GRAND SPECIAL CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

How the famous Boys of St. Frank's celebrate Xmas is told in this week's special story :—

THE SCHOOLBOY SANTA CLAUS!

No. 446. EVERY WEDNESDAY. December 22, 1923.

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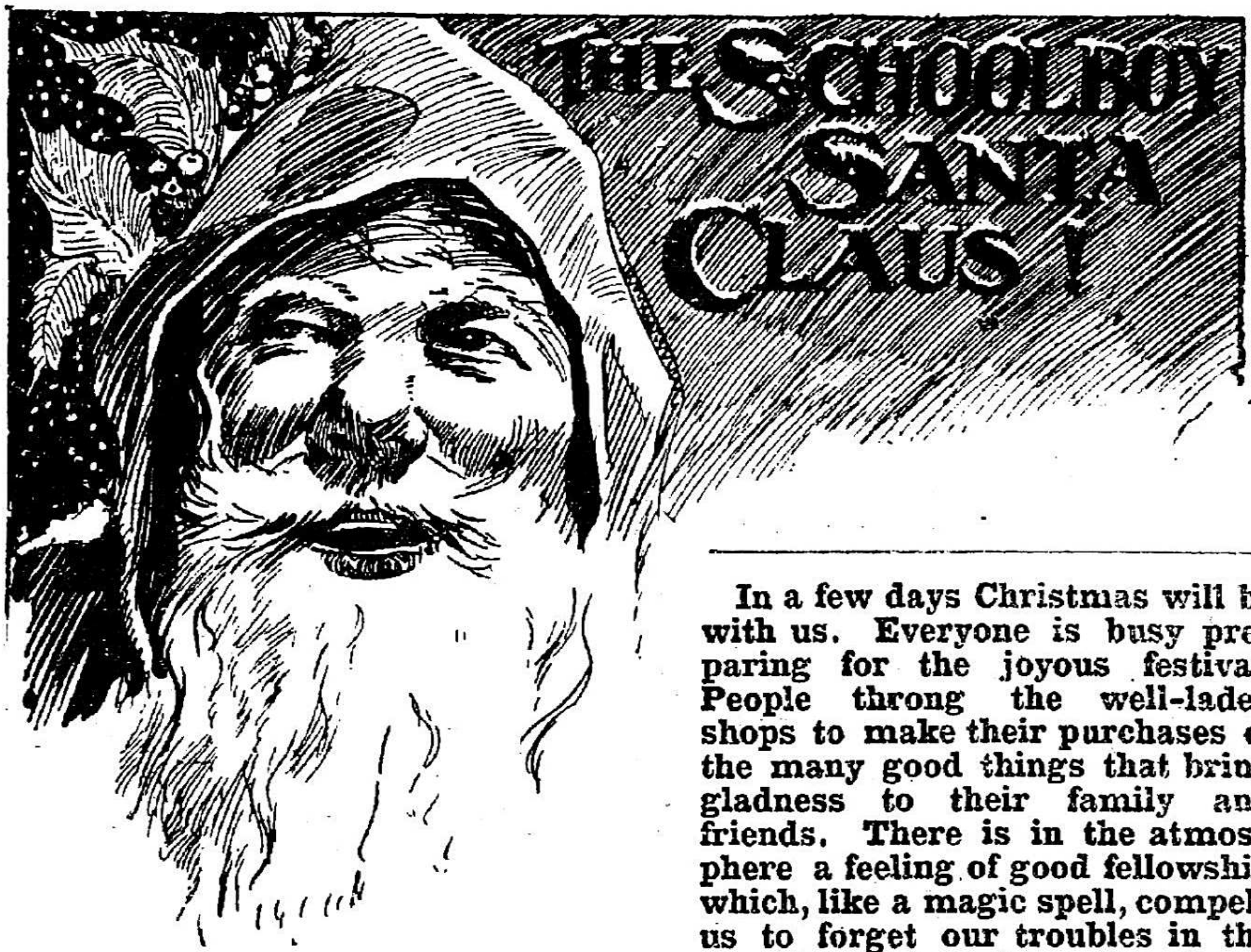


In a few days Christmas will be with us. Everyone is busy preparing for the joyous festival. People throng the well-laden shops to make their purchases of the many good things that bring gladness to their family and friends. There is in the atmosphere a feeling of good fellowship which, like a magic spell, compels us to forget our troubles in the prevailing infectious happiness around us. In keeping with this spirit is this week's very special Christmas story of St. Frank's. It breathes of Christmas, of revelry and good cheer, and I hope that all who read it will derive as much fun and pleasure during this season of festivity as do the Boys of St. Frank's in the story.

THE EDITOR.

The Narrative Related Throughout by Nipper.

CHAPTER I.

NEARLY A TRAGEDY!

"LOOK out!" screamed Church madly. But Handforth was too late. He failed to find foothold on the edge of the treacherous, snow-covered cliff, and the next second he staggered and pitched headlong over the chasm.

"Oh! He—he's gone!" shouted McClure hoarsely.

The three chums of Study D, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's, had been out for a walk on the last day of term—within an hour, in fact, of catching the train which would take them home for the Christmas holidays.

And, passing along the edge of the cliffs which overlooked Bannington Moor, Handforth had approached the edge. With his usual recklessness, he had failed to take into account the loose, wind-driven snow. The cliff-edge looked solid, but it was not.

He was over in a second.

In tragic moments it is generally the case that the crisis comes abruptly, unexpectedly—dramatically. Handforth had been scoffing at his chums for grumbling at this eleventh-hour stroll. And then, all in a moment, Handforth had vanished into the depths.

Church and McClure, wild with alarm and fear, rushed to the edge of the cliff. They nearly pitched over, themselves, in their dreadful anxiety. They knew that the precipice wasn't absolutely sheer, but it was a considerable drop to the level of the moor. And there were rocks, too—ugly, jagged rocks.

They arrived just in time to see their study leader rolling over and over down the steeply sloping cliff, and they were thankful for the fact that the night's fall of snow had been unusually heavy.

Handforth rolled down amid the soft, fleecy snow—until, indeed, he no longer looked like a human being. The two juniors stared down upon a great mass of rolling, ever-increasing snow.

In short, Handforth had started an avalanche!

And the leader of Study D was the centre of that avalanche. Down, down he went—until at last all movement ceased. Church and McClure stared down in horrible fascination at that great pile of disturbed snow. They knew that Edward Oswald Handforth was buried beneath.

"Quick! We've got to get down!" gasped Church. "He may be only slightly hurt, you know! Oh, the ass—the reckless idiot!"

"Come on!" panted McClure.

They hurried to a point, further along the cliff, where the descent was not so steep. They rushed down at such a speed that they were in constant peril of starting a second avalanche, on their own account.

And, all the time, they kept their gaze fixed upon that ominous pile of snow. They saw no sign of movement—no upheaval of the feathery mass which would denote that Handforth was conscious, and struggling to get free.

Breathless, smothered with snow, and bruised from more than one tumble, Church and McCure arrived at the cliff bottom, and ran pell-mell towards the great snow heap. But even now there was no sign of movement.

"Quick—chuck the snow aside!" said Church hoarsely. "We've got to dig him out! If we don't, he'll die of suffocation within ten minutes."

They worked like madmen. Using their hands as scoops, they tore up the snow, sending it flying behind them in one continuous smother. And at length, owing to the very intensity of their toil, they were compelled to pause.

"Oh, he's dead—he's dead!" moaned Church, almost too exhausted by his efforts to speak. "Handy—Handy!"

"Handy!" shouted McClure, in a choking voice.

They stared at the snow pile tragically.

But there was no movement—no sign. They caught one another's glances, but dared not look into one another's eyes directly—for both were beginning to fear the worst.

"Oh, it's no good—we can't do it!" whispered Church, in horror. "We want spades—shovels! He's lying under here—in all this snow!" he burst out, in a sudden storm of panic. "Don't you understand? He's buried—he's dying! Oh, heavens, what can we do?"

"I—I don't know!" panted McClure, husky with alarm.

For just two seconds they stood perfectly still, gazing down at that mass of beautiful white snow. They expected to see some movement—they expected to hear some feeble voice from amid the great pile.

But neither movement nor sound came.

"We can't stand here like this!" screamed Church, nearly mad with anxiety. "I'll rush off for help——"

"No, I'll go!" gasped McClure.

"All right—better go straight to the school, and get some chaps!" said Church, taking hold of himself, and speaking with forced calmness. "Bring shovels and brooms—anything! Even then you'll be too late!" he added dully.

McClure was off like the wind, and Church, left alone, continued his efforts single-handed. His task was, indeed, a hopeless one. For that pile of snow was over twelve feet high, and of enormous breadth. The avalanche had disturbed an almost incredible amount of the loose, fleecy snow, and it had swept down in one vast smother—Handforth being at the very bottom.

But, although he was perspiring from every pore, and well nigh exhausted, Church pluckily maintained his effort. And his thoughts were bitter and tragic as he worked.

But what was the good of thinking in this way now? Church and McClure had started upon that walk against their own inclinations. For Handforth's sake they had accompanied him. It seemed an absurd thing to them, more especially as they knew Handforth's reason.

It was the last day of term, and already a great many juniors had gone bustling off, laughing, cheerful, glad enough to be away for the year's most festive holiday. For Christmas was at hand, and even the weather itself had done its very best to clothe the countryside in a Yuletide mantle.

The snow had commenced in the previous evening, and a regular blizzard had swept down over the whole of Sussex—to say nothing of many of the other counties. And even now, although no snow was falling, the clouds were heavy and thick—promising a further heavy fall ere long. The weather glass was dropping, too, and the wind had a tendency to become boisterous.

The train which was to have carried Handforth & Co. to London was due before so very long. Yet Edward Oswald had firmly made up his mind to go for this stroll. And it took him, by a roundabout route, in the vicinity of the Moor View School for Young Ladies.

Handforth hadn't mentioned this fact to his chums, but they were well aware of it. They knew that his whole object in going was to catch a glimpse, if possible, of the fair, bobbed haired Irene Manners. Handforth wouldn't admit it for worlds, but he was rather keen on Miss Irene.

His great hope was that he might be able to see Miss Irene, in order to say good-bye. But before the Moor View School could be

even reached, this awful affair had happened.

Fortune favoured McClure.

For before he reached the school, he caught sight of a number of St. Frank's fellows in the lane ahead of him. Pitt was there, and De Valerie, and Tommy and Tregellis-West and myself. We saw McClure coming, and paused to stare at him in astonishment.

For he was well-nigh exhausted.

He came up, reeling, and so breathless that for the first two or three moments no words would come. Although wet with perspiration, he was deathly pale. We knew at once that something serious was wrong.

"Hold up, old man?" I said quickly. "What's the matter with you? What's happened? Take your time——"

"Handforth!" gasped McClure faintly. "He—he's buried!"

"Buried!" yelled the juniors.

"Avalanche—fell over cliff—buried!" muttered McClure disjointedly.

It was some moments before we got the full story out of him. And then, staring at one another in consternation, we were gavanised into activity.

"Three of you dash to the toolshed, nad get spades and shovels!" I said crisply. "The rest of us will whizz back with McClure, and do all we can. Every second may be of value."

"Even if we do drag the poor chap out, he'll be frozen stiff!" said Reginald Pitt, with concern.

"My hat! And we were going home with Handy for the holidays!" said Watson.

"Never mind that now—we shall be thankful if he's alive!" I broke in.

We separated, and half of us sped down the lane at the double, outstripping McClure, who was still half-exhausted from his previous run. We drew near to our destination, hoping against hope that we should find that Church's efforts had been successful.

But this was not the case.

When we arrived, Church was on his knees, half buried in snow, burrowing madly and almost mechanically. The poor chap was well-nigh exhausted, and his eyes were full of horror.

"He's here—down in the middle of this snow!" he choked. "I can't get at him—I can't get any answer! Oh, it's awful!"

"We'll soon get him out!" I said briskly. "Get a hustle on, you chaps!"

Many hands make light work, and the way in which the snow flew was remarkable. Foot by foot the great pile diminished. Deeper and deeper we got, but still there was no sign of the missing junior. And by this time we were all beginning to share Church's unspoken fear.

After all this time, Handforth could never emerge alive. Even if, by some miracle, he still breathed, the dreadful coldness would have chilled him to the marrow—until pneumonia was an almost certain complication.

And then came a loud hail from the top of the cliff.

"Hi, you chaps!" roared somebody.

"Oh, thank goodness!" panted Church. "They've brought the shovels!"

I looked up, and a well known figure stood on the cliff edge, gazing down. I started violently, and stared harder.

"What the dickens are you wasting time for down there?" demanded the figure indignantly. "We've lost our giddy train now!"

We stood there, and our jaws dropped.

For the figure was none other than Edward Oswald Handforth himself—as large as life, and apparently unhurt!

CHAPTED II.

HANDFORTH'S LUCKY DAY!

CHURCH nearly fainted.

"It's—it's Handy!" he blurted out blankly.

"You spoofing bounder!" roared De Valerie. "So you did this on purpose, eh? We'll jolly well——"

"Don't be an ass," I interrupted. "Church thought Handy was really buried!"

Church was looking dazed.

"I—I can't understand!" he said, his joy and relief acting as a wonderful stimulant. "Handy went right down——"

"Ass!" roared Handforth, from the cliff top. "I was out of that snow heap in two ticks! I rolled clear of it all, and went round the other side of the cliff to meet you chaps—but you must have come the other way."

"We didn't see you!" shouted Church.

"I can't help it if you're blind, can I?" demanded Handforth, who seemed rather ungracious. "All this delay has made us loose the afternoon train now! We can't go until after tea!"

"Well, thank goodness you're safe!" said Church fervently.

"I'm safe, but I'm jolly well bruised!" shouted Handforth. "How would you like to roll down a giddy cliff? I'm going back to the school to change—I'm all torn and dirty!"

Handforth turned away and vanished. And we looked at one another, grinned, and then roared with laughter. The very relief at finding handforth safe and sound was enough to make us hilarious in itself.

But at the time we didn't know that Handforth was really making light of a pretty serious affair. His assurance that he hadn't been hurt was hardly the exact truth.

As a matter of fact, he had staggered out of the snow, unseen by Church and McClure in their wild scramble down the cliff, and he had gone off in an absolute daze—wracked with agony.

He had bruised his head, he had gashed an elbow, and his ankle was painfully strained. He didn't exactly know where he went, but must have wandered round to a little sheltered spot, where he sank down. Although he never admitted it, it is possible that he swooned for a few minutes.

Anyhow, he was horribly groggy when he picked himself up again, and laboriously climbed to the top of the cliff, bent on making his way back to the school. The sound of voices below had pulled him up, and he had seen what was happening. It had cost Handforth a great effort to appear so robust and unconcerned. He never liked to admit himself beaten.

The bruise on his head was considerable, and it was fortunate that he had such a thick skull, or it might have been fractured. Under these circumstances, he gave up all hope of seeing Miss Irene now. Besides, in his present state, he didn't want to meet her.

And, naturally he did.

That's just the way of things. When you want something, you can't find it—when you don't want it there's no trouble at all.

Handforth had only just reached the lane when he paused dead in his tracks, and forgot all about his aches and pains. A hot feeling surged into his neck, and he had a wild desire to flee. For he was painfully aware of the fact that his appearance was most unpresentable.

Walking briskly down the lane was a slim, girlish figure—a very dainty young lady attired in a warm tweed costume, high winter boots, and a bright woollen tam-o-shanter, and scarf to match. Altogether, she was a very delightful picture in that setting of freshly fallen snow.

She waved her hand as she approached, and then the smile of greeting faded from her face, and she looked concerned.

"Why, Ted, whatever has happened?" she asked quickly.

"I—I—— That is—— You—— Nothing!" stammered Handforth, tremendously confused because she had called him Ted. "Nothing at all, Miss Irene! I'm all right, thanks!"

"Don't tell stories!" she said firmly. "You've had an accident, or something. Why don't you tell me?"

"Well—er—as a matter of fact, I—I slipped!" replied Handforth, somewhat confused. "Had a bit of a tumble, you know—fell down a bit of a slope in the snow. Nothing to hurt, Miss Irene. I—I thought perhaps you'd left for the holidays, but I'm glad you haven't."

"You mustn't stop talking to me here," said the girl. "You've got to get back to the school, and patch yourself up. Why, you're in a dreadful state! It's a shame that some of the other boys don't help you!"

Handforth shuffled his feet.

"Well, as a matter of fact, they—they thought I was buried in the snow, or some silly thing like that!" he admitted. "They've been pretty anxious about me, too. And now we've lost our train."

"Well, that's not a tragedy," smiled Irene. "There are other trains."

"Oh, rather!" agreed Handforth. "In fact, I'm glad we did lose it. Otherwise, I shouldn't have met—— I mean, we should have been a long way from here—— What train are you going by, Miss Irene?" he added carelessly.

The girl shook her head.

"Not any train," she replied.

"Oh, you're lucky!" said Handforth. "Your pater's car, I suppose?"

"No, not even that," said the girl. "You see, I'm staying at school for Christmas, because my people——"

"Staying at school!" echoed Handforth, aghast.

"Yes."

"Down here, all alone?"

"Well, not exactly alone," laughed the girl. "Doris Berkeley and two or three other girls are staying, too. They're bricks! Two of them didn't need to stay behind, at all, but they're just doing it so that we shall have a nice little party. You see, my people are in Malta, and I wouldn't think of going to stay with my aunt. I'd rather stay at school."

Handforth was rather staggered. He had had hopes of seeing Miss Irene in London—he had even braced himself up for the task of inviting her over to his pater's place for Boxing night.

"Oh, well, that's rotten!" he said disconsolately. "You'll have a ghastly time down here, in this dead hole. It's not so bad when everybody's about, but during the holidays it's absolutely stagnant. I—I'm awfully sorry."

Irene laughed.

"You can keep your sorrow for something more deserving," she said, smiling. "To tell you the truth, I'm rather looking forward to it—it'll be quite a novelty. But you really must be going now, Ted. Good-bye."

She held out her hand, and Edward Oswald took it. Once, weeks earlier, he had carelessly mentioned that his name was Ted, and it delighted him to know that she still remembered.

"Oh—er—rather!" he said awkwardly. "Yes, I suppose I'd better get a move on. Well, goodbye, Miss Irene. Hope you have a pretty decent time over the vac. Of course, you'll be here when we get back?"

"I hope so!" said Irene. "Good-bye—have plenty of fun!"

"Yes, of course—thanks!" said Handy. "Merry Christmas!"

Irene waved her hand, and passed on. And Handforth trudged on his way through the snow to St. Frank's, feeling strangely heavy-hearted. He pulled himself together with an effort. Of course, he was an ass—a silly fathead! Why the dickens should he feel heavy-hearted just because

a blessed school girl was going to stop in this dull hole over Christmas?

He shook himself, and laughed scornfully. As if he cared a toss about girls! Irene wasn't so bad—a very decent sort, in fact—but as for being especially interested in her, the idea was dotty.

Assuring himself that he didn't care a jot one way or the other, Handforth reached the school gates, marched in, and lost no time in entering the Ancient House. And twenty minutes later he came downstairs, looking more like his normal self. He wouldn't have admitted, for worlds, that he was still feeling a bit shaky.

Church and McClure had turned up by this time. And now that their anxiety had been quelled by the knowledge of Handforth's safety, they were inclined to be indignant.

But after seeing Handforth, they decided to let the matter drop. He was obviously off-colour, owing to the effects of his fall. He pretended to be all right, but he couldn't disguise the paleness of his cheeks, and the general air of listlessness.

In the lobby a number of other juniors were talking, and their voices seemed to ring hollow—for they were practically the only fellows left in the great building. It was afternoon now, and the vast majority of the boys had already taken their departure.

"This is what comes of allowing Handforth to get out of our sight!" declared Reggie Pitt. "We've lost our train, and now we shall have to stick here until after tea."

"This train leaves at three-fifty," said Tommy Watson.

"Yes, but what's the good of it?" asked Pitt. "It's only a local to Bannington, and then we've got to change, and wait half an hour, and get in a rotten slow train to London. But the six o'clock train is an express—and that'll land us in Victoria at just about the same time."

"That's right," I agreed. "We'll go by the six o'clock—slow trains are awful. It doesn't matter much—no need to cry over spilt milk. It's nearly Christmas-time, and we've got to be cheerful and merry."

It may be wondered why the accident to Handforth should have delayed so many of us. But the explanation is quite simple.

A few days earlier Handforth had received word from his pater that he could invite a dozen of his school chums to the Handforth mansion for the Christmas holidays. And Handforth, full of importance, had selected his guests with great care and trouble.

And he did not fail to impress the favoured ones with a full and adequate realisation of the honour. It seemed that Sir Edward Handforth was preparing an extra special party, mainly composed of young people.

And then came a loud hail from the top of the cliff.
"Hi, you chaps!" roared somebody.

Handforth's list, complete, was as follows: Church, McClure, Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Archie Glenthorne, Reggie Pitt, Jack Grey, De Valerie, Alf Brent, Fatty Little, Ulysses Spencer Adams and myself.

Naturally, we had all planned to go up by the same train. Handforth's people had not made any special preparations—we could arrive just when we liked. So losing the afternoon train was not a catastrophe. At least, it didn't seem to be so at the time.

