

# The TRAIL of FALSE CLUES



*An intriguing mystery story, featuring  
Noel Raymond, the famous young detective.*

By

PETER LANGLEY

## CHAPTER I

### THE RIVAL DETECTIVES

"THIS looks like the place!" murmured Noel Raymond, as he slowed his car outside the massive iron gates and glanced at the name inscribed on the pillar.

"Elmwood Lodge."

The young detective smiled quizzically as he glanced at the high wall surrounding the estate—a wall embellished with broken glass and barbed wire.

"Umph!" he commented. "The pro-

fessor's taking no risks. I wonder what's on his mind?"

He descended from his car and tugged at the rusty bell-pull. It was some time before his ring was answered; then a dour-faced manservant appeared and scrutinised him suspiciously.

The servant's manner changed as Noel produced his card.

"Professor Tremayne is expecting you, sir," he said. "Will you drive in?"

"Queer sort of establishment," thought Noel, as he pressed his foot on the accelera-

tor. "More like a fortified castle than a private house!"

But to his surprise he found Professor Tremayne to be a very pleasant and genial man—a trifle absent-minded in his manner, but in no wise eccentric.

He came straight to the point as he ushered Noel into his study.

"You may be surprised at the precautions I am taking, Mr. Raymond," he said, "but I felt that they were necessary. As I mentioned in my letter, I am engaged on some highly important experimental work on behalf of the Government—work in which secrecy is essential."

Noel raised his eyebrows.

"Surely you don't anticipate that spies would make an attempt to—"

"Oh, dear me, no!" interrupted the professor, smiling. "Nothing like that. My notes, diagrams and apparatus would be completely useless to anyone but myself. What I am afraid of, Mr. Raymond, is that the daring burglar who has twice broken into my house and robbed me of certain valuables might make another attempt, and perhaps carry off or destroy some vital papers or apparatus at the same time. I read of a similar case some time ago."

The young detective nodded thoughtfully, a gleam of interest in his eyes.

"So your house has been burgled—in spite of your precautions?"

"Twice within the last fortnight," replied the professor. "I have lost several valuable objects of art. I'm a bit of a collector in my spare time. The stolen objects were in the sitting-room adjoining my laboratory. You may perhaps understand my anxiety."

"I certainly do," replied Noel. "I suppose you have no suspicions as to who the thief might be?"

"None at all," replied the professor. "The local police are baffled. But my niece, Julie—"

At that instant the study door was thrown open impetuously, to admit an auburn-haired, very attractive girl, whose eyes were dancing with excitement.

"Uncle," she exclaimed, "I've found another clue! It—"

She broke off abruptly, her cheeks flaming, as she caught sight of Noel.

"I—I'm sorry!" she faltered. "I didn't know—"

"It's all right, my dear," put in the professor, smiling. "This is Mr. Raymond, the London detective. Mr. Raymond—my niece, Julie Vardon!"

Noel bowed, but to his surprise Julie Vardon drew back with a little gasp of disappointment.

"Uncle!" she exclaimed reproachfully, turning to the professor. "Why—why didn't you tell me before? Now you've spoilt everything!"

"Ahem!" remarked the professor, somewhat abashed. "I'm afraid the matter completely slipped my mind, Julie." He glanced apologetically at Noel.



"When I've deciphered this message," Julie said, "I'm going to lay a trap for the thief!" Noel frowned, for he realised that it was impossible to dissuade the headstrong girl from carrying out her dangerous plan.

"The fact is, Mr. Raymond, my niece prides herself on being something of a sleuth—an amateur, you understand. She has been handling this inquiry for me."

"I see!" said Noel, a twinkle of understanding in his eyes. "I'm rather cutting in on your preserves, Miss Vardon. But surely—two heads are better than one, at times, and we could pool our discoveries?"

"I—I'm sorry!" the girl said at once, holding out her hand frankly. "It was stupid of me to take it like that. But, you see, I was getting on so well. I feel certain that I'm on the point of getting on the track of the thief. So what I'll do," she went on eagerly, "is to tell you what I've discovered and let you draw your own conclusions."

Noel suppressed a smile.

"That'll be fine," he said. "Shall we start at the scene of the burglary?"

