

GIRLS' CRYSTAL

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*A Thrilling Mystery Story, Featuring that
Famous Young Detective, Noel Raymond*

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CHAPTER I

A STRANGE DISCOVERY

BERYL—be careful! It's not worth risking; it's probably empty——"

"Perhaps—but how on earth did it get there? Talk about a mystery! I'm jolly well going to risk it—hang on to the rope, dear!"

Noel Raymond, the young detective, paused abruptly on the steep snow-covered path he had been following among the Derbyshire hills.

For miles he had tramped without meeting a soul, delighting in the keen, invigorating air, the unbroken solitude. And now

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unexpectedly he was greeted by excited, girlish voices, quite close to him.

He heard a slithering sound on the rocks above him—an anxious cry.

"Beryl, come back! I can't possibly hold you——"

The young detective, galvanised into action, scrambled up the treacherous path.

Reaching a flat ledge overlooking a snow-covered valley, he saw one of the speakers—a fair-haired schoolgirl—clinging for dear life to a rope. Below her, holding precariously to the side of the rugged cliff, was another girl—a girl with unruly auburn hair.

"I'm sure I could make a jump for it!" she called breathlessly. "Be a sport, Alice, and pay out a little more line——"

"You'll do nothing of the kind, young lady!" interrupted Noel, catching at the rope—to the amazement and obvious relief of the young climber's chum. "Are you trying to break your neck?"

The girl looked up, revealing a flushed, attractive face and a pair of merry blue eyes that regarded him in mingled surprise and resentment.

"I say—who are you?" she called.

Her tone conveyed the unspoken comment:

"Of all the cheek!"

Noel smiled grimly.

"Time enough for introductions when you're safely back on the ledge," he rejoined dryly. "The rope's frayed as it is, and if you fell you'd be buried in the snow. There's no way out of the valley; it's hemmed in by the cliffs."

"I don't want to get out!"

"Then—what do you want?" asked Noel curiously.

Both girls replied together—a surprising answer:

"The biscuits!"

"Biscuits?" echoed the young detective in amazement.

The auburn-haired young climber laughed, her annoyance soon forgotten.

"Chocolate Assorted! My favourites. There's a whole tin of them in the snow—down there!"

Incredulously, Noel followed the direction of her pointing finger.

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Protruding from the smooth, untrodden snow was a square biscuit-tin, its coloured wrappings intact—and the legend—"Chocolate Assorted"—visible on the lid even at that distance!

A soft, bewildered whistle escaped the young detective's lips. Utterly incongruous the gay-coloured tin appeared against the white snow; but it was not only that.

The most baffling feature was the position of the tin—almost in the centre of a snowdrift—some hundreds of yards from the nearest cliff, and without a path or track within sight!

No wonder the two adventurous schoolgirls had been intrigued.

But the daring Beryl had overlooked the danger of attempting to reach it.

"Better come up," said Noel cheerfully, "and we'll see what can be done about it!"

His boyish smile banished the girl's momentary resentment; she commenced to climb cautiously, while Noel hauled on the rope.

A moment later she stood with her chum and the young detective on the narrow ledge.

"Well?" she panted, her blue eyes challenging. "Don't *you* think it's a mystery?"

"It's certainly perplexing," agreed Noel, with a smile. "A tin of biscuits—apparently new—dumped in a snow-bound valley, half a mile from the nearest village."

"That's Crayleigh," put in the other girl. "Beryl and I've got a room in the village stores."

"We tried to buy some chocolate biscuits before we came out," added Beryl inconsequently. "We thought they'd be just the thing for our picnic—but we were told there was a shortage. In fact, the girl got quite sharp when Alice said she'd seen some in the shop. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I spotted that tin in the snow!"

"Could it have been thrown there—from the cliff?" suggested Alice.

"Impossible!" replied Noel. "A bulky tin like that—full or empty—couldn't be thrown for any distance; it would simply have dropped straight down. And it couldn't have been dumped there

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before the snow fell, or it would have been buried," he added, with a mystified frown.