A small junior came bustling in from the Triangle, shaking many white flakes from his shoulders. He was Willy Handforth, of the Third.

"Snowing like the dickens again!" he announced. "Regular blizzard blowing up, you mark my words!"

Edward Oswald, who had just come in, glared at his minor.

"Are you still here?" he demanded ominously.

"No!" said Willy. "I'm a ghost!"

"You—you cheeky young sweep!" snorted Handforth. "I was hoping you'd gone by the earlier train. We don't want to be bothered with you all the giddy time."

"I'm lucky!" said Willy—"lucky to you chaps, I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, without me, you'd just make up thirteen," said Handforth minor. "And thirteen's a rotten number to start out on a snowy night by train! But with me we shall be fourteen, and so everything will go fine."

Handforth snorted.

"I don't believe in superstitions!" he snapped. "But it's no good grumbling, I suppose—you're just a necessary evil. Blessed if I know why you weren't left on the doorstep of an orphan asylum!"

"Well, we don't want any family arguments," said Reggie Pitt diplomatically.

"Absolutely not!" agreed Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, it's dashed bad form to wring out the old family washing in public! What about it, laddies? The good old cup that cheers, what? Phipps is still available, and at the word of command, he'll rally round with large supplies of tea juice!"

"Good! Lead the way to Phipps!" I said promptly.

And Archie led the way.

Upon the whole, we were not very sorry to have lost the train. Phipps supplied excellent tea, and we had quite an enjoyable hour. And it was a novelty, too—for everything was so quiet and peaceful.

Scarcely anybody was left in the school except our own party, a few of the servants, and about two masters.

And as the afternoon progressed, the weather grew wilder.

CHAPTER III.

ONE OR TWO SHOCKS!

"PHEW! It's an absolute blizzard!" Tommy Watson gasped out the words as he strove to close the front door of the Ancient House. Myriads of snowflakes were driven in by the high wind, and unless Tregellis-West had gone to Tommy's assistance, the door would not have been closed.

"It's—it's about the worst storm I can remember!" gasped Watson. "The Triangle's a foot deep in snow already—and it's coming down by the giddy cart-load!"

"Dear old boy, we shall have some trouble in gettin' to the station, I'm afraid," said Sir Montie, with concern. "Begad! The night's frightfully wild—it is, really! Pity we haven't got a car handy!"

Handforth sniffed.

"Who cares for a bit of snow?" he asked briskly. "In my opinion, this makes the journey all the more interesting. It's the right thing to have snow at Christmas-time. Buck up, you chaps. It's half-past five, you know."

"Plenty of time," said Church. "Train doesn't go till six."

"And it's bound to be late!" added Reggie Pitt.

"Trains are only late when you get to the station in heaps of time!" said Handforth. "If you turned up a minute late, the train's gone! Blessed if I know why things should be that way, but they are!"

The lobby was fairly crowded with juniors. We were just on the point of departing, and the howling of the wind outside made us fully realise that our walk to the station would not be an easy one. So it was better to give ourselves plenty of time.

"I say, dear old souls!" exclaimed Archie Glenthorne, lounging in. "What about it? That is, do we go, or not? The old weather, you know—bally rough, and all that sort of thing. How about staying on at the old homestead until morning, what?"

"You can stay if you like—we're going!" declared Handforth.

"Oh, absolutely not!" said Archie firmly. "I mean, we must rally round one another, and stick together, and cling like the old ivy. I mean, it's no good carving ourselves up into sections, and all that rot. But it just struck the old bean that it might be a frightfully priceless scheme to dodge the storm. Snow of course, is rather priceless, but——"

"I think we'd better go, Archie," I interrupted. "A storm always sounds worse inside than it actually is. Once we're trudging down the lane, we'll be all right. But we'd better start at once, or we shan't

leave ourselves comfortable time. Everybody ready?"

After a brief spell of hustling round, Handforth had all his guests on the spot. We were well wrapped up in overcoats, mufflers, and thick boots. Our luggage had gone on a short time earlier—to catch the same train. We only had two or three handbags among the whole crowd of us now.

The big door was flung wide open, and two or three juniors were nearly swept off their feet. The gale roared in with terrific velocity, bringing a perfect deluge of snow. It made us gasp.

"Great Scott!" I panted. "It's worse than I thought!"

"Come on!" roared Handforth. "We can't waste any time!"

Bending our heads to the wind, we forced our way out into the night. The Ancient House steps had vanished. We could see nothing but a piled up mass of snow. It was soft, crisp and feathery. With every step we kicked up masses of powdery whiteness—which the wind caught up, and whirled about us in thick clouds. And the air itself was so thick with driving flakes that it was nearly a matter of impossibility to open our eyes.

"Oh, boy! Some storm, I'm telling you!" said Ulysses Spencer Adams. "It sure reminds me of my home town. Gee! This is the kind of dope we get around N'York City! Let's go, boys!"

We literally pushed our way across the Triangle to the gates, and emerged into the lane. Here the full force of the blizzard passed over the tops of the high hedges, and we were able to breathe more freely. But the snow-flakes were still whirling round us in countless millions.

"Come on," said Handforth breathlessly. "Who cares for snow!"

"Attaboy!" remarked Ulysses.

"Absolutely!" gasped Archie. "I mean, here we all are, and with several slabs of luck we shall reach the station. The chappies on the outskirts had better look after themselves, though. It's bally easy to get lost in this sort of stuff."

The lane contained more snow than we had ever seen on that road before. On one side it was fairly clear, but on the other the drifts were piled up until they formed great sloping banks, half as high as the hedges. In many places the drifts were four and five feet deep.

In Bellton High Street, trade was practically at a standstill. Although it was not yet six o'clock, and the shops were all open, they could hardly be seen. The fine snow-flakes, driven along by the high wind, filled the atmosphere so much that it was almost like a fog.

We didn't see a soul all the way down the High Street. And by the time we got to the station, practically all the breath had been knocked out of our bodies. But we arrived—fourteen white and ghostly figures—at five minutes to six. And in the little booking-office, we stamped about and shook ourselves, and collected round the blazing fire.

"Brrrr!" said Reggie Pitt. "I'm glad to be out of that smother!"

"We shall be all right now," said De Valerie. "The train goes straight through to London, and by the time we get there the storm will be over, I expect. Anyhow, we'll hope for the best."

Handforth took the tickets—arrangements had been made beforehand with regard to this. And, armed with the tickets, Handforth planted himself in front of old Wiggins, the solitary porter.

"Just in time, eh?" said Handforth, putting half-a-crown into the old chap's hand. "Here's a Christmas box for you, Wiggins. When the train comes in, you've got to find us an empty compartment!"

"Right ye are, sir!" said Wiggins, delighted. "I'll have one ready for ye. I don't reckon there'll be many folks travellin' on a wild night like this 'ere. But the train's liable to be late."

"Late!" said Handforth indignantly.

"Mebbe twenty minutes—mebbe half an hour, young gent."

"Half an hour late!" snorted Handforth. "I never heard of such a nerve! What do they call this—a railway?"

"Be reasonable, old man," said Church. "Think of the snow!"

"Snow or no snow, the train oughtn't to be late!" said Handforth firmly. "Are you going to tell me that a whacking great train is delayed by a few snow-flakes. Pooh! I'll write to the giddy company!"

Handforth was chipped a good deal because of his views, and the time passed quickly. By the time the train came in, over half an hour had elapsed. And we were quite ready to leave.

Of course, Wiggins didn't have to trouble to find any empty compartment. We found one for ourselves at once, and all piled in. The compartment was only supposed to hold ten, but that made no difference. Handforth tried to push his minor out, but failed. In any such battle of wits with Willy, Handforth was always the loser.

The journey started, and I was pretty certain that we should arrive in London two hours late, at least. But it didn't matter much. At Victoria we could get as many taxicabs as we liked, and it was only a short drive to Handforth's home.

"We seem to be sticking here a long time!" remarked Pitt, as the train remained stationary. "Taking on some luggage, I expect."

"And they call this a railway!" sneered Handforth. "I know what's happened! The water's gone off the boil!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps the carburettor's got a piece of grit in it!" suggested Pitt solemnly. "Or, it's quite likely that the sparking-plug is sooty."

"Rats!" said Grey. "The engine's got a puncture!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

However, as if to give the lie to these base insinuations, the engine gave one or two preliminary puffs, a whirring of driving wheels on the slippery track, and then we slowly pulled out—the storm roaring and blustering all round us.

"Thank goodness!" said Handforth, settling back in his corner seat. "Now, I vote we tell a few stories, to pass the time away. I'll start, and you chaps can follow."

"That won't do," I said, shaking my head.

"Why not?"

"Because you'll only be half way through by the time we get to Victoria."

"Ha ha, ha!"

"Fathead!" said Handforth witheringly. "I'm going to tell you a Trackett Grim story——"

"HELP!" yelled about six juniors in one voice.

"My hat!" gasped Handforth, startled by the vocal blast. "What the dickens are you shouting for help for? This Trackett Grim story is the best I've ever thought of! It's all about Trackett Grim in New York—prowling through Chinatown, on the track of a gang of opium smugglers! Trackett Grim gets chucked through a trap door into the river, and swims into Boston Harbour before he can get ashore!"

"Gee winnikers!" said Ulysses. "That guy's sure some swimmer!"

"Trackett Grim can do anything!" said Handforth carelessly. "He gets on the trail of the smugglers because he finds footprints on the river!"

"The river?" gasped Church. "You—you ass——"

"The river," explained Handforth, "is frozen over!"

"And I suppose Trackett Grim swims under the ice?" I asked casually.

"Great pip! I'd forgotten about that!" said Handforth, with a start. "Still, it doesn't matter—I'll soon put that right. Details never worry me! Now, after getting ashore—— Hallo! We've stopped!"

"Thank Heaven!" said Pitt, with a sigh of happiness. "Oh, you mean the train? I thought you meant the story!"

The train certainly had stopped, and it remained stationary for about ten minutes. These minutes seemed like hours, for Handforth insisted upon continuing his thrilling Trackett Grim yarn. But at last the carriage gave a preliminary jolt, and again we moved.

"At this rate, we shall get into Victoria just in time for the New Year!" said Handforth sourly.

"It'll be marvellous if we get to Victoria at all," I remarked. "We're going backwards!"

"Backwards!"

"Yes—we'll be in Bellton again soon."

Sure enough, after ten minutes the train jerked to a standstill against the station platform. And the guard came along the train, a snowy figure, lantern in his hand, inviting everybody to get out.

"Look here, what's the idea?" snorted Handforth, leaning out of the window.

"Line's blocked beyond Bannington—snowdrifts!" said the guard shortly. "The whole service is suspended until to-morrow."

"Wha-a-at!" gasped Handforth blankly.

We looked at one another with startled expressions. Then we buttoned up our coats, and piled out upon the platform. And the guard's statement was true enough. Word had come through that impassable snowdrifts on the other side of Bannington had disorganised the whole train service. There would be no trains through to London—or even to Bannington—until the morrow.

This was shock No. 1, and it left us somewhat flabbergasted. In the waiting room, we crowded in a corner, and held a discussion. Handforth, in the meantime, had got the money back for the tickets. He flatly declared that he wasn't going to be swindled.

"Well we can stay here talking for an hour—but it won't make any difference," I said practically. "The train service is suspended, and we're stranded. All we can do is to go back to St. Frank's, and wait until to-morrow."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "A foul piece of work, but there it is. I'd ask you all to stagger along to Glenthorne Manor——"

"My hat! That's a good idea!" said De Valerie.

"But what would be the bally good?" went on Archie. "I don't want to disappoint you, old companions, but it so happens that the ancestral pile is bolted and barred! I mean, the people are gallivanting in London. Glenthorne Manor is locked up, and cheer fails to abound there."

"Beg pardon, young gents, but is there a Master Handforth here?" asked the station clerk, appearing on the outskirts.

"Yes!" said Handforth major and Handforth minor.

"Well, there's a telegram here—addressed to Master Edward Handforth," said the clerk. "It came through from Bannington five minutes ago. It was delayed, owing to the wires being down this afternoon. It ought to have arrived about half-past twelve."

"Phew!" whistled Church. "It's only about seven hours late!"

"Some service!" said Ulysses. "Over in the States we deliver telegrams a few minutes after they're handed in."

"Except when you have blizzards, like this one!" I reminded him.

Handforth tore open the telegram, and read it. First he went red, then he went pale, and finally he stared at us open mouthed. He gave one or two gasps, but words failed to come.

"What does it say?" demanded Willy impatiently. "Don't stand there like a giddy fish! My hat! Look at him! He's going to have a fit!"

"Yes, I am!" roared Handforth, in a sudden explosion. "It's off!"

"Off?" echoed Church. "What's off?"

"The party!"

"The party!" yelled all the guests.

"Yes—the mater had a fire—the Christmas decorations blazed up, and everything was ruined!" said Handforth. "Nothing very serious, but the whole Christmas party is coshed on the head!"

"Well, that," said Archie Glenthorne, "is that!"

CHAPTER IV.

STRANDED AT SCHOOL!

UNDOUBTEDLY, the situation was about as ghastly as it could be. Archie's further remark, to the effect that the whole thing was poisonous, was correct. One thing after another had cropped up, until this telegram provided a fitting climax to a day of misfortunes.

First Handforth had nearly killed himself, and then we had lost our original train, and then we found that the whole service was cancelled—and now the Christmas party was wiped off the map, in any case!

Handforth was nearly at his wits' end. His distress was touching.

"I say—this is awful!" he said blankly. "The fire must have happened early this morning, and the mater wired at once—thinking I should get the news before everybody left. She ends up by suggesting that all you chaps should make other arrangements."

"Well, we can't make any other arrangements to-night," I pointed out. "In fact, it's too late to think of any Christmas party now. We can't wire to Somerton, for instance, saying that we're going to plant ourselves on his people! As far as I can see, we shall have to spend Christmas at St. Frank's!"

"Not likely!" said Pitt. "We can all go home!"

"Not all of us," I said, shaking my head. "Adams can't—Glenthorne can't, and one or two others are left temporary homeless, too. But it's no good discussing these things here—let's get back to the school."

"Absolutely," said Archie. "A wave of cheerfulness is oozing through the old frame, you know. I've just remembered that Phipps is at St. Frank's—staying on

until the end of the week. How absolutely tophole! I mean to say, he'll rally round, and whizz hither and thither, and make life worth living!"

We hung about the station for another quarter-of-an-hour, although it wouldn't have made any difference, now, even if the train did go.

As I pointed out, talking was useless, and we at least had a refuge in St. Frank's. We had beds—food—and plenty of other comforts. Under the circumstances, the Head wouldn't object to our remaining.

And so we ventured out into the night again, and braved the elements. The storm was thicker than ever, and seemed to be increasing in violence. By the time we got to St. Frank's after a big struggle against the wind, we were very nearly breathless with the battle.

Handforth had been strangely silent during the walk up. He never acted as everybody assumed he would act. They had taken it for granted that he would rave wildly about the train service, about his mater's carelessness in allowing a fire, and all sorts of other unreasonable things.

Instead of this, Handforth scarcely said a word.

And, finally, we all marched into the Ancient House and found the school as good as empty. The majority of the household staff had gone, we were the only boys in the whole place, and even the masters had cleared out. Nelson Lee was in London, and I was rather sorry that I hadn't gone with him.

But it was no good crying over spilt milk. Here we were—stranded at school. The Headmaster remained, it is true, and it wasn't long before he appeared on the scene to inquire why we had come back.

He listened gravely while we told him the news.

"Dear me!" he said, at length. "This is bad. I am deeply sorry, my boys, that you should be so disappointed. I understand that this party is now completely abandoned?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what do you intend doing, boys?" asked the Head.

"We don't know, sir."

"H'm! The situation is certainly somewhat awkward," agreed Dr. Stafford, looking at us with kindly concern. "Of course, boys, we're on equal terms now, eh? I don't want you to regard me as your Headmaster, for we are now enjoying our holidays. And since you must remain at school for one night, at least, there is no reason why you should sleep in your dormitory."

"Thank you, sir."

"I will give instructions at once, and have some of my own private bed-rooms prepared," said the Head genially. "I want you to be quite at home, boys—make yourselves comfortable, and do just as you please. You are perfectly at liberty to use my house as your own."

"Thanks awfully, sir."

"You're a brick, sir."

"Not at all—not at all!" laughed Dr. Stafford. "Indeed, if you care to, you are at perfect liberty to remain at St. Frank's for Christmas. I don't suppose you will do that but it is just a mere suggestion. Please yourselves, boys. And remember that you are more than welcome to stay if you want to. Just look upon yourselves as my guests."

He bustled off, leaving us all in a state of uncertainty. There was no question about the Head's decency. He had acted like a sportsman. Giving us the run of his own house was nothing more or less than handsome.

And so, shortly afterwards, we found ourselves in Dr. Stafford's big, comfortable breakfast-room, sitting down to a ripping supper. The warm fire, and cheerful electric light, and the excellence of the food, put us all into a good humour. And the Head was sport enough to make himself scarce.

"I must say he's absolutely one of the ones!" remarked Archie. "Dash it, here we come, piling in on the old lad like a somewhat energetic avalanche. I mean, he's taken it bravely. There's many a chappie would have been somewhat staggered at the shock, and would have wilted perceptibly. But the Head, bless him, appears to absolutely like it!"

"He's certainly making us jolly comfortable," I agreed. "Real hospitality—that's what it is. But as for staying at St. Frank's over Christmas—well, I'm not so sure about it."

"Why not?" asked Handforth thoughtfully. "When you come to think of it, we can have a fine time down here."

"A fine time?" asked De Valerie, staring.

"Of course we can!" replied Handforth with enthusiasm. "We can have a party on Christmas night, we can go skating, and —and all sorts of things! Tons of things we can do, in fact."

"It'll be as dead as ditchwater!" complained Jack Grey. "After a couple of days here we shall be fed up with ourselves, and die of sheer stagnation. We don't even get a change!"

"She distinctly said she wasn't going!" said Handforth dreamily.

"What?"

Handforth started violently, and went red.

"Er—I mean—Mrs. Poulter, you know!" he gasped, with a triumphant feeling that he had covered up his awful slip. "And with the matron still here, we can call on her for anything we like."

"No, you don't!" said Reggie Pitt firmly. "You're not going to slip out of it like

that, my lad! I'll bet you were talking about Irene!"

"Irene?" repeated Handforth, as though the name was new to him.

"Irene Manners!" said Pitt. "So that's why you're so resigned? Deceitful youth, thou art unmasked! O traitor! I shouldn't be surprised if you worked the whole thing! Such are the channels of love!"

Crash!

A doughnut struck Pitt in the eye with considerable force.

"You rotter!" howled Handforth, his very violence giving him away. "I didn't work anything!"

you try to explain, the plainer we see the lie of the land. And about Christmas. Perhaps it would be a decent idea to stop."

"Couldn't do better!" declared Handforth promptly. "Look here, we're going to Sir Montie's place after Boxing Day, aren't we?"

"Yes, rather!" said Tregellis-West. "It's all fixed up. An' as everythin' has turned out so frightfully shockin', I think we'd better decide to stay here until we start for Tregellis Castle."

"Well, we'll stay until to-morrow, anyhow—and then we can finally decide," I said. "It's good to know that we're welcome to remain, if we want to. The

We literally pushed our way across the Triangle to the gates, and emerged into the lane. But the snowflakes were still whirling round us in countless millions.

"I'm very fond of doughnuts," said Pitt. "But I prefer them a bit lower down in the face! Under the circs., old man, I'll forgive you—but don't throw any of the crockery about. The Head might object."

Handforth sat down, breathing hard.

"Sorry I chucked that doughnut at you!" he growled. "But you make me so jolly wild! Just as if I know anything about Irene Manners! Huh! Supposing she is stopping at school for Christmas? Think I care? As a matter of fact, I said good-bye to her this morning—— I—I mean——"

"Take my advice, old man, and let the subject drop," I said gently. "The more

Head's a stunner!"

"Hear, hear!"

There were certain alluring prospects in the thought of staying at St. Frank's. As guests of Dr. Stafford, we should be on quite a new footing. It would be an absolute novelty. For there would be no restrictions, no bounds, and we could go and come just as we pleased.

After supper—which had been quite an early one—the fellows disported themselves in their unaccustomed luxurious surroundings. Archie went off to change his collar—painfully conscious of the fact that a little snow had made a smudge. He had

wanted to change his collar earlier, but hadn't been allowed to go.

Phipps met Archie in the passage, and they went upstairs together.

"Some rather serious news from the village, sir," said Phipps.

"Really! Don't tell me, Phipps, that some poor chappie has perished in the old blizzard?" asked Archie, in concern. "I mean, what a frightful predic! A cove can never be quite the same after perishing in the blizzard."

"The news is scarcely as tragic as that, sir," said Phipps. "One of the under-servants, just arrived from Bellton, declares that a row of small cottages near Holt's Farm are so completely snowbound that the occupants are practically imprisoned. Indeed, they are in danger of being completely enveloped by the drifting snow."

Archie paused, and looked at Phipps squarely.