The professor led the way into a spacious, attractively furnished room adjoining his laboratory. The walls were lined with curios and objects of art; thick Oriental rugs covered the polished parquet floor.

As they entered a woman appeared from the door opposite—a rather hard-faced woman, wearing a dress of rustling black silk and carrying a bunch of keys.

"Ah, Mrs. Parsons!" said the professor. "Will you tell Mr. Baxter that I should like him to come to the laboratory to take down some notes? Thank you!"

The housekeeper swept out of the room with a slight toss of her head.

"Mrs. Parsons, I should explain, is a very trustworthy woman," remarked the professor, "though a trifle short-tempered at times. Her husband is employed as chauffeur-gardener. He has charge of the gates."

Julie plucked Noel by the sleeve, drawing him aside.

"A queer couple!" she whispered, with a warning glance. "I'm keeping my eye on them. I'll tell you later. S-sh!"

Noel managed to look suitably grave. A brisk-looking man had entered the room, a portfolio under his arm.

"You sent for me, sir?" he asked.

"Er—yes, Baxter. I should like you to take down some notes for me," replied the professor. "We'll leave these two young people to proceed with their investigations."

He and the secretary entered the adjoining room, closing the door.

"Mr. Baxter has been very helpful," explained Julie in a whisper. "It was he who suggested to uncle that I should take up the case. Shall I start explaining?"

"Please!" said Noel. His practised gaze scanned the room. "I take it that the stolen curios were removed from the shelf on the right of the window?"

Julie glanced at him in a startled fashion—and then she smiled.

"Of course! You saw those marks in the dust. That's easy! Two things were stolen last night—a heavy silver candlestick and a Chinese bowl. The thief came in through the window, and left the same way. I can also give you a description of him."

"Eh?" demanded Noel, taken aback. Julie laughed.

"I thought that would surprise you. Listen! The thief is tall—exceptionally tall and agile. He wears size nine in shoes, and has expensive tastes. He's either visited the house on some previous occasion—or is in touch with someone who knows it well. What do you think of that?"

She glanced at Noel triumphantly. The young detective whistled softly.

"You've certainly got the description pat," he replied, regarding her quizzically. "Now, let me see if I can discover how you reached your conclusions."

He stepped back from the window, glancing at the shelves.

"You say the thief is a tall man—and agile? The suggestion being that he must have been exceptionally tall—in order to reach the curios from that shelf while standing on the floor."

"If he entered and left by the window, he must have been very agile. I notice faint, muddy footprints on the parquet floor, and I take it that you have measured them? Good! You certainly don't let much escape you, young lady!"

Noel bent again to examine the muddy footprints. There was a rather curious expression in his eyes as he straightened himself.

"And what about the expensive tastes?" he asked.

"I thought that would puzzle you," declared Julie. "Look!"

Opening her handbag she took out a half-burnt cigarette of a rather expensive brand.

"I found this on the floor, near the window," she explained.

Noel examined it gravely.

"How did you know this brand was expensive?" he asked.

"My brother smokes them," replied Julie, "and he's got awfully extravagant tastes. Donald's in Scotland on business," she added.

"Well, you certainly seem to have got your case cut and dried," said Noel. "But one rather curious fact has occurred to me. The thief certainly seems to have gone out of his way to leave tracks deliberately, doesn't he?"

He held out the half-burnt cigarette.

"Take that, for example. Do you notice anything peculiar about it?" he asked.

"No," replied the girl, frowning a little. "There aren't any finger-prints, because I've looked."

"I don't mean finger-prints," said Noel. "I mean the way it is burnt. It was smoked to within a fraction of an inch of the maker's name, and then extinguished."

"What of it?" asked Julie.

"I don't know," replied the young detective thoughtfully. "But it seems a strange oversight on the thief's part to leave so incriminating a piece of evidence lying about!"

Julie tossed her head.

"If you are suspicious of my clues, why don't you look for some of your own?" she asked.

Noel accepted the girl's rebuff good-humouredly.

"Let me try," he said.

He barely glanced at the window, but crossed the room towards the door. He bent to examine the seat of a chair.