"We'll settle the question," said Noel. "Stand back!"

While the two girls watched with bated breath, he uncoiled the rope he was carrying, made a running noose at one end, and tossed it out across the snow. Twice it fell short, but at the third attempt the noose fell squarely over the tin.

The two girls cheered as Noel carefully hauled in his curious "catch."

Its weight revealed that the tin was by no means empty!

"Biscuits for tea!" exclaimed Beryl gaily, as she bent eagerly over the tin.

"Wait!" interrupted Noel, a trifle sharply.

The two girls stared at him in surprise. The smile had faded from the young detective's lips; his eyes were grave, perplexed.

"It may be a trick," said Noel, as he examined the tin through his magnifying-glass. "The tin has been opened—and sealed up again! And the label on this side has been carelessly stuck——"

He tore it off with a swift jerk, revealing a similar label beneath—with something scrawled across it faintly in pencil.

The young detective caught in his breath sharply as he examined the half-obliterated writing; the two girl climbers peered curiously over his shoulder.

"It says—'Help——'" ventured Alice.

"Help yourself!" suggested Beryl, laughing.

But there was no answering smile in Noel's eyes. The intriguing mystery had taken a sudden, grimmer turn.

"The second word appears to have been a name," he remarked gravely. "Frankly, I don't like it. I advise you girls not to open the tin."

"Oh, rot!" said Beryl impulsively. She flushed, smiling apologetically. "Sorry—I didn't mean that—but what possible harm could it do? After all, there's no one to claim it—and finding's keeping!"

"I'll admit it appears innocent enough," Noel agreed, "but I'm not taking any risks. Where do you suggest having your picnic?"

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"In that cave—up there," replied Alice, pointing to an intriguing-looking cavern in the hillside, well away from the snow.

"Right," said Noel, smiling gravely. "With your permission, I'll join you. You'll find sandwiches and a flask of tea in my haversack—more than I'll be requiring. While you're preparing the picnic, I'll open the tin."

"Oh—goody!" exclaimed Beryl. "That'll be topping!"

"We'd love you to join us!" added Alice, with her pleasant smile.

Together they made their way up to the cave, Noel carrying the mysterious tin.

While the chums busied themselves in unpacking the hamper they had brought with them, Noel lit a fire of twigs and brushwood at the entrance of the cave, and turned to examine the tin.

The two girls left him for a moment to fill their kettle at a near-by brook. The young detective seized the opportunity to cut the label sealing the tin. Cautiously he raised the lid, removing a layer of paper shavings.

The young detective leaned forward, a wry smile on his lips. For the tin contained—chocolate biscuits! A neat layer, some wrapped in silver-foil, others plain.

"Looks as though Beryl was right!" he muttered. "I seem to have made a bit of a fool of myself."

Carefully removing the upper layer, he revealed a second layer almost identical. He broke one of the biscuits to make certain that it was genuine.

Puzzled, rather nonplussed, he awaited the return of the two young climbers. No doubt they would laugh at him; and it served him right, decided Noel, with a rueful smile. Yet—the mystery was still unexplained, as baffling as ever. And there was that queer, half-obliterated message.

"'Help——'" repeated Noel thoughtfully.

He stiffened suddenly, turning swiftly on his heel as he heard a faint sound from the darkness of the cave.

A stifled ejaculation escaped his lips; he was in time to see a hand—a white, girlish hand—reaching out from the shadows towards the biscuit-tin! On the slender wrist was a curious gold bangle.

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Noel sprang towards the outstretched hand, but it was withdrawn swiftly into the shadows.

The young detective halted, staring round him, wondering if his imagination had been playing tricks.

There appeared to be no one in the cave except himself! Certainly the hand had belonged to neither Beryl nor Alice, whose merry voices he could hear outside the cave.

Noel hurried farther into the cavern; it seemed to be of considerable extent, and became more narrow and tortuous as it receded into the cliff.