"But dash it!" he said. "This, old tulip, is somewhat ghastly! What I mean is, how can the poor populace exist with snow smothering their abodes? I trust something is being done about it?"

"I don't exactly know, sir," said Phipps. "By what I can understand, there are very few people who know of the peril—and no rescue-party has yet set out to assist the unfortunate cottagers."

"And is it really serious, laddie?"

"I imagine so, sir," replied Phipps gravely. "The snow is drifting so rapidly that these small cottages, lying in a very exposed position, are becoming completely buried beneath the snow. The occupants, being in bed and asleep, are probably unaware of the danger."

"What-ho!" said Archie firmly. "This, Phipps, is a time for action. I mean, it's no good talking, what? How long ago did you hear the broadcast?"

"Only just now, sir—a minute before I saw you."

"Then, old fruit, I must away," said Archie. "It's a good thing you told me. Cheerio! The young master will see you anon!"

"But your collar, sir——"

"Collars, Phipps, are of less importance than snowbound cottages," interrupted Archie curtly. "There is work to be done!"

He hurried back to the other juniors and quickly related the news. We all gathered together and discussed the matter.

"Pretty rough on the snowbound people; but what can we do?" asked Watson.

"Dash it—I mean, what can we do?" asked Archie. "Well, it whizzed into the old think department that we might gather up a few shovels and such like impliments, and sally forth to the rescue. In my opinion, this is one of those occasions when it's up to the gang to rally round."

"Archie's got the right idea," I agreed promptly. "You know what these sleepy country people are. In all probability they haven't made a move to do anything. It's just possible they don't know anything about it in the village. Let's go to the place and see what we can do."

"Where are these cottages, anyway?" asked Church.

"Ass!" snapped Handforth. "Don't you know Pelton's Bend? They're just there—four or five cottages in a little row, on Farmer Holt's property. In fact, they're occupied by the chaps who work for the old rotter—labourers and their families. But they're just as human as we are, and if they're in trouble we'll lend a hand."

"Hear, hear!"

It was no time for dilly-dallying. We bustled into our overcoats and mufflers, pulled our caps well down, and ventured out into the night. There was no change. At least, no change in the weather conditions. But the Triangle itself looked absolutely different.

The snow, still coming down with extraordinary force, had covered the Triangle in a mass of whiteness which in many places rose to a height of five and six feet. The fountain had nearly vanished. A drift had formed at the corner of the gymnasium which rose as high as the roof.

"My hat! It's worse than ever!" shouted Pitt, into the teeth of the gale.

"Tool-shed!" I roared. "Grab anything you can!"

We found a good supply of spades and shovels and brooms. And armed with these, we set off for Pelton's Bend—a small isolated row of cottages just at the end of the village.

Walking in Bellton Lane was by no means easy. The snow had become so thick that we had to plough our way along. It was a constant struggle, fighting against the elements. The driving snow, swirled along by the force of the gale, struck into our faces like so many pellets of ice. We were compelled to bend our heads and to trudge on blindly.

And yet we quite enjoyed it.

There was something rather thrilling about the idea of digging these unfortunate people out of the snowdrift. They were the victims of the storm, and it was questionable whether any other aid was going to them.

For Pelton's Bend was completely detached from the village. The small, low cottages were quite by themselves, with Holt's Farm set back among trees on the other side of the road. The evil tempered farmer was not likely to render any assistance to his unfortunate employees.

And our surmise was correct.

For when, after a hard struggle, we arrived at Pelton's Bend, we found the place utterly deserted. It was very exposed, too, and the full force of the blizzard was whirling round the row of tiny houses. They had practically vanished amid the snow.

"My goodness!" shouted Church. "Look at that!"

The front doors were no longer visible, and all the windows were covered. The

great mounting snowdrifts reached to the tiny upper windows, and before long would smother the roofs entirely. Such a snowstorm as this had seldom been seen in Bellton for many years.

"All hands to the pumps!" I sang out.

And then we heard one or two other shouts, and became aware that children were crying. But it was impossible to tell much in the howl of the wind. We soon discovered that some of the villagers were at the upper windows, alarmed and utterly snowbound.

One or two of the men had got out, and were fighting a losing battle against the snow. But our arrival made all the difference. We set to work systematically to fight the ravages of the storm.

Two or three of us worked at each cottage, cutting a deep trough through the snowdrift to the front door. Once this was made, and kept clear, there would be no danger.

But the fight was a difficult one. For as fast as we shovelled the snow it blew round us like powder. The flakes were fine and feathery, and we were in a constant smother.

However, working hard and continuously, we made headway.

Archie Genthorne was a wonder. He threw aside all his reserve, cared nothing about his clothing, and worked with a will. Indeed, we were all perspiring freely. The exercise was so strenuous, in fact, that it wasn't long before we cast off our overcoats.

And, one by one, the cottages were unburied.

CHAPTER V.

THE SON WHO NEVER CAME BACK.

"WELL, young gents, we don't know how to thank ye," said Joe Catchpole, his gruff voice filled with gratitude. "Like as not we'd have all been smothered if ye hadn't come to lend a hand."

"That's all right, Joe," I said. "Only too glad to help."

"You allus was real gents, and no mistake," said the labourer nodding. "It's right glad I am that my missus and kids is safe. I was getting real scared, and I don't mind a-sayin' of it!"

Joe Catchpole was Farmer Holt's foreman, not that this was any distinction. The farm labourers who worked for Holt were a somewhat unfortunate number of men—five all told. Four of the men were married and lived in these cottages with their families.

And we were forcibly struck by the pitiable signs of poverty in every cottage. Of comforts there were none. The children—three or four in each family—looked weakly and ill-nourished. Somehow there was an atmosphere of stark misery about these wretched hovels.

"My hat!" breathed Handforth. "Old Holt ought to be sent to penal servitude for keeping his tenants in this state."

"They work for him, and that's why they've got to put up with it," said Pitt softly. "You know what a beast he is. If they dared to complain about these cottages they'd get the sack. And work's scarce enough as it is."

Reggie Pitt was right.

We had all gathered together in Catchpole's humble abode, which was at the end of the row. He had insisted upon his wife making us some hot tea, although they could ill-afford the necessary milk and sugar. The other men had come in, and some of the wives and children—a kind of big gathering. The kiddies were crowded together, looking on with wide eyes.

"I reckon we've got a lot to thank you young gents for to-night," said Tom Belcher, one of the other men. "Ay, but Farmer Holt ought to be ashamed of hisself, and no mistake! It's queer that he couldn't do nothin'. He must have knowed what was happening."

"It don't do no good to talk agin Mr. Holt, Tom," said Joe Catchpole.

While the tea was served, we talked, and from the general trend of the conversation it was not difficult to put two and two together. Times were very bad. All the men were earning wages that absolutely horrified the juniors. How they and their families could exist on the few meagre shillings a week was little short of miraculous.

But it was winter, and work on the farm was so scarce that these labourers were on a half-time basis, and, consequently, only receiving half their usual pay. And this was small enough, in all conscience.

There was no other work in the village—perhaps an odd job now and again, on a lucky day, but very seldom. And for weeks these families had been fighting hopelessly on against this dreadful poverty. It was only when the juniors came into close contact with such conditions that they realised the full horror of want.

At St. Frank's, eating all they desired, spending money on luxuries, they had never given a thought to these pitiable souls who worked at Holt's Farm. The men were gaunt and wiry; the women ill-nourished. But, most pitiful of all, the children showed every sign of the poverty which stalked at Pelton's Bend. The St. Frank's fellows were greatly affected.

And it was just upon Christmastime—the great festive holiday of the year.

"Of course, you get something extra for Christmas, don't you?" asked Handforth carelessly. "Old Holt gives you a bonus, or something, doesn't he?"

Catchpole shook his head rather grimly.

"Not he, sir," he replied. "That ain't Mr. Holt's way. We don't get nothin' extra for Christmas—not even a bushel o' potatoes. And I ain't saying but what we wouldn't be glad of a few o' them swede

turnips, over in yonder field. But we ain't likely to see one of 'em. Farmer Holt don't give nothin' away."

"But look here, dash it!" said Archie, with great concern. "About Christmas, I mean. What about the old turkey? And the priceless plum-pudding? Of course, you'll have the good old spread?"

This time Catchpole laughed harshly.

"Mebbe you're joking, young gent," he said. "Christmas don't mean nothin' to us. Some folks, I dessay, can afford a bit extry for the kiddies. But when the missus only gets a few shillings a week, she can't make no Christmas puddens. The nippers will be lucky if they gets margarine on their bread. As for turkeys, young gent, all Mr. Holt's turkeys were sent to market last week. We won't see so much as a feather."

"How absolutely poisonous!" said Archie aghast. "Look here, old lad, kindly allow me to contribute——"

"No, sir; 'tain't likely!" said Catchpole quickly. "We ain't askin' for no charity—are we, Jane?"

"We ain't that!" said Mrs. Catchpole, looking up from the miserable little stove. "We're grateful enough, young gentlemen, for what you've done, without asking for money."

"Oh, but come!" said Archie. "I mean to say, come!"

"I'll be obliged, young gent, if you don't mention the matter agin," said Catchpole gruffly. "We've all stuck it, and we'll keep on. We ain't starving, an' that's something to be thankful for these days. Come the spring, we'll have more work, an' times will get better, mebbe."

I liked the man's spirit. He echoed the sentiments of them all. They were bluff country labourers, not beggars. And although their condition was pitiful, they wouldn't hear of charity. Unless they gave something in return they wouldn't accept money.

And at last, after we had had our tea, we bade them all good-night, and set off back to St. Frank's. By great good fortune the snowfall was now abating. The wind was just as high, and the sky was leaden. But only a few stinging flakes were being carried along by the gale.

"I think they'll be all right now," I said. "Anyhow, we've done all we can—— Hallo! What's that little house over there?"

We paused and gazed up the narrow lane towards an isolated cottage—the only other dwelling in this lonely part.

"By Jove! I'd forgotten all about Mrs. Hewitt," said Reggie Pitt. "That's where she lives, you know—Mrs. Hewitt, the old lady who does dressmaking. Haven't you seen her card in old Sharpe's window?"

"Why, yes!" said Handforth. "Let's go and have a look."

In our concern for the cottagers we had overlooked Mrs. Hewitt's tiny abode. Now and again we had seen her in the village—an elderly, bowed figure, but always neatly dressed. She lived utterly alone, and eked out an existence by doing odd jobs of dressmaking.

As we struggled through the snow towards her cottage, I remembered a few details concerning the old lady. In a small village like Bellton it was only natural that we should know practically everything about all the inhabitants. And now that we were coming in such close contact with these humble people, we were beginning to realise the hidden hardships of their existence.

Mrs. Hewitt, if I remembered correctly, was respected by nearly everybody, and sneered at by a few. For she was proud, and always carried herself with something which was very akin to dignity. In early life, before the death of her husband ten or twelve years earlier, she had been a lady of importance in Bellton. She and her husband had lived in a big house, had had servants, even a carriage and pair. But after Mr. Hewitt's death, she had become poverty-stricken, and was compelled to do dressmaking for a living.

We arrived at the cottage and found that it was just as badly snowed up as the others. Great drifts were piled round the front door and window until they were buried. There was no light showing anywhere, and when we went to the rear, we found the back door in the same condition.

"Come on; we'll soon have this clear," I said briskly.

With six of us at one door and six at the other we made quick headway. And at the end of twenty minutes we had cleared the snow to such good purpose that a complete path was made.

And when the front window was uncovered, we found rather to our astonishment that a small night-light was burning on the sill. In such intense gloom that tiny light seemed to be brilliant.

It shone out upon the snow and cast a steady light far down the lane. It must have been visible for quite a good distance. Peering through the glass we could just make out a miniature box-like parlour.

"I wonder why she left that light burning?" asked Pitt. "I say, perhaps she's ill or something. Don't you think we'd better knock her up?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," I said thoughtfully. "Just let her know we've cleared the snow away, anyhow. She may have gone upstairs, half scared with fright. It's pretty awful to be snowed in, you know."

We knocked upon the door and stood back waiting. It was only a gentle knock, and we expected that we should have to make another summons. But almost at once a

light appeared in the small upper window. And then soon afterwards we heard a key being turned in the rusty lock.

"My son—my son!" came a voice to us—a voice that was thrilling with pent-up joy. "Oh, Jack—Jack! My boy's come at last!"

We looked at one another rather startled. We had hardly expected anything like this. The situation promised to be uncomfortable.

And then the door opened, and Mrs. Hewitt stood there—a small, sad little figure, attired in a shabby dressing-gown. Her eyes were alight with eagerness, and she held out her arms.

"Jack—Jack!" she cried. "Oh, I knew you would come!"

We didn't know what to say. She seemed to take it for granted—it was almost as though she had been expecting to hear a knock.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, we thought you'd left a light burning by mistake," said Handforth awkwardly. "We've just cleared the snow away——"

"Oh! Yes—yes—thank you!" said Mrs. Hewitt, her voice trailing away, and becoming unutterably sad.

As she stood there, her figure drooped, and she passed a hand over her brow. Then, with a brave smile, she pulled herself together. In a few words we told her why we had knocked.

"It was foolish of me to—to think that Jack had come!" she said quietly. "But it was so late, and I have always dreamed that he will come in the night. Nobody has ever knocked at my door at this hour before. So the mistake was rather natural, wasn't it?"

"Oh, rather!" said Archie. "Of course Jack will probably turn up a bit later, what? Some chappie you're expecting, no doubt, dear lady!"

"My son!" said Mrs. Hewitt quietly. "Oh, they may laugh—they may smile at me. But Jack will come back—I know it! Thank you, boys—I am deeply grateful for what you have done."

A few minutes later we were once more on our way along the lane—very puzzled and curious about Mrs. Hewitt.

But we soon had some enlightment. For as we were passing the other cottages we saw Joe Catchpole.

"I see ye've been clearing the snow away from Mrs. Hewitt's place, young sirs," he remarked. "Good on ye! She's a poor soul, and can do with a little help now and agin."

"She thought we were her son!" said Handforth. "We knocked her up, you see, to tell her that she left a light burning——"

"Ay, that's her habit, gettin' on towards Christmas," said Catchpole, nodding. "Every Christmas, this last ten years, she's had that burning. Allus expecting her Jack to come home, like he said he would. But it's my opinion the boy was killed during the war. Leastways, he ain't been heard of since he went away."

"Her son, you mean?" asked Grey.

"Ay—John Hewitt," replied Catchpole. "I mind him well. A reckless sort of lad, allus wasting his time, and idling about. Ten years ago he went off—worked his passage to one of the Colonies, so I reckon. Judging by what we hear, he promised his mother that he'd return at Christmastime, and she, pore old lady, has expected him to come back every Christmas since; but she don't even get a letter—not a line. She won't believe it, of course; but we all thinks as how Jack joined up at the beginning of the war, and got killed."

"It's pretty sad," said Pitt slowly.

"Ay, young gent, that it is sad, and no mistake," agreed the man. "The faith that woman has is 'straordinary! Allus sayin' that her Jack will come back for her—and that he'll come back rich, like one o' them plays ye see on the stage. Pore soul! A body can't help feeln' sorry for her."

We said good-night to Catchpole again, and went on our way. We were more thoughtful than ever. Mrs. Hewitt's story was indeed sad—pathetic in the extreme.

"How absolutely ghastly, if you know what I mean," remarked Archie. "Dash it all, the poor old gal waits year after year, and nix happens. Christmas after Christmas rolls by, and the lad fails to whizz out of the unknown. It's a frightfully touching story, by gad! And those cottagers! My only sainted aunt! The poor blighters are positively living in a condish of bally destitution! Something, you know, ought to be done!"

"It's all very well to say that, Archie; but we're not philanthropists—we can't go about assisting the poor by increasing their incomes," I said gently. "And this case is only one of thousands. Of course, it makes it all the worse because the kiddies have to suffer so much."

"I wilt when I think of it!" declared Archie.

"Upon the whole, I'm rather glad that we missed our train to London," I went on. "There's plenty that we can do here—in the village. And I vote that we definitely decide to stay at St. Frank's for Christmas."

And I put a little plan before the other fellows that met with their entire approval.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN FROM SOUTHAMPTON.

IRENE MANNERS walked down the snowbound lane, humming softly to herself.

It was morning, and the gale of the previous evening had moderated to a gentle breeze. The air was crisp with frost, and the snow lay thick and in amazing drifts.

Irene rather revelled in the experience.

With sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks full of the joy of life she was a sweet picture of English girlhood as she tripped through the snow. She was well wrapped up and she was making a trip to the village in order to purchase a few Christmas cards that she urgently required.

It was only just nine-thirty, and the day was beginning. She glanced through the gateway at St. Frank's as she passed the famous old school, and she could not help noticing the great silence which had descended over those grey old walls.

As she continued her walk she fancied she heard a shout of boyish laughter, followed by a yell. She paused, wondering, but all she could now hear was the distant barking of a dog in the village, and the vociferous crowing of a few cockerels, at various points. They appeared to be holding a regular confab, answering one another without fail.

"Oh, I must have been mistaken!" Irene told herself. "There can't be any boys here—I knew they all went home yesterday."

She continued on her way, and felt rather uncomfortable because two rough-looking men were coming up from the village, and there was no possible way of avoiding them.

Irene was by no means a nervous girl, and she could take care of herself all right, but these two men were strangers. She judged them to be tramps, by their general unkempt appearance.

As they approached, she kept straight on, looking in front of her, without even turning her eyes in the direction of the men. But she was aware of the fact that they were staring at her rudely and inquisitively.

Irene flushed, and she felt very annoyed with herself. She would be thankful after she had passed the men. She was aware of feeling very self-conscious—and this was hardly surprising.

She didn't exactly know how fresh and attractive she really looked on that bright morning, with the background of snow-covered lanes and hedges to set off her dainty figure. The men were tramps of the most brutal appearance, attired in an old assortment of rags and tatters.

"Beg pardon, miss."

Irene paused for a moment, and bit her lip. The very worst had happened. She had been hoping against hope that she would get past without being accosted. But there was no hope of that. The two tramps had halted, and were standing fully in the road.

"Yes, what do you want?" asked Irene steadily.

"Spare a copper, missy?" asked one of the men, eyeing her handbag greedily. "Times are 'ard these days, an' me an' my mate ain't 'ad no work for weeks. Think of our wives an' kiddies, Miss! Just a copper, seein' as it's near Christmas."

"You look kind 'earted, young lady!" said the other man.

Irene knew well enough that the men deserved no charity from her. Their faces were drink-sodden and coarse. They were good-for-nothing. But the best thing was to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

She opened her handbag, took out her purse, and found two sixpences. She gave one to each man.

"Thank 'ee kindly, miss," said the bigger rascal of the two. "I suppose you couldn't make it a bit more, while you're about it. Christmastide, you know, Miss—an' times is awful 'ard just now."

Irene frowned.

"No, certainly not!" she said coldly. "Let me pass!"

The two men glanced at one another. They had caught sight of currency notes when Irene had opened her purse. And one swift look up and down the lane assured them that not a soul was in sight.

It wasn't often these tramps had such an opportunity as this—a young girl, utterly alone, with a handbag containing at least two pounds—probably more. The smaller tramp would never have had the nerve; but his companion was a reckless, ruffianly brute.

"Beggin' yer pardon, miss; but this 'ere tanner ain't much good!" he said roughly. "Let's 'ave one o' them quid notes! An' look sharp about it, too! 'And over yer purse, or we'll lay you out!"

Irene made up her mind in a flash.

"Oh, look!" she cried. "There's somebody coming!"

As the men started round, she swiftly leapt to the side, and ran. The tramps discovered how they had been tricked a second later. And the big man gave a bellow of fury, and gave chase. His companion, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

Now thoroughly frightened, Irene ran with all the speed of which she was capable. But the snow, lying well over a foot deep, made her progress slow. It did not have such an effect upon the heavy, determined men. And they overtook her rapidly.

"You little vixen!" snarled the bigger tramp. "Just for that, we'll take everything you've got! Tried to fool us, eh? All right, young lady! Grab 'er, Bill—shove yer 'and over 'er mouth, if she yelps!"

Irene was seized from behind, and pulled to a standstill. She gave one scream, and it rang out clearly—a cry of alarm and anger. But then the heavy arm of her captor was pressed against her face.

The other man grabbed at the handbag.

And it was just at this crucial moment that another figure appeared. He had come into view at the old stile—appearing out of the depths of Bellton Wood. He had known nothing until that cry of Irene's had come to his ears.

And now the fellow stood there, looking on grimly—quickly perceiving what had happened. He was not a tramp but only a short distance removed from one. His boots were patched, and his clothing torn and threadbare, and he had two or three days' growth of beard on his chin. At long range, a ruffianly looking specimen; but at close quarters there were evident signs of hardship. This man was no drunkard or tramp.

He didn't hesitate a moment.

The very instant he grasped the situation, he clenched his fists, and dashed forward. The two tramps knew nothing of his arrival until he was actually on the spot. And the newcomer snatched the handbag away in one movement.

Crash!

The stranger's fist thudded against the side of the big tramp's head. The man reeled back, yelling with pain and surprise.

"You scum, setting on a girl like that!" shouted the newcomer. "You'd better clear off before I knock you down!"

