

## The Puzzle of the Yuletide Doll

An intriguing mystery story, featuring Noel Raymond, the famous young detective and his schoolgirl niece, June Gaynor.

By PETER LANGLEY

### CHAPTER I

WHAT HAPPENED TO BELINDA?

"UNCLE—it's really lovely!" exclaimed June, craning out of the car window. "There's a Christmassy look about it, 'specially with the snow. I know we're going to have a gorgeous time."

Noel Raymond's eyes twinkled affectionately as he glanced at his exuberant young niece. Deftly he brought his big car to a standstill in the paved yard of the quaint old hostel.

"Glad you like it, June," he said. "Thought it might be a change—as we're both on our own this Christmas. I made the arrangement on the spur of the moment when I heard from Dick Foster that he had bought a derelict old inn to convert into a youth hostel. He's expecting quite a crowd down for Christmas."

"Goody!" exclaimed June, as she threw open the door and jumped out.

"Oh—oo—it's slippery! Look out, uncle."

The famous detective chuckled as he reached out to grab his niece by the arm.

"Better look out yourself, June, or you'll be a casualty before we start," he warned. "Good weather for skating."

"And tobogganing!" declared June happily. "It's going to be a *real* Christmas this year." She looked round with bright, eager eyes at the picturesque scene—at the quaint oak-beamed house with its latticed windows and overhanging eaves; at the courtyard powdered with snow, sparkling in the soft yellow gleam of the lantern that swung over the door. "They've been putting up the decorations, uncle!" she cried.

"Have they?" smiled Noel. "But the curtains are drawn. How do you know—"

"Holly berries!" explained June, pointing triumphantly to a few shiny red

spots trodden into the snow. "That's easy!"

Noel's eyes twinkled.

"So—ho! Sleuthing already, young lady, and beating me at my own game? I thought we were on holiday?"

"Must keep in practice, nunky," said June. "Anything might happen—even at Christmas!"

Noel chuckled, but his eyes were serious as he followed his high-spirited niece down the short flight of steps that led to the door of the hostel.

As June tugged gaily at the rusty bell-pull, causing an eerie clamour to echo somewhere in the basement, the young detective bent to pick up one of the "holly berries" that lay on the steps. A strange expression flashed into his eyes, and he was about to speak—but changed his mind as he heard the door unbolted. Quickly he slipped a red bead into his pocket—a bead broken from a child's necklace.

The door was thrown open by a cheery-faced boy with a shock head of carrotty hair and an infectious grin.

"I say—I bet you're June Gaynor!" he exclaimed, grabbing June's hand and shaking it warmly. "And you're Mr. Raymond, the famous detective—we were all thrilled to hear that you were coming, sir."

"Thanks," said Noel, with a grin. "But I'm on holiday, this time. Merry Christmas!"

"Same to you! Please come in—Mr. Foster's expecting you. He's in the study. My name's Jim Tarrant—these are my chums." He waved his hand to the small group of boys and girls gathered round a blazing log fire in the hall. "Ralph—Irene—Harold—meet Noel Raymond and June!"

Ralph Ainsworth, a good-looking youth of seventeen and his dark-haired sister, Irene, shook hands formally. Harold Hopkins, tall and studious, blinked at them rather mournfully through his spectacles.

"Pleased to meet you," said June warmly. "Merry Christmas!"

"Er—I hope so," murmured Harold doubtfully. "I sincerely hope——"

"Oh, cheer up, Harold!" put in Jim gaily. "Anyone would think you were the Christmas turkey! Goodness I almost forgot Ruth. Stop nursing that beloved doll of yours, Ruth, and come and be introduced."

A fair-haired, attractive youngster of about seven came forward rather shyly, hugging a large, obviously new doll. She shook hands seriously, and impulsively thrust the doll into June's arms.

"This is Belinda!" she announced proudly. "I got her for Christmas. She talks and moves her eyes. You can nurse her if you like."

"May I really?" asked June. "I think she's lovely."

"Well, I'll be getting along to the study," said Noel, his eyes twinkling. "I'm leaving you in good hands, June. Take care of Belinda!"

Jim roared, and Ruth's piping treble added to the general merriment as the young detective left the gaily festooned hall and rapped on the door of his friend's study.

As he entered he realised that it had been no mere whim that had prompted Dick Foster to send him that urgent telegram, begging him to come for Christmas.

"Thank goodness you've turned up, old man!" exclaimed Dick, as he sprang to his feet to grip Noel's hand. "Mary and I have been at our wits' end. I knew you wouldn't let us down."

Noel shook hands with Dick's attractive young wife.

"I'm sure you'll help us, Mr. Raymond," she breathed.

"That's what I'm here for," said Noel, with a boyish smile. "What's the trouble, Dick? When you last wrote you were enthusiastic about your new venture."

"I know," replied Dick, grimly. "It seemed a winner. I put all my savings into the hostel and advertised widely. Got scores of replies from people wanting to book up months ahead. We thought our fortune was made, didn't we, Mary?"

His wife nodded, pluckily blinking back her tears.

"And we were so thrilled, for Ruth's sake," she breathed. "We planned to send her to a marvellous school, and—and—"

"It didn't come off," put in Dick, gruffly. "Some wretched rumour got about—and people wrote cancelling their bookings. We expected to be full this Christmas. Instead of that—well, you've seen for yourself. Just a few of our young regulars—company for Ruth—and that's all."

"Rumour?" asked Noel, keenly. "What was it?"

Mary Foster gulped, catching her husband's glance.

"The—the hostel is—haunted!" she burst out.

"That's what people say," cut in Dick, staring defiantly at Noel. "Of course it's a lot of bunkum!"

"I—I'm not so sure!" breathed Mary, her hands clenched. "I've tried to persuade Dick to sell the house, even at a loss. If—if anything happened to scare Ruth I'd never forgive myself!"