Soon he discovered that he could barely stand upright, and the light from his torch revealed masses of fallen rock and debris.

It was here that he found his first clue—the clear impression of a brogue shoe in the thick dust and rubble.

A single footprint; nothing more! No indication how it had come there, or other trace of its elusive owner. But it was sufficient to confirm Noel's startling suspicions.

There was something sinister afoot on the lonely hillside—something connected with the seemingly innocent biscuit-tin!

Just then he heard running footsteps—a girl's merry laugh.

"They *are* biscuits—I told you so, Alice!"

Gripped by an uneasy premonition, Noel turned swiftly.

"Look out!" he called. "Don't touch that tin!"

His words were echoed by a girl's terrified scream—and an ominous crash that echoed through the cavern.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Noel, as he broke into a run. He blamed himself bitterly for having left the girls to their own resources.

As he came in sight of the entrance, his fears were confirmed. Alice Dering, the fair-haired girl, was kneeling tearfully beside the crumpled figure of her daring friend.

"Beryl—something's happened to her!" she gasped, catching sight of Noel.

The young detective bent over the motionless girl. Beryl's face was white, her eyes were closed. A jagged rock, apparently fallen from the roof of the cave, had narrowly missed her head.

There was something grasped tightly in her fingers—and as Noel gently loosened them a startled whistle escaped his lips.

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Beryl was clutching a chocolate biscuit, wrapped in silver foil ! Noel stared round sharply, his eyes narrowed.

" Did you see what happened ? " he asked.

Alice shook her head.

" Beryl was hurrying in front ; I saw her go into the cave—then I heard her scream. I found her, like this."

" Notice if anything was missing ? "

" I—I didn't look," faltered Alice. " What——"

" The tin of biscuits ! " snapped Noel. " It's gone ! "

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL WITH THE FRIGHTENED EYES

THE mystery of the elusive tin of biscuits had taken a dramatic and sinister turn.

Beryl had been struck down in the act of helping herself to a biscuit. The tin itself had vanished—as inexplicably as it had appeared in the untrodden snow !

Noel found himself confronted by as baffling a puzzle as ever he had undertaken to solve.

But his immediate concern was for the unconscious girl. A swift examination convinced him that she had fainted from shock. There was only a trifling graze on her forehead where she had been struck by a splinter from the fallen rock.

Losing no time, he applied a powerful restorative from his first-aid kit, to be rewarded by a flicker of the girl's eyelids, a faint moan.

Alice gave a choking sigh of relief.

" Is she——" she faltered.

" Don't worry," put in Noel cheerfully. " She'll be all right in a few minutes. No bones broken, or anything like that. Well, young lady, feeling better ? "

The question was addressed to Beryl, who opened her eyes dazedly, staring round her.

" Beryl," whispered Alice, " are you—are you all right ? What happened ? "

Beryl managed to sit up, supported by her chum. There was a puzzled expression in her blue eyes.

" What," she whispered, " what—oh, goodness ! I remember.



Noel swung swiftly round as he heard a faint sound come from the darkness of the cave. Then he gave a startled gasp. A white, girlish hand was reaching out for the mystery biscuit-tin.

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I was just taking a biscuit when I heard Mr. Raymond call out. As I jumped back, something—something fell."

"Part of the roof of the cave," interrupted Noel grimly. "A narrow shave, young lady."

Alice shivered, her arm round her chum's shoulder.

"It missed you by inches," she breathed. "If Mr. Raymond hadn't been there, I don't know what——"

Beryl gave a quick, unsteady laugh.

"Accidents will happen, I suppose?"

"If it *was* an accident!" put in Noel sternly.

Both girls stared. The young detective was examining the lump of fallen rock.

"Why—what do you mean?" gasped Beryl.

"I mean," said Noel, "that this rock was deliberately dislodged by someone who intended to frighten you, or worse!"

The chums exclaimed in bewilderment. Alice looked rather scared, Beryl incredulous.

