

No. 437.
Vol. 17.
EVERY
FRIDAY.

GIRLS' CRYSTAL ^{3^D}

Week
Ending
March
4th, 1944.

AND "THE SCHOOLGIRL"



VICKY'S DESPERATE PLAN TO HELP KENNEDY VANE is Featured In This Week's Exciting Instalment of HAZEL ARMITAGE'S Enthralling Story.

SWIFT WORK

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

They were thrilled when they found a clue which led them to believe they were on the track of a treasure known as the Witch's Hoard. But someone else was also after it—someone who dressed up as the witch. One of the boys, Kennedy Vane, whom the chums all liked, in spite of his odd ways, said his uncle was the well-known detective, Humphrey Spence, and that during his absence abroad he himself was out to catch the witch, who was actually a notorious crook known as Ghostfingers.

The chums had some really frightening experiences from the witch, but the colonel said it was Kennedy who was playing a silly joke, and when the witch's costume was found in his room he sent him away from the manor.

Kennedy did not go far—only to the old witch's cottage, where he found clues which definitely suggested that Ghostfingers was a woman. The chums suspected Amanda Shorter, the colonel's secretary, and Kennedy asked Vicky to let him into the manor in secret. She did so. There he searched Amanda's room, but the alarm was raised. Though Kennedy got away without being seen, his school O.T.C. badge was found there.

WITH horrified eyes Vicky Kingswood and her chums stared at the incriminating O.T.C. badge which Colonel Roberts held in his hand.

"Gad, yes. It's Kennedy Vane's all right," the colonel growled. "Phone for the police, Miss Shorter."

"But," Vicky gasped, as the secretary moved doorwards. "Miss Shorter, no! Colonel, please!" she said desperately.

"Look here, Vicky, you keep out of this. You're too dashed fond of that young rascal," the colonel growled. "This is proof!"

"But—but how is it proof?" Vicky cried. "I mean, how do you know that badge is Ken's? It's an O.T.C. badge, of course—but aren't there thousands of badges like it? Look! Frank, Jim and Dick have each got one."

"Exactly," the colonel said, "but that doesn't alter the facts. Don't argue, Vicky!"

The chums bit their lips, all looking at Vicky. Frantically Vicky was fighting for time. Another argument struck her.

"All right," she agreed. "It's proof! But supposing, colonel, when the police go to interview Kennedy, he's wearing the badge? Then we shall look a lot of sillies!"

"Oh, colonel—" Amanda Shorter said exasperatedly.

But the point struck home. The colonel glared at Vicky, but he paused. If that should happen, then, of course, he would have no leg on which to stand. He snorted.

"All right," he said. "We'll put it to the test ourselves. Never mind the police for the moment, Miss Shorter. Get hold of Cobley instead and tell him to get the motor-sled going. We'll slip over and see the young rascal before he has time to think up excuses. And if he doesn't happen to have the badge—as he hasn't, of course—then, by gad, I'll haul him along to the police station myself."

He thrust the badge into his pocket as he said that; with a jerk of the head he motioned them all out of the room. Then, as Amanda locked the door, he looked at them.

"Better get back to the concert, all of you," he said gruffly. "I don't want any of you interfering in this. I'll let you know when that young rascal is under lock and key."

And with another scowl he strode off, followed by Amanda. More slowly the chums, grouped about Vicky, followed him, their interest in the concert completely evaporated now. Frank Carlton gave a groan.

"It looks as though it's all U.P. with poor old Ken!" he said glumly. "Oh, gosh, what on earth can we do?"

That was a question which was also hammering in Vicky's mind. They had to do something. Ken, at least, must be warned; must be prepared for the attack which was coming—but how?

At the bottom of the stairs she paused, beckoning Dick on one side.

"Dick, quickly! In the library," she cried. "Please, chummies, don't come in for a moment; I've got to have a special word with Dick. Hurry, old lad," she added urgently.

Dick nodded. The rest of the party, trusting to Vicky, passed on through the hall. Into the library Vicky and Dick popped, just as the colonel, struggling into a fur-lined leather coat, appeared on the scene again.

"What's the idea of hanging about? Go and see the concert," he said to Betty, Dawn, and Frank, and passed on to join Amanda, who had just appeared at the door of the study.

As that door slammed the library door opened. Vicky appeared, urgently beckoning. At once the chums all crowded in.

"We've fixed it," she said. "Now, no questions or objections, because everything has got to be done in double quick time. Ken's got to know about this. And so," Vicky added simply, "I'm going over to warn him."

"You?" Frank glared. "But it—it's nearly dark. Scrap that notion, Vicky; we're all coming."

"I'm going," Vicky asserted firmly. "I'm going alone. I know the way. Half a dozen of us would only get mixed up. And don't forget," she added, "that seconds count, seeing that the colonel is taking the motor-sled. You all say—very kindly—that I'm the fastest skier among you, so I'm going—on skis."

"And racing the motor-sled?" Jim asked, incredulously.

"I've got to—if I'm to save Ken," Vicky said simply. "Now, please, no more argument. I must hurry."

She pushed her way through her chums, none of them looking too keen on the suggestion. Into the corridor she hurried, jumping a little anxiously as she heard the motor-sled starting up outside. Oh, could she do it? Could she possibly reach Ken before that unsuspecting boy was pounced upon by the colonel and his wily secretary?

Time was precious. Minutes—even seconds, would count vitally now.

Breathlessly she hurried towards the cloak-room. About to enter it, she paused in dismay as Trelorna came along.

"Hallo, Vicky, not gone back to the concert yet?" she asked with a smile. "Or are you a little upset? I'm frightfully sorry about what happened. What a scamp Kennedy must be."

"Oh, Miss Fleet, he isn't!" Vicky blurted, hurt to feel that the beautiful Trelorna Fleet, whom she admired so much, could think so badly of Ken.

Trelorna looked at her sympathetically.

"You like him, don't you, Vicky?"

"Yes," Vicky answered.

"In—in spite of what he's done?"

"I don't believe he has done anything wrong," Vicky insisted sturdily. "And I'm sure," she added, "that we shall all find out the mistake before long. But—excuse me," she added hurriedly. "There's something I want from the cloak-room."

With a smile Trelorna stood aside for her to pass, and Vicky, chafing at the delay, hurriedly seized her coat and muffler, first feeling in the pocket to make sure she still possessed her torch. She heaved a sigh of relief when she felt its hard shape through the folds of her pocket.

She did not leave by the door she had entered. She was afraid Trelorna might be there. She left by the small side door which opened out into the snow-blown courtyard, and again her heart jumped as she heard the sled moving off, the colonel's voice roaring a last instruction as it sped through the gates. Then, bending her head, she fought her way to the ski sled.

Could she do it? Oh, could she do it?

She was already panting when the ski sled loomed before her. Precious time was expended while she found her skis, fixed them, and plunged through the semi-gloom towards the ski run. Near by a voice spoke.

"Hallo! Who's there?"

The voice was that of Cobley, the groom. Vicky gasped. She did not reply. Recklessly she dug her sticks into the snow. Half crouching she levered herself on to the slope, and with one frenzied thrust of her ski-sticks, lunged forward. At once she found herself whizzing. Oh, could she do it?

More impossible the task seemed now. The colonel had a start. Though, of necessity, the motor-sled must travel by road, and therefore the greater distance, it had a mechanical speed which she did not possess.

Moreover, it was dark now—almost as dark as night, and buffeting wind and flying snow particles blowing straight into her face must decrease her speed. Apart from that it was by no means all downhill going—

"But I've got to do it. For Ken's sake," she told herself fiercely.

She set her teeth. On she whizzed now, hoping to goodness that she was going in the right direction. But even that she had no means of knowing. Then suddenly she struck some covered obstacle, stumbled, and went flopping into the snow, and for several yards ploughed downhill on her shoulder.

She felt bruised when she finally got to her feet. But on she went, her breath coming in great gulps. She sensed, from the growing steepness of the gradient, that she was nearing the valley, and again let herself go so as to gain the maximum momentum which would carry her up the lower slopes of the hill on the opposite side.

With a whiz she swished through the valley; uphill she went. And then again something rose in front of her. Before she rallied the skis had crashed against a hidden rock, and back she went reeling from the impact, one ski flying from her foot.

"Oh!" she gasped.

She sat up, breathless and dazed. Then, in a panic, she realised her ski had gone. Out came the torch; frantically she hunted round.

"Oh, where is it?" she choked. "Where is it?"

Hopping around on one ski, she prodded the snow, but still she couldn't find it.

"Oh, goodness, where on earth is it?" she muttered. "If I don't get to Ken before the colonel gets there, we're sunk!"

She turned round, and floundered back a few steps.

"Oh, it must be here somewhere!" she gasped. "It can't just have vanished."

Then in the ray of the torch she saw it, glaring darkly on a white bed of snow. She grabbed it, and then, rooted with horror, stared at it.

Never again would that ski render useful service in the snow. For from side to side it was split! Only the shoe-grip, indeed, kept the two pieces together.

A groan of utter despair broke from Vicky's lips.

KEN IS CORNERED



MEANTIME, completely ignorant of what had been happening back at the manor; unaware that Colonel Roberts and Miss Amanda Shorter were at that moment chugging towards him on the storm-driven road from Mountcrest Manor, Kennedy Vane, a pleased smile on his face, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was preparing tea for himself in the refurbished room of the witch's cottage.

It was cheerful in the room in spite of its cracked wall and broken ceiling; the great log fire that roared in the grate, the white cloth on the table and the cheerful hiss of the kettle as it began to boil, made a homely contrast with the beat and whine of the storm outside.

"Good work, Kennedy," old son," Kennedy was muttering to himself. "I must thank Vicky a million when I see her, and I must show her what I found. I—hey," he added as, with a splutter, the kettle began to eject water on to his fire. "Enough of that!"

Grabbing a cloth, he lifted the kettle; poured its steaming contents into the teapot. Then he started, his head jerking swiftly towards the front door.

"Hallo, a car!" Kennedy muttered. "Can it be that some weary wanderer has lost his way in the snow? Aha, a footstep!" he added. "Maybe it's Vicky herself." And then a hefty thump came at the door. He went to it, lifted the bar he had contrived as an inside fastening, and was immediately hurled back into the room by a fierce hail of wind and snow as two forms thrust themselves over the threshold. With a gasp, Kennedy slammed the door back into position, fastened it, and then turned to his visitors.

Then his eyebrows lifted. "Well, well, if it isn't my comrade the colonel, and the Amazing Amanda," he murmured. "Welcome to my humble hearth, fair sir and dazzling demoiselle. You observe that you call at an appropriate hour. You'll have some tea, I'm sure?"

The colonel, shaking himself like a great St. Bernard, took off his snow-laden hat, jerked its moisture into the fire, and glared.

"Vane, I have not come here for tea."
"No, sir?" Kennedy beamed politely. "Some toast perhaps? I am about to make some!"
"And," the colonel glowered, "I have not come here to listen to your prattlings!"

"Oh, you've come just for a warm?" Kennedy guessed hospitably.

"Nor for a warm. I've come, young man, to ask you some questions. And be careful you don't tell lies, otherwise— But never mind, you do the talking, Miss Shorter," he added, obviously remembering a pre-arrangement with his secretary. "Question the young man in your own way."

Ken blinked a little. At once he braced, sensing something serious.

"But won't you be seated while you do it, Miss Shorter?" he murmured, and drew up a chair. "I shall be pleased, of course, to give you any advice I can," he added cheerfully. "Always come to Uncle Ken if you find yourself in a spot of bother. Now, what's the trouble? Measles in the family?" he added with a sympathetic glance at the colonel.

"Vane, don't talk rubbish—please," Amanda said tartly. "This afternoon you went to the manor. You went to my room." Ken stared. "Do you admit that?"

"My dear Miss Amanda, would you expect anyone to admit such a thing?" Ken murmured. "Young man, give proper answers!" the colonel growled.

"While you were at the manor, Vane, you deliberately and maliciously wrecked my room!"

"Well, well, I am finding out things about myself!" Ken murmured.

"You wrecked my room as an act of revenge!"

"And what makes you so sure I did all these frightful things?" Kennedy asked. "Why pick on me?"

"Because we know!" the colonel broke in with a snort. "We have proof, and that proof—dash it, show it to him!" And then, as Amanda opened her hand and displayed the glistening O.T.C. badge, Ken did give a start.

"Here, Kennedy Vane, is the proof," she added thinly. "Deny that this is your badge."

Kennedy stared at it, even he, for a moment, taken aback. He had, already missed that badge, but he had had no idea, until now, that he had left it in Amanda's room at Mountcrest Manor.

"H'm, awkward!" he considered. Then he laughed. "Still, I'm not the only possessor of a badge like that, you know."

"Admitted. So we'd like to see your badge," Amanda sneered. "This morning, when I saw you in the woods, you were wearing a badge, Kennedy Vane. Unless you have lost it in the meantime"—she paused, allowing the significance of that statement to take root—"you must still have it. Let us see it, and perhaps we will believe that you did not wreck my room. If you cannot produce it—"

"Then, by gad, you come back with us to the police station," the colonel threatened. "Now quickly, young man, where is it?"

Instinctively Ken's eyes strayed towards the curtain-hung door which gave on to the rear of the premises. On the wall, near the door, hung his coat, its lapels, fortunately, not exposed to the view of the room. But, of course, there was no badge there. There was no badge anywhere among his possessions, for the badge in question was in Amanda's hand.