"The scratches on this leather seem to have been made recently," he remarked; "almost as if someone might have been standing on it."

He straightened himself, glancing at a framed photograph on a near-by table—a group of young men in football attire.

One of them, in the centre, stood head and shoulders above the rest.

"Who's the good-looking young fellow," inquired Noel casually as he picked up the frame—"the one in the centre?"

The girl's expression softened.

"That's my brother Don," she said, "the one I was telling you about who's in Scotland. He's awfully keen on sports. He's got a good job, too—connected with the Government."

Noel thoughtfully replaced the portrait; his eyes were grave and rather troubled.

"Have you searched outside the house?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Of course," said Julie. "It was the first thing I did. The ground's too dry for footprints, but I found traces where someone had been hiding in the bushes."

"Will you show me?" asked Noel quietly.

Only too willingly the girl complied, leading the way from the house. Noel followed, the troubled expression on his face more pronounced.

Every indication helped to confirm his startling theory—that the clues found by Julie had been laid deliberately!

But the girl sleuth would be affronted if he suggested it. So for the time being he decided to keep his own counsel.

As they halted in the grounds, Julie pointed up to the window of the drawing-room.

"You see," she said. "An agile man could reach the window by way of the ivy. I'm convinced that he must have hidden himself in the grounds, and possibly he's found some secret way in."

Noel was staring at the bushes surrounding the house; he noticed unmistakable traces of the undergrowth having been recently trampled.

As he strolled forward his keen eyes detected something caught up in the shrubbery. It was a man's hat.

He took a swift step towards it, but Julie, whose eyes were equally sharp, sprang in front of him.

"I saw it first!" she gasped.

But, with a swift gesture, Noel's agile fingers pounced on the hat and jerked something from the lining before he allowed her to take it from him.

Crimson with mingled indignation and suppressed excitement, Julie held the battered hat protectively.

"You—you're just jealous!" she scoffed. "You're afraid I'll solve the mystery before you. I think you're mean!"

The young detective's lips tightened.

"Miss Vardon," he said gravely, "please listen to me! I'm anxious to help you in every way within my power, but I must warn you that the clues you are following will lead you to a bitter disillusionment—and worse!"

The girl laughed scornfully, her eyes flashing.

"If you think you can put me off in that way, you are mistaken!" she flashed. "In future you can go your way and I'll go mine!"

With a defiant toss of her auburn hair she swept away towards the house, holding tightly to her latest clue.

The young detective's face was rather pale as he stared after her. Not till she was out of sight did he examine the tab he had snatched from the inside of the hat.

The tab bore two inked initials:

"D. V."

The young detective drew in his breath sharply, his worst fears confirmed.

"Donald Vardon!" he breathed huskily. "Julie's brother! And all unknowingly she's trying to expose him as the thief!"

## CHAPTER II

### JULIE GOES HER OWN WAY

NOEL'S mind worked swiftly. He found himself confronted by one of the strangest problems he had ever been called on to solve.

Was Donald Vardon—supposed to be away in Scotland—actually the thief? Noel doubted it.

But whether innocent or not, one thing

was certain: Julie, headstrong and impulsive, was doing her level best to track down the person dearest to her in the world!

If he was to save Julie Vardon from bitter disappointment, he must act on his own.

And there was no time to lose!

Swiftly, with grim determination, Noel made his plans.

He could only ward off the danger by learning the whole truth: the truth behind these mysterious thefts—the trail of false clues!

Thoughtfully he returned to the house, to re-examine the clues from a completely new angle.

Supposing that they had been "planted" there—as he was inclined to suspect. Who could have laid the trail—and why? How was Julie's brother mixed up in it? Were Mr. and Mrs. Parsons?

Noel's expression was even more thoughtful as he went up to his room to prepare for dinner.

During the meal he found himself cold-shouldered pointedly by Julie, who devoted herself almost entirely to gay exchange of conversation with her uncle's secretary.

Professor Tremayne himself appeared a trifle worried, and he questioned Noel anxiously as to the results of his investigations.

"I've learnt a great deal," announced Noel, encountering Julie's scornful glance. "I'm almost convinced that I'm on the right track."

Julie turned pointedly to Roland Baxter.