"I—I don't understand. There's no one here except us three."

"Perhaps!"

The young detective rose to his feet, staring hard at the roof of the cave. Through a jagged hollow, he could just see a glimmer of daylight.

He pointed significantly.

"There's an opening in the cliff above here. Someone was watching you—someone who intended to take no chances!"

"But—but why?" asked Beryl, rather pale. "It doesn't make sense!"

"Neither did the tin of biscuits," replied Noel dryly. "Can you explain how it came to be in the snowdrift without a trace of footprints, or why the word 'Help' was written across the side? And why was it spirited out of the cave before you had a chance to enjoy its contents?"

Beryl started, looking round her in amazement.

"You mean, it's *gone*? You're not joking?"

"I'm afraid this isn't a joking matter," replied Noel. "You stumbled on a bigger mystery than you imagined when you spotted that tin in the snow. I've no idea what lies behind it, but the sooner

you girls are safely back in the village, the better I'll be pleased."

Alice and Beryl exchanged glances. The latter looked distinctly taken aback.

"But we haven't had our picnic yet," she protested. "We'd planned to start back this evening in time to see the moon rise over the peaks."

Noel glanced at the sky, faintly tinged with the glow of the setting sun.

"It's getting late," he said. "I'm not taking the risk of allowing you girls to stay out here after dark. As soon as we've had tea, I suggest we start back for Crayleigh."

Beryl was inclined to argue, but the young detective's authoritative manner had its effect.

The picnic tea was a cheery meal, in spite of the mystery that threatened to cloud it. The two girls were thrilled when they discovered their companion's full name and identity.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Beryl. "Fancy our meeting a famous detective in a place like this! But, honestly, Mr. Raymond, do you think a *real* mystery could be connected with a tin of chocolate biscuits?"

Noel smiled, meeting her laughing glance, but his eyes were grave.

"I've known mysteries that started with something even smaller," he replied. "A detective has to be on the look-out for seeming trifles, such as——"

He took something from his waistcoat-pocket, holding it out.

The two girls craned forward.

"Why, it's a broken biscuit!" exclaimed Beryl.

"The biscuit you took from the tin," replied Noel. "And this was the foil it was wrapped in. Notice anything peculiar?"

"N-no——" began Beryl doubtfully. "Why, yes! There's some smeared printing on it. It looks like—like part of a girl's face, but it can't be!"

"That's precisely what it is," said Noel, smiling grimly as he returned the foil to his pocket. "By a fortunate chance, this biscuit provides a valuable clue. A hundred people might have seen it without noticing anything in particular, because they wouldn't be looking for anything."

"But what does it *mean*?" gasped the two girls in unison.

The young detective shook his head, his eyes grave.

"So far, I've only a theory—a rather startling theory. But I must keep it to myself till I've more definite proof. Meanwhile, I'm not allowing you girls to run any risks. Are you ready?"

Alice was packing the picnic things, but Beryl tossed her auburn head a shade rebelliously.

"You know, we're quite capable of looking after ourselves," she declared pertly. "I don't know why we should give up our plans for a moonlight outing——"

Noel rose to his feet, his expression good-humoured but firm.

"Look at that rock!" he said. "It missed you—by inches. Next time you might not be so fortunate. Coming?"

Reluctantly Beryl gave in, and the two chums accompanied Noel down the precipitous path that led to the village.

They turned in at the little village general stores, where they were staying.

The elderly storekeeper was busy behind the counter, but he looked up quickly as they entered. A look of relief crossed his face.

"So you're back safely, young ladies? I'm glad! It doesn't do to stay out on the hills after dusk. Folks have got lost before now—and never seen again."

"Oh, nonsense!" laughed Beryl. "Come on, Alice, we'll change our things. And thank you so much, Mr. Raymond, for all you've done!"

Alice also thanked him, then the two girls made their way upstairs.

Noel turned to the old shopkeeper.