"My dear Miss Shorter, I assure you—" he murmured.

"Where's the dashed badge?" the colonel blared, and then glared round. In a moment his eyes had fastened on the coat. "Hey, there's the jacket," he cried, and took a step towards it.

In an instant, however, Ken had leapt up from the chair on the arm of which he had been sitting.

"My dear sir, spare yourself the trouble," Ken begged. "Over-excitement is bad for the heart. As the dear doctor who took out my tonsils used to say—"

"Give me that coat!" the colonel roared.

"Tut, tut, dear sir, how could I refuse you?" And Ken swiftly stepped towards the coat as the colonel also blundered in that direction. Yet, for all his apparent lightheartedness, Ken was alarmed.

He saw himself cornered, the evidence against him. Hoping for the best, he knew not what, he turned his back and lifted down the coat.

As he did so there came a quickly hissed "Here!" from the curtain in front of him. To Ken's startled astonishment a white, girlish hand suddenly thrust itself round the edge of the curtain and opened to disclose a small metal object.

And Ken jumped then. For the object was a replica of his school O.T.C. badge, and the hand that held it was the hand of Vicky Kingswood!

TWO IN A CONSPIRACY



ON the other side of the curtain Vicky quickly withdrew as she felt the badge plucked from her hand. Under her arm she still clutched the broken ski and the good one which she had carried for the rest of the journey.

"Thank goodness," she breathed as she squeezed back through the door which the curtain covered. Never in her life had Vicky run so hard or so desperately. And thanks to Ken's banter,

thanks also—though she did not know it then—to a fault in the cooling system of the motor-sled which had considerably slowed down the colonel's progress, she had arrived just at the moment when all seemed lost.

She did not return to the road. She intended waiting until the colonel and his secretary had departed. For desperately she wanted a chat with Ken.

She waited. To her ear, through the door, came the colonel's muffled, growing voice and the sharp tones of Amanda, the bland accents of Kennedy. No distinct words could she hear, but the very tone of the conversation told her that the situation was straightening itself out. Presently there sounded footsteps, a banging of the door, a crunch through the snow in front of the cottage. Then the engine of the motor-sled started up outside and chugged away up the road.

At once the curtain came back. "Vicky! Are you there?" the voice of Kennedy Vane called softly. "You are?—wizard! Come in, old heroine, and accept my grateful thanks—also a cup of choice China."

And he grinned as Vicky entered, helped her off with her coat, brought a chair up to the fire, and then poured out the tea.

"Good work, Vicky," he said gaily. "You certainly saved me that time. But where did you get the badge?"

"Dick lent it," Vicky returned. "Now you've finished with it, I'll take it back—thanks. Ken, you'd better get another of those badges in case questions are asked later."

"Intention anticipated," Kennedy beamed. "To-morrow, Vicky, the loss shall be made good in the town. But come, tell me, fair one, you're not browned off yet?" he asked quizzically. "You still want to help track down the witch—or Ghostfingers?"

"Oh, Ken, you know I do. But tell me—what happened at the manor?"

"Something unforeseen," Ken said musingly. "You know, Vicky, I've got several suspicions as to who Ghostfingers is—no, don't ask me to give you names, because I'm not going to until I've got absolute proof. What you told me this morning about Amanda decided me to concentrate all immediate efforts on her. That's why I asked you to get me into the manor."

Vicky nodded with understanding interest.

"Alas, something went wrong," Ken said ruefully. "My first plan went up in smoke as soon as I stepped into Amanda's room. A horrid sight, that, as you know."

"Ken, who did that?" Vicky asked.

"Not me."
"Of course not, chump. But you must have some idea."

"An idea—yes." He nodded thoughtfully. "But only an idea, Vicky. The mischief might, of course, have been done by Amanda herself, in order to get me blamed and off the scene. If she is Ghostfingers, that would give her a good chance of getting after the Witch's Hoard, you see. Still—never mind that," he added cheerfully. "To get back to the story—"

Vicky gratefully sipped her tea. "My own notion," Kennedy resumed, "was to get a copy of Amanda's fingerprints—and what better hunting ground than her own room?" He shrugged. "But finding fingerprints among that mess was rather like looking for a bullet on a battlefield. Then I was interrupted by the wandering maid. Queer girl she is, Vicky."

"That's what I've always thought!" Vicky concurred.

"And so—a masterly withdrawal on the part of Kennedy Vane was required," he said wryly. "That's the simple story as far as I'm concerned—with the exception, of course, that just to make things difficult, I left my badge behind. But—" He paused; then he leant forward. "Vicky, d'you know the thought that occurs to me? You might make a better job of this than I can."

"I?" Vicky's eyes at once lit up. "You mean—"

"I mean, you're on the spot; I'm not. Now, take it easy, and just look at this." And while Vicky watched, he fished from his pocket the small black box which contained his "specimens." Carefully he extracted a smudged piece of paper no larger than a postage stamp, and slipped it into a small envelope. "That, Vicky, is a genuine impression of Ghostfinger's fingerprint, bequeathed to me by my uncle. Take it."

With new excitement racing through her veins, Vicky accepted the print and carefully stowed it away in her handbag. Kennedy, about to resume, paused abruptly, twisting his head towards the curtain.

"What was that?"
"What?" Vicky asked. "I heard nothing. It's just wind—of course. But Ken, tell me—"

Kennedy, however, strode across to the curtain. He pulled it aside, opened the door on its other side, looked out for a few moments and then came back. He shrugged.

"The wind, as you say. Now listen, Vicky. What you've got to do is to get Amanda's print—how, I'll leave to you. When you get it, compare it with the print you now have in your possession and should they tally—heyho, Ghostfingers is yours! Meantime," he added, "have you got the clue to the Witch's Hoard with you?"

"The parchment, you mean? Why, yes, it's here."

"Then," Ken asked with a mysterious smile, "will you bequeath it to your old friend for a while? I've an idea about that, Vicky. Without making rash promises, I think I may be able to work it out. And now," he added, when the clue had changed hands, "what about doing a spot of homeward-bounding—in case you are missed at dinner and awkward questions asked? Don't forget, though, Vicky—get that fingerprint!"

As if Vicky could forget that! Refusing Ken's offer to accompany her—she would get along quicker on her own, she declared—she stepped back into the night. With Ken she left the broken skis, and thrilling at the thought of the task Ken had set her, set out across the hills.

She glowed as she plunged through the darkness. It had stopped snowing, fortunately, and a cloud-hidden moon was shedding a faint light, which helped the going considerably. Along the road she trotted and then, breaking off near the ski-run, began to climb the hill.

Many thoughts raced through her mind as she plodded on. How could she get Amanda's fingerprint without the suspicious secretary knowing what she was up to?

Meanwhile, she mustn't lose Ghostfinger's print that Ken had entrusted to her. She clutched her handbag to her. When she got back to the manor she must hide it!

She hesitated for a moment to regain her breath, a dozen plans whirling through her brain—some impossible, some just laughable. But they would sort themselves out; Vicky told herself as she toiled on.

She had gone fifty or sixty yards when, in front of her, she saw a shadowy figure—a black, bulky, statuesque figure, rising, like some materialised shadow, out of the snow. She paused.

"Who's there?" she cried.
The shadow moved. And suddenly Vicky stopped dead still, a gasp coming from her lips, and her heart gripped by a chill as she saw the figure's outline, caught the grey glimmer of its face.

It was the witch—the witch! She was alone on the lonely hillside with the sinister Ghostfingers herself!

What can the witch want now? Will she escape again, or will she confront Vicky? Be sure to read next Friday's thrill-packed chapters.



The DISAPPEARING SCHOOLGIRLS

THE AVENGER'S DRAMATIC WARNING

By PETER LANGLEY

LOOKS a nice kind of school—the last place one would expect mystery.”

Halting outside the entrance gates of the girls' college at Denville, Noel Raymond, the young detective, gazed round him.

There was no hint of lurking drama in that peaceful view, and yet an urgent telephone message had been responsible for bringing Noel down to the school.

A week ago one of the senior girls—Kit Carstairs was her name—had disappeared, and though the police had searched thoroughly, no trace of her had been found.

She had been seen entering the chemistry laboratory, and one of her chums had declared that she had heard a pitiful scream. But that was all that was known. And now, according to a frantic phone call from Miss Huntley, the headmistress, another sensational development had occurred.

Noel's face was grave as he made his way up the drive to the front door. He rang the bell, and a few minutes later he was interviewing the headmistress. She quickly put him in possession of the few necessary facts. They were sufficiently dramatic and disturbing.

Following the disappearance of Kit Carstairs, special measures had been introduced into the school for safeguarding the girls. But in spite of the precautions, another tragedy had occurred.

A Fifth Former, this time a popular, athletic girl named Jessica Fairbrother, had been spirited away in the middle of prep.

The lights had suddenly failed—there had been a cry; when the lights went up, Jessica had vanished. And she had not been found.

“This—is this terrible, Mr. Raymond,” exclaimed the headmistress.

She was twisting her hands together, her control almost breaking down after hours of sleepless anxiety.

“I have, of course, informed the other girls' parents,” she went on more steadily. “The school will be ruined if the girls go, so in sheer desperation I wired to you.”

Noel leaned forward, a reassuring gleam in his eyes.

“Miss Huntley,” he said, “don't worry. I'll find the girls.”

His tone of confidence gave the headmistress fresh hope.

“To start with, Miss Huntley,” Noel went on, “I should like to have a word with the

staff, the servants—and the girls themselves. But not in my professional capacity. With your permission, I should like to be introduced as a visiting master.”

“Certainly,” the headmistress said. “As it happens our science master has left. You can take his place. What name shall I say?”

“John Noel,” replied the young detective, with a smile. “And now,” he added, “I should like to look round the school. By the way, in what room was it that Jessica Fairbrother was doing her prep, when the last disappearance took place?”

“In the chemistry laboratory,” replied the headmistress.

Noel whistled significantly. “The room, connected with Kit Carstairs' disappearance,” he murmured, “I'll visit that room first, with your permission. You understand that, as a visiting master, I am just taking a look round the school.”

The headmistress nodded comprehendingly; she appeared much calmer as she led the way from the study.

They encountered several members of the staff, to whom Noel was duly introduced. Then he visited the chemistry laboratory.

The young detective made a swift examination, his keen eyes missing nothing that could possibly help to solve the mystery. Especially he examined the desk where the Fifth Former, Jessica Fairbrother, had been sitting.

It was a desk apart from the others, and near the door, but there had been several girls in the corridor at the time who had sworn that Jessica had not left the room.

“Have you any reason to believe ransom was the reason for the kidnapping, Miss Huntley?” asked Noel.

“None at all,” replied the headmistress, with a bewildered shake of her grey head. “Both girls came of quite poor parentage. Now, had the attack been made on Julie Adair—”

“Julie Adair?” repeated Noel, with a swift, questioning glance.

The headmistress bit her lip, as though regretting having spoken.

“I am not in the position to go into details, Mr. Raymond,” she said, in a low voice, “but I am especially concerned about Julie, owing to these attacks. Adair is not her real name;”

at her father's express request she adopted it on coming to school. She herself, you understand, is quite unaware of the extent of her father's wealth. She is a likeable though very headstrong girl.

The headmistress broke off quickly, as there came the sound of footsteps and merry voices in the corridors.

"Excuse me a moment, Mr. Raymond," she murmured, as she left the room, "I'll inform the girls that their new science master is here."

Noel seized the opportunity to take a final swift survey of the room. His glance rested on the empty fireplace, and his eyes narrowed. There were some charred papers in the grate.

Crossing over, he inserted a thin card beneath the charred scrap of paper, and transferred it deftly into his cigarette case.

Just then, amid much excited whispering, a group of girls entered the room, followed by the headmistress.

"This, girls, is Mr. Noel, your new visiting science master," said Miss Huntley. "Mr. Noel—these girls are in the Fifth, and are taking special evening courses in chemistry. Irma Barr, Julie Adair, Vera Curtis, and Paddy Dale."

Noel greeted them with a friendly nod. "Glad to meet you, girls," he said briskly.

"I'm sure we'll get on famously together."

The girls smiled; then Julie Adair laughed openly.

"I think so, too," she said frankly, "so long as you can put up with us."

The other girls all showed unmistakable signs of nervousness. Irma Barr, in particular, was very pale, and her dark eyes held an expression of secret dread. Paddy Dale, stolid and freckled, and Vera Curtis, tall and lanky, both looked uneasy.

"I'll leave you now, girls," Miss Huntley said, "and you may proceed with the lesson. I'm sure that Mr. Noel will prove an excellent tutor."

Noel took his seat at the high desk. Under pretence of sorting some papers, he was watching the girls closely.

"It—it was just about this time yesterday evening that it happened," breathed Irma Barr, in a nervous whisper.

"That what happened?" inquired Noel.

The girls exchanged uneasy glances.

"Haven't you heard about—about Jessica Fairbrother?" Julie asked. And she launched into a breathless account of what had happened.

That was exactly what the young detective wanted. He was getting the news, first-hand from the actual witnesses.