"You did promise to help me in my search, didn't you, Mr. Baxter?" she asked.

"Rather!" replied the secretary, with a good-humoured smile. "I'd be delighted!"

The young detective smiled grimly as he reached for his coffee. It was obvious that Julie meant to go ahead with her quest, in defiance of his advice.

After dinner, Julie disappeared on some errand of her own; Baxter and the professor had work to do. Noel was left to his own resources.

The young detective strolled into the grounds. He had a definite plan in mind—and there were certain points in the mystery that he was particularly anxious to clear up.

Could any intruder have contrived to get into the grounds unseen? Was the false trail of clues designed merely to divert suspicion from the real thief—or was there some more sinister purpose behind it?

An examination of the high walls suggested that only an athlete could contrive to scale them without the aid of a ladder. But Noel continued his search; and at length his patience was rewarded.

On one part of the wall, farthest from the house—and hidden by dense shrubbery—he discovered unmistakable traces of some kind of ladder having been used—possibly a rope-ladder with hooks.

The creeper was torn, and the grass was trampled.

Noel whistled softly, his expression suddenly grave.

If an intruder had broken in, the fact seemed to smash his theory of an "inside" theft. Or—was this another clue that had been deliberately planted?

Noel was frankly worried. He suspected where Julie's trail would lead her—and he dreaded the result of her impulsive investigations.

Torch in hand he continued his search. Ahead of him, through the trees, he saw a tumbledown old lodge—obviously disused.



Obstinately Julie clung to the battered hat. "I've found this clue, and I'm going to keep it!" she told Noel Raymond. Plainly, she regarded the young detective as an unwanted rival!

The windows were boarded, and weeds grew in tangled riot in what had once been the garden.

As Noel approached the desolate building he saw a dim light shining through a crevice in the boards!

A noiseless whistle escaped his lips, and his eyes glittered as he moved cautiously among the bushes till he drew level with one of the ground-floor windows.

He attempted to peer through a crevice in the boards—but could see nothing except a stump of candle burning fitfully on a rough deal table.

No sound came from within the house; the spluttering candle alone suggested the presence of an occupant.

Swiftly the young detective made up his mind. Taking a bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket, he inserted one in the door; there came the rusty click of

the falling latch—and Noel flung open the door, stepping into the room.

As he did so, the spluttering candle was extinguished. A shadowy figure sprang at him from the gloom, knocking the torch from his hand and sending him sprawling backwards.

Noel, not unprepared for an attack, grappled swiftly with his attacker.

The other man was obviously young and powerful, and more heavily built than Noel.

Not a word was spoken as they swayed in the darkness, each attempting to obtain the mastery.

It was rarely that the young detective had been matched against so powerful an opponent. Finally he resorted to a ju-jutsu trick to throw his assailant; the other staggered backwards, recovered miraculously, and leaped for the door, slamming it in Noel's face.

Swiftly Noel had it open, and, picking up his torch, he ran some distance without seeing his quarry, when suddenly he halted.

The gleam from his torch stabbed the darkness.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated softly.

For, standing there, flushed and triumphant, a magnifying glass in her hand, was Julie Vardon.

"Miss Vardon!" rapped Noel, staring at her.

The girl eyed him defiantly, holding something behind her back.

"You may be interested to know that I've found another clue," she said. "I'm convinced that the thief has been hiding in the old lodge—and that he'll come back again!"

"What makes you so certain?" asked Noel quietly.

"Because," said Julie with a triumphant smile, "he dropped this!" She held up an envelope. "There's some kind of message inside—in code. I'm going to ask Roland Baxter to help me decipher it—and I'm going to lay a trap for the thief!"

Noel's face paled.

"Look here, Miss Vardon," he said gravely, "can't we bury our differences

and work together? If you carry out this plan of yours you may regret it to the end of your life!"

Julie looked rather startled by his tone; then she gave a quick laugh.

"You're just trying to scare me," she said. "It won't do, Mr. Raymond! You go your way and I'll go mine; and I'll prove that my way was best!"

Noel clenched his hands as he stared after her.

The headstrong girl was going the right way to wreck her own life—and her brother's.

And the young detective was powerless to dissuade her.