Noel looked keenly from one to the other, his shrewd eyes alight with interest.

"There have been queer happenings in the village, as well as here," he said. "You may have heard of them? Inspector Todd, of the local police, happens to be an old colleague of mine. There may be no connection, of course, but I thought we might pay a call on the inspector this evening—"

"Let's go now!" exclaimed Dick, jumping to his feet. "I won't rest till I get to the bottom of this."

"Please—please don't be too long!" begged Mrs. Foster, as she followed them to the door. "I'm so afraid, Dick—for Ruth—"

"She's in safe company," put in Noel, smiling. "I've a notion that June's adopted her already!"

Ruth was perched happily on June's knee, in a cosy chair by the fire, as Noel and his friend passed through the hall. They were mutually admiring the accomplishments of the flaxen-haired Belinda,

while Jim Tarrant roasted chestnuts and the others stood round munching and chattering.

As the front door closed Jim turned a heated and grinning face from his task.

"Hallo—your uncle's gone out, June!"

"Uncle's always wandering off somewhere without telling me." Her eyes twinkled. "You can roast him a chestnut when he comes back. I say, Ruth—Belinda's lost one of her shoes!"

"I'll go an' find it!" exclaimed Ruth, and skipped across the hall towards her playroom.

"Say!" remarked Harold Hopkins, suddenly.

June stared at him in surprise.

"While the youngster's out of the way," said the boy impressively, "I may as well tell you—"

"Oh, cut it out, Harold," put in Jim hastily. "It's Christmas, y'know."

"All the more reason," said the other boy earnestly, "why June should be warned—"

"That there's a ghost in the house!" declared June, her eyes sparkling.

They all stared at her incredulously.

"Who—who told you?" demanded Harold, blinking.

"No one," said June, smiling. "I just sensed it. It's that sort of house, and everyone looks jumpy—you do, Irene does—and so does Jim, though he pretends he doesn't."

"Well, I like that—" began Jim.

"Tell me about it!" ordered June, a gleam in her eyes. "I was waiting till uncle was out of the way before I asked; he's too fond of bagging my mysteries. Does it clank chains and groan?"

"N-no—not exactly," said Harold, peering through his spectacles. "It's not that kind of ghost. It's a young girl—the step-daughter of an old miser who lived here years ago. He ill-treated her—kept her shut in an attic room. One Christmas Eve the neighbours heard distressed cries—and the next day both the old man and his step-daughter had vanished—"

A spluttering log fell with a sudden clatter into the hearth.

Irene started violently, and Jim gave a chuckle.

"Bed-time story!" he said.

"Lot of rot," declared Ralph impatiently.

But June, unusually excited, was making notes in her pocket-diary.

"And what happened to them—the old man and the step-daughter?" she breathed.

Harold blinked, shaking his head.

"No one ever found out. There'd been a heavy snow-storm that night. People said he turned the girl out of the house in a fit of temper—and, going out later to fetch her, met his own fate in the mill-race at the end of the meadow. Anyway, the story is that about Christmas time she always comes back to the house in search of her old toys and treasures, and the miser follows her——"

He broke off sharply as a muffled, terrified cry rang through the house. June sprang to her feet, the blood draining from her face. The doll slid unnoticed from her lap.

"That—that's Ruth!" she gasped. "Something's scared her——"

Without waiting for the others, she darted towards the playroom. The door stood ajar, and the room was in semi-darkness except for the pale light that filtered through the window.

In a moment June was on her knees beside the crumpled, sobbing figure huddled near an open cupboard.

"It's all right, pet," she exclaimed, catching the frightened youngster into her arms. "Tell Auntie Jane about it."

Ruth clung to June tenaciously, speaking brokenly through her sobs.

"The—the white lady came to steal Belinda's shoe," she sobbed. "It was in the cupboard, an'—an' I saw her take it——"

A startled look flashed into June's eyes as she stared quickly round the room. But there was no one—nothing unusual to be seen. Could Ruth have imagined it?

"Don't worry, dear," she urged. "It was probably a shadow. You know what

funny shadows the moonlight makes. Let's go and fetch Belinda."

But her expression was troubled as she led the youngster back into the hall. Her sharp eyes had noticed that the window of the playroom was unlatched and swinging in the faint breeze.

Luckily, Ruth's muffled cry had not carried upstairs, where Mrs. Foster was making the rooms ready for her guests.

But Jim and the others looked troubled and anxious; Jim hurried forward.

"I say—what happened?" he asked, with a swift glance at the tearful youngster.

"Nothing much," said June, with forced lightness. "Ruth got a bit of a scare—but it's all over now, isn't it, Ruth?"

Ruth nodded, banishing her tears with the ease of childhood.

"I'll ask Father Christmas to bring Belinda some new shoes," she declared eagerly, as she pulled June towards the fireside chair. "She—she——" Her voice quivered suddenly, and her chubby face took on a stricken look as she clutched tightly at June's hand. "Auntie June, Belinda's gone!" she burst out.

June strode incredulously to the chair, and snatched up the cushion. But there was no sign of the Yuletide doll, either on the chair or beneath it. Ruth, trying pluckily not to cry again, was helping in the general search.

But Belinda had vanished as surely as though she had been spirited away.

Rather pale, an angry gleam in her blue eyes, June straightened up.

"Someone's playing a horrid trick!" she exclaimed. "Did any of you notice anything?"

Jim shook his head.

"Not a thing—and I didn't leave the hall! I was just coming to look for you when you came out of the playroom."

"Same here," declared Harold, peering round uneasily.

Irene, at June's suggestion, had taken Ruth over to the sideboard to attempt to console her with some chocolates—but the little girl was still asking fretfully for Belinda.