"Miss Voysey was in charge," explained Julie. "There was a whole crowd of us in here, taking prep. Jessica Fairbrother came in late, and sat over there—in the desk by the door. She'd been playing hockey in the afternoon and had got a whack across the face that left a whopping great bruise. Matron had bandaged her up and she was feeling a bit fed-up, I suppose, because she wouldn't look at us when she came in, but just sat with her face in her hands."

"Voysey didn't take any notice; she never does. She just asked Jessica to lock the door, as the wind was rattling it."

Noel looked up sharply. "This was news! "So the door was locked at the time?" he remarked casually.

Julie nodded.

"That's what makes it so—so spooky, you know," she declared. "All of a sudden the lights went out and we heard a scream. Then they went up again—and there was Jessica's desk empty, and Jessica vanished!"

"That's right," muttered Paddy Dale.

Noel looked from one to the other, shrewdly summing them up. Here were two witnesses—pleasant, likeable schoolgirls—both telling the same incredible story.

"Well, well," he remarked, assuming a crisp, pedantic tone, "no doubt the police will clear up the mystery in due course. And now for the lesson. By the way, we don't want the

door to rattle and disturb us. I think I'll lock it!"

He crossed to the door, turning the key in the lock. Then he switched on the lights.

Noel returned to his desk, glancing at his watch. It was five minutes to seven. Outside the dusk was gathering swiftly. It had been seven o'clock precisely on the previous evening that Jessica Fairbrother had vanished!

"This evening," he announced, "we shall study the chemical properties of magnesium—a silvery white metal. If heated strongly, it will take fire. What are you doing, Julie Adair?" he added, looking up suddenly.

Julie had shifted noiselessly into the vacant desk.

"Why shouldn't I change places?" she asked. "Jessica was sitting here last night before she disappeared. I want to see if it feels creepy."

The young detective made no reply.

Only a minute to go now before the fatal hour at which Kit Carstairs and Jessica Fairbrother had disappeared!

"Would anything happen?"

"A little practical experiment," he went on briskly, determined to take the girls' minds off the dangerous subject. "I approach a piece of magnesium wire to the flame of a bunsen burner. What happens?"

At that moment the school clock chimed the hour, and as it did so every light in the room was suddenly extinguished. There came a piercing scream and the sound of a thud.

Noel leapt to his feet and as quick as thought thrust the magnesium wire into the dull blue flame of the hissing burner.

There was a blinding flash of light, revealing a motionless girlish figure lying face downwards on the floor.

Irma Barr! In one stride Noel crossed the room, dropping to his knees beside the motionless girl. Then he drew in his breath sharply.

Pinned to Irma's back was a square of paper. Across it was scrawled:

"WARNING. DO NOT MIDDLE WITH MY AFFAIRS!" "The Avenger."

THE CLUE OF THE THREE J'S



THE momentary panic was quelled by Noel's calm, decisive tones.

"Every girl will please remain in her seat, Irma Barr has fainted, that is all."

Swiftly he removed the message and thrust it into his pocket. At the same instant the lights flickered up unexpectedly and there came a loud knocking on the door, and Miss Huntley's agitated voice.

Noel crossed to the door and unlocked it. He checked Miss Huntley's questions with a warning, significant glance.

"There's no need to scare the girls unnecessarily," he murmured. "The lights failed. Irma Barr's fainted. Leave it at that."

White-faced, the headmistress darted across to Irma's side.

Noel was making a swift examination of the door and the windows. He was convinced that it was quite impossible for anyone to have entered during that moment of darkness. How, then, had the mysterious Avenger entered?

Julie Adair darted out of the room to fetch water and summon the matron. The other girls stood by nervously, their faces pale.

Irma was coming round slowly.

"The hand!" she moaned. "The clutching hand!"

Noel was at her side in an instant.

"You've been dreaming, Irma," he remarked. "The sudden darkness startled you and you came over faint."

"There was something—something in the room," she declared earnestly. "I—I felt it!"

The young detective's face was grave as he turned to Miss Huntley.

"Who is in charge of the lighting apparatus of the school?" he inquired.

"The school porter—Burkin," replied the headmistress. "A very trustworthy man. He has only been here a few weeks but he came with the highest credentials."

"I should like to have a chat with Burkin," said Noel in an undertone. "I'm going to get to the root of this business."

Julie Adair entered the room at the moment, very out of breath and followed by the matron. She had obviously overheard the young detective's remark and she stared at him with frank curiosity.

But before she could speak, the headmistress called on her to assist the matron to get Irma to her room.

A few minutes later Noel was interviewing Burkin, the school porter, an elderly, crabbed-looking individual, in the cellars.

Burkin explained that it had been an ordinary fuse which caused the lights to go out, and left Noel alone to examine them, which he did closely.

As he replaced the fuses, a gleam came into Noel's eyes. As he had suspected, the wire had been cut.

Hastily Noel left the cellars, and returned to the laboratory.

Carefully closing the door and pulling the blinds across the window, he lit the bunsen burner and placed it beneath a piece of wire gauze until the latter was white hot. On to this, very carefully, he deposited the scrap of charred paper he had discovered in the empty fire-grate.

If anything had been written on the paper, in ink, the heat would bring out the writing!

In a few moments his anticipation was rewarded. The charred paper turned white, and across its surface appeared glowing letters.

Noel bent down eagerly, picking out the disjointed message:

"... Dreadful happened . . . Greycombe Spinney . . . must go . . . Kit . . ."

A startled ejaculation escaped Noel's lips, and his eyes glittered. Kit Carstairs! The first of the girls to vanish!

As Noel stared at the glowing letters, he heard footsteps behind him, and on turning he saw confronting him Julie Adair.

"Hallo, what do you want?" he asked.

"I came for a talk," she replied. "You see, I know who you are." She lowered her voice to a thrilled whisper. "You're Noel Raymond, the famous detective, aren't you?"

Noel endeavoured to look stern.

"And what if I am?" he asked.

"I want to help you solve the mystery," Julie declared. Then her lips trembled slightly. "Everyone thinks that, because I'm not going about with a long face, I don't care about—about Kit and—poor Jessica. I do! I care dreadfully, and I want to do something to help. Please—please let me!"

"I suppose you realise, young lady," Noel remarked dryly, "that this is not just a matter of solving a mystery. There's danger—"

Julie gave an impatient gesture.

"Of course I know. And I'm not afraid," she added defiantly.

Noel said nothing for a moment.

"Ever heard of Greycombe Spinney?" he asked Julie suddenly.

Julie laughed.

"Of course I have. Why, the spinney adjoins the playing-fields—though it's really out-of-bounds. We girls sometimes picnic there in the summer," she added confidentially.

"Were you a great friend of Kit Carstairs?" Noel asked.

"I liked her tremendously," Julie replied.

"So did we all. Her real name was Judith, you know—but we called her Kit for short."

"Judith Carstairs," Noel murmured. "Jessica Fairbrother."

He wrote down the two names and stared at them rather hard.

"I wish you'd tell me how I can help you," complained Julie.

"The best way to help me," Noel answered dryly, "is to say nothing about this to anyone."

Julie pouted.

"Is that all?" she asked. "I'll find some other way of helping—just you see if I don't."

And with a wave of her hand she skipped out of the room.

Noel did not pay much attention to her words; his mind was occupied with a little problem.

The discovery of Kit Carstairs' real name had suddenly drawn his attention to a curious fact.

Both the girls who had disappeared possessed Christian names commencing with "J" and surnames in which the syllable "air" appeared.

From his pocket Noel took a copy of the school roll, which he had borrowed from the headmistress.

Painstakingly Noel went through the list. There were plenty of girls who possessed the initial "J," but the syllable "air" was not so common.

Finally Noel narrowed down his search to one name.

"Julie Adair."

Two girls had already been spirited away by some mysterious enemy, and by a coincidence their names contained the same combination of letters.

Was Julie the next to be taken?

The young detective sprang to his feet. It was a strange idea, but he could not afford to take risks. Julie must be guarded.

He hurried out of the room, to encounter Paddy Dale in the corridor.

"Have you seen Julie Adair?" he demanded.

Paddy hesitated, then nodded.

"She—she went out about five minutes ago," she faltered. "She—she said she was going to Greycombe Spinney to solve a mystery."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Noel, his face paling.

And with a vague dread in heart he raced out of the school.

The strange reference on the charred paper of Greycombe Spinney could only mean that it was connected in some way with Kit Carstairs' disappearance.

And Julie had gone to the spinney—

At that instant, through the misty night, rang a girl's frightened scream.

JULIE RUNS INTO DANGER



"IT'S a shadow," breathed Julie un-

steadily. "Just a shadow."

She spoke aloud and defiantly,

trying to convince herself. She

was ashamed of having screamed

—ashamed and angry.

But it was very dark in the

spinney—dark and rustling. Julie did not

suffer with nerves as a rule, but the events

of the last few days had affected her more than

she would admit.

She pulled herself together, taking a firm

grip on her fears.

"No one ever thought of searching the

spinney," Julie breathed. "But Kit often

used to come here—so did Jessica. So—"

Clenching her hands, she set out to walk

along the winding path that led through the

spinney—the path she knew so well. It led to

an old, tumbledown building where she and

her chums had often enjoyed a surreptitious

picnic.

Suddenly Julie became almost positive that

she was being followed. Soft footsteps were

padding behind her.

Panic suddenly gripped her. She com-

menced to run blindly. Stumbling, panting

for breath, she ran on—and ran into something

dark and enveloping that closed round her,

stifling her screams.

Julie, in spite of her terror, put up a plucky

struggle, but even now she felt her senses

reeling.

The Avenger that haunted the school had caught her in its toils!

And then suddenly the iron grip relaxed on her shoulder. There was a sound of scuffling—a muffled shout.

The next moment Julie found herself lifted in powerful arms and carried swiftly for what, to her bemused senses, seemed miles.

Finally she was placed on the ground, a hand supporting her arm. The enveloping material was snatched from her head, and she found herself outside the school, gazing into the grave eyes of Noel Raymond.

"You!" gasped Julie, her relief struggling with a wave of anger.

"I'm sorry I didn't catch the bounder," said Noel dryly. "He was a bit too slippery for me."

Julie gulped, fighting back her angry tears.

"I—I don't believe there was anyone there except you," she gasped.

Noel smiled grimly as he stroked an ugly brute that was rising on his forehead.

"A little while ago, young lady," he remarked, "you offered to help me. Is that offer still open?"

Julie stared at him, taken aback, her anger evaporating.

"Why, what do you mean?" she breathed.

"If you come with me," said Noel quietly, "I'll tell you. To-night we're going to solve the mystery."

"We?" whispered Julie delightedly. "Oh, thank you!"

TEN minutes later Noel set out from the school alone. With him he took his torch and a revolver. He intended to search Greycombe Spinney.

To his annoyance he had been unable to see the face of Julie's attacker. The man had worn a mask, but there was something about his figure that confirmed a suspicion the young detective had been harbouring.

He made his way to the tumbledown building—once a cottage—that stood in the depths of the spinney.

Noel was searching for certain footprints, and finally he discovered them imprinted on the muddy ground inside the ruined walls.

The footprints led to an old stone fireplace, and a swift examination confirmed his suspicions. The stone slab forming the fireplace could be raised on hinges.

With an effort Noel contrived to lift the slab; an iron ladder led down into the darkness.

Noel smiled grimly as he swung himself on to the ladder and climbed swiftly down into the gloom.

But he had barely set foot in the tunnel when an unpleasant, hollow chuckle sounded behind him. Noel spun round in time to hear the massive stone slab fall with a clang above the opening.

With a startled ejaculation he snatched out his torch; as the brilliant white beam cut through the darkness, his face paled.

He was trapped in a narrow, cellar-like cavity, and the iron ladder had been drawn up out of his reach.

And Julie Adair was waiting in the school, unaware of the new peril that threatened her.

Noel clenched his hands as he carefully examined the dank walls.

Just above his head was a small cavity in the brickwork. Reaching up, Noel thrust his hand through the opening. His groping fingers fastened on an iron lever. He flung his whole weight on it; there was a dull rumbling, and the apparently solid wall seemed slowly to swing away from him.

THE clock in the school tower was booming the hour of nine when Noel returned to the school a trifle dishevelled, his eyes glinting with grim determination.

Barely had he entered the school than he was confronted by a white-faced, distracted headmistress.

"Mr. Raymond—Julie Adair has gone!" Miss Huntley wrung her hands. "She was last seen going up to the laboratory—"

Noel drew the headmistress aside.

A few minutes later a startling order went round. The whole of the upper school was to assemble in the chemistry laboratory.

Miss Huntley, surprisingly calm and detached, took her stand on the dais. Noel stood near her.

"We'd better have the door guarded, Miss Huntley," he said crisply. "Is the porter here?"

"I've sent for him," announced the headmistress.

A moment later the school porter appeared. He was instructed to stand by the door and to permit no one to enter or leave the room.

A hush settled over the girls; all eyes were turned towards Noel. Even Irma Barr was there with the matron, her face pitifully pale.

At a nod from Noel the headmistress stepped forward.

"Girls," she said gravely, "you have heard that your schoolfellow, Julie Adair, is missing. Does anyone here know where she is?"

There came a choking sob from Irma Barr.

"The—the Avenger has got her!" she sobbed.

"It's probably here now—among us—"

"It is!" rapped an unexpected voice, and every eye turned to a screen that stood in one corner of the room. "And I am going to confess the truth!"