"WELL, Mr. Baxter, have you solved the cryptogram?" asked Julie eagerly.

The secretary shook his head with a smile.

"Not yet; but I have hopes. Better leave it with me for the time being."

But Julie shook her head.

"I'm going to lay a trap," she whispered, "this evening! The cryptogram will be the bait and I want you to help me. But promise you won't breathe a word to that conceited detective."

Roland Baxter laughed.

"Aren't you being rather hard on Noel Raymond? He's got a big reputation, you know."

Julie tossed her attractive head.

"I don't care about his reputation; he's not nearly as clever as I thought he was—and—and he needs taking down a peg or two. I'm going to catch the thief without his help. Listen."

Swiftly she outlined her plan.

Half an hour later, Julie and the secretary, with Professor Tremayne and the village constable—who had been hastily summoned by telephone—made their way towards the old lodge.

They found the door standing open, the lock shattered. The place was deserted—though a burnt-out candle revealed that someone had been there recently.

The constable was posted in the garden. Roland Baxter and the professor stood just inside the room, behind the door

Julie herself stepped into a cupboard, half closing the door.

"Don't make a sound!" she whispered. "The thief is bound to return for that envelope—and we'll catch him red-handed."

A quarter of an hour passed—half an hour; Julie's nerves began to play uneasy tricks. The suspense was becoming almost unbearable.

On the table she had placed the fateful cryptogram, in full view of the door.

Suddenly there came a faint, stealthy footstep; a muffled figure appeared in the doorway and took a hurried step towards the table, snatching up the cryptogram.

"Quick!" cried Julie, starting from the cupboard, torch in hand.

The intruder spun round with a start, and at the same instant Baxter and the professor leaped at him, securing his arms. Julie darted forward triumphantly and whipped off the scarf that concealed the other's face.

Then a startled, chagrined cry escaped her lips.

For, staring at her grimly, a dry smile on his lips—was Noel Raymond!

### CHAPTER III

#### HER BROTHER'S SECRET

"YOU!" gasped Julie.

"Mr. Raymond!" exclaimed the professor angrily. "What does this mean?"

Noel shrugged.

"Surely," he replied dryly, "that is for Miss Vardon to say."

Julie faced him, her eyes blazing.

"It's a trick!" she gasped. "A hateful trick. He's deliberately trying to assist the thief to escape!"

Noel bowed gravely.

"Miss Vardon is perfectly correct," he replied. "That is what I'm trying to do."

Noel's cool statement caused a sensation in the group.

"You admit that?" demanded the professor incredulously. "You—a well-known detective—admit a plot to aid this scoundrel to escape?"

The young detective shrugged as he calmly lit a cigarette. There was an almost

humorous glint in his eyes as he encountered Julie's accusing stare.

"I do not admit that he is a scoundrel," he replied. "That is where Miss Vardon and I differ."

"Oh!" gasped Julie, her hands clenched. "Don't listen to him, uncle. From the very first he's tried to spoil my investigation and to prevent me catching the thief."

The professor nodded sternly.

"Mr. Raymond," he said brusquely, "I should be obliged if you would leave my house without further delay."

Noel bowed coldly.

"I shall leave at once," he said. "As soon as I have had time to pack."

Turning, he strode back towards the house, without another glance at Julie.

Reaching his room, he locked the door and took from his pocket a crumpled slip of paper.

The fateful cryptogram!

Noel smiled grimly as he set to work to decipher it. By a piece of clever sleight-of-hand he had extracted it from the envelope on the table in the lodge and substituted in its place a sheet of blank paper!

He wondered what Julie would think when she found it.

But his expression became grave as he deciphered the code—the code that had baffled both Julie and the secretary.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated under his breath.

"To-night—at ten," he read. "Situation desperate. Will look out for the usual signal.—D. V."

"Donald Vardon!" muttered Noel.

The cryptic message banished the last possible shred of doubt. Julie's brother was mixed up in this affair—and, unless a stop was put to the girl's headstrong actions, she might even be the cause of her brother's arrest!

Noel thought quickly.

To whom had the cryptic message been written? One name flashed immediately into his mind. There was no time to lose if he was to confirm his suspicions.