June moved apart from the others, her active brain grappling with the mystery.

As niece and constant companion of the famous young detective, she tried to apply Noel's methods—aided by her own girlish intuition.

Ruth had spoken of a "white lady"—and Belinda had vanished!

Why should anyone play such a despicable trick on a youngster—and who could have done it? By their own statements, none of the chums had left the hall. If anyone had come in through the door, or down the stairs, they'd have been seen. There was only the window—

Instinctively June glanced towards the curtained window-alcove. The plush curtains were swaying slightly. Could—could anyone be lurking behind the curtain?

Her heart beating rather quickly, June strolled unobtrusively to investigate. For an instant she hesitated by the curtains, and then pulled them quickly aside.

No eerie shape was standing there—nothing more frightening than a cluster of mistletoe swaying from the canopy. The pale moonlight streamed across the verandah white with powdery untrodden snow.

But as June crossed to the open window she fancied she heard a faint rustle—a sigh. Something white and noiseless flitted among the bushes, though it might have been no more than an owl.

June's heart beat faster, then she gave a little shake of the head, a faint smile on her lips.

"I'm seeing things now," she chuckled.

And then she caught in her breath sharply, as she leaned from the window. There was something lying in the snow—tiny, dainty, an unmistakable blue.

One of Belinda's small shoes!

Without pausing to think June swung herself over the window-ledge, her eyes shining with the excitement of the quest.



As June saw the tiny object lying in the snow, she swung herself over the sill. The doll's shoe promised to be an important clue.

## CHAPTER II

### THE WHITE STRANGER

JUNE picked up the tiny shoe, examining it closely. Without question it belonged to the doll which had been given to Ruth. Yet the powdery snow bore no trace of footprints—nothing to show how the doll had been spirited away.

What was the white figure that Ruth had seen in the playroom? Why should anyone take the trouble to steal a child's doll?

She remembered Harold's ghost story, but dismissed it promptly from her thoughts. A Christmas legend couldn't explain what had happened.

From her pocket June took a small fountain-pen, with a torch-bulb fitted into

one end. Uncle Noel's Christmas gift. This was where it would come in useful.

The twinkle returned to June's eyes as she thought that she might steal a march on Noel. To solve a mystery entirely by herself was her ambition—and this was a mystery after her own heart!

Stepping cautiously over the snow, to disturb it as little as possible, she descended the broad steps that led from the verandah to the shrubbery.

Winding, shadowy paths led among the bushes, their frosted shapes standing like white-hooded sentries, motionless and eerily watchful.

June whistled softly to assure herself that she was quite unconcerned as she flashed the tiny beam from her torch into the patches of shadow.

Abruptly she halted, stooping to scrutinise the path. A faint trail on the snow, barely visible—but it brought a gleam to her eyes.

"Sawdust!" breathed June.

Her pulses were racing now as the quest grew warmer—more exciting. The absence of footprints was uncanny, but she was definitely on the right trail. Instinctively she quickened her pace, her heart thumping as she approached a bend in the path.

The shadows were deeper here where a yew tree overhung the path, forming a dark archway. She heard a faint rustle close by her—and a sound that made her blood run cold.

A low, eerie chuckle!

June's legs seemed to act without conscious effort as she sped desperately towards the moonlight.

She imagined that she could hear light footsteps padding behind her, and the temptation to look round became almost too strong to bear. Slowing her pace, she ventured to turn her head, and the movement brought disaster.

She failed to notice the flight of ornamental steps that led down to the rock garden; a stifled cry broke from her as she pitched headlong—and everything went black.

It might have been minutes or hours later when June heard a voice calling her name—miles away it seemed. Then sud-

denly she felt an icy wind on her face, the voice sounded nearer—gruff and rather unsteady.

"Trust you to get into some scrape while I am out!" declared Noel, grinning slightly, though his face was rather white.

June blinked up at him dazedly, trying to collect her scattered thoughts.

"Hallo, uncle!" she breathed. "What—what's happened? Where—oh!" She sat bolt upright, grabbing the detective's arm. "The sawdust—the footprints!" she whispered.

"What footprints?" asked Noel gently.

"That—that's just it," breathed June. "There weren't any—and there ought to have been!"

The famous detective eyed her quizzically as he supported her against his arm.

"You're still dreaming, June," he said.

"I went out for a short stroll with Foster—and came back to find you'd disappeared. Then I discovered your tracks in the snow and heard you cry out. Luckily you hadn't far to fall," he added dryly. "How do you feel?"

"All—all right," admitted June doubtfully. "A bit dizzy." But she smiled faintly in spite of herself. Then her eyes grew serious. "Did you—did you see anything uncle?" she asked.

The young detective regarded her narrowly.

"I saw your footprints," he said. "You were walking at first—and then you started to run. Why?"

"I think—I'm almost certain someone was following me," breathed June. "Did they tell you about—Belinda?"

"Belinda—oh, you mean Ruth's doll?" Noel eyed his niece shrewdly. "Someone mentioned that it had been mislaid. What's on your mind?"

"Belinda wasn't mislaid," declared June. "She—she was stolen! There was the sawdust."

"So you noticed that?" murmured Noel, a gleam of approval in his eyes. "But was Belinda a sawdust doll?"

"Of course," said June. "Most dolls are, these days. She had a china face, though, and flaxen hair. Uncle—I must find her!"

She stared round at the ornamental garden, a pucker of perplexity on her forehead.

"If only there had been some footprints!" she added softly. "That's what makes it so strange. Oh!" She broke off excitedly, starting towards a tall holly bush. "Look!"

She flashed her torch on the prickly leaves and red berries. Carefully she removed something caught on the dark green spikes—a scrap of blue silk.

Noel whistled softly.

"You've sharper eyes than I have, June! Torn from Belinda's frock, eh?"