"I suppose visitors do occasionally meet with accidents among the hills?" he asked carelessly, as he purchased a packet of cigarettes.

The shopkeeper nodded.

"All too often, sir," he rejoined earnestly. "Cran Fell—the peak you can see from the window—has a bad name. I always warn folk not to go near it after dusk."

Noel pursed his lips thoughtfully; the peak in question loomed high above the cave where the two girls had planned to picnic—where Beryl had had such a narrow escape!

"Oh, well," he remarked lightly, "I'm not keen enough on

mountaineering to risk my neck after dusk. I'll be getting back to the town. That reminds me—I want some biscuits: Chocolate Assorted."

"Chocolate biscuits?" inquired the old shopkeeper, shaking his head. "We've been out of them for weeks——"

There came a loud clatter from the dim interior of the little shop. The old man started violently, a frown crossing his face.

"It's that stupid girl—my assistant! Clumsy isn't the word. Miss Shannon—what are you doing?"

A girl appeared from behind the shop—a dark-haired young assistant, carrying a pile of empty biscuit-tins.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Deane—I tripped and dropped some tins," she replied meekly.

But Noel saw an expression in her dark eyes that belied the meekness of her tone—a smouldering discontent, not unmixed with fear!

"Kindly serve this gentleman, Miss Shannon," said her employer curtly. "When you asked for the afternoon off, you promised to be back before tea."

"I'm sorry, sir——"

"Don't apologise. You're wasting time. Show this gentleman our range of biscuits."

Muttering, the old shopkeeper went out to put up the shutters.

Noel glanced smilingly at the girl, hoping to put her at her ease.

"Chocolate biscuits seem to be hard to obtain," he remarked pleasantly. "I'll try some other kind—shortcake will do."

As the girl turned to the well-stocked shelves, Noel was looking at her slender arms. On her left wrist, just below the sleeve of her overall, was a faint red mark.

The young detective's eyes narrowed slightly; he leaned over the counter, staring at the girl's shoes—serviceable brogues, a trace of snow still clinging to the welts.

He waited till she returned to the counter and was weighing out the biscuits; then, unexpectedly, he asked a question.

"You enjoy hill climbing?" he asked, with a smile. "On your free afternoons?"

The girl shot him a swift, apprehensive glance.

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"Why?" she countered.

"I only wondered," murmured Noel, watching her closely. "Do you happen to know a certain cave—in the shadow of Cran Fell?"

The girl's hand shook, and she dropped a number of biscuits over the counter.

"No!" she replied quickly.

"Is it necessary to lie?" asked Noel.

With a swift movement he caught at her arm, and pulled back the sleeve, revealing a curious gold bangle which she had thrust out of sight under her overall.

The girl drew back with a gasp, her face deathly pale. She flung a swift, frightened glance over her shoulder.

"Who—who are you?" she faltered. "What do you want?"

"The truth," replied Noel grimly. "What grudge do you owe those two young girls upstairs?"

The assistant caught in her breath sharply; her lips were trembling.

"I don't know what you mean," she breathed. "Take your biscuits—and go."

She snatched the coins Noel had placed on the counter, thrust the packet of biscuits into his hands, and hurried into the room behind the shop, slamming the door.

The young detective whistled thoughtfully; there was a curious gleam in his eyes.

Pocketing the biscuits, he strolled out of the shop.

The old shopkeeper was putting up the last of the shutters; he touched his cap respectfully.

"Good evening to you, sir."

"A fine evening, by the look of it," remarked Noel, glancing at the sky. "A full moon to-night."

The old man shook his head.

"They say a full moon brings bad luck to those who venture into the hills," he muttered. "There was Jim Shannon——"

He broke off, and Noel glanced at him swiftly.

"Any relation to your dark-haired assistant?"

"Ay—her father." The old man lowered his voice confidentially. "As clever a craftsman as ever was, in his time—a goldsmith and

engraver. He made that bangle she always wears on her wrist." Noel's interest was aroused.