Packing hastily, the young detective made a pretence of leaving the house.



But as he reached the gate he doubled on his tracks and approached the mansion cautiously from the rear.

There, concealed by the bushes, he lay in wait.

The time dragged past. By the illuminated dial of his watch Noel could see that it was close on ten o'clock.

Then abruptly he stiffened, every nerve alert.

From the direction of the house he saw a light flashing. Two long flashes and then a short one. The signal was repeated.

The young detective crept nearer. The light was flashing from a basement window.

Cautiously, keeping in the shadows, he approached the window—to see a white face pressed against the bars.

A flight of steps led down to the basement, and Noel descended them noiselessly, throwing open the door.

There came a frightened cry as the figure crouched by the window turned suddenly, torch in hand.

The housekeeper!

In a flash Noel caught the woman by the arm, twisting the torch neatly out of her grasp.

"What—what do you want?" she gasped.

"To whom are you signalling?" countered Noel sternly.

"That's my business," replied the woman in sullen, half-scared tones.

"You refuse to answer my question?"

The woman's lips tightened, and she made no reply.

The young detective shrugged.

"Very well. We'll try another way."

Still keeping a firm hold on her arm, he flashed the torch towards the window—two long flashes and a short one.

"Stop!" cried the woman, her face paling. "You don't know what you're doing."

"I'm willing to risk that," rejoined Noel grimly as he continued the signals.

In a few moments came a reply—a glimmer of light among the trees. The light was approaching the house.

With sudden desperation, the housekeeper twisted her arm from the young detective's hold and raced for the area door.

Noel bounded after her, but even as he reached the door a burly figure sprang from the shadows, and the young detective was sent sprawling backwards with a blow that might have felled an ox.

He heard the door slam and the key grate in the lock.

Dazed and shaken, he flung himself at the door, seeking to smash it open.

But the door was built to withstand burglars—and the window was heavily barred.

For an instant Noel caught a glimpse of an athletic figure climbing on to the railings outside, then the moon vanished behind a cloud.

His hands clenched, the young detective stared round him. His gaze rested on a massive iron bar leaning against the wall of the room. He snatched it up and attacked the door with all his strength.

Every moment was vital if he were to avert a tragedy.

**T**HE clock in the old tower was chiming a quarter to eleven as Julie Vardon crept out of her bedroom and made her way cautiously towards her uncle's study.

She believed that the rest of the household had retired, but Julie had no intentions of going to bed just yet.

For the last hour she had been standing behind her bedroom door listening, her ears strained for the slightest sound.

And now she had heard it, that sound she had half-expected—the creaking of a loose board just inside the window of the study.

A mysterious intruder had entered the house.

Julie was convinced of it, and her pulses thrilled with excitement.

It was the crowning moment of her investigations, the proof of her ability as a girl sleuth.

In her hand—that trembled slightly, in spite of herself—Julie grasped a revolver. It was an old Service revolver that had belonged to her brother—and it was unloaded. Julie had never handled a weapon before, but the touch of it gave her confidence.

Her heart beating quickly, she approached the study door and listened. She could hear no sound, but she was certain that there was someone in the room.

Plucking up all her courage, she turned the handle softly and threw open the door.

Silhouetted against the dim light from the window was a tall figure.

"Put your hands up!" exclaimed Julie breathlessly. "If you move I'll—I'll fire!"

She saw the figure stiffen, turning sharply towards her.

"Don't be a fool!" came the husky retort. "Put down that weapon; it might go off!"

Julie's lips tightened as she felt for the switch, but there came no answering gleam of light as she pulled it down. The mysterious intruder had taken the precaution of removing the bulb.

"Uncle!" called Julie at the top of her voice. "Uncle—quickly! The burglar!"

Doors were thrown open; her uncle appeared on the landing in his dressing-gown.

Roland Baxter, the secretary, emerged fully dressed from the laboratory.

"Julie, what—" he exclaimed.

"The burglar!" gasped Julie. "Oh, quickly! He's in here!"

The mysterious intruder made a dive for the window, but his foot caught in one of the rugs and he fell to the floor.

