



The Secret of the Golden Scarab

Written by Helen Käit
Illustrated by Sirly Oder
Tänapäev 2022, 176 pp
ISBN: 9789916172377
storybook, fiction
Age: 9+

One Sunday afternoon, a strange man trying to sell a “wonder-vacuum” barges into the home of siblings Armin and Anna. Their mom is irked by his snotty attitude and quickly sends him packing. Before long, it turns out that the family’s precious scarab figurine, which their great-grandpa brought back from a trip to Egypt nearly a hundred years ago, has vanished from the mantel. Given that the salesman was their only visitor, Armin and Anna deduce he must be to blame. Enlisting their friends for help, the kids decide to recover their precious heirloom, cost whatever it may. Still, they could never expect what astonishing and dangerous turns the seemingly casual summer adventure has in store for them.

Reading sample

[...]

Chapter II

Armin was the one who discovered that the golden-greenish dung beetle had disappeared from the mantel. Dad couldn't find his car keys anywhere (though, as it later turned out, they were in his pocket the whole time), so he asked Anna and Armin to help find them. The boy happened to glance at the mantel and, although the keys obviously weren't there, the empty space on the white dolomite slab that was otherwise packed with bric-a-brac immediately caught his attention.

"Hey, where's Poopy-Ick run off to?" he asked his sister after taking a closer look just in case.

The cookie-shaped beetle figurine had gotten its nickname when they were still just tots. Dad explained to them that dung beetles a.k.a. scarabs roll tiny balls of droppings, to which two-year-old Anna pursed her lips in a funny way and exclaimed, "Poopy, ick!" They'd called the beetle "Poopy-Ick" ever since and had a great time playing with it when they were young.

Mom was a little more help.

"I dusted the mantel on Saturday and I'm sure it was still there then. I'd have noticed an empty spot."

"Hm, Saturday," Armin murmured thoughtfully. "Today's Tuesday. That means we need to figure out what happened to Poopy-Ick between Saturday and today. Do you think Dad moved it somewhere else? No, impossible—why would he do that?"

Mom and Anna also agreed that Dad had no reason to move the dung beetle elsewhere.

"Okay, but there's nobody else here!" Armin whined in exasperation. "We haven't had any visitors and even if we had, then why would somebody . . ."

He trailed off when he noticed Anna staring at him as if she'd seen a ghost.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The vacuum-cleaner salesman," she whispered, her eyes bulging, and looked to their mom for support.

Mom's eyes widened, too.

"Anna's right. We haven't had any guests recently, but when you and Dad were watching basketball yesterday afternoon, this weird wonder-vacuum salesman showed up . . ."

Mom wrinkled her nose at the memory.

"A wonder . . . what? Vacuum?"

"Yeah, a vacuum," Anna confirmed.

"The guy was super-unpleasant. I wouldn't be surprised in the least if he pinched our dung beetle."

"Wait, hold on a minute," Arman snorted. "So, you're saying some kind of wonder-vacuum-cleaner salesman—and what the heck is a wonder vacuum cleaner, anyway?—came here yesterday and ran off with our Poopy-Ick? You do realize how silly that sounds, don't you?"

Armin glanced at his mom, waiting for her to back him up.

"It certainly does sound strange, but Anna's right," she sighed. "There was an extremely unpleasant salesman with a filthy mouth. I sent him packing as soon as I could . . ."

". . . but he was alone in the living room for a few minutes before that," Anna said, finishing Mom's sentence. "And he was standing right next to the mantel when I came back from telling you to come downstairs . . ."

No one spoke for several seconds. Finally, Armin opened his mouth.

"But—why?"

Mom shrugged.

"Maybe he thought it might be worth something."

"And is it?" Anna demanded.

"Of course not, minus the sentimental value. My great-grandfather brought it back from Egypt around the turn of the 20th century. It's the kind of junk they always sell to tourists and that everybody brings back from vacations. It was the only memento I had left of my great-grandpa and was very dear to me, though I hardly imagine it would be to anybody else."

"So that nasty guy stole something that's precious to us but can't be of any value to him?!" Armin growled, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Seems so," Mom sighed defeatedly.

"But what can you do? Might as well chase wind across a field. The police would never go looking for a measly little two-euro figurine, so there's no point in even filing a report. I suppose it's simply gone for good."

Armin clenched his hands into fists and marched out of the room without a word. Anna rushed after him.

"What are you planning to do?"

She recognized the determined face her brother made when he'd come to some kind of a decision. Armin spun around and grabbed his sister's hands.