"What happened to him?" he asked.

Once again the old man glanced cautiously over his shoulder before replying.

"He went to the bad, sir—stole from his clients. Mr. Geoffrey, the local landowner, had him watched. He was caught with the stolen goods, but he escaped into the hills—on the night of the full moon. And—he was never seen again."

Noel raised his eyebrows.

"You think he met with an accident?"

"Mebbe," mumbled the old shopkeeper. "He disappeared. Cran Fell holds its secrets. I wouldn't go there after dusk if you gave me a fortune.

Noel laughed, but there was a glitter of excitement in his eyes.

"Thanks for the tip," he said. "I'll be getting back to town!"

He strolled down the road, whistling softly; but he did not go far.

Halting at a telephone-booth, he made a call to the local police-station; then, climbing the fence, he made his way across a field at the rear of the shop.

Taking up his stand in the shadow of a hedge, he kept watch.

His vigil was long and cold; the daylight had faded, and the moon was not due to rise for an hour. The shadows deepened till the landscape was barely visible. Only the white peak of Cran Fell towered like a ghost above the village.

At length Noel's sharp ears heard the faint click of a latch; a door creaked open at the rear of the shop, and a slender figure emerged, hurrying across the field.

Noel followed at a distance, his pulses quickening; the girl was making her way towards the hills!

Remembering the old shopkeeper's strange story, Noel was conscious of a growing uneasiness as he trailed the girl.

The path grew steeper—but the girl possessed the swiftness and agility of a gazelle; the young detective found difficulty in keeping pace with her.

She was making her way up a sharp incline which Noel judged would lead them to a point above the snow-covered valley.

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And just then he heard a sound—a strange whining sound—indescribably eerie. The sound faded into the distance, and he saw the girl halt on the edge of a steep gorge.

Her slender figure was silhouetted against the grey sky and the surrounding snow.

The young detective felt a sudden premonition of danger. He shouted to the girl, but she was too distant for his voice to carry.

He broke into a run, desperately anxious to overtake her.

And just then the whining sound was repeated—closer, this time, and apparently overhead. Nearer and nearer it came—a rushing hissing sound, hard to describe.

To Noel's straining eyes it appeared that some dark, sinister shape was flying across the valley from the snow-clad peak. A giant bird? Impossible! The deepening shadows played strange tricks with his eyesight—

As he leaped up the last slope, he heard a stifled gasp—a cry.

He reached the spot where the girl had been standing; but she was no longer there!

She had vanished—incredibly—into the night.

To Noel, there seemed only one possible explanation. She must have slipped over the edge of the cliff.

Careless of his own safety, the young detective prepared to make the hazardous descent. Guided by his torch, he discovered a narrow, treacherous path—and by that means at length reached the valley.

But the mystery girl was not in sight! The snow lay unbroken for nearly a mile across the valley. Wait!

Far away across the white expanse he saw a dark speck against the snow, but no footprints led that way. Grimly the young detective tramped towards it, wading through the untrodden snow. It took him a full ten minutes to reach the spot; and then—

An incredulous ejaculation was torn from Noel's lips.

Lying huddled in the snow—without a trace to show how she had come there—was the dark-haired young assistant from the stores.

And clutched in her arms was a tin of chocolate biscuits!

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CHAPTER III

PERIL ON THE PLATEAU

WHAT did it mean? What incredible, fantastic mystery surrounded that seemingly innocent tin of biscuits?

It was not the same tin that had vanished from the cave; Noel could see that at a glance. This tin was intact—unopened.



"Show this gentleman our range of biscuits," snapped the shopkeeper. As the girl stepped forward to obey, Noel regarded her with interest. He had a shrewd idea that they had met before. Was she the mystery girl of the cave?

He bent quickly over the unconscious girl. She was breathing heavily—as though stunned by a fall. But from where had she fallen?

Noel stared towards the cliff, nearly a quarter of a mile away; there was a baffled expression in his eyes.