"No—no!" A startled scream escaped Irma Barr's lips. "This—this is a trick!" she gasped.

Next moment the screen toppled over, and there emerged, not the mysterious Avenger, but Julie Adair! She had hidden there at Noel's orders. This was the young detective's scheme to trap the Avenger into betraying him or herself. And the plan had succeeded. There was no mistaking the guilt on Irma Barr's face.

"Irma Barr!" Julie cried. "You are the Avenger!"

"It's a lie!" screamed Irma, her face contorted.

"It's the truth!" rapped Noel. "And your father can vouch for it. Stand still, Burkin—and keep your hands above your head!"

A revolver flashed from his pocket, pointing at the white-faced school porter. In one stride Noel crossed the room, snatching off the man's wig.

"It was a cunning scheme, Burkin—or perhaps your name is Barr," said Noel grimly. "And you possess a clever daughter who's as unscrupulous as yourself. Unfortunately she's got rather carried away by this Avenger business. When she pinned that notice to her own back and pretended to faint I was pretty certain that she was mixed up in the plot. It was a scheme to put me off the track, but actually it aroused my suspicions, for it was obvious no one could have entered the room. Therefore Irma must have pinned the note on herself."

He smiled grimly, then went on:

"Kit Carstairs was beguiled away by a fake message an hour before Irma had stated that she had seen her entering the laboratory. As for Jessica Fairbrother, she did not enter the room with the rest of the class. It was Irma who came in, her face carefully bandaged.

"When the lights went out she merely removed the bandage and screamed to give the necessary atmosphere."

"Both girls were beguiled by message to Greycombe Spinney, where you, Burkin, were awaiting them. The tunnel leading to the cellars beneath the porter's lodge proved useful to your plan."

"But—but why did they kidnap Kit and Jessica?" asked Julie.

"Because they weren't sure whom they did want to seize," was the unexpected reply.

"Really, it was you they were after. They meant to hold you to ransom."

"Me?" gasped Julie.

(Please turn to page 417.)



The SCHEMER AT THE Co-ed School

THE PRESENTATION WATCH

By ELISE PROBYN

VALERIE KING gazed in queer excitement at that small gold presentation watch.

She had left Jack Warrington in the sports field of Rossmere Co-ed School. She had rushed here to the lonely Manor House, believing that at last she could unmask the secret of that scheming new boy. But defeat had mocked her. She had explored this creepy old place from room to room, only to realize that she had come too late. Here was the vital Blue Room, newly cleared out and emptied, its secret gone. But this watch she had picked up, broken, from the floor was an astonishing discovery.

Val read again the inscription engraved in the back:

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

It was Warrington's watch! Presented to him by his old school. And it had been dropped in this room only a few minutes ago. It had been dropped here at exactly ten-to-six, the time at which it had stopped!

How? Val kept asking herself. How could Warrington have dropped his watch here? He was at Rossmere where she had just left him—he was captaining the Fourth at practice this evening, for their coming sports fixture against Abbeydale Co-ed! How could he be in two places at once?

The mystery was uncanny. So was this old manor. So also was Warrington's connection with it, and the two-faced game he was playing. He had made himself a popular hero at school, and Val knew it was just a blind for his secret scheming with Clem Barney, the shady caretaker of the Manor. Yet Warrington had not been here this evening. Nor would he have left his watch—a valued presentation watch—lying broken on the floor!

Who else could have dropped it here?

Not Clem Barney, that was certain. Barney wasn't the kind of person to wear a gold wrist-watch, and Warrington was assuredly not the kind of person to lend him such a thing.

Val's thoughts took a queer new turn. Could anybody else have been in this room while Barney was here? Somebody who was wearing Warrington's watch?

It seemed a fantastic thought. Barney had guilty secrets to remove. He had cleared the room out with furtive thoroughness. Was it likely that he would allow anyone to witness

what he did? Yet Val stared down at the carpet, and again she was struck by the way the blue pile had been trampled and disturbed.

Was it caused by some heavy object Barney was removing?

Or was it the mark of feet—other feet besides Barney's? Val gave a start. She stared closer. The carpet bore not only footmarks—they looked almost like the marks of a struggle. But who—

Not Jack Warrington, but someone who was wearing Jack Warrington's watch!

She drew a tense breath. She remembered the glimpse she had seen of Barney, driving out of the Manor gate in a closed car only a few minutes ago. A black, heavily closed car. What was inside that car? Was someone else inside it besides Barney? Someone he was carrying off by force?

A wild theory, a frightening theory, was shaping in Val's mind.

She thought of her chum, Joan Selby, lying hurt in the school sanatorium. Joan had overheard Warrington and Barney whispering about the Blue Room. Joan had known they were scheming to cheat her of something that was connected with this old Manor. She had secured the key of the Blue Room from Warrington by a trick—she had come here alone to explore, and she had met with a mysterious accident, causing a touch of concussion and clouding her memory.

Joan had no recollection of what she had heard.

But her accident in itself had proved how desperately Barney was guarding Warrington's secret.

Had someone been kept hidden in this room? Had Barney carried off someone who could have betrayed him and Warrington? Someone, amazingly enough, who had worn Warrington's watch?

With a shudder of excitement Val slipped that watch into her pocket.

She backed out of the room; she locked the door again with that blue-ringed key Joan had given her, the loss of which had caused this sudden, hurried move on the part of Warrington's caretaker accomplice.

Strange, startling thoughts were obsessing Val's mind. She sped away through the gloomy corridors of the derelict Manor. She let her-

self out into the bedraggled grounds, and then at a run she set off on the two-mile journey back to Rossmere School.

Her thoughts were clearer now. Her suspicions were taking feverish shape. She knew only that she must calm herself, must give no hint to Warrington of the extraordinary find she had made. Here in her pocket was this watch—presented to Jack Warrington at his former school for breaking the sprinting record. Never had she seen him wearing it. But someone else had worn it!

Val wouldn't voice her suspicion even to herself—but her mind had already planned a test as she came to the gates of the school playing fields.

The sports practice was still going on. She could hear Warrington shouting encouragement to the tug-o-war team. He was making himself more and more popular since he had become sports captain in her stead. Val realised it by the responsive enthusiasm she heard from the team.

But this enthusiasm changed to a clamour of indignation the instant she entered the field.

"Look, everybody! Here she is! Here's Val King coming back at last!"

"What d'you mean by walking out on us like this?"

"Sneaking off without a word just when we wanted you for the high jumping!"

The tug-o-war broke off. The entire Fourth came storming round Val. All had missed her suddenly during the middle of the practice. Many were saying hotly that she had left them in the lurch out of spite for Warrington—jealousy against the new skipper who had taken her place.

Warrington alone was blandly unperturbed. He looked quizzically at Val, and she saw a gleam of amusement in his eyes. He could guess where she had been—and he was well aware that she had arrived too late, after Clem Barney had already removed the secret of the old Manor House.

"Leave Val alone, you people!" he sang out lightly. "I'm sure she wouldn't have gone off like that if it hadn't been for something important."

"Sorry if I've upset the practice!" Val said, pretending to look crestfallen.

"Not at all!" And Warrington's smile was secretly mocking. "I only hope you've come back in good form for some high jumping?"

Val let him enjoy his complacency, while she gathered her high-jumping team together.

In the space of three minutes' jumping, Val's absence was forgiven and she had redeemed herself. There was no one in the Fourth who could equal her in the high jump. Better still, as they all said eagerly, there was no one in Abbeydale who could rival her. Val was on top of her form this evening. She cleared the tape at a peg higher than her own best record. The change of tone was heartening to hear.

"Good old Val!" everybody shouted—everybody except Denis Blayne, his sister Cecily, and a handful more of Warrington's special toadies. "Keep it up, Val, and you'll give us a walk-over against Abbeydale!"

"Don't be silly!" Cecily snapped. "One win won't give us a walk-over. We've got to win dozens of events, and we won't win the girls' sprinting races, that's certain. We've lost our best girl sprinter in Joan Selby getting knocked up—thanks to Val!"

"Then we'll just have to make up for it by winning the boys' sprinting events!" Val said quickly. "What about trying them out now?"

Cecily's brother was in instant agreement. He was one of the sprinters, Warrington got together the rest, and lined them up, stopwatch in hand for the hundred-yards race.

Val had been waiting for this opportunity. "Aren't you going to run, Jack?" she asked him curiously.

She was burning to put her plan to the test.

"Not me!" he said lightly. "I'm no runner! Never could sprint to save my life!"

Val hardly knew how she concealed her excitement. Was Warrington being mock-modest? Or was this the truth he was speaking? If it were true that he was no sprinter—then her own wild suspicions were true! It meant that he had never in his life won the watch that was presented to Jack Warrington! It meant that he was not Jack Warrington at all, but an impersonator—an impostor!

A STAGGERING SUSPICION



THE thought was so staggering that Val couldn't believe it. How could she make sure? How could she induce Warrington to enter the race, so that she could see for herself whether or not he were a record runner?

Then, as Warrington moved off a little way to measure the course, Val saw his toady Denis Blayne watching her frowningly.

"So your precious Jack can't do everything, after all, Denis! He can't sprint!" Val said provokingly.

Up spoke Denis in hot indignation.

"I knew you'd say that, Val King. You can't even see when you're getting your leg pulled. Of course Jack can sprint—he can do just anything on a sports field!"

"Then why isn't he pulling his weight with you chaps? We can do with another sprinter," Val pointed out. "I've never known Jack Warrington be particularly shy before, and if he says he can't sprint, then he can't, and that's all there is to it!"

But now Cecily Blayne as well as Denis was determined not to see her hero Warrington disparaged.

"You're only being spiteful, Val King—making out that Jack's not pulling his weight!" she burst in. "I'll soon settle this. I'll get him to run, just to keep you quiet."

To Val's secret excitement she dashed across to Jack Warrington, and in another moment back he came with her.

"I told you why I wasn't taking part in the sprint, Val," he said with a shrug. "But if you think I'm not doing my fair share, okay—here goes!"

And he lined up beside Denis Blayne and the others.

Outwardly Val only smiled. Inwardly she was taut with excitement. Her test was now to begin. The test of the boy who called himself Jack Warrington. He was crouching now with the other runners, preparing to show his speed over a hundred-yards lap as per the inscription in the watch.

Cecily, holding the stopwatch, acted as starter.

"Get ready!"
Val's heart beat painfully fast.
"One—two—three— Off!"

The boys flashed away. Denis Blayne was leading and gaining on all five runners in the race. Last but one was Warrington. No! Someone was overtaking him. Val's heart crashed against her ribs. Old Tubby Wardle was creeping up—he was level with Warrington—he was passing him! Warrington was running last now!

The dust of the cinders rose up, and for a second or two all was a blur to Val.

But she had seen enough. She knew already the staggering answer to her test.

Warrington was no sprinter. He had never been a sprinter! He hadn't the stride or the pace, and he obviously had never had the training! Not one of the other four boys was a record sprinter, but all had outrun him!

Val's head spun giddily. It was seconds

before she could think. Then all at once the boys were trotting back, and she could hear Warrington's breathless voice saying with a laugh:

"I'm not in it with you chaps. Never was a runner, and never will be!"

And Val's hand in her pocket was gripping feverishly at that gold wrist-watch. Its inscription was whirling crazily in her mind: "Presented to J. H. Warrington—for the Record Hundred-yards Sprint!"

This boy who called himself J. H. Warrington had never in his life won this watch—had obviously never known of its existence!

It had been won by somebody else. By somebody who had dropped it only an hour ago in the Blue Room of the old Manor House!

Somehow Val steadied herself. Warrington had stopped before her, and was speaking to her.

"So that's how it is, you see, Val. I told you I couldn't run."

"I expected you to do better, Jack. I—I made a mistake," Val managed to say.

"Jack's the best all-round athlete in the team, anyway, so you needn't crow, Val!" Cecily Blayne chipped in. "And he's going to watch the Abbeydale practice to-morrow, to see how we stand!"

Val edged away, leaving Cecily to gush over Warrington to her heart's content. The meeting was breaking up now; the practice was over. Val wished she could get into the sanatorium to see Joan. Her window was in full view of the sports field, she must have seen the practice. Val couldn't rest till she'd confided her shattering discovery. If only Joan hadn't been forbidden all visitors. If only—

And then an imposing figure stepped out from the sanatorium porch. It was Matron. An even more important personage than the Head himself!

Val didn't stop to think about that. Just as she was, in her running pumps and shorts, she flew across the field and pulled up breathlessly in front of Matron.

"Excuse me, Matron. I know you've put the bar up, but please, please may I see Joan now?"

Her words weren't properly chosen; they just tumbled out of her lips anyhow. Val only realised what a frightful breach she'd made when she saw Matron gazing down at her incredulously from under her stiff white head-dress.

And then—and then a merry twinkle lit up Matron's eyes.

"And who is Joan, my dear?" she asked.

"Joan Selby!" gasped Val. "Matron, I—I must apologise for—"

"For being yourself? Why should you?" Matron said, all her stiffness melted now. "Well, I'm glad to tell you, my dear, that Joan is getting along splendidly, and the worst effects of her fall are gone now, her memory is clearer. Tell nurse I've given you permission to see her for ten minutes. In you go!"

Breathless with thanks, Val swept in through the porch, and in another moment nurse was ushering her into Joan's little ward on the second floor.