June had bent down to flash her torch under the bush.

"Uncle—quickly—you've got a longer arm!" she cried excitedly. "There's something under here. It might be—"

Noel promptly dropped to his knees, thrusting his arm under the bush and groping among the spiky foliage. Slowly he withdrew his hand, and June pounced on the object he held.

A little gasp escaped her lips as she bent over the broken doll. Its china face had been shattered, its blue frock ripped, and its flaxen hair almost torn off.

Noel's expression was suddenly grim. It was plain that this was no accident—no light-hearted jape.

"Better not say anything to Ruth," he remarked.

June looked up at him, a strange expression in her eyes.

"But, uncle—you don't understand. This—this isn't Belinda!"

Noel started, as he took the broken doll from her hand.

"Eh? Are you certain? Dolls look much alike—"

"Perhaps they do—to a man," replied June impatiently. "But any girl could tell the difference at a glance. Belinda had real hair—this is only imitation. And she had lost a shoe."

Noel whistled softly as he turned the broken doll over to examine the flaxen wig. There was a strange glint in his eyes.

"You beat me to it that time, June," he said quietly. "Someone seems to be

making a habit of collecting dolls—and it isn't a ghost!"

"But—what does it mean, uncle?" breathed June, her voice shaking with excitement.

For answer Noel gripped her arm; instinctively they both turned as they heard a faint rustle in the moonlit garden.

"What—what was that?" breathed June.

Noel did not reply; his hand tightened on her arm as he watched a dark patch of shadow thrown by an overhanging tree.

June's heart stood still, and her hair seemed to creep on her scalp as a figure appeared from the shadows into the moonlight.

A slight, elusive figure, its dead-white draperies seeming transparent against the snow. A cold breeze rustled the bushes as the figure glided across the garden almost as though floating over the surface of the snow.

June gave a cry as she caught a glimpse of the bundle it held—a small, shapeless bundle with pale blue frock and flaxen hair. She took a half step forward, but Noel's grip tightened.

"Stay where you are," he breathed huskily. "There's danger here!"

June saw his hand slide to his pocket as he started out at a noiseless run. But as she watched, tense and fascinated, the elusive shape vanished—seeming to dissolve into the shadows.

June's breath came back in an audible gasp as, disobeying orders, she sped after her uncle.

The young detective had halted beside the rustic bridge that spanned an ornamental stream. The stream formed an artificial moat encircling the garden, and crossed at that point only by a narrow plank. Drift-snow lay powdery and undisturbed on the bridge, and along the footpath that bordered the stream.

June pinched herself to make sure that she was awake.

"Uncle—she—it's gone!" she gasped. "Where are the footprints? We must follow—"

Noel turned from his scrutiny of the bridge, a grim smile on his lips.

"We'd search in vain, June," he said. "This confirms what I've suspected. There's danger—danger to-night at the hostel; but not a word to anyone about what we've seen! Promise?"

June nodded speechlessly, and Noel read the bewildered question in her eyes.

"We're up against something more dangerous than a ghost, my dear," he added gravely. "We'll need all our wits to help us defeat it this Christmas Eve!"

### CHAPTER III

#### THE UNSEEN GUEST

"WE?" echoed June, hopefully. "Uncle—you mean——"

Noel's eyes twinkled as he took her arm.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'm not leaving you out! This is your mystery—so far as Ruth and her missing doll are concerned. But I don't want you to wander off on the trail again without consulting me. Promise?"

"Finger wet—finger dry!" returned June fervently. "What's the next move, uncle?"

"Back to the house," said Noel firmly. "We must join in the fun as though nothing had happened, June. Tell 'em you've been ghost-hunting, if you like—but make a joke of it. And whatever happens, keep your eyes and ears wide open—and take no chances!"

June's pulses were racing as they returned to the hostel. Her uncle was relying on her to help solve the mystery—and the schoolgirl detective was on her mettle.

"The wanderer's returned!" exclaimed Jim Tarrant, as they entered the long, raftered dining-hall to find the youthful company impatiently awaiting them. "Thought you must have grown tired of us and taken the next train home," added that irrepressible youth, grinning across at June. "Here—catch!"

There was a burst of laughter as June neatly caught the mince-pie tossed over to her.

"Thanks," said June, returning his smile. "Nothing like a brisk walk to make you hungry." She looked round

quickly, a hint of anxiety in her blue eyes. "Where's Ruth?"

To her relief, Mr. and Mrs. Foster appeared at that moment with their young daughter. Ruth immediately made a bee-line for June.

"She wouldn't go to bed till she'd seen you," declared Dick Foster, smiling. "You've certainly made a hit with our bundle of mischief, young lady!"

Ruth clung to June's hand. "Where's Belinda, Auntie June?" she asked. "It's time she was in bed!"

June bit her lip, forcing a quick smile as she met Noel's glance.

"I'll bring her up to you when you're asleep, pet," she declared hastily. "She's staying to have a word with Santa Claus—about a surprise for you!"

Ruth was all smiles, and permitted herself to be led away to her room.

Jim Tarrant approached them, deftly balancing a tray of cups and glasses.

"Coffee—lemonade—trifle?" he called. "Step this way, ladies and gentlemen—lots more where this came from! Hand round the cakes, Emily."

He was followed by a smiling maid carrying a larger tray heaped with cakes, mince-pies and other Christmas fare.

"Gather round," chuckled Jim, clattering his tray on the table. "Make the most of the good things—before Harold scoffs the lot!"

Harold Hopkins blinked disapprovingly over a large mince pie.

"Your humour is out of place, Tarrant," he said. "It was from this very room, on a certain Christmas Eve, that cries of terror were heard and the sound of a heavy fall——"

A dull crash interrupted him, seeming to come from outside the door. Ralph Ainsworth, who was sitting nearest to the door, leaped to his feet, his face rather white. His sister gave a stifled cry, catching at June's arm.