The tramps started back, and Irene found herself released. She backed away, looking on, half terrified. For this third stranger was scarcely any better looking than the others.

"By thunder!" snarled one of the tramps. "So that's the game, is it? You want the bag for yourself, do you? On 'im mate?"

They hurled themselves at the stranger. In a flash he stuffed the handbag into his pocket, and met the charge. And, although he was much smaller, his knowledge of boxing was considerable. He landed two swift, lightning blows. The tramps were the most surprised men in the world at that second. They reeled back, howling with pain.

And the stranger followed up his advantage.

Leaping in, he delivered more punishment. The smaller man crashed over, three of his teeth badly loosened. The bigger man had his nose nearly squashed into his face. His calibre was evident by his next action. With a snarl of terror, he turned on his heel and ran.

The other man picked himself up, whining like a kicked dog, and followed. These tramps were no good in a fight. They showed plenty of aggressiveness against a helpless girl. But in a stand up fight against a man, they were utterly finished after one taste of punishment.

"The infernal scum!" said the shabby stranger, his eyes burning with anger. "I hope they didn't hurt you, miss?" he added, turning to Irene, and producing her handbag. "It seems I just came in the nick of time. Brutes like that ought to be horsewhipped!"

The girl recovered her composure, and took the bag.

"I—I really don't know how to thank

And then the door opened, and Mrs. Hewitt stood there—a small, sad little figure, attired in a shabby dressing-gown.
"Jack—Jack!" she cried. "Oh, I knew you would come!"

you," she said, in a low voice. "It was awfully plucky of you to fight like that."

The man laughed.

"Fight?" he repeated, with a touch of scorn. "That wasn't a fight, miss. Those chaps don't possess an ounce of manhood between them. I was hoping they'd go for me. Then I should have had an excuse to finish them off, as they deserved. The contemptible curs!"

Irene looked at the man curiously. She was no longer feeling nervous. There was something about the shabby stranger that gave her confidence. He was unkempt, unshaven, but there was an indefinable something about him that stamped him as one of Nature's gentlemen.

"You are really wonderful," she said frankly. "And please let me show you how grateful I am."

She commenced opening her handbag, but the stranger quickly broke in.

"No, miss—please don't offer me any money!" he said. "I'm not that sort—I don't want rewarding for doing just what any decent man would do. Only too pleased to have been of a little help."

"Oh, but really!" said Irene, looking at his threadbare overcoat.

The stranger flushed.

"Yes, I'm a bit shabby," he admitted, reading her thoughts. "But that's no crime, miss. It's not always a man's fault that he's struck hard times. Well, good-morning, miss, I won't keep you. Those brutes won't touch you again, they've gone the other way."

He raised his battered hat, and was just about to pass on when he noticed that several other figures had appeared in sight. Irene saw them, too—and was taken quite by surprise.

For they were St. Frank's juniors—six of them. Handforth and Church and McClure, and Archie Glenthorne and Tregellis-West and myself. We were just on our way to the village to send off a few telegrams. Handforth broke into a run at the very sight of Irene, and we all followed.

"Good morning, Miss Irene!" said Handforth breathlessly. "Anything wrong here?" he added, with a ferocious glare at the stranger.

"Why, I thought you'd all left St. Frank's yesterday!" exclaimed the girl.

"Oh, we came back—the train service was suspended," put in Church. "We've pretty well decided to stay at St. Frank's for Christmas now."

"That's wonderful news!" said Irene, with a pleased smile. "If you had come along five minutes earlier you would have seen some excitement. Oh, it was splendid, the way this gentleman knocked down those two tramps, and sent them running off."

"Gentleman?" repeated Handforth, looking round.

"Yes!" said Irene quietly.

The stranger flushed, and shuffled his feet. Again he raised his cap, and attempted to go. But Irene insisted upon his remaining while she told us exactly what he had done.

"If I may say so, the lad appears to be a bally old knight-errant sort of chappie," observed Archie, beaming upon the shabby stranger. "Allow me, dear old thing, to offer my congrats. Dashed pleased to meet you!"

Archie extended his hand, and they shook. And we all followed his example, the stranger decidedly embarrassed.

A minute or two later Irene went on her way—now escorted by Handforth & Co., who absolutely insisted upon accompanying her. Handforth pointed out that the two tramps might appear again, and an escort was necessary.

But Sir Montie and Archie and I remained talking with the stranger. There was something about him that had attracted my attention. His features struck a chord in my memory, and for some minutes I had been wondering who he looked like. Then I jumped to it. And I regarded the stranger even more curiously than before—indeed, with genuine interest.

"I say, does your name happen to be Hewitt?" I asked suddenly.

The man started.

"Why, yes—I'm John Hewitt," he said, looking at me inquiringly. "How did you know? I haven't been in Bellton for ten years—and I know I've never seen you before."

"Good gad!" said Archie. "John Hewitt! I mean to say, how priceless! That dear old soul in the cottage, you know! This is dashed good!"

"I knew you, Mr. Hewitt, because I happened to meet your mother last night," I said quietly. "I noticed a slight resemblance, but I couldn't place you for the moment. Your mother will be very pleased to see you again."

"She's all right, then?" asked Hewitt eagerly.

We told him how we had removed the snow from Mrs. Hewitt's cottage—how we had found the night-light burning—and how the old lady had believed that her son had returned. The stranger bowed his head as he listened.

"Poor mother!" he muttered brokenly. "She'll be disappointed in me—and the other folks of the village will have the laugh. Not that I care about them—it's mother I think of. I've come home broke—and she's always expected me to return rich! It'll be a sad blow to her."

"Dear old boy, I rather fancy your mater will be frightfully pleased to see you, even though you are poor," declared Sir Montie. "If I'm any judge of character, the dear old lady doesn't care much about your position. She wants you, dear boy—she does, really!"

John Hewitt squared his shoulders, and set his jaw.

"I daresay I've been a bit of a scallywag in my time, but I'm not old, not now!" he said. "I've got time to make good. I've walked from Southampton—was paid off a tramp steamer yesterday morning. And I've got enough money to provide my mother with some Christmas cheer. That's why I walked—because I didn't want to spend any."

"But I thought you said you were broke, dear old onion?" asked Archie.

Hewitt shrugged his shoulders.

"So I am, near enough," he said. "If possible, I want to get a job—a shore position. I'm sick of the sea. I want to stay here, in Bellton, so that I can look after my mother in future."

The man spoke sincerely, and rather impressed us. He admitted his own faults, and had come home to make amends. It seemed to me that Hewitt ought to be encouraged. I turned to Sir Montie and Archie, and spoke to them in a low voice.

My idea was to give this man ten pounds, so that he could make himself look smart, and then appear before his mother as

though he had returned in good circumstances.

Mrs. Hewitt had hoped for so much—and her son's bedraggled appearance would be a terrible shock to her. Archie and Montie were enthusisatic, and insisted upon contributing a fiver each. I added two pounds of my own, and offered the money to Hewitt, explaining our plan.

Hewitt was startled. He stared at the money, he stared at us, and a slow, deep flush mounted to his face. His eyes sparkled for a moment as he looked at the notes. But he pulled himself up, and slowly shook his head—regarding us in the meantime with quiet, grateful eyes.

"I—I don't know what to say," he muttered. "It's too much—I never expected such generosity as this from strangers——"

"Dash it all, this is somewhat embarrassing," said Archie. "Kindly slide the old wad into your pocket, dear old soul, and trickle forth into the mater's arms. I mean to say, there's no need to do any thanking——"

"It is very kind of you—so kind that I can find no words to express myself," said John Hewitt. "But I'm afraid I cannot accept the money."

"Oh, but look here——"

"Please don't think I'm proud, or ungracious," went on Hewitt quickly. "I don't want you to misunderstand me—it would be terrible if you did that. But it wouldn't be fair to mother—it wouldn't be fair to myself. I've come home as you see me, and I've enough faith in my mother to know that she will give me a welcome. As for the people in the village, I care nothing for their opinion. I will show them that I can make good!"

And Hewitt, without waiting for us to press him further, turned on his heel and walked away. And we looked after him—strangely warmed towards this returned wanderer who was broke—but independent.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FINGER OF SCORN!

"SAKES alive! If it ain't young Jack Hewitt!"

Ebenezer Sprigg, the old village cobbler, came to a halt in the snow-bound Bellton High Street, and adjusted his spectacles. He had just paid a visit to the White Harp, where he was a regular customer. Indeed, old Ebenezer spent half his existence in the chimney-corner of the White Harp tap-room.

"Yes, Mr. Sprigg, I've come back—at last," said John Hewitt.

"An' time ye did," declared Mr. Sprigg. "Time ye did, an' all. Nigh on ten years ye've been away, ain't it? Don't seem as you're prospered a deal, either," he added, running a critical eye over Hewitt. "H'm! Just as I allus says. Got work, have ye? In a reg'lar job?"

"No—I'm out of work," said John quietly.

"I ain't surprised," grunted Mr. Sprigg. "I allus says as you'd turn up one day without a coat to your back. Ain't ye ashamed of yourself, boy? Nigh on thirty-five or thereabouts——"

"I'm only twenty-eight," interrupted Hewitt, flushing.

"Well, well! Old enough to have got yourself a good job," said Ebenezer. "I ain't got no use for young fellers who don't make no headway. In these days a boy ain't got no excuse. Now, when I was young, and there weren't no proper eddication——"

But John Hewitt walked on, leaving Mr. Sprigg to talk to himself—which was one of his favourite pastimes. Ebenezer gazed after John, and shook his head as he removed his glasses.

"Pity he ever come back—that's what I says," he muttered. "The boy ain't no good, an' never was. Mebbe his mother won't talk so big now. Fine ideas she had about the young varmint, too. Telling everybody as he'd come back wi' money! Still, I'm glad to see the boy—thought he was dead, these five years past. Not as he'll find work in these here parts."

Mr. Sprigg was a great gossip, and before he reached his little shop he had imparted the news of John Hewitt's return to at least four people. And within an hour the whole village knew it.

It was quite an event for Bellton, for as a rule life went on placidly and tranquilly in the little village. Even the tiniest ripple on the smooth surface of events caused a minor sensation.

It was a great morning for the gossips, who lost no time in crowing "I told you so!" with much gusto and relish. It really seemed that some people were pleased to know that John Hewitt had returned broke. It enabled them to triumph over those people who had spoken well of the prodigal.

Not that John cared. He had had the courage to return—for his mother's sake. And to his mother he went, bringing untold joy to a heart that had been nearly breaking.

Little she cared whether her boy was rich or poor! She had waited for ten long years to have him back—ten lonely years that had seemed like an eternity. But during all this time she had been convinced that he would return.

And so, for an hour or two, her only thoughts were for his immediate needs. She prepared him a meal, waited upon him, and insisted upon hearing how he had fared during his long absence.

But John was disinclined to talk on this subject—his story was not exceedingly pleasant, and this was no occasion for tell-

ing it to his mother. And she, realising something of what was in his mind, did not press him.

"But, Jack, you're not going away again, are you?" asked Mrs. Hewitt anxiously.

"No, mother—I've come back for good."

"Oh, my boy, you don't know how it would grieve me if you went away again," said the mother. "You'll find something to do, maybe, and with my dressmaking to help us along, we'll manage."

John looked at her and flushed.

"Oh, I've been cruel to you, mother," he said in a low voice. "But I didn't know that you were so badly hit as this. And now I've come back with only just a little money to see us over Christmas! I'm a failure, mother! Why don't you scold me—why don't you turn me out, and tell me to go away for ever?"

Mrs. Hewitt placed a hand over her son's shoulder.

"Jack, boy, you don't know what you're saying," she said softly, with her voice trembling. "It's you I want, Jack—just you. Money, success, riches—they are secondary. With you, Jack, I can be happy. And you've got to stay here now—stay with me. You'll find work——"

"Yes, mother—I'll find something to do," said John, with a kind of choke in his voice. "In the village, perhaps—or Bannington, or Caistowe. There's always work for a man who's willing. I'm not proud—I don't mind what the job is so long as I earn a little. I've come home to make you comfortable, mother."

It didn't matter a jot to Mrs. Hewitt that John was a failure—that his return to Bellton was an ignoble homecoming. It was him she wanted—just him.

And her words of encouragement, her complete lack of criticism, spurred John Hewitt more than ever he had been spurred before.

And without any delay he sallied out into the village, looking for something to do. If he could land a job at once—no matter how menial—he would prove to his mother that he was in earnest.

Nobody exactly knew how much it cost John Hewitt to swallow his pride, and to go through Bellton asking for work—any work, any odd job. If he could only get something to do here, right near his mother's cottage, she would be overjoyed.

In the meantime the village gossips had been very active. Not only had the story got about that Hewitt had returned, but this story had received all sorts of embellishments.

One version had it that John had just come out of prison—that was why he had stayed away for ten years. And the vindictive tongues were wagging, and when Hewitt walked down the snow-covered High Street he found himself the centre of all eyes. Curtains were pushed aside, and faces peered at him from the cottages. Shopkeepers left their counters, and watched his progress. Children jeered at him from a safe distance.

And a few people pitied him—were genuinely sorry. Dr. Brett, for example—the village practitioner—met Hewitt and paused, chatting with him for some time, and saying words of encouragement. Mr. Binks, of the tuckshop, had a cheery word of welcome for John—and Mr. Spence, the stationmaster, welcomed the prodigal home with a hearty handshake and the best of good wishes.

But these kindly-hearted people were few. John Hewitt knew the value of friendship, for those who would cheer him when he was down and out were indeed people of outstanding merit.

Police-constable Sparrow, the lumbering, thick-skulled village officer, eyed John with open suspicion, and when John spoke to him he pulled himself up to his full height, and said that Bellton "warn't no place for tramps."

And John's search for work was a dismal failure.

He went into Mr. Sharpe's establishment, and the short-tempered ironmonger threatened to run him out with the prongs of a pitchfork unless he hurried himself. Mr. Sharpe, in bitter terms, declared that he had no use for gaol-birds.

Only with difficulty did Hewitt keep his temper. But he was not in a position to argue with Mr. Sharpe. A quarrel in the public street would be the worst possible calamity.

Everywhere he went he was sneered at and jeered at. At the first mention of work he raised a laugh, and was curtly told to go about his business. The majority turned him down as a waster and a failure. Even with Christmas so near—with the time of good will at hand—these people were not ready to give John Hewitt a chance. For even if they had had no work for him, they could at least have told him so in less sneering terms.

And at last, in the early afternoon, he returned through the village to his mother's cottage—a dejected, slouching figure. All the spirit seemed to have been knocked out of him.

The rebuffs and the sneers had done their evil work. The courage had been knocked out of this man, and he felt almost ashamed to return to his mother. But she, at least, would sympathise with him. And on the morrow he would go to Bannington. It was a pretty big town, and he wouldn't come home until he had found a job of some kind.

Upon the whole, he was glad he had tried in the village. For he had learned who were the kindly people, and who were the hard-hearted. It pained him that so many people he had known in his boyhood should turn against him with this bitter, jeering spirit.

But it was the way of the world—and John Hewitt had knocked about a good deal, and knew that he could expect little else. Certainly, he had had dreams of receiving different treatment in his own village. But now. It was the same, all the world over.

He was approaching Pelton's Bend, and had come within sight of the row of cottages which sheltered Farmer Holt's employees, when a man came in sight through a gateway, trundling a wheelbarrow. He was Tom Belcher, one of Holt's labourers.

Tom put his wheelbarrow down, and waited for John to come up.

"Darn me, boy, you ain't altered much!" said Tom Belcher. "I heard as you'd come back. Glad to see ye, Jack. I'll warrant your old mother was pleased, hey? A lonely soul she's been, these past years!"

"Yes, Tom, I've come back for good," said John. "You haven't changed, either. Still working on the old farm?"

"Ay, working on the old farm," said Tom heavily. "There ain't naught else for a man."

"How's old Holt—any better than he used to be?"

"Wuss! Ten times wuss!" said Tom, with a frown. "As mean as they make 'em, and it ain't no wonder there's all this talk about goin' off the land, an' findin' a town job. It's a good thing there ain't many farmers like Mr. Holt."

"Why don't you leave him, and get another job?" asked John.

"'Tain't so easy as it sounds, m'lad," replied Belcher. "Wot work could I do, at my time o' life? There's other farms, I dessay, but they got their own men. I'm here, and I got to stick here. Some folks say I'm lucky to 'ave work at all. Mebbe they're right," he added. "Times is mortal hard these days."

"They are, and that's a fact," said John slowly. "I've tried——"

"Hey! Get ye about your work, ye lazy good-for-nothing!" roared a voice, jarringly interrupting the conversation. "And think yeself lucky I don't give you the sack."

Tom Belcher, with a scared look, picked up his barrow. Farmer Holt appeared from the gateway, and strode up. The big, bullying farmer stared John up and down, and a sneer came to his thin lips.

"So it's you, eh?" he said harshly. "I'd heard ye'd come back. And it seems ye ain't got onything better to do than stop my men from workin'. Clear away from here, you lazy, worthless scamp!"

John flushed.

"I was only having a few words with Tom——"

"I don't want to hear no lip!" roared the farmer. "I pay my men to work—not to talk to you! And don't come asking me for work, because I don't need wasters and tramps!"

"You needn't worry, Mr. Holt.—I wouldn't demean myself by applying to you for a job," said Hewitt quietly.

"Ye insulting scallywag!" shouted Holt, raising his stick. "Don't ye dare to answer me back, John Hewitt!"

"I will if I choose to, Jeremiah Holt!" snapped John.

"Why, you—you——"

Slash!

The farmer, enraged, brought his stick down across John's shoulders. It was a heavy, brutal blow, and John staggered. The attack had been utterly unprovoked, for from the very start the farmer had been the aggressor.

And John Hewitt was not a coward and a weakling. He had put up with insults and with sneers, but he would not put up with blows. Hot with rage, he recovered himself and leapt forward.

Crash!

His clenched fist struck Farmer Holt full in the neck, and Holt reeled over, and measured his length in the snow. Tom Belcher stood by, nearly scared out of his wits. He went to assist his master up, but Holt cursed him roundly, and sprang to his feet.

"Let me warn you, Mr. Holt, that I'm not a man to——"

John's words were cut short by a bellow from the farmer. He was gazing down the lane. P.-c. Sparrow was hurrying up—the constable having just turned the corner in time to see John's blow. He had not seen the attack which Farmer Holt had made.

"Hey, Sparrow—Sparrow!" roared the farmer. "Come ye here!"

The constable came up at a lumbering run, full of importance.

"I give that man in charge for assaulting me!" shouted Holt thickly. "Do ye duty, Sparrow, and arrest him!"

"Ay, Mr. Holt, that I will!" said the policeman. "I saw him—and he ain't got no chance!"

John Hewitt had gone pale, and he turned quickly to Tom Belcher.

"Tom, haven't you got anything to say?" he asked. "You saw what happened——"

"I—I don't rightly know!" muttered Tom Belcher. "I was looking t'other way!"

For a second John's lip curled with contempt. Then his expression softened. He remembered that one word from Belcher in his favour would mean instant dismissal. The man was afraid. He had a wife and children, and if he lost his job on the farm, his plight would be serious.

"You've got to come along wi' me, my man," said Sparrow heavily, laying a hand on Hewitt's shoulder. "And no nonsense, neither. I saw ye strike Mr. Holt. 'Tain't no good denying of it."

"But Mr. Holt attacked me first!" shouted John angrily.

His protests were in vain, and two minutes later he was being marched off—under arrest.

And Handforth & Co., and Archie and myself, and a few other fellows, coming out of

the tuck-shop in the High Street, became aware of an unusual excitement. And we saw a procession coming up the village street. John Hewitt, firm in the grip of P.-c. Sparrow and under arrest! Behind the pair, a trailing procession of village louts, led by Lumpy Bill and Jim Potter. And jeering children in the rear.

John Hewitt's homecoming was not very triumphant.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS!

"SOMETHING," said Handforth, "has got to be done!"

He banged the breakfast-table with such force that the cups and saucers jumped. Several juniors jumped, too—particularly Archie, who received sundry splashes of coffee in his lap.

"I say! Dash it all! I say!" he protested. "Look here, laddie! It's a bit dashed thick when you cause large quantities of hot liquid to deluge the old nether garments! I mean to say, Phipps will be staggered when he learns!"

"I can't help your troubles!" said Handforth callously.

"Oh, but really——"

"Blow your coffee—and blow your giddy trousers!" roared Handforth. "What's going to be done about Hewitt? We can't let the chap stay in prison, I suppose? We've got to get busy!"

"Handy's right," I agreed thoughtfully. "And I've got a suggestion. We'll take a run into Bannington this morning, and visit the County Court. We'll see what's happened to the poor chap."

"That's the idea," said Reggie Pitt.

The other fellows approved. We were at breakfast in the Head's comfortable breakfast-room which had been set aside for our especial use. In spite of the fact that we were at St. Frank's, we were enjoying ourselves immensely. And we had made all sorts of preparations.

But just at the moment, Hewitt's troubles engaged our attention.

After seeing the poor chap marched off under arrest the previous evening, we had lost no time in making inquiries. We had even attempted to force Sparrow to give his prisoner up.