"Joan!" Val swooped across to her bedside and hugged her. "I met Matron. You're better, dear?"

Joan was obviously better.

"I'm not sticking here for the sports next week, Val—not for anybody!" she said forcefully. "I've been watching the practice from this window. It's us girls who'll have to win the sprinting. The boys can't run for toffee. Warrington was absolutely hopeless. He can no more sprint than— But never mind that now!" And in a voice shaken with disappointment she added: "You were at the practice, Val, so you weren't able to go along to the Blue Room, after all?"

Val laughed.

She drew the wrist-watch from her pocket and handed it to Joan, who was suddenly agog with eagerness.

"Remember what you've just seen from the window, Joan—and now read the inscription inside that watch!" breathed Val.

There was a hush. Joan was gazing spell-bound at the wording in the watch.

"W-Warrington—R-Record-breaker—!" Her voice stumbled away and she stared up dizzily. "Val, where did you get this?"

"In the Blue Room."

"B-but Warrington wasn't there!"

"No. Not the Warrington that we know," Val said in a measured whisper. "But somebody else had been there. And that somebody else, Joan, was the rightful owner of this watch and the rightful owner of the name inside it!"

"Val! Who do you mean?" Joan gasped.

"The real Jack Warrington," Val said quietly.

Then she went on to tell Joan how she had heard Barney tell Warrington that "the move comes off at six—then the Blue Room would have no more tales to tell," and how she had rushed off to the Manor, and seen the heavily blinded car being driven off by Barney. She told her how she had searched the Manor, found the Blue Room empty and showing signs of a struggle, and the finding of the watch.

Joan looked at her stupefied. And then she looked at the watch again, and the inscription engraved there, and an expression of sensational incredulity came slowly over her face.

"You mean," she whispered—"you mean, Val, that this fellow Warrington took the other one's place, locked him up in the Manor, then came here to Rossmere impersonating him?"

"Just that!" Val said.

They gazed at each other tensely, remembering the fine record the boy who called himself Jack Warrington had brought with him from his old school.

Yet what had he done in Rossmere but to play a clever double game? Winning his way to the height of popularity in the Form—while all the time sneaking out after school hours to scheme some plot with shady Clem Barney! He had undoubtedly stolen Joan's locket before he was tricked into restoring it. And undoubtedly he knew some secret—some immensely important secret—which connected that locket with the portrait of the shepherdess hanging in the Manor.

"Warrington's an impostor, Joan!" Val said with hushed excitement. "I'm certain of it now. I'm certain that he shut the real Jack Warrington away, with Barney's help, because he found out something that the real Warrington knew and determined to take his place—so that he could feather his own nest instead. I've got other suspicions. But that's as far as I'm going now, because the first thing is to prove, absolutely, that this schemer we've got here is not the real Warrington!"

"But—but you can't prove it, Val, except by the watch—!" Joan began.

Val's eyes glistened.

"Think, Joan," she said softly. "If I'm right, our Warrington must have lots of things in his possession which don't belong to him, but to the real Warrington. Some of those things are bound to incriminate him. Just as this watch does. You see, he didn't think of taking this watch away from the real Warrington—because he didn't know of this inscription inside it. And he didn't think it could ever get into anyone else's hands. But it did. And it's not the only thing now that's going to get into my hands!"

Joan put her finger swiftly to her lips. She could hear nurse returning along the passage.

"What are you going to do, Val?" she whispered.

"I'm going to make a search of Warrington's study when he's not there!" Val whispered back, with measured deliberateness. "I'm going to examine everything he brought with him here to Rossmere. And I rather fancy, Joan, that some of that property will tell the same tale that this watch tells!"

Then swiftly she took the watch back from Joan and slipped it into her pocket again as nurse entered. Nurse looked at her patient and beamed to see how bright she looked.

"Bless your heart, Valerie, you've done Joan a world of good!" she said. "She hasn't had such a lovely colour since she was brought to me!"

VAL MUST TAKE A RISK



"VAL! What about your taking the team for sports practice this evening?"

"Jack Warrington's going out!"

"He's going across to Abbeydale to watch their team at practice and see what we're up against!"

It was the next evening, and it was the moment Val had been awaiting all day in breathless suspense. Warrington was going out; he was going over to Abbeydale. And now the whole Form were pleading with her to take his place and lead them in practice.

Ordinarily, Val wouldn't have refused them, no matter how little some of them deserved it. As it was, she had something vitally more important to do this evening—during Warrington's absence.

"Sorry!" she said briefly. "Lots of you were only too glad to get rid of me as skipper. You can't expect to make a makeshift of me the first time your new skipper's missing. Let Denis Blayne take over for him."

Denis looked immediately smug. But with the exception of his sister, no one else looked at all enthusiastic.

"We'd sooner it was you, Val!" they said. "Aren't you turning out to practice this evening, Val?"

"I might," murmured Val, with a show of carelessness—"later on."

She skipped up to the deserted dormitory the moment they had departed. Gone now was her show of carelessness. All day long she had been carrying that intriguing wrist-watch in her pocket. It was too precious a trophy, too important, to take any risk with it. Now to hide it where no one—and especially Warrington—would ever chance to see it.

There was a loose floorboard beside Val's bed. It had often concealed a useful hiding-place for more innocent secrets. Now Val lifted that board, hid the watch carefully between the rafters beneath it, then replaced the board and drew the mat across it. So much for that mysterious piece of property which did not belong to Warrington of Rossmere.

Now to investigate the property which Warrington had brought with him to the school.

Val went softly downstairs, and she knew that it was a serious venture on which she was embarking. The end alone would justify the means. But it would have grave consequences if any girl were suspected of rifling a boy's study.

Her heart beat painfully fast as she tiptoed into the boys' corridor, paused a moment to make sure the coast was clear, then darted furtively into the study Warrington shared with Denis Blayne.

Once inside, her heart hammered still more

wildly. There in the corner stood a pile of trunks. They bore the name: "J. H. Warrington." They bore the labels of St. David's—the school Warrington was supposed to have attended before he came to Rossmere. Those trunks, those labels, were genuine! They could only have belonged to the real Jack Warrington!

Either her suspicion was fantastically wrong—or they had been stolen from that unknown stranger of the Blue Room!

Somewhere here—somewhere in one of these trunks—there would surely be some shred of evidence that would betray him!

One trembling step Val took towards those trunks—then with her throat parched she stood rigid.

A fussy step came hurrying along the corridor, and she knew with horror that it was Denis Blayne's step. He was coming here to his study! She scarcely had time to breathe before the door burst open and in flounced Denis.

"O-oh!" It was Denis who got the shock now. Val was ready for it. "I—I say, what are you doing in here, Val?"

"Waiting for Warrington. He hasn't gone yet, has he?" Val said, and marvelled at her own coolness.

It completely deceived Denis Blayne. "Of course he's gone—hours ago!" exaggerated Denis irritably. "You gave me a horrible start, Val—standing there like a mute. What do you want? Anything I can do?"

"No, thanks. I only wanted to see Warrington about the sports," invented Val.

"You can see him afterwards. Better go out and join the team now and act as vice-skipper," Denis said surlily. "They won't have me!"

And he plomped himself down moodily in the armchair.

"Oh, bad luck!" Val sympathised.

Denis looked at her in surprise.

"I wasn't really keen," he mumbled.

Val escaped. It had been a lucky escape, and her heart went cold at the thought of what might have been. If Denis had sailed in and caught her in the act of opening one of Warrington's trunks—

Val shuddered. She dared not take another risk like it.

She skipped the team for their evening's practice. She saw Warrington come back from Abbeydale, and she was careful to ask him a few quite unnecessary questions about the sports, just to justify her interrupted visit to his study, should he hear about it.

She went up to bed at last, and she turned in with the rest of her dormitory mates.

But not to sleep.

Hour after hour Val lay wakeful in bed, listening for every sound that echoed through the schoolhouse. She heard the Form-mistresses one by one go to their rooms. She heard the clock strike eleven, eleven-thirty, twelve. Then at last she heard the porter doing his fire-watching rounds, till at last his steps faded away, then a bolt rasped below as he locked up for the night. He was gone and would not come back.

Val braced her nerves and crept silently out of bed. She picked up her clothes from the chair. Noiseless as a shadow she stole out of the dormitory.

She could hear her heart thumping. She was taking a wild risk. Detection might mean her expulsion. But it was the only way. She was going to search Warrington's study now—search his property in the dead of night, and prove to herself whether it was truly his property, or the property of someone he was impersonating, someone who had dropped that watch in the Blue Room and was the real Jack Warrington!

Will Valerie at last be able to prove her suspicions about Jack Warrington? Do not miss the exciting chapters in next FRIDAY'S GIRLS' CRYSTAL.

SAVE PAPER

YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS IT

The Merrymakers in Arizona



Enthusiastically Sally & Co. repaired and painted the old canoe—little realising the thrilling secret that lay hidden in it.

By DAPHNE GRAYSON

THE PIONEER'S CANOE

"PHEW! It was hard work, but we've knocked it into shape now," beamed Sally Warner proudly.

"Knocked it into shape!" Don Weston's voice was horrified. "My dear old Sallykins, we hardly dared breathe on it, otherwise the canoe would have fallen to bits."

"Yep, it was a tricky job making that seaworthy," agreed Johnny Briggs seriously. "Lucky you had someone with a delicate touch to handle it—"

"Meaning you, I suppose?" asked Fay Manners sweetly. And chuckled at Johnny's look of surprise as a burst of laughter came from the crowd of Merrymakers surrounding the very old, very large, but smartly painted canoe which lay outside their boathouse.

But, old as the canoe was, the Merrymakers gazed upon it very proudly. For in it had sailed some of the original pioneers who had founded Dixon many years ago, and in it Sally & Co., dressed as those old-time settlers, were to take part in the river pageant this afternoon. True, it had needed a lot of attention, for it had lain rotting for many years in the barn of a near-by rancher. But the Merrymakers didn't mind hard work, especially when they had such high hopes of being acclaimed the winners in the pageant, and so adding another trophy to their collection.

"Better dab a last bit of tar on those seams to make sure they're watertight," said Sally, "then we can test those new seats, make sure they won't collapse at the critical moment."

"Rather!" put in Sadie King. "Especially as Mary will be standing up to sing—say, where is Mary?" she added surprisedly.

Sally straightened up, looked quickly around, then frowned puzzledly. Strange for Mary Wilson to be late, for her enthusiasm for the pageant seemed greater than any of the other Merrymakers. Perhaps that was because Mary was taking the most prominent part, for she possessed a delightful voice, and it had been Sally's suggestion that she should stand in the canoe whilst the others were paddling, singing some of the haunting old folk-songs that were fashionable in those far-off days.

"Guess she's having to help her grandpop," remarked Elmer Jenks, a sympathetic note in his voice. "I hear he's not doing so good."

There was a murmur of agreement from the

others, and Sally felt a little tug of pity at her heart. For Mary's grandfather, as she knew, had a very hard time trying to make enough money out of his smallholding to keep himself and his granddaughter, and the harsh attitude of John Jefferson, the rancher to whom the land belonged, didn't help at all. But what made Sally even more sorry for the old man was the fact that he had no recollection at all of his young days; his life prior to his arrival in Dixon was a complete blank. But for all that he was a good-natured, friendly old man, and Sally hated to think of the struggle he was having.

It was with a strange little feeling of relief that she turned at the sound of approaching hoof-beats, and saw Mary riding towards her.

"Hallo, there!" she cried, with a gay wave of her arm. "Come on, slacker, we've loads to do!"

But there was no answering smile on Mary's pretty face, and she ignored Don's outstretched hand as he stepped forward to help her dismount. Instead she gripped the reins of her horse very tightly, averted her eyes from Sally's rather astonished upward gaze.

"I'm sorry," she said in a voice that trembled a little, "I shan't be able to help you any more."

There was a dead silence at those words. All the Merrymakers ceased work, walked to where Sally was standing and gazed amazedly at the newcomer.

"Not help us any more?" blurted Sally. "You mean you've got some other work to do? Well, that's all right, Mary. Don't look so upset. As long as you can get along this afternoon—"

"But I can't—I can't!" burst out Mary. "I shan't be able to take part in the pageant. It—it's awful: I feel as if I'm letting you down, but—grandpa comes first, and we've just got to go."

"Go where?" asked Sally puzzledly, still unable to grasp the meaning of Mary's words. But Mary, instead of replying, gave a little sob. Then, with a quick jerk of the bridle, she wheeled her horse round, sent him galloping off through the trees, while the chums stood staring after her in stupefied amazement.

Johnny was the first to break the silence. "Well, what do you make of that," he said morosely. "Mary, one of the sweetest girls I know, developing a temperament."

"Mary hasn't developed a temperament, chump," replied Sally indignantly. "The poor kid's upset about something—terribly upset." She paused, her blue eyes softening as she thought of that last glimpse she had had of Mary's face before she had dashed away, the quivering lips, the tear-filled eyes, and wished desperately that she knew what lay at the back of the girl's grief so that she could try to help her.

"But what did she mean by saying she'd got to go?" asked Don rather apprehensively. "Gosh, you don't suppose she's going away somewhere?"

"Certainly sounded like it," replied Sally worriedly. "It'll be miserable for her if she has to give up the pageant, she was so jolly keen on it. Not so good for us, either," she added, "because we can't get anyone else at this late hour."