"Silly chump!" snapped Jim, glaring at Harold.

"Really—I didn't do anything——" protested that youth.

The door creaked open—to admit a grizzled, red-faced old man wearing a



green apron and staggering under the weight of a load of logs.

"Evenin', young ladies and gents," he panted. "Thought you'd be needin' these. It's a rare cold night. Me hands are that numb I dropped one o' the logs on the stairs."

"Thomas, you gave us the start of our lives!" chuckled Jim, as he hurried to relieve the gardener of his burden. "On with the yule logs—and let's see the sparks fly!"



Harold Hopkins pointed a quivering hand at the picture which had so startlingly fallen from the wall. "That's the old miser and his daughter who're supposed to haunt the house!" he declared.

Willing hands piled the logs in the great open fireplace, and Jim tossed one on to the glowing fire, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney.

The tense atmosphere was forgotten; everyone was laughing and talking now as old Thomas grinningly accepted a glass of something special, and proceeded to drink their healths.

In the glow of the firelight June looked round at the assembled faces—watching their changing expressions, seeking the

slightest clue to the strange mystery that lurked behind the Christmas fun.

Jim's face was alight with mischievous gaiety; Harold Hopkins was soberly commencing his third mince pie. Ralph and Irene had recovered from their momentary scare and were eating their share of the good things.

The little maid's perky features reflected the general merrymaking, as she jauntily wore the paper crown that Jim placed gravely over her cap.

Finally her glance rested on Noel—and by the twinkle in his eyes June realised that the young detective had been engaged in a similar scrutiny.

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. June shook her head. As yet, neither had a definite clue. June's pulses quickened. It was going to be a close race—and she was determined to win.

Dick Foster returned with his wife, to announce that Ruth was safely in bed.

"And what are the plans, now?" he asked, smiling round at his guests.

"Snap-dragon!" suggested Jim promptly.

"What's that?" asked Irene.

"I know!" laughed June. "You take a bowl of raisins and nuts and things, pour some spirit over them and set light to it. It burns with a blue flame—not really hot—and you snatch the raisins from the flames."

"Let's try it!" exclaimed Ralph eagerly. "Put out the lights first," suggested Harold, with some enthusiasm. "Make it more effective."

There was a general buzz of assent to the plan.

The little maid brought a bowl of raisins from the sideboard, and Dick Foster poured the spirit over them.

"Take your places round the table," chuckled Jim. "Watch me do the fire-eating act."

Harold switched out the lights, and only the glow of the leaping flames lit up the festive scene.

June found herself next to Noel, her back to the panelled wall. Jim was on her other side, with Harold next to him, and their host and hostess, with Ralph and Irene Ainsworth, facing them across the table.

The firelight played on their excited faces, throwing dancing shadows on the panelling and the gilt-framed pictures.

"All ready?" chuckled their host. "One—two—three—and off you go!" He struck a match and set light to the bowl.

There were squeals and laughter as, one by one, the youthful guests made a grab at the blazing raisins. The harmless flames travelled ecirly over the fingers and hands, and even appeared to set fire to Jim's nose as he transferred the fruit daringly to his mouth.

In the general merriment, June's smile suddenly faded. Only Noel observed her sudden stiffening as she plucked something from the bowl of raisins, turning it over in her hand.

The young detective bent towards her, staring at the object. It appeared to be a piece of crinkly metal.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

"Don't you know?" breathed June, flashing him an excited glance. "It's a girl's hair-clip!"

Noel raised his eyebrows.

"A rather small one," he ventured.

"It's a special kind," whispered June. "The kind you buy for children. Ruth had one—this one—I recognise it by the way it is bent at the end. And—and the last time I saw it, it was in her doll's hair."

The young detective whistled softly.

"First clue to you, June," he murmured.

"What do you make of it?"

There was a strange, tense light in June's eyes.

"I think I know how it came here," she whispered. "I've guessed who—"

But she did not complete her sentence. There was a faint twang, practically inaudible in the general commotion—but Noel happened to look up.

A horrified gleam flashed into his eyes. "June—look out!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

He sprang to his feet, raising his arm as though to ward off some unexpected peril that threatened his niece.

The heavy gilt-framed picture beneath which June had been sitting caught him a glancing blow on the shoulder, numbing his arm, as it crashed to the ground.

"The light!" shouted Jim's voice unsteadily. "Switch on the light."

Someone complied. In the brilliant glare, the startled merrymakers crowded round.

June's face was white, and her heart was thumping. The heavy picture might have caused her serious injury. Noel's timely warning, and Jim's swift action in dragging her towards him had averted the peril. Everyone stared at the canvas portraits of a thin-lipped, thin-faced old man, and a slender girl whose lovely face seemed haunted by tragedy.

Harold Hopkins' eyes were goggling.

"Do you know who that is?" he asked huskily. "That's the old miser and his daughter who're supposed to haunt the house on Christmas Eve!"

"Stuff!" interrupted Jim, his face rather white.

"We've no proof of that story," put in Dick Foster hastily. "The picture was left here by the previous owners."

"And no ghost was responsible for this!" snapped Noel.

All eyes were turned towards the young detective, as he knelt on the ground, examining the broken picture-wire.

"This wire had been partly cut through before it snapped," he added grimly.

Dick Foster and his wife looked pale and worried; and the youthful guests exchanged startled glances.

June moved across to the windows, where Noel joined her. His hand closed warningly on her arm as he saw the reckless gleam in her eyes.

"Better keep out of this, June," he muttered. "One narrow escape is enough—and the danger's not over yet!"

June looked up at him challengingly.

"Uncle, you're not forgetting we're partners?" she breathed. "You said so yourself. Besides—I've almost solved the mystery!"