But the constable—who only made an arrest about once a year—was not going to be robbed of his prey. Besides, he informed us that Hewitt had committed a brutal and unprovoked assault.

It wasn't long before we learned the full truth. We got hold of Tom Belcher, and after we had promised him that we wouldn't repeat what he said, he told us that Farmer Holt himself had been the aggressor. Of course, if the case ever came before a magistrate, Belcher would be called as a witness. And the result would be a foregone conclusion.

But at the moment things were rather bad. Hewitt was in Bannington, and was to be brought before the magistrate that very morning. But in all probability he would be remanded until the police made further inquiries. We were pretty sure that he would be allowed to go, on the understanding that he would present himself when required. It was only a slight offence, after all.

But we intended going to Bannington to find out for ourselves.

There were one or two delays, however, and by the time we were ready to start Phipps turned up with some definite news. He had just learned on the telephone that John Hewitt had been remanded in custody. The case, in fact, had been put off until after Christmas!

This meant that Hewitt would have to spend Christmas in a cell. And his mother—after waiting so long to have her boy with her—seemed doomed to spend a lonely Christmas, after all. And her anguish was no doubt very great. For this was the crowning disgrace of all.

It was Farmer Holt's doing, of course; he had attended the court, and had made things very black against Hewitt—Sparrow unwittingly corroborating the lying story. The village constable thought he was doing his duty, but the very opposite was the case.

"Well, there's only one thing to do," I said grimly. "We've got to bail him out."

"Gadzooks!" said Archie. "Bail him out, what? That's rather a priceless scheme, when you come to think of it. Allow me to gather the necessary cash together. I'll wire to the pater——"

"My dear ass, there's no need to wire to anybody," I interrupted. "The bail won't be much—not more than fifteen quid, I bet. Hewitt isn't a forger, or a dangerous criminal. It's only a trivial offence."

And so, forthwith, we set out for Bannington.

We went by train, and arriving at the County Court, we had no difficulty whatever in bailing out the prisoner. The sum was ten pounds, and we collected this between us in less than two minutes.

Hewitt was brought to us after we had waited a few minutes in the ante-room. He was looking very flushed, and his eyes shone with new hope.

"Was—was it you young gentlemen who paid the money to get me out?" he asked, in a low voice.

"That's all right," said Handforth gruffly. "We're going to take you along for a feed now, and then you can have a shave and a wash, and pay a visit to the outfitters. Come on! This place gives me the pip!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "As a matter of fact, I've been feeling frightfully pipped for the last ten minutes. These white-washed walls, and so forth! I mean, it gives a chappie an idea that chokey isn't so dashed cheerful!"

Hewitt was overwhelmed with gratitude.

"I—I don't know what to say!" he muttered. "I didn't know what I should do—and I'm worried about my mother. It's good of you boys to believe in me—to help me like this. I—I shan't forget it."

"Don't be an ass!" growled Handforth. "Do you think we don't know Farmer Holt? The old scoundrel! My hat! I wish I'd been there to help you! We'd have pitched him into the ditch, and buried him in his own mud!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie, with emphasis. "Kindly drop all ideas that we are doing this as a bally pastime. It's a dashed matter of justice. Here you were, incarcerated in the old dungeons, and the poor old mater weeping like anything at home! I mean, it makes a chappie's heart jolt somewhat badly. We don't believe a word against you, dear old soul. Not a dashed word!"

"And we all agree with Archie," I said warmly.

We were somewhat embarrassed by John Hewitt's gratitude. And if we had needed any reward, we got it by one look at his flushed face and shining eyes.

And after he had had a shave and brush-up and was generally smart in appearance, we all went back to Bellton by the afternoon train. We insisted upon accompanying Hewitt—just as a lesson to these cold-hearted villagers who could do nothing but jeer.

We would show them that we were not snobs—that we were Hewitt's friends. And many were the stares of amazement as we progressed down the village street. Nobody had known that Hewitt was bailed out, and his swift return to Bellton was somewhat dramatic.

Our friendship for Hewitt was also another cause for astonishment. But the biggest sensation of all was brought about by a newcomer entirely. He was not exactly a stranger, for we had seen him once or twice during the past five or six weeks.

We had just got to the middle of the High Street when a superb limousine came gliding smoothly over the crisp snow. We stood aside, in order to let the magnificent car pass.

"Belongs to the chap who's just bought the Chase!" said Pitt. "Must be rolling in money, by the look of the car. Doyle is his name, I think. There he is—rolling in the cushions."

Somewhat to our surprise, the tall, distinguished man in the car suddenly leaned forward and gave an order to his chauffeur. The limousine came to a halt a few yards farther on, the chauffeur nipped down and opened the door, and Mr. Doyle alighted.

He approached us with an expression of interest on his kindly face. But he did not look at anybody except John Hewitt. And in the latter's eyes an expression of recognition was appearing.

"I may be wrong, but are you not the man who worked for me as valet in Sydney,

"Beggin' your pardon, miss, but this 'ere tanner ain't much good"! he said roughly. "Let's 'ave one o' them quid notes! An' look sharp about it, too! 'And over yer purse, or we'll lay you out!"

Australia?" asked Mr. Doyle, without beating about the bush.

Hewitt caught his breath in.

"Why, yes, sir," he said. "You're Mr. Howard Doyle, aren't you?"

"Exactly," said the other. "And you are Hewitt. Dear me! I hardly expected to see you in this out-of-the-way corner of England, Hewitt. And how are you getting on?"

"This is my own village, sir," said Hewitt. "My mother lives here."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Doyle. "Very interesting, Hewitt. Home for Christmas, eh? That's splendid! So we shall both live in the same village. It only proves, young man, how small the world is, after all."

Hewitt looked rather eager.

"Why, are you living in Bellton, sir?" he asked, a hope dawning in his eyes.

"I recently purchased Bellton Chase—the big old house just on the Caistowe Road," smiled Mr. Howard Doyle. "As a matter of fact, the house is ready for occupation, and I am holding a house-warming party on Christmas Day. By the way, Hewitt, you did not answer my question regarding your position. Possibly you have knocked about a bit since leaving Australia?"

"Why, yes, sir, a good bit," admitted Hewitt.

"And you have doubtless got a good position, eh?"

Hewitt made no reply.

"Ah, what is this?" said Mr. Doyle keenly. "Am I to understand by your reticence, Hewitt, that you are out of work?"

"Yes, sir," muttered Hewitt. "I've had some hard luck, sir."

By this time a crowd of villagers had gathered round, and were listening with unbounded interest. The very fact that this great gentleman talked to Hewitt so kindly was a shock. For Mr. Doyle was regarded as a kind of tin god. Since his advent in the village, Bellton had felt somewhat prouder.

"Dear me! This is very bad!" said Mr. Doyle, his voice full of sympathy. "Well, Hewitt, in Sydney you served me very well indeed, and it so happens that I need a valet at once. If you care to accept the position it is yours, and you may start your duties to-morrow, if you so wish."

Hewitt stammered incoherently, greatly confused.

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth. "I knew you'd come out on top before long, old man. Good luck to you!"

But Hewitt was looking very uncomfortable.

"I hardly know what to say, sir," he said. "I'd love the job, sir—better than anything in the world, because I shall be here, in my own village. But I can't accept, Mr. Doyle. I'm under arrest!"

"Good gracious! What on earth——"

Hewitt was not allowed to explain. Handforth started talking, and Pitt started talking, and I joined in. Between us all we soon told Mr. Doyle the exact truth, and explained how we had bailed Hewitt out. And we were anxious regarding Mr. Doyle's attitude. To our relief he burst into a laugh.

"Dear me! Quite a storm in a teacup," he chuckled. "So you were arrested for knocking Farmer Holt down, eh? A rank injustice, Hewitt! In my opinion, knocking Farmer Holt down was an excellent service to society! I have every reason to know the character of that arrogant ruffian."

"Then—then it's all right, sir?" asked Hewitt eagerly.

"As far as I am concerned, decidedly," laughed Mr. Doyle. "Have no fear about the police-court affair, Hewitt—I'll see to that. I'll put everything right. And, what is more, I shall not forget the kind-heartedness of these boys."

"Neither shall I, sir," said Hewitt quietly.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCHOOLBOY SANTA CLAUS!

BELLTON did not get over the sensation for several days.

John Hewitt had undoubtedly awakened the village with a jolt. He had returned broke, he had been arrested, but now he was the lucky possessor of the best situation in the whole district.

As valet to Mr. Doyle, he was practically in a gentleman's position. He lived in Bellton Chase, he dressed quietly and smartly, and his wages were very generous. He was, in fact, a person of importance in Bellton. But there were still sneers going about among the gossips, who prattled about the luck of good-for-nothing scallywags.

As far as we were concerned, John Hewitt became a mere memory. Mr. Doyle had returned the ten pounds that we had paid out for Hewitt's bail. For Mr. Doyle maintained that as he was Hewitt's employer, it was his business to look after that affair.

Besides, we had other irons in the fire.

Christmas at St. Frank's was going to be the very opposite to what we had expected. Instead of time hanging heavily on our hands, instead of having a dull holiday, we were thoroughly enjoying ourselves.

The fact that Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple were staying at the Moor View School made all the difference. For we came in contact with them frequently, and if the frost lasted we should have the pleasure of skating with the young ladies on the River Stowe. And we were getting up a party for Christmas night, too, and the girls had promised to attend.

On their part, they were preparing a party for Boxing Night—when we should have to be the guests. So, on the whole, we were not at all sorry that we had stayed at St. Frank's. Handforth, indeed, was in the seventh heaven.

But there was still another project we had on hand.

Christmas Eve, to our joy, proved to be a day of real Yuletide weather. Snow had fallen lightly in the morning, but towards evening it stopped, and the frost grew harder than ever. All the lanes were covered in a powdery whiteness, and the Christmas was certain to be an old-fashioned one.

Down at Pelton's Bend the occupants of the little row of cottages had made brave attempts to keep up the Yuletide spirit. The little cottages were gaily decorated with ample supplies of holly—which had cost nothing but the trouble of gathering.

Holt's labourers had managed to get just a few good things for Christmas—but very, very few. There would be no turkeys—no Christmas puddings. All the spare money had gone on buying cheap little toys for the children—some common sweets, and so forth.

The children of these poverty-stricken villagers were in the seventh heaven of delightful anticipation. For their school teacher had told them to look out for Santa Claus. He would come on Christmas night, and leave good things in their stockings.

And they had further cause for excitement, too.

For only that very morning decorated cards had been found under each door, cards bearing the words, "Look out for

Santa Claus to-night." The parents had wondered who could have performed such a trick. But the children were too young to question the authenticity of those cards. They gleefully told one another that Santa Claus himself had already been. And everything their parents said made no difference. Their faith was astonishing.

In all truth, Christmas was likely to be a bleak affair for these needy people—so humble and so poor. They were making the best of what they had. And could do no more than that.

And now it was just about bed-time—for the children.

In Joe Catchpole's cottage, the youngsters were reluctant to get undressed. They persisted in their story that Santa Claus was coming. And poor Joe hadn't the heart to tell them that there would be no Santa Claus this year. He and Mrs. Catchpole were heavy-hearted, indeed.

It was just the same in the other cottages, with slight variations. The children were all eagerness to be at the door—to watch for Santa Claus.

"Father Christmas is coming, mum!" the children kept saying. "We know he's coming! Oh, won't it be lovely?"

At last, in sheer desperation, the distracted parents insisted upon the children preparing themselves for bed. And it was just at this time that Joe Catchpole's eldest girl—Elsie, aged nine—rushed to the cottage door and flung it open. She stood there, listening intently.

"He's coming—Santa Claus is coming!" she cried gleefully.

"Elsie! Come back at once!" insisted her mother. "Don't be so foolish, child!"

"Oh, but mum, he's coming—listen!" said the child breathlessly.

In spite of themselves, Mr. and Mrs. Catchpole found themselves listening. The other children gathered at the door, almost too excited to breathe. And Joe looked at his wife, and their eyes were filled with wonder.

For on the clear, frosty air came the merry jingle of sleigh bells. And Santa Claus was popularly supposed to ride about in a sleigh, popping up and down chimneys with extraordinary facility.

Joe racked his brain—trying to think what that jingle was caused by. He didn't know anybody who owned a sleigh in that part of the village—and he was still more puzzled to know why a sleigh should come up this blind lane.

"Oooh!" shouted Elsie, her voice cracking with excitement. "Look, daddy—look! It is Santa Claus! Oh, I knew he was coming!"

By this time the doors of the other cottages were open, crowded with wondering children and parents. After the youngsters' insistence that Father Christmas was coming, the sound of these sleigh bells was significant.

And then a perfect scream of delight went up from childish throats.

For round the bend of the lane came an amazing spectacle. A great sleigh, laden with parcels and toys and turkeys and geese, and other things too numerous to mention.

The sleigh was gaily decorated, and four great torches were blazing. Father Christmas himself sat in front, driving his extraordinary steeds. For the sleigh was drawn by animals of every sort—a tiger, an elephant, a bear, a lion, and so forth.

The children raced out, shrieking with glee.

And Joe Catchpole and his wife and the other parents stood at their doors, flabbergasted at first—but quickly jumping to the truth. For they could see that the "animals" were boys wearing grotesque headpieces. They were drawing the sleigh with a will.

And Santa Claus, with his flowing white beard, and his picturesque costume—Santa Claus was a boy, too. Joe Catchpole turned to his wife, his face flushed and his eyes eager.

"Them St. Frank's young gents!" he whispered huskily. "Bust me, what'll they be up to next? I never did see!"

"God bless 'em—that's what I say," murmured Mrs. Catchpole.

With shouts and laughter the sleigh drew up in front of the first cottage. The attendants pranced up and down, to the intense joy of the children. and Santa Claus rose in his seat.

"All good children gather round!" he chanted in a deep voice. "Come and see what you have found! Christmas is the time for joys—so gather round, girls and boys!"

The children went nearly mad with excitement and delight.

And Father Christmas and his attendants proceeded to unload. Santa Claus himself distributed the toys and sweets to the children. And the attendants unloaded the Christmas feasts.

Big parcels of fruit and biscuits and jam and so forth—Christmas puddings, turkeys, and groceries in large quantities. The children received good toys, boxes of sweets, and other things that nearly sent them off their heads with the greatest joy they had ever known.

Never for an instant did the children suspect that this genial old man with the white beard and red face was not Santa Claus himself. They were completely deceived—as we had always intended. In the innocence of their little hearts, they believed that Father Christmas had really come.

And none of us would hear a word of thanks from the parents—we succeeded in smothering every attempt to get in conversation with us. For the children would jump to the truth if there was any talk.

And having unloaded at last, Father

Christmas got back into the driving seat, cracked his whip, and off went the sleigh to the jingle of bells—leaving those souls happy and joyous—with the certainty of spending the happiest Christmas of their lives.

"Went off like a dream'!" said Father Christmas.

"You bet!" declared the bear.

"I mean, everything is absolutely topping, and all that sort of rot!" remarked the tiger. "Of course, this dashed thing is frightfully uncomfortable, but what does it matter? Kindly be careful with the whip, Santa Claus, old thing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We went back along the lane, as happy as those whom we had helped. For there is absolute truth in the saying that it is better to give than to receive. We felt perfectly content with the world in general. And the money that we had collected together, to pay for the good things, could not have been spent in a better cause.

Pelton's Bend was not the only place we visited. Before coming there we had made a trip to one or two other poverty-stricken cottages. And now we went on our way to St. Frank's, where an excellent supper was being prepared for us.

I was Santa Claus, and I had no compunction about letting the other fellows haul me along. For on the crisp snow, the sleigh glided along without any apparent effort.

Just as we were nearing the school gates we met Irene Manners and Co. They gave us a warm welcome, and told us how they approved of our action. And we made final arrangements about the morrow.

But in spite of all our plans, events on the morrow were to turn out very differently to what we had expected.

CHAPTER X.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

"HEWITT is outside, Master Nipper, and would like a word with you."

Phipps made this announcement as supper was drawing to a close. We had enjoyed the meal as only those can who have gained a strong, healthy appetite by exercise in the open air.

And we had talked over the evening's adventures during the meal. There was a feeling of great satisfaction upon us all. And the announcement that John Hewitt was outside interested us.

"Bring him in, Phipps," I said promptly.

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "Dash it all, Phipps, what's become of your massive intellect? I mean, why couldn't you bring the dear old tulip straight in without all this frightful rigmarole?"

Phipps went off, and a minute later returned with John Hewitt—quite a new John Hewitt. He was smart, well-dressed, and spotlessly groomed. He looked exactly what he was—a valet.

"Sorry to interrupt you young gentlemen at a meal," he said apologetically. "I've brought a letter from Mr. Doyle."

"Who for?" I asked.

"For all of you, I believe," said Hewitt.

I took the letter and opened it.

"Well, I'm blessed!" I ejaculated, glancing up from Mr. Doyle's letter. "This is an invitation—to all of us."

"An invitation!"

"Yes—Mr. Doyle wants us to join the big house-warming party at the Chase tomorrow," I said. "It's going to be a fine affair, by the look of it. He wants us to turn up at about six—in good time for dinner."

We discussed Mr. Doyle's invitation, and were greatly interested to learn from Hewitt that Irene and her girl chums had been invited, too. In a way, that settled it. We told Hewitt to take word to his master that we should be delighted to accept, and would arrive in good time.

It's hardly necessary for me to say that Christmas Day was a huge success. We were a jolly light-hearted party. And the weather could not have been better. Hard frost, and a clear sky.

We spent practically the whole morning on the River Stowe, skating. The Moor View girls were there, two of their mistresses, to say nothing of Phipps, and numerous other people from the village. It was a morning of sheer enjoyment.

And then came a glorious Christmas dinner—which for the sake of politeness we called luncheon. Dinner, strictly speaking, would come in the evening, at Bellton Chase. But not one of us objected to Fatty Little's idea, and having two.

After tea, preparations were begun for the party. And, strict to the minute, we arrived at the Chase—a fine, handsome old house which had been recently completely renovated from top to bottom.

We were all in evening dress and felt particularly smart. And we needed to be, too. For Mr. Doyle's house-warming party was a swell affair. The house was an absolute revelation inside—sumptuously furnished, dazzling electric lights everywhere, and an air of quiet charm that could not be overlooked. Everything was in beautiful taste.

Mr. Doyle himself greeted us warmly, and it was a matter of great delight to us to find Mrs. Hewitt among the guests. Other villagers were there, too—Mr. Spence, the station-master, Dr. Brett, Joe Catchpole, Tom Belcher, and a few others. Mr. Doyle, apparently, was by no means a snob. It was Christmas-time, and he had extended his hospitality to the lowly as well as the rest.

And, in a way, this made the party all the more enjoyable. Hewitt was there, calm and quiet. He discreetly hovered in the background, unobtrusive.

And in due course we sat down in the beautifully appointed dining-room for Christmas dinner. The great long table, glittering with plate and cut glass, and gaily decorated with flowers and Christmas hangings, was filled to its utmost capacity. Everybody was laughing and chatting, and there was a "feel" in the air that gave promise of a joyous evening. One can generally tell by the atmosphere at a party whether it is likely to be a success or not. And there was not a doubt about this party.

All the guests had taken their places, and it was at this moment that everybody received a startling surprise. For instead of Mr. Howard Doyle taking his place at the head of the table, he stood smilingly aside.

And John Hewitt stepped quietly forward—changed for the third time. For John Hewitt was now attired in spotless evening dress, with diamonds sparkling in his shirt-front, and with the air of a master—not a servant.

There was an intense hush as he took his place at the head of the table. Glances of astonishment were passed from guest to guest.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Hewitt quietly. "You must forgive me for springing this dramatic little surprise on you. My explanation is a simple one, and I hope you will clearly see my own point of view.

"Mr. Howard Doyle is the gentleman who has been acting for me during the past five or six weeks—a famous London estate agent who has very kindly carried through the plan according to my original suggestion. For I am the owner of Bellton Chase, and everything it contains."

A little sob came from Mrs. Hewitt, but she controlled herself, and gazed up at her son with joy and amazement in her eyes. There were tears in them, too. But they were tears of happiness.

All round the table there were excited bursts of conversation. John Hewitt was the owner of Bellton Chase—the rich man who had come to the village! He was not down and out, as he had pretended to be, but wealthy!

"It was a whim of mine to see what reception I should have in Bellton if I returned apparently broke," continued Hewitt quietly. "I knew very well that if I appeared with money, I should find friends without number. The only way in which I could determine the true hearts was to appear as a broken-down waster. As you know, I did so, and it did not take me long to sift the genuine friends from the false. Ladies and gentlemen, Bellton Chase is my future home—the home I have prepared for my mother."

Here he was interrupted by numerous cheers.

"In many ways I have been an erring son," went on John Hewitt, when quietness was restored. "For years I neglected to write to my mother—I was overwhelmed with business activities in Australia, and I have returned a comparatively rich man. But that is no excuse for my neglect, and I stand before you now, penitent and sorrowful. In future I shall do my best to make up for the thoughtlessness of my former actions Everything that I can possibly do to atone, I shall do.

"I had purposely arranged the meeting between Mr. Doyle and myself in the village High Street—as a stepping stone towards this night's gathering. It was a fancy of mine to give you this little surprise."