"I don't intend to just let this go! Some random jerk can't come into my home, steal my dung beetle, and walk away unpunished!"

"Well, what do you intend to do about it, then? Mom said the police . . ."

Armin snorted.

"I don't plan on bringing the police into it. I'll figure out who he was myself, why he stole our scarab, and get it back all on my own, too!"

"How?"

"I don't know yet, but I'll come up with something. And I'll need your help."

Armin gave his sister's hands a firm squeeze, let go, grabbed his jacket from the peg, and walked out the front door without glancing back.

Chapter III

Sander and Liisbet were gaping at Armin.

"You want us to help you look for some kind of . . . um . . . popsicle that some random salesman nabbed from your mantel?" Sander asked hesitantly.

"And you don't even know who he was or where he went with it?" Liisbet chimed in.

Sander and Liisbet, siblings who lived a few houses down the block, were sitting with Anna and Armin in their shed, munching on chips, sipping soft drinks, and listening to Armin's account of the crime committed in their home.

"Poopy-lick," Armin corrected. "And yes, I do. Anna and I played with it a lot when we were little and it's important because it's also the only memory I have of my great- . . . great-grandpa. And I can't just let some random guy nab it and walk away unpunished."

"Okay, I get that part. I'd be enraged if somebody stole something from me, too, but how do you plan to track it down?" Liisbet pressed. "You've got no idea who he was, where he lives, or what he did with the figurine. Maybe he threw it away the second he realized it wasn't valuable."

Armin shook his head.

"I don't think so. I'm pretty sure he believed it was worth something and will try to sell it. Of course, he'll realize at some point that it's just a little trinket or manage to find some idiot who also thinks it's valuable and buys it."

"Yeah, you may just be right," Sander was forced to admit. "But I still can't figure out how you plan to find it."

"I've got a plan."

Armin looked absolutely determined once again. Curious, the other kids shifted closer.

"And what's that?" Anna asked.

"If we assume that he stole Poopy-lick to sell it—and I think we can take that as a fact—then he'll have to offer it somewhere and to

somebody."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"I also don't think he'll just peddle it to passersby on a streetcorner like the old ladies who sell kittens outside the market, but will post it online or offer it at an antique store. Therefore, the only choice we have is to go to those places looking for it."

Armin beamed at his sister and friends. For some reason, they didn't appear to share his optimism.

"And how do you see this playing out?" Liisbet asked skeptically. "I mean looking for it online. Are you going to Google 'Poopy-lick' or something?"

"Um . . . not quite," Armin stammered, slightly mixed up. "Sure, we could search for 'scarab' or 'dung beetle', but I bet it'll just give us hundreds of useless hits . . . I was actually thinking we could check Craigslist or somewhere. People buy all kinds of weird stuff on there and if I were trying to sell a little figurine, then that's where I'd post it."

"Now you're getting somewhere, but I think there's still a little kink to work out," Anna said. "People do sell all kinds of junk on Craigslist and that'd be the logical choice if you wanted to get a couple euros. But right now, nobody believes the thief thought it was as worthless as that."

Armin thought for a moment and had to admit his sister had a point. His head sunk in defeat.

"Though that doesn't mean we can't check antique stores for Poopy-lick," Anna quickly added. "I think that's a very good idea. And not just antique stores, but pawn shops as well."

The sparkle returned to Armin's eyes.

"You're absolutely right!" he exclaimed. "Pawn shops, duh! Where else do people dump all kinds of stolen stuff? Nobody there asks too many questions, whereas antique dealers might require some kind of . . . document. Proof that it's legit. On top of that, I bet not one self-respecting antique shop would agree to sell a toy beetle like ours."

"So, what's the plan? We head to the pawn shops?" Sander asked.

"I think that'd make the most sense," Armin replied.

"Okay, but . . . which ones?" Liisbet pressed.

"I don't know, but we can start by looking up where they're at. I've got no idea how many there are, to be honest, but I hope there aren't too many."

The kids were in for a disappointment. After only a couple swipes on their phones, they

realized the city was home to more than they could count.

"Uff, this is going to lead nowhere," Anna sighed, grabbing another fistful of chips as consolation.

"You're right about that," Armin said. "They're spread all across the city. I guess we're just going to have to reduce our search area a bit."

"What do you mean?" Sander asked.

"I'm not sure . . . What if we just stuck to our own neighborhood?" Armin suggested with a note of hope, but Sander just shook his head.

"How do you know he took it to a pawn shop right around here? We've got no idea where he lives and have no reason to believe he ran straight from your house to sell it."

No one said anything for a while.