"Eh?" demanded Noel, staring at her keenly. "If that's true, you haven't wasted much time, young lady! I'm on the track of the culprit—but I haven't the proof."

"Nor have I," admitted June softly. "But the ghost who stole Ruth's Yuletide doll is in the house at the moment, uncle—in this room!"

#### CHAPTER IV

##### THE FIND IN THE BOATHOUSE

**A** YELL from Jim Tarrant caused a momentary diversion; that youth, stepping unwarily on to the terrace, had come a cropper on the glassy surface. His grinning, rueful countenance caused some merriment and helped to relieve the uneasy tension.

"If that ghost is around to-night," he remarked, "It's going to need sandpaper on its shoes!"

June caught in her breath, a strange expression in her blue eyes as she met Noel's glance. Her uncle smiled quizzically as he lit a cigarette.

"I wonder if we're thinking the same thing, June," he murmured. "Everyone's in the room at the moment, except Ruth. No one could have come in from the terrace without making some noise—or leaving a

trace of snow on the floor. The french windows were left open as a 'blind'—by one of the party."

"Someone who's deliberately trying to scare us," whispered June.

Noel nodded grimly, glancing towards the fallen picture.

"Whoever is responsible is a pretty desperate customer, June. This ghost scare is no mere trick. He's got a reason——"

"You mean 'she,'" corrected June.

"I mean 'he,'" rejoined Noel drily.

"No girl is responsible for this. That picture wire was cut by an expert who knows how to handle tools. I've reason to believe that the ghost scare is part of a more sinister plot——"

"Uncle—you and your big plots!" breathed June, a momentary gleam of merriment in her eyes. But abruptly she became serious. "The ghost is a girl!" she whispered. "That figure we saw in the grounds—and the hair-clip——"

"Does the hair-clip really prove anything, June?"

"Of course it does," declared June. "Girls are always losing hair-clips—and borrowing them. Whoever stole Belinda couldn't resist borrowing the hair-clip. No boy would think of such a thing."

Noel smiled faintly, though there was a hint of approval in his glance.

"I see we're thinking along different lines, my dear—but stick to your own theory. And whatever happens—take care! We haven't seen or heard the last of this ghost."

"Don't worry, nunky," breathed June, a daring gleam in her eyes. "Next time it's the ghost who'll have to do the worrying!"

Noel stared at her sharply as, with a mysterious smile, June moved from his side.

"Wait—where are you going?" he asked tersely.

"To see if Ruth is still awake," breathed June. "I'll be back in a minute!"

Unobtrusively June slipped from the room, into the darkened hall. Her heart was beating quickly. She was anxious to prove her theory right—and Noel's wrong! Yet the shock caused by the falling picture

had affected her more than she would admit.

Had it been an accident—or had it been a deliberate attempt to harm her, as her uncle suggested? June was breathing quickly as she mounted the stairs; every creak made her heart jump uneasily. The house seemed strangely silent.

Supposing—supposing both she and Noel were wrong? Supposing that there was something in the old legend—that the restless ghosts of the old miser and his stepdaughter did return on Christmas Eve—

Impatiently June thrust aside the fanciful thought—but it still lurked at the back of her mind, struggling with her common-sense.

The door of Ruth's bedroom stood ajar, and the pale moonlight streamed out on to the landing.

Her heart beating suffocatingly, June pushed open the door; a faint sigh of relief escaped her lips.

Little Ruth was fast asleep, her cheeks flushed, her fair hair strewn on the pillow. An empty stocking hung at the foot of the small bed, in readiness for Santa Claus. And beside it hung a small sock with a label attached.

By the moonlight June could just read the scrawled, childish handwriting—

*"For Belinda."*

June was conscious of a sudden lump in her throat as she straightened herself, her hands clenched. Whatever sinister mystery lay behind the Yuletide doll's disappearance she had promised Ruth that Belinda would come back—and she meant to keep her promise, at all costs.

And June had a plan—a plan she had not confided in her uncle. She would tell him later, when she had tried it out!

Quickly she glanced round the bedroom. On the bedside table were a number of childish treasures, including several old dolls, obviously discarded in favour of Belinda.

June selected one—a casualty with one arm and a leg missing; but its blue frock and fair hair slightly resembled Belinda's.

Carrying her curious trophy, June crept from the room and downstairs, out into the moonlit night of the garden.

Intent on her purpose she did not see the shadowy figure that moved silently from the bushes—a stooping figure shrouded in a black cloak, whose eyes seemed to gleam malevolently as it followed noiselessly in her steps.

Noel glanced at his watch, and frowned a trifle anxiously. June's "few minutes" had been up for some time, and still no sign of his niece returning.

He was alone in the firelit dining-hall. The younger members of the party, their merriment a trifle subdued by the recent scare, had dispersed to amuse themselves in their own way. Dick Foster was in his study, and Mary had gone upstairs to prepare last-minute Christmas surprises.

Knowing June's questing, dare-devil spirit, Noel felt uneasy. Suddenly he rose, making his way through the French windows out on to the terrace.

The snow was crisp underfoot, and the young detective spotted more than one trail of footprints leading from the terrace into the garden.

His practised eye read the trails like a book. Someone had made for the shrubbery; a medium-sized shoe, rubber-soled. One of the boys!

Then there was a pair of footprints leading from the front door—a boy's and a girl's. They, too, had made for the garden.

And there was another trail—at the end of the terrace where the shadows lurked. A girl's slender footsteps—June's!

Noel flashed his torch on them, and a startled look crept into his eyes. Joining the trail and overlapping it in parts were other footprints—blurred and curiously shaped, made by no ordinary shoe.

Noel clenched his hands, his face paling slightly. His eyes grim, he sprang down the steps into the shrubbery. There was not a minute to lose. As he sprinted along the narrow path that led to the rose-garden, he detected a furtive movement among the bushes.