"Oh, things mayn't be so bad as they seem," put in the ever-optimistic Sadie King cheerfully. "Perhaps Mary will be back soon, and, anyway, we'd better get on with our boat if we're to get it finished in time. Come on!" She turned, rounded the corner of the boat-house behind which the Merrymakers had been concealed during that little interlude with Mary, then gave a shrill cry of indignation. "Say, look at that guy messing about with our boat. Hey, leave that alone!"

A small, foxy-looking man, who had been eyeing the canoe in a furtive, but strangely eager fashion, pulling roughly at the interior, leaped back in alarm. He blinked in a scared way at the approaching chums, then smiled in an ingratiating manner.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he said rather gushingly. "I'd no idea this was your property."

"Well, it isn't exactly," replied Johnny in his candid way, "and that's one of the reasons why we don't want strangers pulling it about."

"I see!" The stranger gave a little laugh. "Perhaps I was rather forgetting myself, but you must excuse me. I'm very interested in things like this. May I ask what you are doing to it?"

Sally looked at him sharply as he asked that question, wondering at the queerly apprehensive note in his voice. But Johnny, flattered at the interest of the stranger, visibly swelled.

"Oh, I guess we're just taking it to pieces and putting it together again so that we can enter it in the pageant this afternoon," he said exaggeratedly. "We want to make a swell job of it—and we will, of course."

"Taking it to pieces," echoed the man, ignoring the latter part of Johnny's sentence. His gaze darted in alarm from the chums to the boat, then back again. "But—but you can't do that."

"I don't see why not," replied Sally brusquely, for some reason feeling a strong dislike against this foxy individual. "Anyway, it's hardly your business, is it?"

"No, no, I suppose it isn't," replied the man rather too quickly, and with a light laugh that failed to ring true. "But, as I told you, I'm very interested in these old relics of pioneer days. I make a collection of them, and I should very much like to buy this."

There was an indignant murmur from the Merrymakers, who seemed to share Sally's dislike of this stranger. But Sally faced him calmly.

"That, of course," she replied coolly, "is Mr. Kent's affair—the boat belongs to him. But, quite definitely, you won't be able to have it until after this afternoon because he's promised it to us, and Mr. Kent wouldn't dream of breaking his promise. Good-morning!"

And rather ostentatiously, she turned her back on the man. For a few seconds more he hung about, then, flushing a little under the rather hostile glares of the Merrymakers, he suddenly strode off and vanished.

"Thank goodness he's gone," muttered Frank

Daly rather angrily. "Cheeky bounder, wanting to take our boat!"

"Well, he didn't get much encouragement from us," replied Johnny aggressively. "I guess when it comes to telling people off I'm your man."

"You? Gosh, you did a fat lot!" Don's tone was withering. "All you did was to tell him a whopper about taking the boat to bits, when we've spent all this week in trying to make it stick together."

"Then, suppose you carry on with the sticking together," put in Sally sweetly, "instead of wasting time arguing."

"Aye, aye, skipper!" grinned Don, and with a grimace at the annoyed-looking Johnny, he returned to work.

For a time the Merrymakers kept hard at it, then Sally straightened up with a sigh and took a glance at her watch.

"Goodness, quarter to one," she said in surprise. "We'd better get back to lunch—it'll take us half an hour and about a pound of pumice-stone to get the paint and tar off ourselves. Be back here sharp at two-thirty, shipmates, and you'd all better come in your pioneer costumes to save time in changing. The regatta is at three-thirty."

It didn't take long for the four chums to get back to the ranch-house, but, despite their vigorous efforts, they hadn't completely rid themselves of the tar and paint when they sat down to lunch. Steve Carson, their cheery host, grinned as he saw their reddened, paint-daubed hands.

"Camouflaging yourselves, eh?" he chuckled. "Great idea!" Then his face grew suddenly serious. "Tough luck about poor little Mary," he added gravely. "She'll be terribly disappointed. Nasty business."

"But what happened?" asked Sally quickly, all her previous alarm, her fears for Mary's happiness becoming uppermost again.

"They're leaving the district this afternoon," replied Mr. Carson heavily. "The old tale—a mortgage on Mr. Wilson's smallholding which he couldn't pay. Jefferson foreclosed this morning."

In dismayed silence the four chums looked at each other. So that was why Mary was so upset—that was what she had meant when she had said she would have to go away. How utterly crushing for her to be forced to leave on the very afternoon of the regatta in which she had so much wanted to take part.

Rather sadly they dressed after lunch in their pioneer outfits, Sally and Fay in the long, rather voluminous print dresses of the period, with fichus around their necks and demure muslin caps upon their heads; Don and Johnny in tough-looking corduroys, deer-skin waistcoats and leather jackets, with old-fashioned muskets under their arms, and a positive welter of whiskers upon their faces. Despite their sadness for Mary, the two girls couldn't suppress their mirth as they stared at their boy chums.

"You look like a couple of walking sage-bushes," chuckled Sally. "But come on—all of you! The others will be waiting."

Quickly they set off, Sally and Fay riding side-saddle on their horses, meeting the rest of the Merrymakers en route. They were a gay, laughing crowd, but their faces fell when Sally told them the news about Mary.

"It's rotten," muttered Andy Spencer feelingly. "Our entry won't be the same without Mary. That Jefferson's a beast!"

"After the way she helped with the boat, too," put in Eva Daly. "She worked like a Trojan getting it ship-shape, and— Say!" Her voice rose in a squeal of astonishment. "Where is the boat?"

In utter stupefaction the chums stared towards the place where they had left the boat when they had departed for lunch. But it had disappeared, and without it there was no possibility of them entering the regatta in an hour's time!

ON THE TRAIL!

FOR a long time the chums sat there gazing at each other, and at the blank place where the boat had been, while puzzlement and anger filled their eyes.



Then with a little cry Sally leapt from her horse, pointed to a deep groove running from the place where the boat had stood to the water's edge.

"This is how it was taken away," she cried. "Somebody just dragged it down to the river and made off with it whilst we were at lunch. And I think I've got a pretty good idea of the culprit," she added slowly. She looked round searchingly, then her eyes flashed. "Just a moment!" she bade her chums, and, gathering up her skirts, dashed fleetingly along the river's edge, making for a point between the trees.

When she returned her blue eyes were blazing with anger.

"Just as I thought," she announced. "It was that little man who was prying about here this morning. I just found out from old Josh who's fishing farther up the river. He saw him take it off, but he didn't interfere because he thought we'd made some arrangement about it."

There was a swelling chorus of indignation from the Merry-makers, a growing fury, a bitter disappointment in their eyes.

"But shucks!" muttered Sadie, a suspicious little quiver in her voice. "He—he just can't do that to us. The pageant's in an hour, and we're all dressed for it. We must have the boat."

"Of course we must!" roared Johnny, through his whiskers. "Gosh, just let me get my hands on that little snooper, I'll—"

"You've got to get hold of him first," put in Sally crisply. "Now listen—all of you! We've got a good chance of catching up with him. He hasn't been gone long, and it's a lumbering old boat for one man to paddle along. Don, Johnny, Andy, Fay, Sue, and myself will take the small canoe. We'll go after the rascal and force him to bring the boat back, even if we have to capsize him to do it. You others wait here—and don't worry."

With more optimism than she felt, Sally jumped into the canoe with the others, and in a very short time it was skimming down the river. The three boys, their faces like thunderclouds, paddled with a ferocity that boded ill for the boat thief when he was caught, while the three girls kept a sharp look-out on either side of the river, in case the man had pulled in somewhere.

On and on they went, but though she did not say anything to her chums Sally's heart began to grow heavy with anxiety. Time was passing, and no sign yet of the missing boat. It would be too awful if, after all the work they had put in on it, they were unable to enter the river pageant. She pictured the bitter disappointment of her chums, and her mouth grew grim.

But why had the stranger taken the boat? He had said he was interested in old relics, but that didn't warrant him stealing the boat.

There must be something more in it than that—yet what could it be? Sally gave a shrug, then suddenly sat up with a jerk.

"Boys, pull into the side—quickly!" she hissed, her voice quivering with excitement. "Fay, Sue! Look! Just ahead by the side of the river!"

As the boys sent the canoe skimming towards the bank, Fay and Sue cautiously looked ahead. Then their eyes blazed.

"The boat!" cried Fay softly. "Oh, Sally, we've found it!"

"Yes, and there's that rascal beside it!" muttered Sue. "But who's that he's talking to?"

"It's an Indian," replied Sally, in a low voice, "and that's why we've got to be jolly careful. This part of the river's utterly deserted, and

it's not going to be easy to flich the boat from under the eyes of an Indian. Quietly now," she warned, as the canoe bumped against the side of the river. "Out you come—everybody! We'll creep a bit nearer, and—"

And there abruptly she stopped again, flattened to the ground. Her chums followed suit, then glanced at each other bewilderedly. For a humming sound had suddenly come to their ears. It came nearer, nearer—

"A car!" hissed Johnny suddenly. "And it's coming this way!"

"And fox-face is signalling to it!" cried Don. "Wonder what his game is?"

"We'd better get a bit nearer," replied Sally, "and try to find out. But we must be perfectly silent. One slip now and we'll lose every chance of getting the boat back in time for the pageant."

With Indian-like stealth they slithered forward, thankful that the hum of the car drowned the crackling of twigs and the rustle of the grass as they made for the point where the two men were standing on the fringe of a vast plain that lay stretched before them.

As Sally & Co. came to a halt a few yards away the car drew up with a jerk. A man leapt out, his face wearing a crafty, triumphant smile. And at sight of him the chums' eyes opened wide in astonishment.

For it was John Jefferson, the tight-fisted, hard-hearted rancher who had dealt so harshly with Mary and her grandfather.

"What's he doing here?" began Johnny, then stopped with a gasp as Sally gave him a violent nudge.

With heart hammering she wriggled forward a little more. But it wasn't necessary, for Jefferson, sublimely confident that he and the other two men were the only occupants of that part of the river, didn't bother to lower his voice.

"You've got it," he stated, rather than questioned, and nodded eagerly as the foxy man nodded his head. "Great work—great work!" he cried, rubbing his hands with oily glee. "Of course, I managed to get rid of the old man this morning. He'll be leaving town on the 3.25 train. But I shan't feel safe until those papers are found. Remember, Matthews, there's a cheque for a thousand dollars waiting for you when you hand over those papers to me."

"O.K., chief!" The little man's face split in a crafty grin. "Just fancy, I've been trying to track down that old canoe all these years, then come upon it just as those kids were about to use it this afternoon. Gave me a bit of a turn, I can tell you. But they can't have found the papers, otherwise they'd have told old Wilson."

Positively quivering now with excitement, Sally returned to her chums, and she beckoned them to retreat out of earshot of the men.

"You heard?" she muttered, when they had gathered once more beside their own boat. "We know now why he was so interested in the canoe—because there are some papers concealed in it."

"But what papers?" asked Johnny impatiently. "And what did he mean about getting rid of Mr. Wilson? All sounds kind of screwy to me," he added plaintively.

"We don't expect your master brain to grasp things straight away," grinned Don, "but it seems obvious that the papers and Mr. Wilson are all connected in some way."

"And it's even more obvious," put in Sally coolly, "that we've got to get that boat back before Matthews and the Indian can start work on it. Then we've got to dash back just as quickly as ever we can, stop Mr. Wilson and Mary from catching that train—"

"And find the papers ourselves," stuttered Sue ecstatically, "and hand them over to Mr. Wilson, as they seem to belong to him."

"So that Mary will be able to take part in the pageant, after all," finished Johnny triumphantly, adhering firmly to that, one point. "Well, come on, let's get started."

"Certainly!" agreed Sally. "But how? There are three men there—one of them an Indian. We can't just barge in and grab the boat—they'd be on us like a ton of bricks, and we wouldn't stand much chance against them." She thought for a moment, while her thumbs glanced at her anxiously. Then suddenly she straightened up, peered through the trees. "I've got an idea!" she cried, her voice vibrant with excitement. "Andy, you can drive a car, can't you?"

"With one hand tied behind his back," chuckled Sue.

"Well, listen! The three of them are down by the canoe now. As soon as Jefferson has gone, Matthews and the Indians will start work on it. You, Andy, wriggle off through the trees. Grab the car and make off with it. Meanwhile, the rest of us will get in our canoe and try to get a little nearer to the boat. When those rosters hear the car start—"

"They'll dash off to see what's happening," put in Johnny excitedly. "Whoopee! That's a great idea! And while they're watching the car we'll pile into the boat and dash off with it."

It seemed a flawless scheme, though hazardous for all of them. With bated breath the chums watched as Andy wriggled off, waited agonisedly as he slowly made his way towards the car. As he reached it they heard Jefferson's voice saying good-bye to his fellow conspirators, heard the crunch of his feet on the fallen pine-needles. Sally held her breath, clenched her hands till the nails bit into her palms. She could have screamed with the suspense as Andy slowly hoisted himself into the car, waited tensely for the whir of the self-starter.

Then just as they began to think their plan had failed, they heard the engine spring into life.

"To the canoe—quick!" cried Sally. Wildly they dashed to the river's edge, piled into their small canoe, and sent it hurtling forward. At the same time they heard a furious roar from Jefferson.