"Maybe we just should start calling around pawn shops," Liisbet tentatively proposed. "It won't take forever if we split them up between the four of us. Better than going to each individual one ourselves."

"Fine, let's call," Armin sighed. "Maybe we'll strike gold."

"And what are we supposed to ask, exactly?" Sander asked.

"Well, I suppose if anybody's tried to sell them a . . . dung beetle over the last three days," Armin answered, frowning. "What else?"

"I mean, it just sounds like we're spying on somebody," Sander said, shaking his head. "They might not tell us anything at all. We should pretend to be customers looking for a very particular item—an Egyptian dung beetle—and ask if they have anything like that to offer."

Armin had to admit it was a very clever idea.

"Great! Let's divide up the shops and start calling."

After about an hour's work, they had a list of more or less all the pawn shops in the city and their telephone numbers. Once that was finished, they split it up into four parts.

"Alright, here goes nothing," Armin said, dialing the first number determinedly.

The kids had been making calls for about fifteen minutes and were already looking a little hopeless when Anna, who'd leaned up against an apple tree a few steps away from the others, started gesturing excitedly with her free arm. Armin was the first to notice. He'd just ended a call and was dialing the second-to-last number on his list. Immediately, he hung up and dashed to his sister.

"What is it?" he whispered anxiously.

She cupped her palm over the bottom of the phone and whispered: "They've got one like it! They want to know if they should set it aside until we come to take a look."

Armin rubbed his temples for a moment before answering.

"No, it's fine. Just tell them we'll stop by sometime."

Anna looked puzzled but relayed the information and hung up.

"Why don't you want them to set it aside?" she asked her brother angrily.

"How would that have helped? I just wanted to know if it's there. Don't forget that we're a bunch of teenagers and they won't look too kindly upon us when we show up. They might not even believe that you were the one who called. And even if they do show us and it really is our Poopy-Ick—what'll we do then? We'll need money to buy it back, but I've spent all my allowance and don't reckon you have more than a couple euros to your name, either. No, that won't help. Better if we just go and see if it's our scarab in the first place."

Sander and Liisbet had walked over by that point and demanded to be filled in on the news.

"Anna found a pawn shop that said they have something along those lines. I reckon we should go have a look. But first, tell us how your calls went."

"No luck so far," Sander said. "There were several I couldn't talk to at all because they only spoke Russian. Sure, we've been studying it at school for three years, but I couldn't make heads or tails of what they were saying and obviously have no clue what 'dung beetle' is in Russian. So, it was a total waste of time. The rest just had nothing to offer. I've got two numbers left, but I doubt it'll make any difference."

Liisbet nodded and added:

"Same here. One thought he might have something that fits the description, but when I asked him to describe it in more detail, it turned out to be a clay ladybug. I had problems with Russian speakers, too. We can go visit those pawn shops in person if we don't come up with a better plan, but most of them were way out in the Russian districts and it's quite a hike to get there."

"How many more numbers do you have?" Armin asked.

"None. I just finished."

"Alright, then here's what we'll do. Sander, Anna, and I will call the rest of the numbers on our lists and if nothing comes up, then we'll go check out Anna's place. Deal?"

"Deal," the others replied in unison and shuffled away to give the callers peace.

They reconvened in the shed about ten minutes later.

"Any luck?" Armin asked.

"Nope."

“Nope.”

“No more than the first.”

“Then we’ll check out Anna’s pawn shop.
Where is it?”

“It’s . . .” Anna checked the web page.

“Not far. In the Mustamäe district. Bus #20
should get us pretty close.”

“And is it open right now?”

Anna scrolled a little longer.

“Yeah. But we should get going.”

Armin glanced at his watch.

“Alright, let’s do it. We should be back
before Mom and Dad get home from work.”

[...]

Chapter VIII

The thunderstorm had turned everything muddy and damp, but the air was still warm. When the kids went out the next morning, it felt like walking into a tropical rainforest. The sky was bright blue and there wasn’t a cloud to be seen, but puddles still dotted the ground and steam rose from the wet asphalt.

“Wow!” Armin exclaimed. “I guess it came down a little more overnight. It’s crazy how wet everything is. And hot. Feels like sucking in water.”

Anna could only agree. To be honest, she disliked the weather even more than yesterday’s dry heat.

“We sure won’t last long today,” she moaned. “I can already feel my head spinning.”

Armin cast his sister a worried glance, but came up with an idea.

“Hey, Sander suggesting that we bring an umbrella is actually pretty genius! I’ll go get Dad’s big one for us to take along. I couldn’t care less if people stare and think we’re batty.”