The secretary was the first to reach him, grabbing him by the shoulder. A brilliant beam from the professor's torch stabbed the darkness, revealing the man's face.

There came a broken, horrified cry from Julie.

"Don!"

"Donald!" exclaimed the astounded professor.

Donald Vardon rose to his feet, his good-looking face rather pale. Baxter kept a firm hold on his shoulder.

Julie was staring at her brother in anguished bewilderment.

Donald Vardon turned and smiled rather bitterly.



Julie gave a startled gasp as the attache-case burst open, and on to the floor rolled the stolen curios. It looked as if her brother would be arrested as a thief—and all because she had ignored Noel's warning!

"I'm sorry, Julie!" he said. "I'd have liked to have spared you this, but you gave me no chance."

"What does this mean?" demanded the professor huskily. "I demand an explanation, young man—at once!"

A stubborn expression crossed Donald Vardon's face.

"I'm afraid, sir," he said, "that I am not in the position to explain just now. Because of an old difference of opinion, you have barred me free access to your

house, so I had to obtain entrance as best I could after dark."

"Donald!" gasped Julie, a little choke in her voice.

"Confounded cheek!" muttered Baxter. "What have you got in that case?"

He pointed to an attaché-case grasped in the other's hand.

"Mind your own business!" rejoined Donald curtly.

"It is my business!" declared Baxter, making a grab at the case.

There was a struggle. With a cry, Julie attempted to part them. In the tussle the attaché-case burst open—and on to the carpeted floor rolled the stolen curios!

"Look!" shouted the secretary.

Julie, her eyes wide with piteous dismay, stared at the incriminating evidence.

Too late she recalled Noel Raymond's warning; she realised now that the young detective had done his best to avert the very thing that her headstrong action had brought about.

The professor was staring at the contents of the case like a man in a dream. His face was dark with mingled anger and grief.

"So this is how you repay me for my generosity to you in the past, Donald——" he began huskily.

"I tell you I know nothing about those things, sir!" declared Julie's brother.

"I suppose they got into your case by accident?" Baxter sneered.

At that moment the door burst open to admit Noel Raymond, accompanied by a uniformed inspector.

The young detective was breathless and dishevelled, but there was a grim smile on his lips.

"Just a minute!" he said. "Sorry I couldn't get here before, but I was delayed by Donald's friends—the housekeeper and her husband."

"Who the deuce are you?" demanded Donald Vardon, staring.

"Noel Raymond—at your service," replied the young detective. "We've met before—in the lodge. You pitched into me without waiting for an explanation. If you'd waited I'd have warned you to be careful what you took out of Baxter's room."

The secretary started.

"Whatever are you talking about?" he demanded truculently.

"Young Vardon found that case in your room," announced Noel grimly. "You needn't deny it; your initials are on the case, though they've been partly obliterated." He picked up the case, pointing to some blurred markings on the leather. "Donald imagined that the case contained certain papers—papers dealing with the professor's secret experiments. Detailed lists ready to be dispatched to the foreign agents in whose interests you are working——"

"That's a lie!" shouted the secretary.

"On the contrary!" snapped Noel.

"I've found the papers, together with a code message from yourself, concealed in the lining of your overcoat. You've packed your things, ready to leave the house to-night. Have a look at these, Vardon."

As he spoke he tossed a sealed envelope across to Donald.

The baffled secretary made a dive for the door, only to be caught by the inspector.

Donald Vardon ripped open the envelope, and his eyes glittered.

"Thanks!" he said. "Here's all the proof I want."

"Donald's in the Secret Service," explained Noel, smiling at the amazed Julie.

"He tumbled to the fact that details of your uncle's experiments were leaking out, and he suspected that a spy was in the house. Owing to an old difference of opinion he was out of favour with the professor; so, aided by the Parsons, he contrived to keep watch on Baxter's movements without revealing his presence.

"Baxter got wind of this, and decided to set a trap to blacken Donald completely in his uncle's eyes. Hence the thefts—and the cunningly laid false trails."

"What a fool I've been!" Julie said.

"I was so taken up with my own cleverness that I didn't dream——"

Noel smiled as he took her hand.

"Every detective makes a mistake at times," he said. "It's all part of the game."