Hewitt was not allowed to proceed.

He was cheered to the echo, and if there had been the slightest question of the evening's success, there was no longer any question now.

For this surprise had all the elements of a sensation. Mr. Doyle, instead of being the host, now became one of the guests. And Hewitt had found great happiness in giving his mother such a delightful Christmas box.

Her own happiness was complete. As for the little police-court affair, that was nothing—it would be settled in a few minutes once the real facts were told at the hearing of the case.

And in Bellton village there was consternation.

Those who had scorned John Hewitt felt very sick indeed. Farmer Holt, especially, was ready to kick himself. For it was one of his favourite plans to get on the right side of rich people.

But John Hewitt had done wisely. For he knew, without question, who were good friends to him and knew those who were false.

And so we spent Christmas—one of the jolliest and happiest Yuletides within our memory. The party was a great success. There were other girls present, besides Irene and Co. And with laughter, dancing and joyous Christmas games, the time sped all too quickly.

But now, although Christmas Day itself was over, the holidays were not. And before we took our departure from St. Frank's to spend a few days at Tregellis Castle, some other exciting events were to take place.

They were ghostly and mysterious—— But that's another story, so I'll finish up now by wishing everybody the happiest of happy Christmases.

THE END.

MY AMERICAN NOTE-BOOK

By the Author of our St Frank's Stories.

No. 3.—New York—The Subway.

AMERICANS who have visited London tell me that our famous Underground Railway and numerous tubes puzzled them so much that they were always in a hopeless muddle. Well, it is only fair to admit that the London tubes are somewhat complex—until you are familiar with them. But after gaining a thorough knowledge of the various systems, one experiences no trouble at all. My American friends, it is evident, did not persevere.

But it is not the aim of this little article to deal with the London Underground, but with the New York Subway.

The Subway is very akin to the District, being a railway laid only just below the surface of the main New York thoroughfares. And when I first used the Subway I was by no means certain as to whether I was going in the direction I desired.

It was some days before I got the "hang" of the system; but after that all was plain sailing. During my tour of America I took care to use all the popular vehicles of transport—'buses, street cars, electric railways, etc. A man may go to America and spend his time staying with friends, and riding about in their great saloon automobiles, and return to England practically no wiser. In order to see America properly you must live as one of the masses.

The Subway in New York is a very complicated affair to the newcomer. The signs over the station entrances "Up Town Trains" and "Down Town Trains" are extremely confusing—for the stranger doesn't know which is up-town or which is down-town until he has moved about a bit. There are no great signs, as we have in London, telling the traveller his exact destination.

There is the West Side Subway, running from South Ferry up-town to Harlem, the Bronx, and Van Cortlandt Park; the East Side and Lexington Avenue Subway, running to another section of the Bronx—this latter being a big up-town district.

There are other Subways to Pelham Bay Park, to Brooklyn, and other outlying suburbs. There is the Broadway Subway, the "Shuttle," and quite a few more lines. It will thus be seen that even the New York Underground is not excessively simple.

There are no tickets on the Subway. The fare is five cents, wherever you want to go. A short ride or a long ride—it makes no difference. The fare is five cents. You can get to Coney Island for this trifling sum.

You just walk into any Subway station, and you are faced by a turnstile—just the same as we have at the entrance of our big football grounds—and you drop a nickel—a five-cent piece—into a slot, and the turnstile is then free for you to pass through. When you emerge at your destination you just walk out. There are no ticket-collectors or officials. This system is only possible, of course, where there is a uniform fare for all distances.

They say that comparisons are odious, but even the Americans themselves—those who have been in London, at least—will undoubtedly admit that our Underground trains are far superior in general appearance and finish to those of New York. My first impression of the Subway was that the trains were very bare and common looking. The carriages are entirely of metal, and the interiors show absolutely no refinements, such as ornamentations and artistic panelling—as we see in our London trains. Upon returning to England, and taking a ride on the District, it was a sheer delight after the grimy, depressing appearance of the New York Subway.

One curious fact about the Subway is that smoking is strictly prohibited both on the trains, and on the platforms. The fine for any infringement of this law is excessively heavy, and the whole time I was in New York I only saw one or two people daring enough to smoke on the platforms. I never saw smoking in the trains.

To be perfectly fair, I must admit that the Subway is far ahead of the London Underground in two respects. Firstly, there are four sets of tracks, and in consequence there are regular express trains, stopping only at big, important stations. These expresses run every minute or so, side by side with the slower locals. They are extremely handy if you are in a hurry—as everybody generally is in New York.

The second reason New York is ahead of us in this—the trains run day and night. No matter how long you may dally at a friend's house, you can always be sure of getting a train home. The night service, naturally, is quite limited, but the very fact that you can get a train in the wee small hours is very handy indeed.

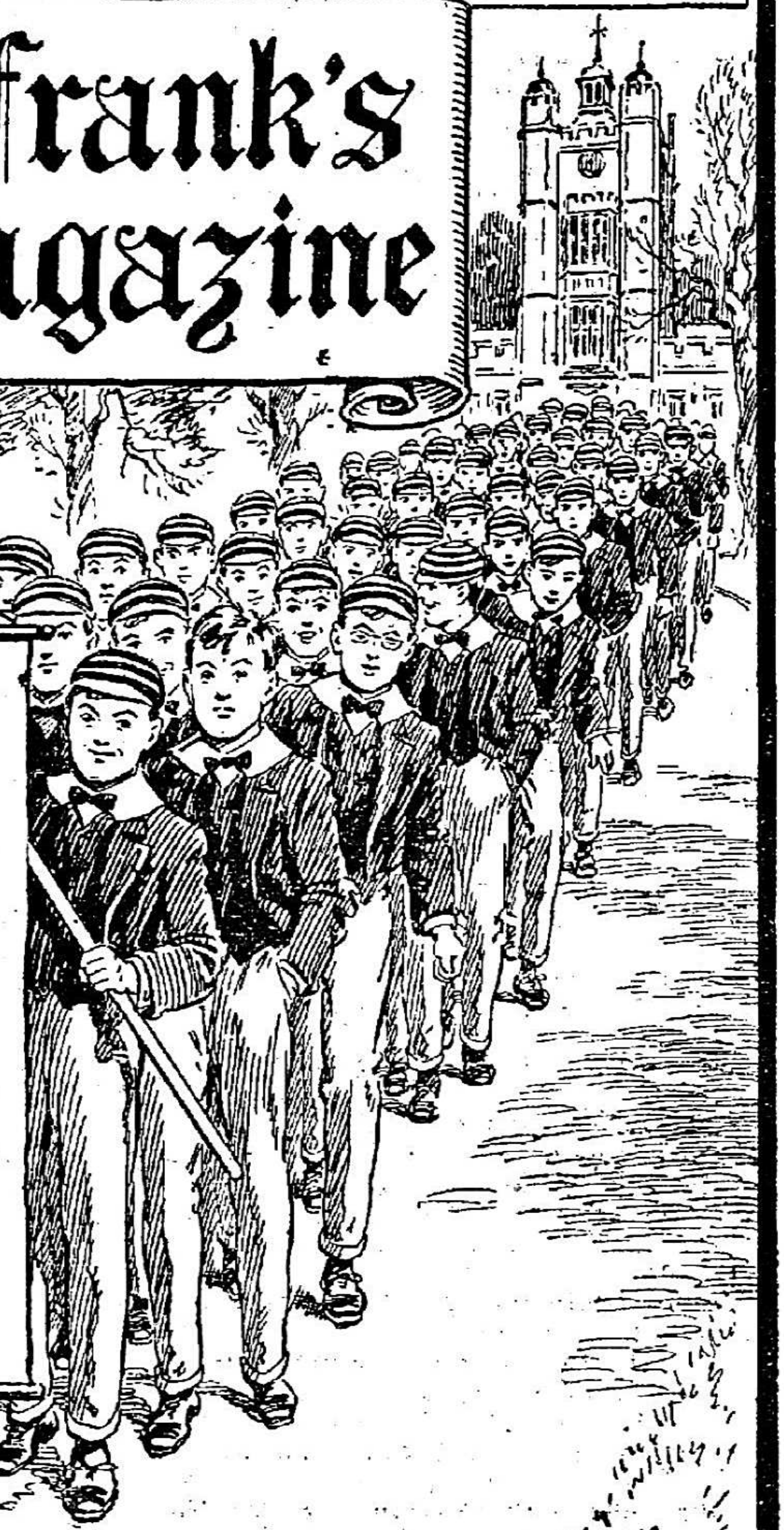
In my next article I will deal with the famous New York Elevated Railroad—known to Manhattanites as the "L" Road.

THIS WEEK!

SPECIAL XMAS No. OF THE MAG.!

No. 4. Vol. 1. Edited by Nipper. December 22, 1923.

St. Frank's Magazine



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A FEAST OF GOOD THINGS INSIDE!

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

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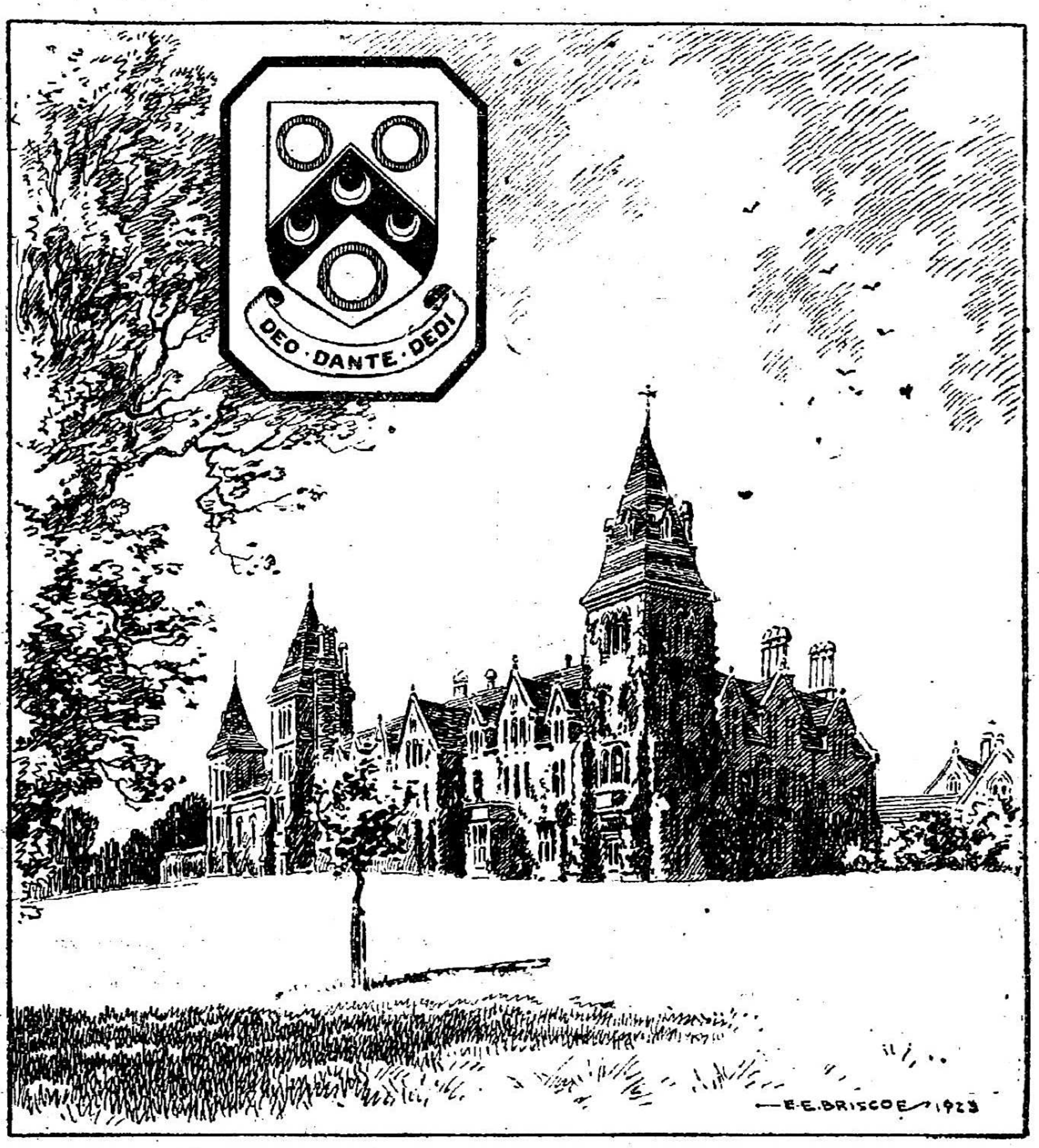
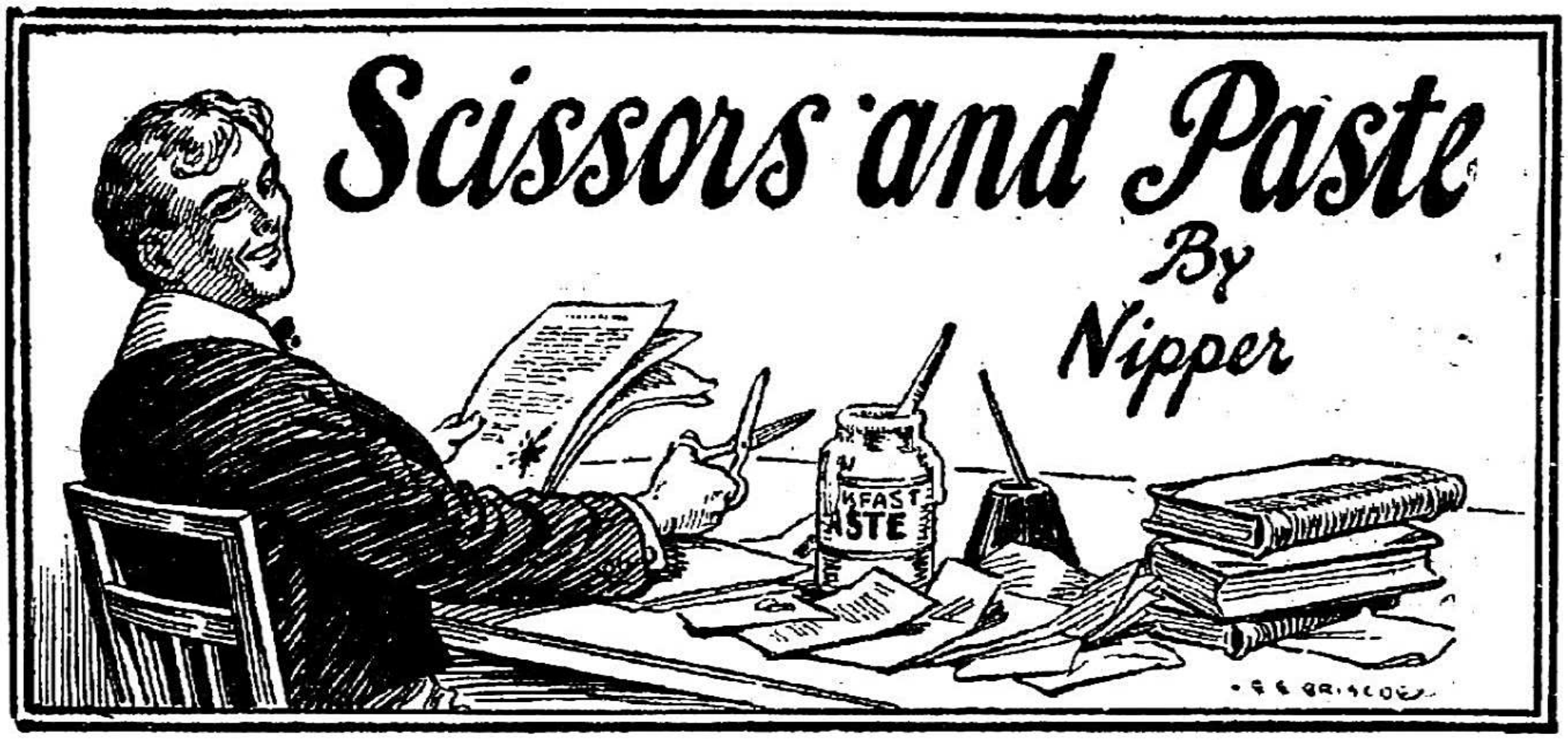


Charterhouse, London, the original site of the famous school bearing its name, was at one time a Carthusian monastery. In 1611 the property came into the hands of Thomas Sutton, who died the same year. In his will he endowed, under Letters Patent from James I., a hospital and school on the site of Charterhouse. The school was intended to educate forty boys, but in course of time it grew beyond the expectations of its founder, until to-day it has attained a high position among our leading public schools. The school was removed to its new home near Godalming, in Surrey, in 1872, and was then under the headmastership of the Rev. William Haig-Brown. The scholars at one time used to wear a distinguishing dress, but although this is now done away with, one house still retains for its scholars the title of Gownboys.



Editorial Office,
Study C,
St. Frank's.

My dear Chums,

By the time you read these lines most of you will be back in your own homes, helping to put up the holly and mistletoe, sending off Christmas cards, and generally getting ready for the festive season. Those few days before Christmas! What a lot there is to be done, and what a number of friends and relatives to be remembered! Then there are the shops, looking more alluring in their Christmas trappings than at any other time of the year. Who does not look forward to a visit to one of the big stores during Christmas week, and to feast one's eyes on the mechanical wonders of toyland? We fellows may be getting too big for these things, yet there are still many attractions in the toy department—still something of the old glamour left. For instance, there are some really smart indoor games which take more than a kid to play skilfully. One of them, a new "Footer" game—played like a game of chess, though rather more exciting—should appeal strongly to fellows like Pitt, De Valerie, and a few others. Of course, it is no use going to such places with only sixpence in your pocket, and it is much better to persuade the Pater or Uncle Ned to go with you.

A VERY HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO YOU ALL!

I cannot myself provide you with a Christmas dinner, without which it is generally agreed—and Fatty will bear me out in this—Christmas would be a very tame affair. But I can supply you with Christmas fare of another kind. And this consists of a feast of good things in the Mag., all specially written and illustrated for the Christmas Number. Unfortunately, I am unable to find room for all the Christmas contributions this week, and most of them are so good that I am holding them over for next week, when we shall have another Christmas Number, which, happily, will appear during Christmas week.

THE TRUTH ABOUT PITT'S FAIRY STORY

It may be of interest to you to know how "Fatty Little in Frightful Land" came to be written. It is the first time a fairy story has ever appeared in these pages. Yet I do not think it is very out of place. The idea arose from Fatty Little telling us about a queer dream he had had. Pitt immediately went off to his study, and the same evening this comic contribution arrived. He did not show it to Fatty, but I expect the fat one has seen it by now. I haven't heard what he thinks about it or of the opinion of the other chaps mentioned in it. Personally, it made me laugh good and hearty, as U.S.A. might remark.

WILLY HANDFORTH

Now I must say a word about our well-known contributor, Willy Handforth. You will notice that he does not appear in the Christmas Number. Very likely you would like to know why.

It seems that Mr. Suncliffe, who takes a great interest in the Mag., spotted young Willy's article, entitled "Mi Major." Now, although it amused the Form Master, he was not particularly pleased with the spelling, which he thought disgraceful and atrocious. He not only thought this, but told the young author so. And, in addition, he suggested it woulld be a good thing both for Willy and the Mag. if the former spent a little more time in perusing a spelling book. Whether Mr. Suncliffe's impositions will improve Willy's spelling remains to be seen. Certainly it has had the effect of reducing Willy's literary output, but not for long, I think.

Your old pal,
NIPPER.

CHRISTMAS IN LIL' OL' NEW YORK

By ULYSSES SPENCER ADAMS

YOU guys on this side of the water are sure snappy when it comes to doping out a crackerjack Christmas party. I'm handing it to this little island that it knows a whole lot about making merry.

But listen! If you want to know all about a real, honest-to-goodness Christmas, let me spill a few remarks about lil' ol' New York. Gee! The way that dear old dump gets busy around Christmas is sure an eye tonic for a stranger, I'll tell the world!

You've gotta show some speed around Christmas, or you'll sure get left. Say, the crowds along Broadway and Fifth Avenue, and in the big department stores, are just too tremendous for words. And you'll need to be a regular feller, I guess, and not make any objections when you're shoved off the sidewalk. Some guy is always liable to get busy with his elbows, because in those Christmas crowds you've just gotta fight for it—and then some.

Christmas Day itself is sure a nifty occasion. You can bet there's snow on the ground, and plenty of frost, and a clear, blue sky. Over in New York we don't have punk weather like you do over here. No, sirree! I'm handing out the information that we sure get the real dope in Manhattan.

Say, let me put you wise to what goes on. In the morning a whole bunch of folks promenade on Riverside Drive, Fifth Avenue, and the other swell boulevards. But I haven't told you a thing yet.

There's a kind of merry feeling in the air—sheer jollity, and nothing but. Then, after a swell luncheon, you probably take in a show, or go 'way out for a ride in the auto. Tea? Say, I guess not! Folks over in New York don't waste time on tea! I guess life's too short for that kind of fool stuff.