Anna was fully on board with the idea. She also didn’t care so long as they found a bit of shade from the merciless searing sun. Sander and Liisbet arrived just as Armin went back inside to grab their dad’s gigantic umbrella.

“Geeze, what a scorcher,” Sander complained as soon as he was in earshot. “I bet I’ll sweat off at least five kilos by the end of the day.”

Anna smirked as she sized up Sander’s tall, skinny frame.

“You’ll be invisible from the side if you lose five kilos,” she giggled.

“I guess so,” he said. “By the way, where’s Armin? Still sleeping?”

“Course not. He went back in to get an umbrella. Or a sunshade, I should say.”

Anna raised her eyebrows and glanced at Liisbet, but this time her friend made no remark.

“I guess we should go and get ours, too,” Liisbet said instead. “My nose is still so sunburned from yesterday that if I spend all day squatting in the sunlight, it’ll fall right off my face.”

Only then did Anna notice that Liisbet’s nose was bright red and even starting to peel.

“You should rub sour cream on it,” Anna instructed. “Mom always does when Armin or I get a sunburn anywhere.”

Liisbet scoffed.

“And how am I going to all lathered up in sour cream? Stray cats will just lick me to death. I’ll grab one of my mom’s creams and hopefully it’ll help a little. But I definitely don’t want to sunbathe another day. Sander, could you get one of our umbrellas, too?”

Sander was tempted to ask why his sister didn’t get it herself, but just sighed and turned back to go home. At that moment, Armin emerged and discovered that Sander was now missing and it’d be a few more minutes. He opened their umbrella and all three kids huddled into its shade.

“This is divine!” Liisbet said. “I’m glad I sent Sander for ours, too. We should’ve had it yesterday—then, my nose wouldn’t be as red as a beet.”

Anna snorted but made no further comment. She was used to her friend’s impulsiveness.

Sander finally returned and tucked the umbrella under his arm. Then, the kids headed for the city center.

There were more cars in the parking lot than the previous day, but their target was absent. Liisbet sighed.

“I was hoping it’d be right here, front and center, so we could put an end to this endless standing around.”

No one felt like saying anything. Anna wondered what they’d do if the man simply failed to surface. The kids had to quit “standing around” at some point or another—they couldn’t spend the whole summer in a parking lot! Still, it was only day two, so she tried not to think about it.

Once again, they bought a big bottle of cold sparkling water and some cream pies from the grocery store, opened their umbrellas, and made themselves comfortable at the back of the parking lot—as comfortable as they could manage in those conditions.

For the next hour, nothing happened. The kids chatted, finished off the pies, and drank the entire bottle of water. Sander tried to shake one more drop from the empty bottle, flipping it upside down and holding it expectantly over his mouth, but it was as dry as a desert.

“I’ll go get another,” Anna offered. “We won’t last long here in the tropics without water.”

She started getting to her feet but suddenly plopped back down onto the grass, her eyes bulging.

“It’s him!” she whispered in a panic, grabbing her brother’s hand. “That’s our thief . . .”

The words stuck fast in her throat as she nodded towards a dark Volvo parking a dozen meters away. A short man with a big nose and a peculiar moustache climbed out. Armin recognized him instantly.

“You’re right,” he whispered back with an excited squeeze. “Is he going to the store?”

“Where else? I hardly think he’s going to jump on a train,” she cattily replied.

Armin ignored her. They squatted beneath the umbrellas, ready to leap into action as soon as the man reappeared.

“Shouldn’t we look for a better hiding place?” Sander asked a few minutes later.

“I mean, we’re sitting in plain view and the umbrellas really make us stand out. He might notice us and recognize Anna when he comes back.”

“Good point!” Armin exclaimed. “There’s no point in taking risks now that we’ve finally got eyes on him. We should post up at an entrance to the parking lot and wait there.”

“Which one?” Liisbet asked, frowning.

Armin hadn’t considered that.

“Darn it! Yeah, he might just drive out of one that we’re not guarding. No, that won’t work. I guess we’ll have to stay where we are and keep our eyes peeled. But let’s close the umbrellas right now so we don’t attract any attention.”

The kids quickly stood up and closed them. This meant the sun was now baking their skin, but they hoped they wouldn’t have to be out in the open for long. After several minutes went by, Anna started to fidget.

“I’m still afraid he might recognize me. If not here in the parking lot, then when we’re trailing him later. We can’t stay very far behind because otherwise we might lose him, but if we get too close, then he also might remember he’s seen me before.”