"Say, what's happening? Hey, come back there! Matthews, Konoba—my car! Somebody's pinching it! Quick!"

There was another rush of footsteps through the bushes, but Sally & Co., panting with exertion, crimson with glee, were already pulling up alongside the big boat. Trembling with nervousness and excitement, they almost fell into it, grabbed the oars.

"Untie the rope, Johnny!" yelled Sally, forgetting caution in her overwhelming excitement. "Well—Oh, look out! Look out!" she ended, her voice rising in a horrified scream.

For through the trees, coming straight for Johnny, who was in the act of untying the rope that secured the boat to a near-by tree, was a lithe, brown shape. It was the Indian, whose sharp ears had caught the unusual sounds down by the river even above the roar of the car.

And as his talon-like fingers closed on Johnny's arm it seemed that all the chums' planning, their desire to help Mary and Mr. Wilson, their fond hopes for entering the pageant, were doomed to failure.

THE RACE AGAINST TIME



BUT it was not like Sally to accept defeat at this stage. Face white, eyes blazing, looking in that moment very like one of the real pioneer women who had fought with the Indians so many years ago, she rose in the boat, and reached over to the smaller canoe which was bobbing gently against them. Gripping one of the small paddles, she whirled it over her head.

"Here, give that to me!" cried Don frantically, grasping her intention and snatching the paddle from her grasp. "You'll never be able to throw straight."

While the three girls sat almost numb with apprehension, watching the paddle with fascinated eyes, he sent it spinning forward. A split second of suspense, then a shrill cry of joy came from the girls, a grunt of pain from the Indian as the paddle caught him straight and true on the side of the head.

He staggered sideways, releasing his grasp of Johnny. Like a pebble from a catapult Johnny hurtled forward, at the same time Fay slashed at the rope with an old knife which had been left in the bottom of the boat.

"And just to make sure we're not pursued," muttered Sally, grabbing at the other paddle of the small canoe, "we'll send this to the bottom."

And with all her strength she plunged the paddle into the bottom of the canoe. There was a splintering crack, a gurgling of water, and as the big boat pulled away the small craft slowly began to disappear.

"Hew!" puffed Sally, sinking back into the boat and passing a shaking hand across her brow. "All this excitement's left me just about all in, but we've done it. They can't pursue us now, and if we all pull like mad I believe we've still got time to reach the station in time to prevent Mr. Wilson and Mary leaving Dixon."

"Here we are! Grab a paddle, everybody!" cried Johnny. "Then—Oh, great goodness!" For as he straightened up his ruddy face turned queerly white, his eyes widened, stared gogglingly up the river.

And as the chums, alarmed at his expression, gazed in the same direction, they gave little gasps of fear. For the Indian, Konoba, recovering from the blow he had received, had given a queer, piercing whistle. The chums had paid no attention to it at first, thinking it was merely to summon Matthews to his side. But they realised the importance of it now. For rounding the bend of a river shot a long Indian war canoe, manned by half a dozen stalwart Indians. They uttered ear-splitting, blood-curdling yells as they saw the chums, sent their canoe shooting to the river's edge to pick up the waiting Indian and the furious, fist-shaking Matthews.

"Don," cried Sally, in a quaking voice, "what can we do? Oh, my hat, they'll catch us—"

"Paddle!" roared Don. "We've got a start on them! We may make it yet! Don't talk anyone—just paddle."

And at his bidding the chums paddled, sending the old canoe hurtling along. It creaked and groaned, but it responded nobly to their efforts. But it was hard work for the chums. The perspiration was wet on their brows, their breath came pantingly, their cheeks grew scarlet with the effort they were making.

Once Sally risked a glance up the river, shuddered as she saw how easily the Indians seemed to send their canoe over the water. More frantically now she bent to her task, paddling until her hands blistered, until the muscles in her shoulders seemed to shriek with agony.

"They're gaining," muttered Johnny, through gritted teeth. "Oh, my hat, this is hopeless!"

But, hopeless or not, the chums carried on. Still they kept a little ahead. How much longer, thought Sally, until they reached the first signs of civilisation? How much longer could they endure this terrible strain? On they went; but the Indians were creeping up now, once again giving vent to that awful yell.

Then suddenly from the river's bank came a whoop, a heartening shout that sent a thrill of hope shooting through the tired youngsters.

"Come on! Come on! You'll get away from those gosh-darned Indians yet! Over here—quick!"

And another voice:

"Sally! Oh, Sally, hurry!"

Through blurred eyes Sally glanced to where two figures danced impatiently on the bank, then her parched lips parted in a weary smile.

"It's Mary," she gasped, "and her grandfather! Look! They're all ready to go to the station! I forgot we passed their small-holding. Mary, wait!" she croaked frantically. "Wait!"

Frantically they headed the boat towards the bank, but the pursuing Indians, seeing the waiting white people, seeing the other Merry-makers scampering on to the scene, gave one last terrifying yell, then swung about and made off, with Matthews gesticulating fiercely towards the chums.

And as the boat touched the bank, as willing hands helped the dead-beat chums to alight, Mr. Wilson gave a little cry, staggered back, clapping a hand to his brow.

"My head!" he moaned. "Those Indians—I remember! Mary," he cried wildly, "I remember it all now! This old boat—it always seemed familiar to me. That's the boat I came to Dixon in! We were pursued by Indians. I hid my papers somewhere. One of the Indians threw a tomahawk. It caught the side of my head. I couldn't remember anything after that." He was almost incoherent in his excitement.

Sally, as excited as the old man, forgot her weariness as she bounded forward.

"The papers are in the boat!" she cried thrillingly. "That's what Matthews was talking about. We must find them—"

But already Johnny, Don, and several of the other Merry-makers were searching every nook and cranny of the boat. They shook their heads.

"Nothing here," announced Don. "Maybe we'd better—"

"Maybe we'd better get along to the pageant," cried Sadie impatiently, "and look for the papers afterwards! Come on, Mary, you can change at the boathouse. Quick—everybody!"

Excitement was intense then. Only a very few minutes to get to the pageant, and Mary not yet ready. With new hands at the paddles the boat was sent skimming forward. There was a pause at the boathouse while Mary changed; then her cheeks crimson with excitement, she leapt into the boat. Off it shot again, reaching the starting point just as the organiser of the pageant was shouting for them through his megaphone.

"Get into line!" he roared. "Quickly now!" "Quickly! Everything's quickly this afternoon," grumbled Johnny.

But just the same he beamed proudly as Mary's sweet voice floated across the river as their canoe skimmed towards the rest of the decorated boats. And the Merry-makers, thrilled and happy, gazed at the cheering crowds lining the banks, looking as cool and unruffled as if they had not had to fight every inch of the way to get their entry into the pageant in time.

They were nearing the end of the stretch of river given over to the pageant when an ominous creak sounded beside Johnny.

"Gosh, we're breaking up!" he groaned. "Easy on there, boys! Don't pull the canoe in half. I don't want to land in the river." The chums grinned, until another ominous creak warned them of their danger. Very anxiously they eyed the finishing post. Would they make it before the boat collapsed?

Nearer they drew, then reached it. A roar went up, and it increased in volume as the loudspeakers announced that the Merry-makers boat had won.

"Now it can break in half for all I care!" cried Johnny, with a last boisterous paddle.

There was a last crack, a splintering sound as the plank on which he was seated parted company from the old wood at the side of the boat, depositing Johnny ungracefully on the

floor of the canoe. And at the same moment Sally gave a thrilled cry.

"The papers—they're here!" she cried. "Johnny, you clever old thing, you've found them!"

And Johnny, as surprised as anyone else to see the missing papers, changed his injured expression for the look of a boy who had deliberately risked serious injury to unearth the mysterious documents.

By the bank Mr. Wilson, who had heard Sally's cry, waited impatiently. He almost fell upon the papers, with trembling hands opened them out.

"I've got them back," he croaked—"thanks to all of you! And they're intact—"

"But, grandfather, what are they?" asked Mary puzzledly.

"What are they?" The old man gave a booming laugh and straightened up, looking ten years younger. "They prove my right to all Jefferson's land. I staked my claim there when I first came to Dixon, but after that encounter with the Indians, when I hid my papers in the canoe and lost my memory, Jefferson swindled me out of it. He stepped in, claimed the lot. Now it's my turn to do the ordering off. But first we'll celebrate, boys and girls."

"Sounds good," dimpled Sally. "I personally could drink about ten glasses of iced-soda straight away. And goodness knows what Johnny can do!"

"You just wait and see," puffed Johnny. "I'm going to break my own record to-day."

And he did.

(End of this week's story.)

Next Friday's **GIRL'S CRYSTAL** will contain another enthralling story about Sally & Co.

THE DISAPPEARING SCHOOLGIRLS

(Continued from page 408.)

"Yes, you! But unfortunately for them you came to school under a false name. They knew that the daughter of a rich American—a man who was scared of gangsters—was coming here, but they weren't certain what name she had adopted. All they knew was that her Christian name began with the letter 'J', and that her other name had the syllable 'air' in it. Therefore, to make sure of kidnapping the right girl, they had to grab all three."

"So they didn't disappear from the lab at all," cried Paddy.

"No. It was Irma who started that tale." Miss Huntley nodded. It was obvious that the clearing up of this mystery meant everything to that good lady.

"I think we all owe Mr. Raymond a cheer at the very least, don't you?" she smiled.

Vigorously the girls nodded. "I'm only too happy to have been able to help," Noel replied. "It was a good thing you called me when you did, Miss Huntley. Kit and Jessica came to no harm, fortunately, for the rogues realised their mistake at once. But once they had got hold of Julie—well—"

Julie gave a mock shudder, and then laughed in her carefree way.

"But where are Kit and Jessica now?" she asked.

"They're outside," smiled Noel. "I rescued them earlier this evening—found them locked up in one of the cellars under the porter's lodge, and Miss Huntley has already phoned the police. Ah, that will be them!" he added, as there came a knock at the door.

And the police it was. Next day Julie Adair held a tea-party to celebrate the clearing up of the mystery. The guest of honour was the temporary science master, otherwise Noel Raymond, detective.

(End of this week's story.)

THE MYSTERY OF THE EGYPTIAN RING. That is the title of next Friday's grand detective story, featuring Noel Raymond.



LOYAL to the ELUSIVE OUTLAW



IN THE TEETH OF THE STORM!

WITH whirling snow hissing at her from every side, with the gale threatening to blow her right off her feet, Kit Stanforth clutched at the arm of Jim Logan, the young Mountie.

"Jim, we can't wait!" she cried. "If Maurice Hatway and Zena get to the gold-mine before us, we've lost it for ever! Jim, we must go! We've got to!"

"Come here, Kit!" Jim said gruffly. He caught her shoulder. With an arm shielding his face, he fought against the blast until an empty tepee near by was reached. Then breathlessly he turned and faced her.

"Just a tick, Kit. Let's get this straight," he said. "This blizzard means certain death—"

"But, Jim, the gold-mine—"

"O.K. I'm coming to that," he nodded. "When I said we can't make it, I wasn't meaning me, Kit. I'm going if it's the last thing I do. But, Kit, you're not coming."

"I am!" Kit said straightly. "It's my mine, Jim. I've got to stake the claim when it's found, and I'm not letting you take all the risks. No blizzard on earth is going to stop me. And if Zena Hatway can face it, so can I!"

There was determination in her voice, resolution in every line of her body.

"Kit, you don't know what it means—"

"I know, and I'm taking the chance," Kit said quietly. "Jim, I'm going. You and Redscarf—you've already done enough for me between you, and I'm not sitting quietly by while you finish the job off. I'm going—and I'm going now," she added. "And if you don't let me come with you—why, then I'll find a sled and go on my own!"

"Wau! Good talk!" said a voice, and little Moonflower, dressed from head to foot in snow-covered skins, entered the tepee. "You go; I go. We all go, and outside I have a new dog team all loaded up," she added simply.

Jim made a gesture of despair.

"O.K.," he said, and Moonflower threw open the flap of the tent. Screaming and buffeting the blizzard met them again, causing Kit to stagger. But there were the dogs in her sled, and beside it a fine pack of Indian huskies harnessed to Cherokee birch-bark sled with a turned-up front. And there also were Jennings and Cranshaw, Jim's two constables.

"O.K.," Jim said. "Jennings, you and Cranshaw take the Indian sled. I'll go ahead with the girls—"

"Girls—heck!" Jennings exploded. "It's crazy to take them, Jim."

"That's what I say," Jim retorted briefly.

"Anyway, let's get going."

He helped Kit into the sled, Moonflower after her. Then he tucked fur rugs round them, and caught up the whip.

"Right-ho! Keep low," he said. "Shield your faces as much as possible and save breath." The whip cracked. "Mush!" he shouted to the dogs.

Kit blinked, half dazed by the fury of the raging elements. But her heart lifted as she felt the sled move under her, and Moonflower,

as though to comfort her and give her warmth, snuggled closer to her side. From that moment the world was just a shrieking pit of blackness to Kit.

The anxious whine of the dogs floated back in the scream of the storm as the sled bumped and boggled its way forward. Though she was well wrapped up, Kit shivered and was grateful presently when Moonflower, tossing a rug right over her head so that it formed a sort of tent, almost suffocated her.

Behind the sled rode Jim, whip cracking, voice shouting. The dogs strained forward. Now and again the sled tilted as some uneven, snow-covered rock hit its floor.