But there was no time for idle theorising. Lifting the girl gently in his arms, he carried her towards a tumbledown log-cabin, half

buried by the snow, and used at some time by shepherds in the valley.

Kicking open the door, he placed the girl gently on a pile of sack-
ing, chafing her cold and bruised hands. As she showed signs
of coming round, he left her for a moment, to return with the
mysterious tin.

Slitting the paper with his knife, he dragged off the lid, and
emptied its entire contents on to the floor.

Chocolate biscuits lay in a pile at his feet—but nothing else.
Nothing to confirm his suspicions or clarify the mystery.

Noel threw down the empty tin, and crossed to the girl's side.
She was muttering in her delirium.

"Biscuits—danger—warn girl—not to go to hill by moon-
light——"

"What do you mean?" asked Noel, softly as he bent over her.

"Beryl—Alice—warn them—peril——"

The girl's voice trailed away; her head fell back on to Noel's arm.

The young detective's eyes were grave and anxious as he lifted
her, and set out for the long tramp across the valley.

Leaving the girl at the first cottage he reached, in the care of the
shepherd's wife, he hurried down to the village, and hammered on
the door of the general shop.

After a while it was opened by the proprietor's dour-faced house-
keeper.

"Mr. Deane isn't in," she said shortly. "He's gone into the
town on business——"

"I want to speak to the young ladies who are staying here—Miss
Beryl Curtis and Alice Dering," began Noel.

"You can't," came the reply. "They've gone out, too—on some
mad-brained excursion into the hills."

Noel gave a stifled ejaculation, his face paling.

He was too late!

"Did they say which way they were going?" he demanded.

"They said they wanted to see Cran Fell by moonlight," replied
the woman shortly. "I wish them joy of it!"

Noel did not wait for any more; he ran frantically towards
the winding path that led into the hills.

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Even as he ran he could see the moon rising, its ghostly light silvering the distant peak.

Would he be in time?

"Beryl—we oughtn't to have come," gasped Alice, catching her impetuous chum by the arm. "Mr. Raymond warned us——"

"Oh, goodness—we're not children!" laughed Beryl. "Why should our plans be spoilt by a tin of biscuits? I ask you!"

Alice shook her head, her face rather pale as she scrambled up the steep incline after her friend.

"But there was something queer about those biscuits," she declared. "I mean—the way they vanished; and that falling rock——"

"An accident," declared Beryl cheerfully. "The tin was probably buried under the rubble. I'll admit it was a mystery how they came to be out there, in the snow; and I'm rather anxious to have another look at the place. You know how I love mysteries!"

They had reached the snow-covered plateau overlooking the valley; Alice held tightly to her chum's arm as they approached the edge.

"Be careful!" she whispered uneasily.

"Why?" asked Beryl. "There's nothing to be scared of. Why, it's almost like daylight now!"

True, the moon was brilliant—and the snow was a dazzling white in the silent valley below them; but as Beryl spoke a dark cloud crept across its silver face.

Alice shivered.

"It—it's like an omen," she whispered.

"Nonsense!" declared Beryl. "I don't believe in omens. Goodness, I'm hungry, though! I wish we'd thought to bring something to eat—some biscuits——"

"Don't talk about biscuits!" pleaded her chum. "They give me the creeps——"

Beryl laughed; but the laughter faded on her lips. Through the still air came a sound that chilled the blood in the girls' veins.

It was a whining, hissing sound—as though something was rushing through the air towards them.

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Alice clutched at her chum's arm ; Beryl tried to peer through the darkness. And just then they heard a shout, a shout in Noel Raymond's voice.

" Stand back ! "

Noel sprang from the path behind them, catching Beryl by the arm and dragging her forcibly back from the edge.

The startled girls saw the young-detective raise the stick he carried. Something loomed in the darkness—something rushing towards them with incredible speed.

There was a sharp screeching sound—and the stick was almost torn from Noel's hand.

" Got it ! " he panted.