In a flash the young detective swerved; his hand shot out, closing on a figure crouched in the shadows.

The gleam from his torch revealed the surprised features of Jim Tarrant.

"What's the game, Tarrant?" he snapped. "Why are you hiding?"

A faint grin crossed the boy's face.

"Well—that's the game," he explained. "Hide-an'-seek. Like to join in, Mr. Raymond? We tried to rope in June, but couldn't find her."

Noel was eyeing the boy closely; he stared at his shoes. Jim was wearing rubber soles.

"Never mind the game," said Noel, retaining his hold on the boy's arm. "I want a word with you, young man. Do you know anything about dolls? Or—are you more interested in ghosts?"

Jim started, his face paling, and Noel drew in his breath sharply. Echoing through the silent grounds came a girl's terrified scream.

"Gosh—what was that?" gasped Jim. Noel's fingers tightened on his arm. The young detective's face was white and stern.

"Follow me!" he rapped tersely.

Together they crashed through the bushes and out on to the snow-covered lawn. Noel halted by the ornamental moat. Two trails of footprints converged,

disappearing as they reached the bank. The young detective flashed his torch on the glassy surface and bent to touch it.

It was covered thickly with ice!

Noel sprinted along the bank, Jim at his heels. As they neared a bend in the stream they heard a cry for help—and an ominous cracking sound.

"June!" cried Noel huskily.

Just then a cloud that had obscured the moon drifted past, revealing a girl's figure struggling in the water among the broken ice.

A gleam of amazement and relief flashed into Noel's eyes.

"Stand by, Jim!" he ordered in a changed tone.

He forced his way through the broken ice—the water was icy-cold and waist-deep, but a few minutes sufficed to carry the almost exhausted girl to the bank.

But the girl was not June!

With her dark hair lank and bedraggled, and her usually pert features ghostly white, it was hard to recognise the self-assured young maid from the hostel.

"My giddy aunt—it's Emily!" exclaimed Jim.

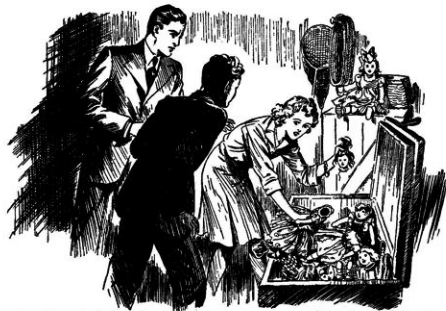
She was wearing a white muslin robe, dripping with water from the stream, and her eyes were closed. The young detective had rescued her only in the nick of time.

"Take the torch, Jim," he said tersely. "We must try a bit of artificial respiration. Is there a shed or something—"

"A boathouse over there, sir!" exclaimed Jim.

"The very thing! Hurry, lad!"

Jim pulled up sharply as he reached the boathouse. Someone



June threw back the lid and Jim gave a startled gasp, staring in astonishment at the box of broken dolls!

was hammering on the padlocked door from inside—calling in muffled, indignant tones.

An involuntary grin of relief crossed Noel's stern face.

"Thank goodness June's all right!" he muttered. "Here, Jim—take this and force the lock!"

He slipped a small metal instrument into Jim's ready hand.

"All right, June!" he called. "We're here!"

"Uncle!" gasped June's voice, rather brokenly.

There was a clatter as Jim forced the padlock; the door burst open—and June stood there in the moonlight, pale and dishevelled, but triumphantly clasping a fair-sized doll—the missing Belinda!

"I found her, uncle!" she exclaimed. "I used your methods and—and—"

Her voice trailed away. She was staring wide-eyed at the white-shrouded figure in Noel's arms.

"So—I was right, uncle!" she breathed. "The ghost was a girl. And I guessed it was Emily, as she was the only one who could have dropped that hair-clip. But I couldn't find any footprints."

Smiling grimly, Noel laid the girl on a pile of straw in the corner and covered her with an old rug from one of the boats. From his pocket first aid kit he administered a powerful restorative.

"There's your answer, June," he said, pointing to the maid's feet.

June started as she bent forward; sudden comprehension sprang into her eyes.

"Skates!" she gasped. "But how—"

"The moat lies close to the shrubbery," pointed out Noel drily. "Emily was hidden there, with her skates. Remember—we were looking for footprints—not for thin tracks on the frozen ground."

"But one minute, uncle—" June was still baffled. "How did she come into the hall and steal Belinda without anyone seeing her—"

"She didn't," rejoined Noel, smiling grimly. "Belinda came to her!" Then as June stared as though her uncle had taken leave of his senses, he hastened to

explain. "Ever played cricket, June? It isn't necessary to carry the ball to the wicket—"

"Oh, goodness!" gasped June, her eyes clearing. "You mean—Belinda was thrown out of the window—"

"To Emily, who was waiting in the shrubbery," put in Noel. "That explains the absence of footprints on the terrace—though one of the doll's shoes fell into the snow."

"Then someone—someone in the room—"

breathed June, her eyes questioning. "Was the real trickster," said Noel sternly. "The scoundrel who invented the cunning plot to terrify the household—as a cover for his activities. The same person who tampered with the picture wire, and trapped you in here. He realised that you were on the track of his secret, and he followed you across the snow, his shoes covered in sacking to blur his trail."

A reminiscent gleam crept into June's eyes.

"I guessed I was being followed," she breathed. "I was carrying a doll that looked like Belinda—as a decoy. I found the real Belinda hidden under that pile of straw."

"They hadn't had time to dispose of her," put in Noel grimly. "Obviously their secret cache is somewhere in here—"

There came a sudden exclamation from Jim, who had been prowling round the boathouse.

