heard their whispered—and some not-so-whispered remarks. And then she faltered, almost stopped as she saw Sally, Don and Johnny, standing in a group a little apart from the others.

She saw the white unhappiness in Sally's face, the bitter look in her blue eyes. Johnny pointedly turned his back. Behind her Carmenita sniggered.

"They're pretty uppish now," she said maliciously to Burt. "But just wait until that letter reaches Senor Gonzalez to-morrow. You have put it away safely, have you not?" she hissed anxiously.

"Sure I have," said Burt confi-

dently. He did not trouble to lower his voice in front of Fay now. "It's locked in my bureau—don't worry."

Fay's heart seemed to turn a somersault of joy. She knew where the letter was—she knew!

The sudden brilliant smile on Fay's face was the last straw for Sally. With a hard little sob she broke away, ran off down the deck. A pang went through Fay as she saw, but even that could not dim her great joy.

"Oh, Sally," she thought exultantly, "it won't be long now before I get the letter. Then you'll understand everything—"

She waited in a fever of impatience to get away from the parade. Her chance came when the parade stopped at the sports deck and Carmenita began to read from her carefully prepared speech, Burt at her side.

They would be occupied for some time Fay realised, and with a muttered excuse she darted off.

Now was her chance! Now she'd get the letter. Then she'd be able to explain everything to Sally.

Even as she thought of Sally that girl suddenly appeared at the head of the companionway. A radiant smile came over Fay's face.

"Sally!" she called excitedly. "Oh, Sally, listen! I have some wonderful news—"

Her voice trailed away. Almost stupidly she stared. For as if Fay did not exist, Sally glanced coldly through her, then with a slight stiffening of her shoulders, she walked on without a backward glance.

Fay stood as if stricken. Sally was finished with her. Sally didn't want to be her friend any more.

(End of this week's story.)

What a terrible moment for Fay. But in next Friday's appealing story you will read how she fights back to outwit Burt and Carmenita and regain the friendship that means so much to her.