"No good for-dogs, no good for Missy Kit," Moonflower said. "But we make it, you see," she added cheerfully.

Hardly were the words out of her mouth than the sled hit something with a bang. There was a howl from the dogs as they were flung together in wild confusion; a gasp from Kit as suddenly she felt herself sprawling into the darkness, so plunge elbow-deep into soft snow. Then Jim was beside her, Jim's fur-covered hands were picking her up, and he was shielding her against the buffets of wind and snow.

"Hurt, Kit?"
"N-no," Kit said. "Golly, though, what a storm! Jim, when will it be over?"

"In three or four days," he answered. "Perhaps not till next month. Better mush along with me for a bit, Kit. You'll just freeze in the sled." Guess we'll have a fire when we get to Moosehills Wood, and some hot coffee. Give me your hand."

He took her hand, holding the traces with his other. Again he shouted, and again the dogs pulled forward into the night. Near by, in the tiny lulls that came now and again, Kit could hear the other dogs howling, the hoarse voice of Jennings, but so intensely black was the night that she could hardly see a thing.

They tramped on, talking no more. Breath and energy were both being used to capacity in the effort of travelling. But Kit was grateful for the warmth of Jim's hand. And then, all at once, the wind ceased to buffet as fiercely as before, and instead of the roar of snowflakes came the rustle of leaves. Unaccountably the temperature seemed to rise.

"O.K.," Jim said. "We've made the wood, though I guess it means we've still got twenty miles to go. Say, we've done well considering the weather," he said, consulting his wrist-watch. "Nine miles in four hours. Hi, Jennings, we'll have a break here!" he called, as the second sled slid up. "Rustle round and find some kindling. Kit, you and Moonflower stop in the sled while I fix up a windbreak."

"Oh, Jim, let me help!" Kit pleaded.

"Sure not. This isn't a job for amateurs, and, besides, you can't see a thing. You can help best by keeping under cover. Look after her, Moonflower."

A torch flashed, and Jim crunched off into the darkness. Seeing that there was nothing else for it, Kit returned to the sled. Huddled against her Indian friend, she began to doze. She awoke with a start presently to find a

bright fire crackling in front of her eyes, and two billycans supported on a portable tripod hanging over the flames. Beyond the fire a screen of intertwining twigs had been erected.

"Hallo, Kit, here we are!" Jim Logan said cheerfully. "Guess we'll soon have something hot inside us. Bring the rugs, and park yourself against that windbreak there—that screen thing there. How're you enjoying the trip, Kit?"

"It's not exactly my idea of a holiday," Kit laughed as she stamped her feet. "But—oh, Jim, it's so kind of you—"

"Kind nothing!" Jim grunted. "Come on!" He caught up an armful of rugs. Sturdily he tramped towards the fire, Kit and Moonflower following. There against the windbreak the rugs were deposited, and while Jennings and Cranshaw moved about, hot coffee was served, together with a pannikin of hot bacon and beans.

But the interval was soon over. Kit, despite her anxiety and impatience, hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry when once more they found themselves in the howling wilderness of ice and snow, the dogs whining as they pulled through the inky darkness. Now and again, at Jim's suggestion, she took a turn in mushing with him alongside the sled.

Unflinching they pushed on, and at last, numb and miserable, to their unutterable relief, a pale grey, sulky dawn broke in the Eastern sky.

THE RELENTLESS JOURNEY



PITILESSLY the snow still beat upon them, the wind tore at their skins. But daylight gave confidence, and despite the buffeting elements, Kit found her spirits beginning to rise again.

"Jim—how far now?" she shouted.

"Nother twelve miles—five-six hours' travel, maybe," he said. "We'll be in the foothills presently, though. May not be so bad there."

They reached the foothills an hour later. There, in a rocky cleft, Jim called a halt. Once more a fire was made, and coffee set steaming, and a fragrant meal was gratefully enjoyed by all. Then Jim suggested that Kit and Moonflower should snatch half an hour's sleep, while he and his men repacked and overhauled the sleds.

"Jim, no!" she cried. "Please, let's get on!" For the light had reminded her that, hours ahead, bent on the same mission as themselves, were the villainous Maurice Hatway and his unscrupulous sister Zena. Even now they might be exploring that unregistered goldmine her father had left behind; even now might be actually staking their claim.

And once that claim was filed, even Jim Logan would be powerless to do anything about it.

"Jim, do let's keep going," she begged.

"Right! We'll do our best," Jim said. "But don't worry, Kit, I reckon the Hatways won't have found things too easy either. Look alive, there, boys!" he instructed his men.

With Moonflower and Kit helping, the sleds were packed, and they resumed their trail in the teeth of the unabating blizzard. The snow, raging all through the night, had piled up in deep drifts here and there. Several times, when the thin ice crust which had formed on these drifts gave way beneath the weight of the sleds, drivers and dogs all disappeared at once. Had it not been for the stalwart help of Jim and his two men, Kit and Moonflower would have perished a dozen times on that terrific trip.

And still stubbornly they pushed on, threading their way through snow-covered valleys, over frozen hills, and down precipitous slopes. Hours went by. Still they toiled, until at last a yawning fissure in the great cliff of rock yawned before them. And then Jim pointed.

"Klondike Pass," he announced.

Kit's heart throbbed. Eagerly she stared towards it. The dogs, as if sensing the nearness of the journey's end, strained more eagerly forward. In half an hour they had reached the mouth of the pass.

"Now keep an eye out for the wolf's head rock!" Jim cried.

They plunged into the pass. Here, after the battling elements outside, all was calm and peaceful. Deep in the heart of that rocky ravine, the wind did not penetrate; except for a few drifting flakes of snow there might not have been a blizzard at all. But here and there were treacherous patches of thin ice, and beneath them silent pools of unknown depth. It was tricky work steering round them.

They mushed on. A mile—two they went, then Moonflower suddenly let out a shout.

"See! Sled trails! Fresh! They come this way only a short time ago!"

Kit's eyes kindled as she saw those evidences in the snow—the evidences of sled runners and the paw marks of dogs fresh in the more exposed places of the pass. At last definitely they had struck the trail!

Straining every nerve now they scrambled along, keeping a sharp look-out this way and that. And then ahead Kit saw the rocks that bulged outwards in a strange shape—in the exact shape of a dog's or wolf's head. She caught Jim's hand.

"Jim, there it is!"

"I know, I spotted it," Jim answered.

"Mush on, boys!"

They were all eager then. Almost cheering, they rushed forward, the perils and exhaustions of the long night magically forgotten. And then at last they were level with the Wolf's Head rock, from the other side of which came a sudden snarling and barking of dogs. And Kit, peering round, saw the dogs—a stalwart team still in the traces and still harnessed to a sled which was secured to a rock.

"Jim, it's their sled—Zena's and Hatway's," Kit breathed.

"You've said it, Kit," was Jim's grim reply. "Now you and Moonflower keep back. Come on, boys!" he added.

And he pressed forward towards the narrow opening which loomed in the rocks near by.

THE CAVE OF GOLD



THE opening was narrow and small, mainly because fallen earth and stones from the cliff face had filled up its base. A great heap of debris had to be climbed before they all at last dropped into the tunnel, and then it was so inky dark that Jim had to flash on his torch.

He pulled a face as, shining it this way and that, he looked round.

"Guess this isn't going to be any picnic," he muttered.

Kit blinked as she stared round. A little shiver passed through her. What Jim said was undeniably right. The tunnel was high and narrow, but the loose earth and the large stones which lay scattered on the floor showed that it was dangerous in the extreme. The walls were cracked and unsafe. Even the echoes made by Jim's words set a little cascade of stones tinkling to the ground.

"It looks as if it might fall in at any moment," Jennings observed. "Guess it's no place for a girl, Kit."

"Oh, it's quite safe—don't worry about me," Kit said swiftly.

"But, supposing—"

"Don't you suppose anything!" Kit laughed. "Nothing's going to keep me from going on now."

Jim grinned as he shook his head.

"Guess it's no good, Jennings, Kit'll just have her way. Still, tread lightly, folks, or we'll set the whole bag of tricks down on us. I don't see any gold," he added dubiously. "Maybe we'll find that at the other end."

"Oh, please, Jim, let's get on," Kit cried. Jim nodded. Leading, he cautiously felt his way along the tunnel. Cracks and bulges showed dimly above them! ever and anon little cascades of earth and stones came shooting down. The whole place seemed to be trembling.

Kit clenched her hands. She was afraid. But she was not going to admit it.

Grimly Jim led on, stumbling now and then against some earth-covered rock. A dull crash sounded in their rear, but though they all heard it, nobody commented. Narrower still the tunnel seemed to grow. Here and there the debris had formed in cone-shaped banks up whose steep sides they had to scramble on hands and knees. And then, after what seemed an age, a faint subdued glow shone in front of them.

"Getting somewhere," Jim whispered; "that's the Hatways' light, I guess.

"Gosh, look at that!" Cranshaw cried in an awed whisper.

He was pointing ahead of him now. Kit, with her eyes accustomed to the gloom, caught in her breath as she saw the spot he was indicating. The spot was the narrow end of the tunnel which apparently opened out into some larger cave.

A great mass of cracked and broken rock lay above the mouth of the tunnel, and out of that mass, just as if at that very moment it was preparing to fall, a huge boulder, which must have weighed nearly a hundred tons, seemed to be in the act of working itself loose—yes, it was actually trembling. In silence they all stared.

"One push, and down comes the lot," Cranshaw said solemnly. "I guess I'll be glad when we get out of this."

"Keep going," said Jim.

They glided forward, almost afraid to tread lest the vibration they caused should upset the trembling rock. Now they were underneath it, now, rather hastily, were skipping into the cave which opened on its other side. And then for a moment, as Kit gazed round with wild, incredulous eyes, she forgot all perils.

"Gee!" she breathed.

She stood stock-still. Everybody stood still. Their torches flashed on rocky walls, glistening ice-white with quartz. But here and there were bright-gleaming yellow bands which shone out in the light. Yellow lay along the walls in streaks, in places in masses, in others so thickly mottled that the cave wall reminded Kit of a star-chart.

"Gosh, gold!" Jim breathed.

Gold, yes. Bright yellow gold! Gold in

seams, in slabs, gold in nuggets and gold in sprinkles. The cave shone with it. Even the dust and debris which scattered the floor glistened with the yellow metal.

"And—and it is yours, Missy Kit," Moonflower whispered. "Heap plenty rich."

Just for a moment they stood. Then they jumped. In that moment they had forgotten Hatway and his sister, but now, as a snarl reached their ears, they saw him. He was standing on the other side of the cave, a brightly gleaming pistol in his hand. And standing beside him, no longer arrogant and flamboyant, but pale and trembling, was Zena.

"Hatway!" Jim cried. "Stand back!" Hatway shouted. "Stand back! This mine belongs to me!"

"This mine is Kit's—and you know it, you rogue," Jim said contemptuously. "Thank goodness we're in time to prevent you from stealing it, as you stole the things that put Redscar on the spot. You can drop that gun, Hatway. I'm going to arrest you."

"You try!" Hatway snarled.

Jim braced himself. He stepped forward. Hatway's pistol came up.

"Another step, Logan, and I shoot."

Jim shrugged. He took the step. Then Kit shrieked.

"Jim, look out, he means it."

But Jim was going on. Hatway clenched his teeth. There came a cry from Zena, too late, she rushed to grab her brother's arm, a shout from Jennings as he leveled his own weapon. But the mischief was done then.

A vicious spurt came from Hatway's gun. There was a roar like a small cannon firing. Then Jim had ducked, with a shout was running on, the bullet whining above his head. From the tunnel came a thud, a crash.

Kit spun round.

A hoarse choking cry left her lips.

"Jim—the rock—the rock—," she shrieked.

"The bullet hit the trembling rock—"

She said no more. For suddenly there was a crash like thunder. Suddenly the air was filled with a choking dust that dimmed the torches, and a crash like a thousand thunderbolts came vibrating through the cave. What Kit had said was true. Hatway's bullet, though it had missed its target, had caused a disaster of a worse order.

The trembling rock at the entrance of the tunnel had needed less than the impact of that bullet to bring it toppling to its fall. It had fallen, and with it the whole mass of rock and earth above it.

There came a moan from Moonflower. Shouts mingled with the crashes. The whole cave shook and trembled, and rocked beneath the impact, and further along the tunnel other muffled roars told them that the work of disintegration was spreading. A foggy dust rolled thickly through the air, choking them, blinding them. A pounding, drumming sensation was hammering in Kit's ears.

How long the landslide went on she never knew. It seemed hours. But presently silence reigned again—silence in an atmosphere which had grown curiously warm and stifed. They looked towards the tunnel. And then a gasp left Kit's lips.

For where the tunnel had been was now a great mass of rocks and earth, reaching from the floor of the cave to the very roof. It cut off their escape, it sealed up what little air had filtered in from outside. With a face suddenly white, Kit turned to Jim.

"Jim—Jim, what can we do?"

But Jim, staring at the mountain of earth which now stood between them and freedom, just shook his head. It was obvious what his silence meant. They could do nothing. They had found the gold mine only to be trapped in it for ever!

Don't miss a word of next Friday's splendid chapters of this exciting story in the **GIRLS' CRYSTAL**.

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