And then comes dinner. Oh, boy! I'm sure telling you that it's some dinner, too! Turkey with cranberry sauce! Creamed potatoes! Creamed carrots and creamed peas! Noodles with cheese! Lemon pie! Coffee cakes—snails! Aw, gee! Not real snails—just cakes. Mince pie! Orange jelly! Ice cream! Salted almonds! Say, my memory ain't good enough to remember half.

Christmas plum pudding? Well, yeah, I guess some folks eat the stuff, but the majority of New Yorkers don't fall for that bunk. And after the dinner there's sure a pile of fun. That's when the presents get handed around—real presents and fool presents. Get me? Some guy makes up a dandy parcel for his dame, and when she unwraps it the whole bunch laffs good an' proper. For you can bet that package contains some cute trifle, with a wise crack written on a label. Say, that's the real stuff for Christmas!

Some guy makes up a dandy parcel for his dame, and when she unwraps it the whole bunch laffs good an' proper.

And then, maybe, there's dancing—with the old Victrola doing overtime. And some of the bunch will take an another show, or go down town for a chop-suey supper, or a midnight cabaret show. Christmas night is something to be remembered in New York, you can take it from me.

Boxing Day? No, sir! There's no such thing as Boxing Day in America. When I first hit this island, and heard about Boxing Day, I kind of figured that it was something to do with prize fighting.

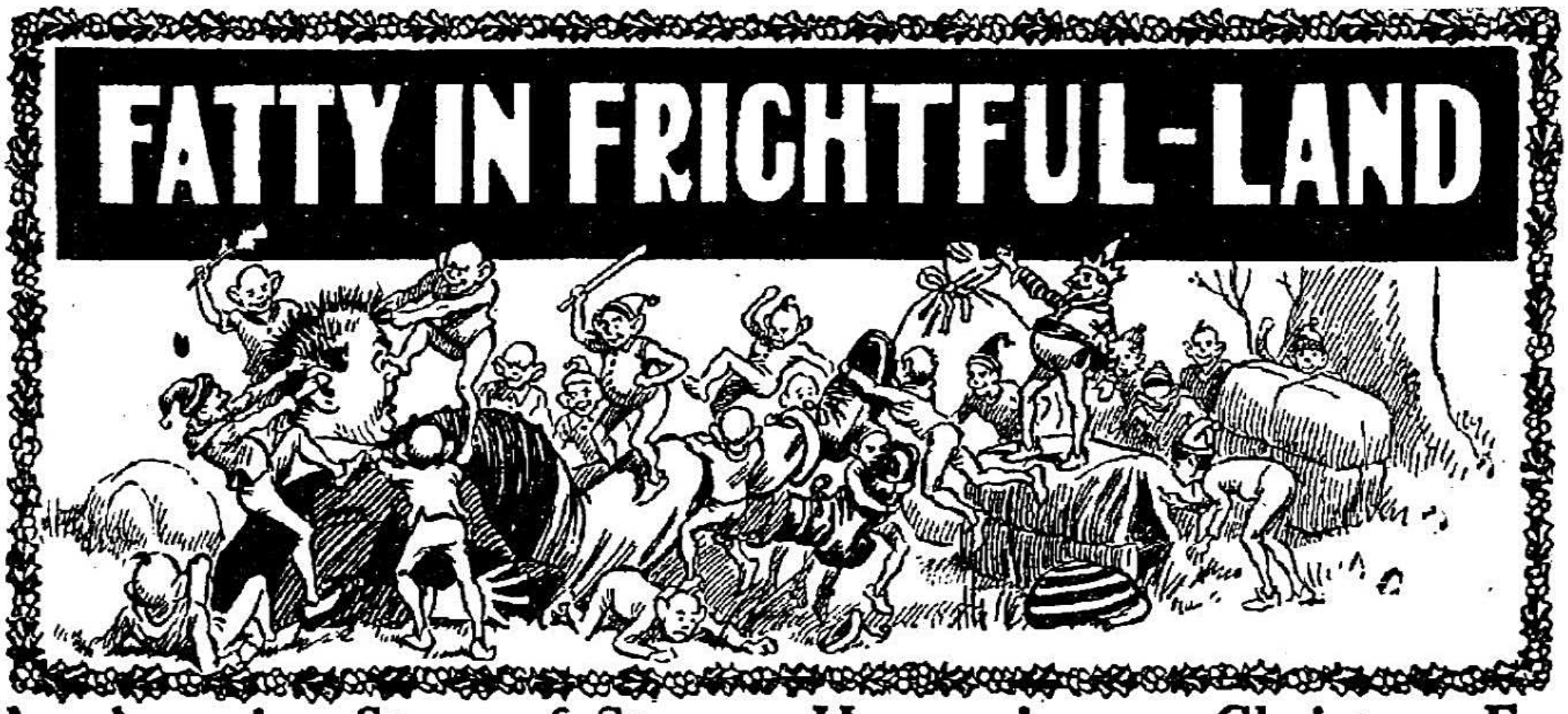
And, say, Christmas night is a swell occasion for the slum children, too. 'Way down town, in Madison Square, they have a swell Christmas tree, and you can bet there's a heap of fun. Folks get kind of dopey around Christmas, and the way they hand out bucks is sure a sight worth seeing.

And Prohibition don't mean a thing. It's sure a punk party that hasn't got a snappy supply of cocktails and highballs. There's enough liquor in New York on Christmas night to supply a small English city for half-a-year!

Say, what's that? You're telling me that the English Christmas is a sight better? Well, suffering cats! Can you beat that? Say, listen! You don't know nothing! Why, in New York——

(Thanks, old man, but I'm afraid there's no more space. Very interesting, I'll admit, but give me Christmas in London—every time!—Ed.)

FATTY IN FRIGHTFUL-LAND



An Amazing Story of Strange Happenings on Christmas Eve

By Reginald Pitt.

ONCE upon a time Fatty Little started to walk back to St. Frank's from Bannington.

That sounds a pretty poor beginning to a story, but I can't help it. All fairy stories begin like that. I know it doesn't seem to fit in, in this case, but there it is.

As I said before, once upon a time Fatty Little started to walk back to St. Frank's. He had been doing his Christmas shopping in Bannington, and was carrying all the things he had bought back to the College.

It's all quite absurd because as a matter of fact, Fatty Little goes home for the Christmas holidays like the rest of us. But you see this is just a fairy story.

He had bought a huge turkey, a couple of great puddings as big as his head, dozens of jam tarts, some boxes of sardines, a few tins of condensed milk, fifty sausages, three dozen sausage-rolls and a number of bottles of ginger beer. Also two loaves of bread, a pound of butter and two pots of jam.

That's absurd too, because Fatty Little could never have been able to pay for such a lot of food all at once. And even if he had he would never have been able to carry it. But I can't help that. This is my fairy story and there it is.

Fatty was staggering along the road to the College, bowed down under the weight of all these good things. It was evening, and quite dark. As he walked he whistled to keep up his spirits, and occasionally—about every half a minute or so—he ate a jam tart or a sausage to keep up his spirits.

It was a snowy, cold, dark, real old-fashioned Christmas, and the stars shone brightly overhead like they do in stories. And suddenly as he walked Fatty noticed right in front of him a hill.

Fatty's eyes goggled with surprise and he swallowed the jam tart he was eating. For as a rule there was no hill between him and St. Frank's.

"Gug-ug-gug-golly!" Fatty muttered, "I shall never get up that!"

A second after he had spoken he had reached the top! It was utterly amazing. And more amazing things followed. For it suddenly became broad daylight and Fatty saw in front of him a huge dark wood.

He took a few steps and immediately he was right in the middle of the great dark wood! There were trees all round him and he could only see a few yards ahead. Mechanically Fatty began munching a couple of tarts and stared about him.

"Ooooo! Wooooooop!" he suddenly shouted.

He had received a very sharp pinch in the calf of one of his legs. It was immediately followed by more pinches. Both his legs were pinched and Fatty hopped into the air with the pain.

"Yar-oooh! Wow!" he roared.

Then he looked down towards the ground and he yelled even louder.

For he saw swarming about the ground hundreds of tiny little pigmies. They had pointed ears and horrible expressions on their little faces. And they were all engaged in biting and pinching his fat legs. Some of them even hit with small sticks. It gave him such a start to see them that he dropped all the tuck he was carrying except a big bag of cream puffs and jam tarts.

"Gug-gug-g u g r e a t pup-pup-pup-pancakes!" he bellowed trying to hop out of the way of the little creatures who were still pinching and biting him.

But he could not get out of their way and his eyes goggled with fright. He started to run vaguely down between the trees but he had not taken more than a few steps when he fell over. There he lay, sprawled upon the ground and the

pigmies started biting him and pinching him and pulling his hair and ears.

"O pup-pup-pup-please dud-dud-dud-don't do it!" Fatty wailed. "Oh, help me. Hellup!"

As he cried out, he heard quick footsteps approaching, and he sat up and looked round. A most extraordinary figure was coming. It was the size of a boy but was covered in soft feathers and had a beak like a bird. But stranger still it wore an eyeglass.

"Hellup me!" pleaded Fatty.

"Do the rescue stunt and all that rot so to speak," spoke the queer apparition, and flapped its wings. "Save the jolly old ship as it were. Dashed awk. and all that, if I may say so. I mean to say, where am I and what not?"

"Why it's Ar-ar-archie!" stuttered Fatty Little, and managed to scramble to his feet.

"Absolutely old fruit," replied the other.

Fatty stared at the Removite and his eyes nearly fell out of his head. But Archie was smiling as though he enjoyed looking like a bird.

"I'm bewitched and what not," he explained. "A jolly old magician did this so to say Turned me into a sparrow and all that Absolutely!"

Fatty was going to reply when he saw that all the little pigmies had run away. They had taken with them all his tuck except the bag of tarts which he still held in his hand.

"But what are we to do?" he asked. "It's awful! All my tuck's gone."

Archie did not reply. Instead, he suddenly flapped his wings. And in an instant he had flown on to the branch of a tree from where he began to whistle. Then he flapped his wings again and disappeared up into the sky.

Fatty ate a tart and mopped his brow. It was too frightful. He could not understand it The only thing to do seemed to be to try and find a way out of the wood. He walked along as quickly as he could, when suddenly he heard a terrific noise as if an army of men were rushing towards him through the trees. The next moment Fatty stood still trembling with alarm. For straight ahead came the strangest animal he had ever seen.

It was a great big monster with a terrific head and a body like a great alligator. Out of its mouth and nose came fire and smoke. It was, in fact, a dragon!

And round its neck was strung a large open box of cigarettes!

Upon its back were three St. Frank's juniors. The next moment Fatty recognised that they were Fullwood and Co.

"Gug-gug-good heavens!" gasped Fatty, in terror.

He could say no more. For the dragon reared up above him and then caught him up quickly and put him on his back in front of the other juniors.

"Now you're going to get it," he heard Fullwood remark. "You're going to be taken to the dragon's lair and be eaten! He does that with all boys he meets. He lives on schoolboys. He has them for breakfast!"

"How do you know?" asked Fatty.

"Because he's eaten us," returned Fullwood, and Gulliver and Bell roared with laughter as though it was a joke.

Before Fatty could reply, they had reached the dragon's lair. It was quite empty. And the floor was covered with cigarette ends. The dragon sat down on the floor and lighted a huge cigarette. Fullwood and Co. climbed off his back and lighted one each.

It was a great big monster, with a terrific head and a body like a great alligator. Out of its mouth and nose came fire and smoke! It was, in fact, a dragon!

Poor Fatty did not know what to do. Fullwood offered him a cigarette and a box of matches. Fatty never smoked. But he struck a match.

Hey presto!

There was a sudden explosion and the dragon turned into a ball of green fire! Fatty did not wait to see what became of Fully and Co. He dashed outside faster than he had ever run in his life. He did not stop running till he saw in front of him a great cavern under a rock. He approached cautiously and peered in.

The cave contained three people. One was a great giant, with a huge club, the others were two tiny dwarfs, no bigger than tablespoons.

An extraordinary sight met his eyes. The cave contained three people. One was a great giant who sat on a small chunk of rock and nearly filled the cave. In his hand was a huge club. The others were two tiny dwarfs no bigger than tablespoons.

But the weirdest part of all was that all three were dressed in Eton suits. The giant had quite grown out of his, and his legs and arms stuck out of sleeves and trousers ludicrously, while the two dwarfs had had to roll up their sleeves and trouser legs to make them fit. One of the dwarfs was cleaning a huge boot, which evidently belong to the giant. The other was at work with an old broom.

"My—my hat!" roared the giant in a voice of thunder. "Are you never going to get that boot ready? I never saw such a chap. Call yourself a friend!"

"All right Handy," came a little squeak of a voice.

Fatty's eyes goggled again. For he realised that the three figures were those of Handforth and Co! And on the rough wall was chalked STUDY D. It was utterly weird. Fatty swallowed three more tarts and then went into the cavern.

"What on earth are you chaps doing?" he gasped.

The giant Handforth leapt to his feet, waving his club.

"Don't ask potty questions," he roared. "We didn't do this. Any idiot could see what's happened. We've been bewitched. It's just like Church and McClure to get so tiny they can't help me to get away."

"It isn't our fault," bleated Church, throwing down Handy's boot. "We didn't ask to get bewitched. And, after all, you're big enough to carry us away from here."

"Where am I to carry you to?" asked Handy. "Tell me that."

"Anyway, you brought us here," put in McClure. "So you ought to get us away."

"Just like you two," Handforth replied bitterly. "You get yourself into a silly hole like this and expect me to get you out of it. Oh, it's all right for you two," he added. "You're so small that you can live on a grain of wheat a day. But what about me. I'm starving. And every time I stand up I hit my head on the roof—wow, yarooh!"

As he spoke there came a terrific crash. Once more Handy had hit the ceiling with his head. He sat down hastily and rubbed the top of his cranium tenderly.

Just then there was the sound of footsteps rushing towards the cavern. And into the room poured a number of juniors headed by Nelson Lee, who wore a fez and was waving a fishing rod.

"Boys!" he shouted. "We've killed the dragon and we're going to toast him for tea."

Even as he spoke he rushed at Fatty and caught him on the end of his fishing-rod. The hook fastened in his coat collar. Fatty shut his eyes. He felt himself swung through the air. Then with a thud he landed on something soft. When he opened his eyes it was to see the familiar surroundings of the Remove Dormitory! And he was lying on his own bed!

Thus ended his Christmas Eve in Frightful Land!

THE END.

E. Sopp's Fables

By Edgar Sopp of the Fifth

No. 4.—The Fable of the Boy who Feasted Not Wisely, but Too Well.

THERE dwelt in the City of London in the Kingdom of England a Noble and Honourable family.

Now this Noble and Honourable family was called by a somewhat strange Surname, for while Father, Mother and Son were of Ample Girth, they all Answered readily to the Name of Little. It was one of Life's Little Ironies, as the Tailor said as he Dropped his Goose on the Cutter's Pet Corn.

It came to pass that the Time of Feasting and Revelling came round—that Period of the Year dear to Young Hearts known as Christmas. And, lo, the Son of the House returned from the Vast Seat of Learning where he was being Educated. And Great was his Mother's Dismay when she Discovered that her Son's latest Outfit of Clothing was already showing Ominous Signs of Bulging at the Buttons.

Observing these Indications himself, the young man's Sire resignedly ordered New Suits and So Forth from the Big Stores—for it would be Asking for Trouble to allow the Boy to sit down to Christmas Dinner in a Suit that was Already Unstable.

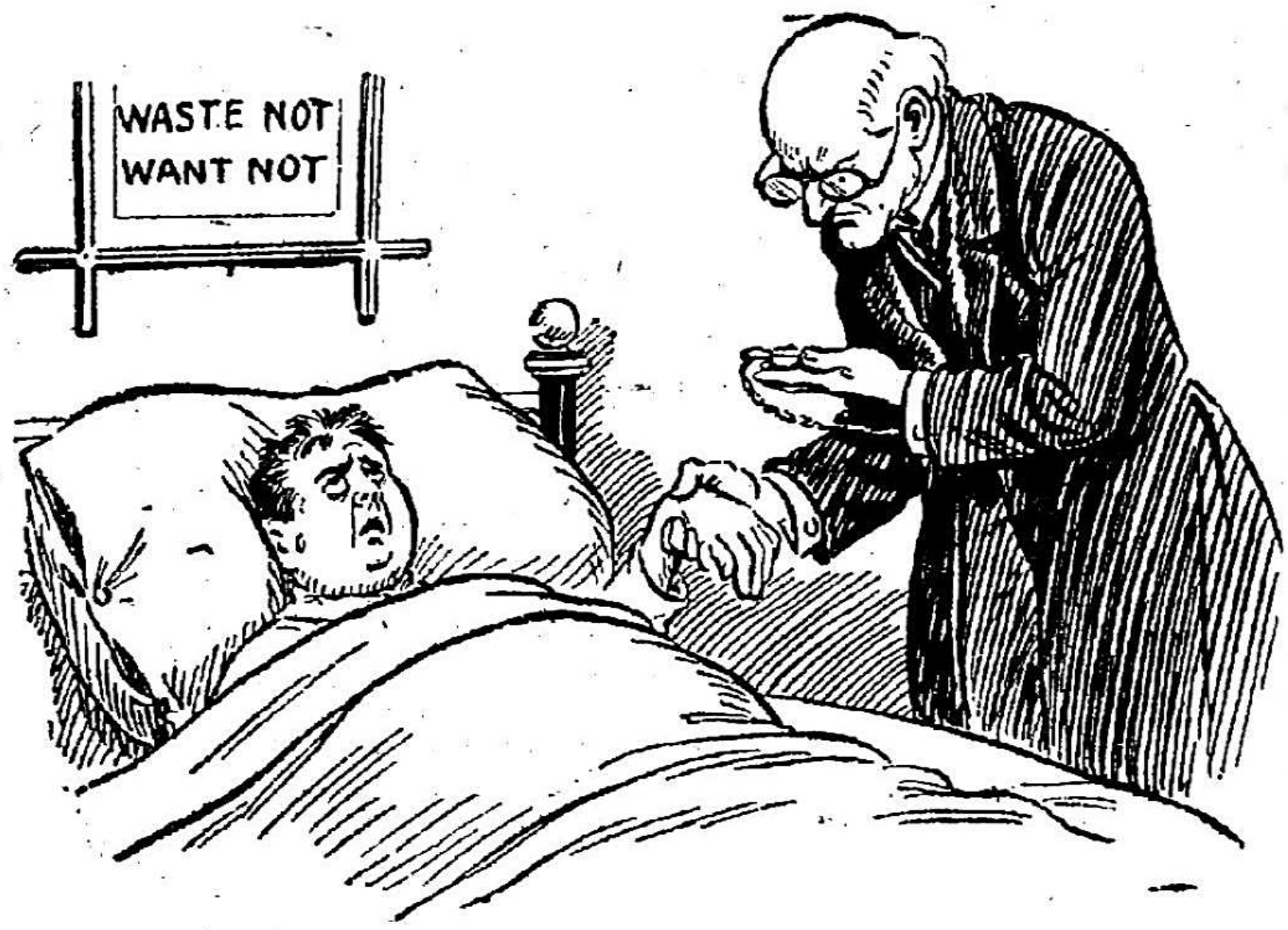
And Fatty Little, as the Youth of Ample Girth was called, gloried in the fact that his People were preparing a Gorgeous Spread for Christmas. With Open Glee he observed the Arrival of Various great Parcels, and he took care to Personally Examine the contents of Sundry Cupboards. His satisfaction was Great when he found that the Spread was to be even more Lavish than he had supposed.

And it happened that Many Guests were invited. There was to be Dancing, Singing, Christmas Games, and, in fact, High Jinks of all Sorts. The great Festive Holiday was to be Observed in the True Spirit of Jollity.

The great day came, and the Youth of Ample Girth was up Betimes. And, behold, he Broke his Fast—a very brief Fast, it is true, since he had Surreptitiously partaken of Oranges and Mince Pies and Walnuts in the Night Watches—he Broke his Fast, let it be repeated, with Such rich and widely assorted Fare that his Parents gazed at him and Wondered.

Not only did Fatty partake of Eggs and Bacon and Cheese Omelettes, but he was responsible for the Disappearance of Numerous Pork Pies, Ham sandwiches, Cakes, Pastries, and other Delicacies too varied to Mention. He arose from the Breakfast Table considerably Larger than when he had sat Down. And even his New Attire was Creaking under the Great Strain.

But, lo, this Youth of Ample Girth seemed to Thrive on the Gargantuan diet, and he



A Learned Physician was Called In, and he looked at Fatty, saying that it was a severe attack of Biliousness, brought on by Ill-considered Feeding.

amazed All and Sundry by making Anxious Inquiries concerning Luncheon before a single Hour had passed.

Between meals he Haunted the Buffet—and he Haunted to such good purpose that the Buffet required constant and continual Replenishment. And it came to pass that towards the Close of the Day the Youth of Ample Girth was beginning to look shiny and Somewhat Bloated—which, under the Circumstances, was not surprising.

And Fatty was dismayed because his Appetite for Chocolates was Dwindling. He no longer packed his Face with Preserved Ginger and Crystallised Fruits and Marzipan Fondants. These Choice Morsels failed to Tempt him as of Yore.