"Here's an old chest of some kind, sir—looks as though it's meant for boating gear, but it's locked—"

Noel looked up from his efforts to revive the unconscious maid. She was breathing more evenly now and the colour was returning to her cheeks.

"Careful!" he warned. "There may be a trap. Better let me open it."

June had darted to the boy's side, and together they were examining the wooden box.

Noel bent over the lock; it was an ancient, heavy padlock, though it bore traces of recent oiling. His skilled fingers made light work of it.

"Stand back!" he ordered tersely, as he flung open the lid. The gleam from the

young detective's torch played on the dusty interior.

A gasp escaped June's lips, and Jim whistled in amazement as they ventured forward.

The chest was half full of dolls. Broken dolls of all shapes, sizes and colourings—dolls without wigs, without heads, brand new dolls, wantonly destroyed.

Jim's eyes were goggling.

"What—what on earth does it mean, sir?" he blurted out.

Noel picked up one of the broken dolls, examined it, and replaced it carefully. There was a grim smile on his lips.

"I think," he said, "that one—or—person present can best explain that. She's kept her secret till now, but we can make her reveal it. June—kindly hand me Belinda!"

June looked startled, but she obediently held out the flaxen-haired doll.

"Hold the torch, Jim," said Noel. "I've an idea that Belinda can answer your question. Better keep your eye on the door in case—"

"Look out!" shouted Jim hoarsely.

Instinctively Noel raised his arm to screen his niece as a grotesque, shadowy figure sprang through the doorway. The torch was knocked out of Jim's hand, plunging the hut into darkness.

There was the sound of a scuffle—a dull thud.

"Uncle!" gasped June. "Uncle—are you all right?"

"Don't worry, June," replied Noel coolly. "You there, Jim? Can you find the torch?"

"Here—here it is, sir," panted Jim. "I don't think it's broken."

The darkness was stabbed by a brilliant gleam, revealing June, white-faced, clutching Belinda protectively—and Noel holding a figure muffled in a dark hood and cloak.

"Who—who is it?" whispered June.

Noel pulled back the hood—revealing the glaring features of Harold Hopkins.

"My giddy aunt!" muttered Jim weakly.

The trickster began to struggle, but Noel was too strong for him. The young detective deliberately snatched off the

other's tousled, boyish wig—revealing a close-cropped head and the scowling features of a stockily built young man in his twenties.

"I guessed as much," snapped Noel. "Hal Parker, juvenile impersonator and cracksmán! The police have been looking for you and your sister for the past month—ever since the Crawford jewel robbery. Your plot nearly cost your sister's life," he added sternly.

The other's expression changed as he looked towards the white-faced girl, the maid Emily. There was no doubt that he was fond of his sister.

"Pinch me!" muttered Jim, as he picked up the fallen wig. "I thought there was something fishy about the chap, the way he kept harping on that ghost story."

"But what—what had that got to do with Belinda?" gasped June, recovering her voice.

Noel smiled grimly as he released his captive to go to his sister's side. He took the doll in his hands.

"A jeweller's shop," he explained, "was broken into from a toy warehouse adjoining. Parker's sister had got a job there, as a packer. The stolen jewels were cleverly hidden—and no one thought much at the time about the disappearance of a case of dolls.

"But in their haste, the tricksters had made a bad blunder; they removed the wrong case. A score of new dolls delivered the next day to an unsuspecting local firm contained a fortune—hidden like this!"

As he spoke, Noel carefully detached Belinda's flaxen hair—and from the cotton-wool beneath he extracted a small fortune in glistening gems!

"By the time the precious pair had discovered their mistake the dolls were sold," added the young detective. "In a desperate effort to recover them, they broke into a dozen houses—and play-rooms and nurseries were ransacked, to the bewilderment of the local police.

"To evade suspicion, Emily Parker took a job at the hostel under an assumed name—while her brother smuggled the dolls into the boathouse. They built up the

old ghost legend to cover any suspicious activity—and Emily used her ability as a trick skater in order to hide the trail.”

Jim whistled softly, and June glanced quickly at Noel.

“What made you suspect in the first place, uncle?” she asked.

“Holly berries,” rejoined Noel, with a faint smile. “Remember you spotted them when we first arrived? Well, they weren’t holly berries. They were beads of a special kind of precious stone. The local police recognised them as part of the proceeds of the jewellery robbery. That clinched my suspicions—though it was your clever deductions that finally settled my doubts.”

June flushed with pleasure.

“You’d have deduced the same, nunky—if you’d been a girl!” she replied, a roguish gleam in her eyes. “I noticed that Emily’s hair was the straight, lanky kind that just won’t stay ‘put’ without a hair-clip.”

When the police called later that evening, the tricksters had flown. They had found an old crowbar lying in the shed and with its aid had broken open the door.

Luckily, Noel had recovered the entire proceeds of the daring robbery, and it

was arranged that new dolls were to be presented to all the children who had lost them.

Belinda, decked in an attractive new outfit, was tucked into Ruth’s bed by June herself—and the presents in the small sock marked “For Belinda” included an exquisite little necklace of bright red stones.

As June tiptoed from the room and hurried downstairs, she encountered Noel in the hall. He smiled as he met her glance.

“Afraid the inspector blames me for those rascals’ escape,” he said drily. “But it can’t be helped. I’ve an idea that pair of young rogues have had a scare they won’t forget in a hurry—and they won’t escape so easily next time!”

June squeezed his arm, her blue eyes sparkling.

“It’s Christmas Eve, nunky,” she said, “and you can’t be a detective all the time! Let’s forget it and enjoy ourselves. Jim’s roasting chestnuts, and we’re going to have a cosy party round the fire—with riddles, ‘consequences,’ and—and —”

“What else?” asked Noel, smiling fondly at his niece.

“Ghost stories!” declared June enthusiastically.