Just then the moon came out from behind a cloud ; an amazed gasp escaped the girls' lips.

Now they could see what had been hidden from them by the cloud—a silvery wire, stretched tautly overhead, sloping away into the distance.

Suspended from the wire on the end of a pulley wheel was a wicker basket ; and protruding from the top of the basket was the corner of a biscuit-tin !

Noel laughed grimly ; but there was a triumphant glitter in his eyes as he dragged the basket towards them with his stick. He tipped the basket, and the tin fell with a thud to the ground.

" Chocolate biscuits ! " cried Beryl in amazement.

" And the solution to the mystery ! " replied Noel, with a grim smile. " The tins were conveyed in this fashion from a cave in the hills—to the general stores below. The wire was sent out by a rocket after dark—in the same way as a breeches-buoy is fired at sea."

" But—but what does it mean ? " gasped Alice. " Why should anyone take the trouble to send biscuits——"

" Come with me," said the young detective, as he picked up the tin. " The police are on their way to the cave ; we'll find out what is happening at the shop ! "

On their way to the village, they called at the shepherd's cottage, and were joined by Esther Shannon, the dark-haired young assistant. She glanced at Noel, an anxious question in her eyes.

"Don't worry," he said, smiling. "We've discovered the scoundrel's game!"

"And my father——"

"I can promise you that he's safe! He'll join us later."

Completely mystified, Beryl and Alice hurried beside them to the village. Noel led the way to the rear of the shop—and flashed his torch on a taut wire, glittering above them in the moonlight.

Just then a hand reached out from the doorway, to detach the wire from an iron hook in the wall.

In a flash, Noel had the other by the wrist.

"The game's up, Deane!" he rapped.

The grey-haired shopkeeper struggled, but he was quickly handcuffed.

Leading the way into the room behind the shop, Noel pointed to a number of unopened biscuit-tins piled on a table.

"Open one of those," he ordered. "Your favourite assortment, Beryl!"

Quickly the girl obeyed, pouring out the chocolate biscuits on to the table.

"But they're only biscuits!" she gasped.

"Wait," said Noel. "Let me see that tin. Ah—I thought as much!"

With a deft movement he loosened the false bottom of the tin, bringing to light a pile of newly-printed pound notes, tied in neat bundles.

"Counterfeit notes!" he said grimly. "Manufactured in the hills and conveyed to the valley by this ingenious device. This scoundrel is the receiver and virtual head of the gang. And the plates from which the notes were made were engraved—under compulsion—by Esther Shannon's father!"

That girl gave a little sob, but there were tears of relief in her eyes.

"I've been trying to prove it for weeks," she whispered. "Ever since father disappeared——"

"He was kidnapped by the forgers—and a charge of theft was trumped up in order to explain his disappearance," said Noel. "The police have been worried by the quantity of counterfeit notes

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that have flooded the district ; that was why I was sent here to investigate."

"But how did you come to realise that the chocolate biscuits were connected with this mystery?" asked Beryl.

Noel smiled.

"I'll come to that in a moment. At first I was baffled by the way in which the biscuit-tins were conveyed from the hill. Miss Shannon had her suspicions—and she kept watch. To-night she made a desperate attempt to grab at the basket, but was swept off her feet and carried for several hundred yards before she fell. You're a plucky girl, Miss Shannon ; I think your father is waiting outside now—to thank you."

A car had drawn up outside the shop ; with a glad cry, the young assistant darted out to meet it.

Noel smiled at the two young climbers.

"Now let me explain how I connected the biscuits with the forgeries. Do you remember the tinfoil—with the curious marking? That biscuit had accidentally come into contact with one of the forged notes, still damp from the press. The girl's head you saw was the head of Britannia—a familiar figure on a pound note!"

"Oh, goodness!" gasped Beryl, as Noel held out a pound note from his wallet. "What stupids we were not to have thought of it."

"It's easy—when you know the answer!" said Noel, his eyes twinkling.