With Considerable alarm he partook of Lemonade, Ginger Pop and Various Fruits in a Vain Attempt to quieten the Sinister internal Rumblings with which he was Beset.

For it was fast approaching the Dinner Hour, when the Prize Turkey would be carved, to say Nothing of the Plum Pudding and other Wondrous Things. All Day had Fatty been thinking of Christmas Dinner. But now that the Great Hour was at hand, he felt a Strange and Unaccountable distaste for Food.

Even the Revellings planned for the Evening interested him Not. The Yule-Tide games, the Dancing, the Concert—all this had lost its interest. And it happened that the Youth of Ample Girth was Attacked by Great and Horrid pains within him.

Ere the gong boomed out for Dinner, Fatty was groaning upstairs. And great was the To-do. His Parents, becoming aware of the Trouble, visited the Boy's bedchamber, and soothed him and did much to Cheer him Up. But Fatty was gradually turning a Greenish Tint.

And, behold, he declared that the very Idea of Christmas Dinner was Horrible to him, and that the Festivities were a lot of Rot. And much of the good food that he had Eaten was ruthlessly wasted. Fatty dispensed with it violently, and was Glad.

But still his pains continued, and a Learned Physician was Called In, and he looked at Fatty, saying that it was a severe attack of Biliousness, brought on by Ill-considered Feeding.

Thus the Long-Awaited Christmas Dinner was partaken of without the Youth of Ample Girth gracing the Board. He lay upstairs, rolling This way and That, his interest in Life having Entirely Ceased. His one Desire was to Die.

And so it came about that Fatty did not recover until Christmas was over, and almost Forgotten. He had missed everything. He had not joined in the jolly party at all, but had Languished in Agony in his Chamber.

MORAL: IF YOU MUST GORGE YOURSELF ON CHRISTMAS DAY — BE CAUTIOUS!

PAINFUL PARODIES

PERPETRATED
By
Clarence Fellowe.

GOOD KING WENCESLAS

(Modern Version).

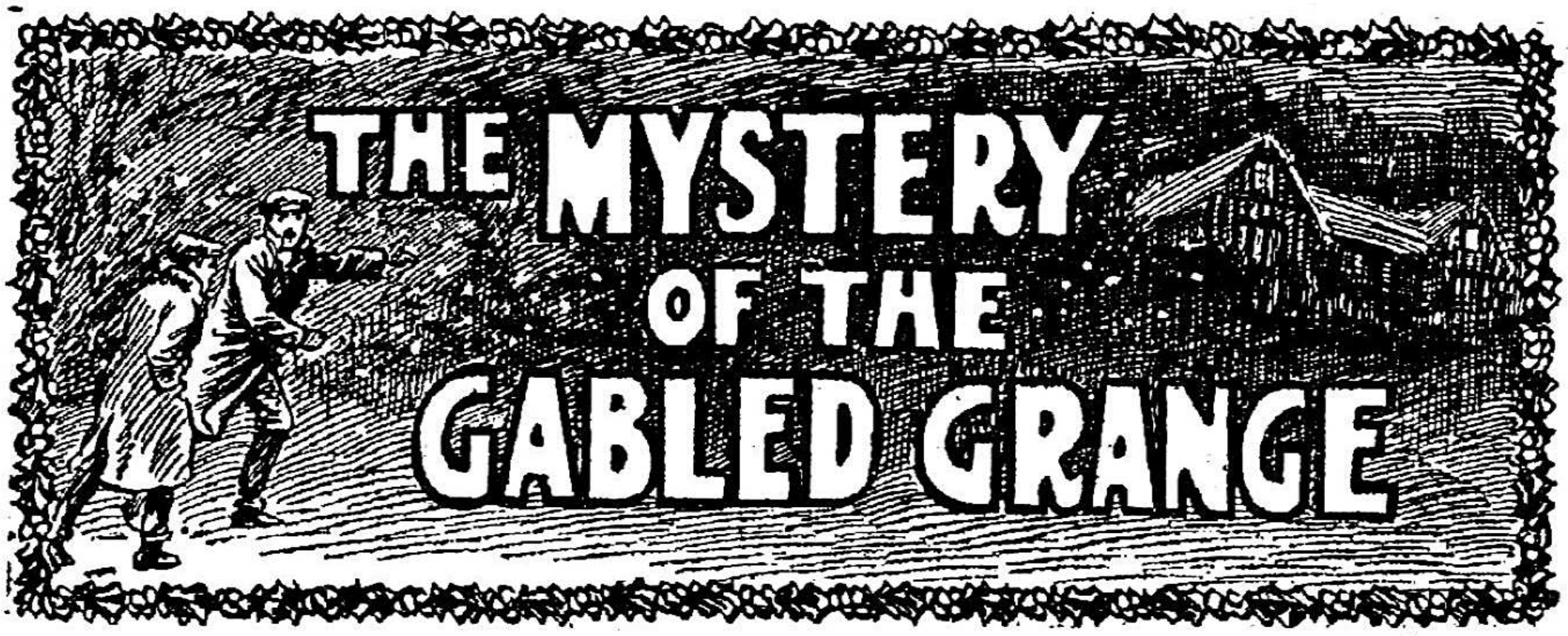
Good King Wenceslas looked out
From his spirit haven,
When the Christmas crowds were out
And the dark was raven.
Densely hung the fog that night,
And the mud was cruel,
Churning 'neath the shopping fight
Thick as any gruel.

Wency had a mind to see
How Old Time had altered,
Christmas, nineteen-twenty-three,
And his spirit faltered.
For the rush and tear scared he,
High his fears were mounting,
As upon the throngs stared he,
Great beyond all counting.

Up and down the Strand he went,
Unseen, silent, ghostly,
And in Selfridge's he spent
Full an hour—well, mostly.
Then on down the Old Kent Road,
After that to Wembley.
Over London Town he rode,
All one vast assembly.

And he smiled as back he climbs
To his own world saintly;
He had found that modern times
Differed only faintly
From those days, now long ago,
When he helped the peasant,
And it pleased him much to know
Good Will lingered present.

Thus we crave your pardon true
For these paltry verses,
And we're sure you will not rue
If some fun disperses.
Good King Wenceslas had seen
Through his travels rangeless,
Though long centuries lay between,
Human hearts are changeless!



A Christmas Story in Two Parts.

By Cecil de Valerie

IT was Christmastime at St. Frank's, and we all gathered round the blazing log fire in Dr. Stafford's drawing-room. As everybody knows, a dozen of us were staying at school for the holidays, and we had had a pretty decent time, all round.

And just now we had one of those odd hours when we were taking our leisure round the fire, and somebody suggested telling a story. I think it was Tommy Watson who trotted out the idea.

"Nipper's the chap to tell a yarn," declared Pitt. "Come on, old man. Let's have one of your exciting adventures with Nelson Lee. I'll bet you've got all sorts of yarns stored away."

But Nipper said that he couldn't remember any Christmas adventures, and invited somebody else to get busy. This was an occasion for telling a regular Yuletide story—not a detective adventure.

"Well, who knows one?" asked Tommy Watson, looking round.

"I can remember something that happened three or four years ago," I said slowly. "That was a Christmas incident, too. It happened to my Uncle John and me, while we were going from Ipswich to London, one snowy Christmas Eve——"

"That sounds the right stuff," said Pitt nodding. "Is it a real story? Plenty of mystery and excitement, and all that?"

"I don't know about mystery and excitement," I replied. "But it really happened, and that's something. You fellows have asked for it, and if you don't like it you'll have to lump it. Don't blame me."

"All right, we'll take a risk," said Nipper. "Go ahead!"

And I settled myself comfortably in my chair and lived again through that night, three years ago, which had proved so thrilling.

. . . . . .

It was Uncle John's idea, in the first place, I commenced. We were trying to get to London for a party that my people were preparing for Christmas Day. Of course, I was a bit of a kid then—merely a fag, in fact. I had been staying with my uncle in Ipswich for a few days before Christmas, and he'd arranged with my people to take me home.

Well, Uncle John had an old crock of a motor-bike. He made out it was a spiffing machine, and swore by it. Anyhow, late in the afternoon of Christmas Eve he decided to go up to London on the old jigger, taking me along in the sidecar. Said the trains were too crowded, or something, and he liked going by road, anyhow.

I was as keen as mustard, you can bet. I hadn't had many rides in a sidecar, and it struck me that the scheme was tophole. At that time I didn't know what a packet of trouble we were in for.

Uncle John declared that we should be in London by half-past seven easy. He's one of those chaps who always look on the bright side. He never allows any time for punctures, or mishaps of that kind. And although he's a bit of a duffer when it comes to anything mechanical, he's such a jolly good sport that you can't help liking him. He's only about thirty-five, even now.

Well, we started all right. Got to Colchester in good time, and Uncle John was as pleased as Punch. Yelled to me, as we were leaving Colchester, that we were ten minutes ahead of schedule, and that the old bus was going fine.

Naturally, he'd only just said the words

when the back tyre went off with a hiss that could have been heard a mile. A whacking great flintstone went clean through the giddy cover.

But do you think Uncle John minded? He just shoved the brakes on, jumped off, and grinned.

"Oh, that's nothing!" he said cheerily. "We'll have it mended in five minutes!"

"But there's a tremendous gash in the cover, uncle," I pointed out.

He just told me not to grouse, whipped out the repair outfit, and in two or three minutes he was yanking the tyre off. His five minutes turned out to be nearly forty. And by the time the tyre was repaired and pumped up, snow was coming down like the very dickens.

I suggested going back to Colchester and taking a train. And Uncle John sloshed me on the ear, and told me not to be a young idiot. With his usual optimism he reckoned that we should make up for lost time long before we got to Chelmsford.

He said the snow didn't matter a bit. What was wrong with snow, anyhow? It made the journey all the more seasonable—and a good bike wasn't affected a bit. Unfortunately, Uncle John's machine wasn't a good bike.

If I told you all the trouble we had you'd grin. Somehow, these motoring misadventures always seem funny years afterwards. At the time they're not at all humorous.

It'll give you some idea of things when I tell you that we limped into Chelmsford at about half-past nine. We had two more punctures, the sparking-plug had gone off duty, and the carburettor had got filled up with grit. Just imagine us effecting repairs in a blinding snowstorm, and with a wonky acetylene headlamp. Even the giddy lamp went wrong.

But Uncle John's one of those chaps who never gives in. In the war, you know, he won the D.S.O. for being obstinate. Wouldn't get out of a corner when there was no hope left, and by a miracle he held the position. His commanding officer said he was a hero, but we all know it was just his pigheadedness.

And it was just the same now. With the old bike fairly groaning at every yard he wouldn't think of giving in. Nearly bit my head off when I mentioned that Chelmsford station was not far off. He said that we'd started by road, and we were going to finish by road, even if we didn't get home till three o'clock in the morning.

And so we started out again from Chelmsford, after a garage chap had tinkered about with the lamp and the carburettor, and made them twice as bad as they were originally.

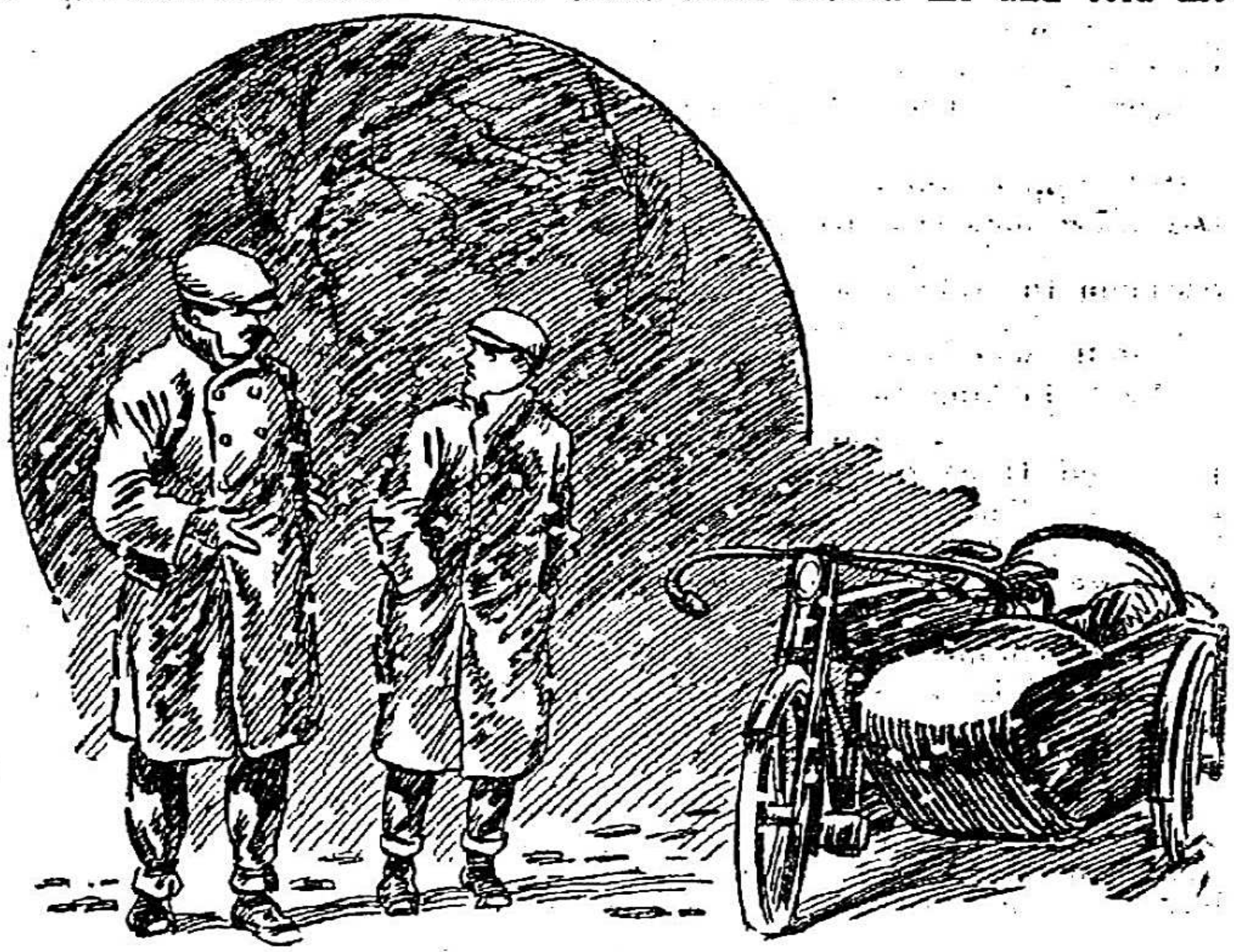
And you've got to remember that it was snowing like old boots now—coming down in clouds. It was as much as Uncle John could do to keep to the road. I was tucked away in the sidecar and fairly comfortable, because it had a windscreen and a hood, and there were plenty of rugs.

I couldn't help feeling sorry for uncle. He knew jolly well that it was a dotty idea; but that made no difference to his determination. And he sat on that old saddle, blue with cold, half blinded by the snow, and coaxing the engine to do its utmost.

I don't know how many stops we made. I kept on falling asleep, and every time I woke up Uncle John was either on his knees in the snow or else pumping up the back tyre. And it came as a bit of a shock to me when I asked what the time was. Eleven o'clock—an hour from midnight!

And we were still only about eight miles from Chelmsford. The snowstorm had turned into a hurricane, and the night was just about as wild as it could be. I was dog-tired and properly fed-up.

Then Uncle John roused me and told me



"It's all up, young 'un," said Uncle John ruefully. "Can't move another yard! The oil froze, or something, and the engine seized."

"Go away!" he said wheezily. "You can't come in here; I won't have you!"

to hop out. I was a bit dazed from sleep, but I did as he told me. And then I saw that he wasn't looking quite so cheerful.

"It's all up, young 'un," he said ruefully. "Can't move another yard! The oil froze, or something, and the engine seized. I think all the bearings must be melted away, and the connecting-rod is sticking through the bottom of the crankcase."

"Then—then are we going on by train, uncle?" I asked.

He gave a feeble kind of grin, and told me not to be a blithering young ass. How many trains did we expect to catch at this hour—nearly midnight? And where was there a station, anyway?

I couldn't answer his conundrums, and just yawned. And I could see that in spite of his pretended cheerfulness he was jolly worried. Who wouldn't be? There we were, stuck on the open road in the middle of a snowstorm, miles from anywhere.

It was absolutely impossible to spend the night there. It might have been all right for me, in the sidecar, although that would have been pretty ghastly. But Uncle John couldn't squat on the saddle, with snow coming down by the bucketful. We simply had to get a move on.

And so we started walking through the snow, Uncle John assuring me that we'd soon come to a village, and then we could knock up an old inn and get a bed-room. In the morning, he declared, we'd go back for the old jigger and get home long before lunch. He was such an incurable optimist that even the seized engine didn't scare him.

By this time I was thoroughly awake and pretty fresh, too, because I'd slept for hours. But uncle was properly whacked. He had had a rotten time, and nearly went to sleep as he walked along. Once or twice I just pulled him up as he was about to investigate the ditch.

And then, just as I was beginning to resign myself to an all night walk, we spotted a light through the trees. Uncle John gave a whoop and bucked up wonderfully. I told him that the place was probably a private house, and not an inn at all. He said it didn't make any difference. Any shelter was better than none.

It wasn't long before we discovered that the house was an old gabled grange—one of those quaint old houses that you can always find along country roads—set back a bit, and surrounded by trees.

We marched up the short drive, hammered at the door, and after about two minutes it was opened by a queer looking old man. He was a bent, wizened old stick, in a dressing-gown and slippers.

"Go away!" he said wheezily. "You can't come in here; I won't have you!"

Uncle John was pretty indignant, and pointed out that we were stranded, and that I was almost dropping with exhaustion. Of course, that was a fib, because he was the exhausted one.

Anyhow, the old man, after growling and grumbling, told us to come in. He said that he couldn't offer us much hospitality, but there was a bed-room upstairs that we could use if we liked.

Well, we got in, and that was half the battle. The old man didn't offer us any supper, and not even a hot drink. He took us straight through a bare, draughty hall, and led the way up to an icy bed-room. Then he left us.

Uncle John just ripped off his outer clothes, tumbled into bed, and was sound asleep in two minutes. But I was a bit scared, and I don't mind admitting it. There was something eerie and mysterious about the old house.

I simply couldn't get to sleep. I could hear all sorts of funny creakings and rust-

(*Continued on page iii of cover*)

By Reginald Pitt

IT is rather a good idea to make Christmas Eve a fast day. By doing this, you wake up on Christmas morning with an appetite that will do full justification to the Yule-tide fare. Care must be taken, however, not to overdo this, or you might get ill. And that would be tragic.

* * *

Never eat more than three helpings of Christmas pudding—that is, if you can get it. You may enjoy it at the time, but too much pudding is liable to make you heavy and dull, and you lose your appetite for other delicacies.

* * *

On no account offer to sing the latest comic song unless you have thoroughly mastered the words. It is most embarrassing to get half-way through the first verse and then dry up. Instead of the company laughing at your song, they laugh at you. And that, of course, is rotten.

* * *

When playing musical chairs, be sure that all the chairs in use are the ones that were borrowed from next door. This game, whilst being enjoyable, is nevertheless detrimental to the chairs, and you should never use your own.

* * *

Be cautious in the use of ginger wine. Although stimulating, this particular kind of wine makes your throat hot, and as a result you have a strong desire for lemonade and other soothing drinks. And the lemonade may be exhausted before the ginger wine, which would be fatal. You would have to drink water.

* * *

Always use a nut-cracker when cracking nuts. Do not use the crack of a door. This method is effective, I will admit, but brazil nuts are liable to make severe dents, and landlords are particular about this sort of thing. It is also expensive to use false teeth—they may crack first.

* * *

If you *must* get dressed up like a nigger, and black your face, use burnt cork. Black-lead will serve the purpose, and give a shiny effect, but it is a fearful trouble to remove. And remember, when kissing Aunt Jane good-bye, that the black comes off. She may object to appearing in public with smudges.

"It is a good plan, when asked to recite, to tie your hands behind your back. By doing this there is no danger of wringing out the corner of your jacket, which, giving an impression of washing clothes, looks very bad.

* * *

When playing snow-balls, always throw towards your neighbour's house. Even the softest snow-balls may crack a window, and it is a foolish thing to risk your own. Besides, Father may object.

* * *

After the Christmas festivities are over, and you are retiring for the night, it is a good scheme to get Uncle Joseph to give you a helping hand upstairs—that is, of course, if Uncle Joseph is capable of doing so. Never spend the the night coiled up on the parlour floor; you will wake up very stiff. Quite apart from this, it doesn't look nice.

THE MYSTERY OF THE GABLED GRANGE

(Continued from previous page)

ling sounds. And then, after about twenty minutes, it seemed to me that there were stealthy footsteps out in the passage. There came a louder creak than ever, and I started up in bed, shivering.

And I gave a gasp of sheer fright when the door slowly opened and the bent old man appeared holding a candle. He put his face round the door and looked at me with an expression of evil intent that absolutely made my blood run cold.

And something that the old man clutched in his hand caught my attention. I crouched there, utterly transfixed with horror.

(To be concluded next week)

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