Armin thought for a minute.

“You’re right, we can’t risk it. Now that we’ve all seen him, you don’t have to stick around anymore. I think you should go home and wait for us there. Even if he notices me, Sander, and Liisbet, then we’re just a bunch of random teens to him. Yeah, I think it’s best if you leave.”

Anna hesitated for a moment before mounting her bike.

“Okay. Hand me your umbrellas—they’ll only get in the way when you’re following him. Hopefully he’ll come out soon, because otherwise you’ll be roasted like rotisserie chickens and I’ll go crazy from waiting.”

She stuck the umbrellas under her arm and pedaled away, leaving the others standing next to their bikes.

“What on earth is taking him so long?” Liisbet complained when even more time had passed and there was still no sign of the man. “Is he clearing the whole place out?”

Armin and Sander agreed that he’d been gone a suspiciously long time.

“Okay, but what else can we do but wait? Maybe he bumped into an acquaintance and they started chatting. He’ll have to come back to his car sooner or later, either way.”

“Yeah,” Sander said, “I just really hope he didn’t go visit a friend somewhere and won’t come back till tonight . . .”

Armin was horrified by the idea, but shook his head after considering it.

“No, I don’t think so. Why should he park in a paid lot if he was going to somebody’s apartment? Street parking is free everywhere else. I’m confident that he entered the store. Maybe he’s just a really slow shopper.”

Liisbet wrinkled her nose.

“He sure wasn’t slow when he nabbed your scarab.”

Armin sighed and nodded.

“Good point. Maybe he did meet up with a friend.”

“Or somebody who buys stolen goods,” Sander added thoughtfully.

Armin jerked.

“You don’t seriously mean that, do you?”

“Well, why not? I’m not saying they met in the store, necessarily, but we also didn’t see exactly where he went.”

“Crap! What’re we going to do now?”

“I say we keep waiting,” Sander said.

“Even if he’s meeting somebody who buys up stolen goods, then what can we do? Snatch the scarab and make a break for it? He wasn’t carrying a bag or a box, so I bet he’s not dealing stolen stuff right now.”

This seemed to calm Armin down a little. He leaned back against his bike.

“Alright, we wait.”

They were starting to lose hope again when at last, they spotted the man with two heavy grocery bags in tow. One was clearly packed with potatoes and other fresh produce—carrot leaves were poking out of the top.

“Darn it! Looks like he is the type of person who goes to the market to buy fresh

veggies,” Sander whispered loudly. “That’s why it took the jerk so long.”

There was no time to waste—the man set the heavy bags down on the back seat of his car, got behind the wheel, and pulled out of the parking space. The kids jumped onto their bikes and starting following the Volvo, hanging back a little ways. He used the Kõvera Street exit and they thanked their sound logic for not waiting around at the wrong spot. It was immediately clear why he chose it.

“He’s heading into the Hiiu neighborhood,” Liisbet said as soon as he flipped on his blinker.

It took him a long time to make the turn because of the dense traffic. The kids held a distance of a couple dozen meters.

“Let’s stay on this side of the road for now; we don’t know where he might turn,” Armin instructed.

The other kids nodded and kept going. Although there were many cars on the road and traffic was slow, they still had to pedal for their lives to keep the target in sight.

“Crap, I think he’s driving on into Pääsküla,” Armin cursed after the car showed no sign of slowing to turn. “We’ll have to get across that big intersection without getting stuck there forever.”

Luckily, a train approached from the opposite direction and the gates went down to stop cars from the cross-street. Their tires humming over the pavement, the kids shot across the otherwise busy intersection and kept up the pursuit. Still, the gap between them and the dark Volvo kept growing.

“If this guy lives outside the city, then he’s as good as gone. We’ll never keep up on the highway, not that I’d dare to try on a bike anyway,” Sander panted.

Armin knew his friend was right: they couldn’t follow the car on a highway. But before he could think up a plan, the Volvo took a sudden right turn and disappeared from sight.

“Cripes!” Sander shouted and started pedaling even faster, though they were already at their limits. Armin and Lisbet followed, gritting their teeth.

“Got . . . to get . . . across . . . somewhere,” Armin gasped.

The next crosswalk was just after the street onto which the Volvo turned. As soon as they got to the intersection, their eyes darted to the right, hoping they hadn’t lost it. The kids were in luck: the man parked less than a hundred meters from the main road and was presently getting out.

“Holy guacamole!” Liisbet exclaimed. “I think we just figured out where this guy lives.”

They had, indeed. Armin pulled out his phone to report their discovery to Anna.