GRAND CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY NUMBER!

The Nelson Lee Library 2D

& St. Frank's Magazine

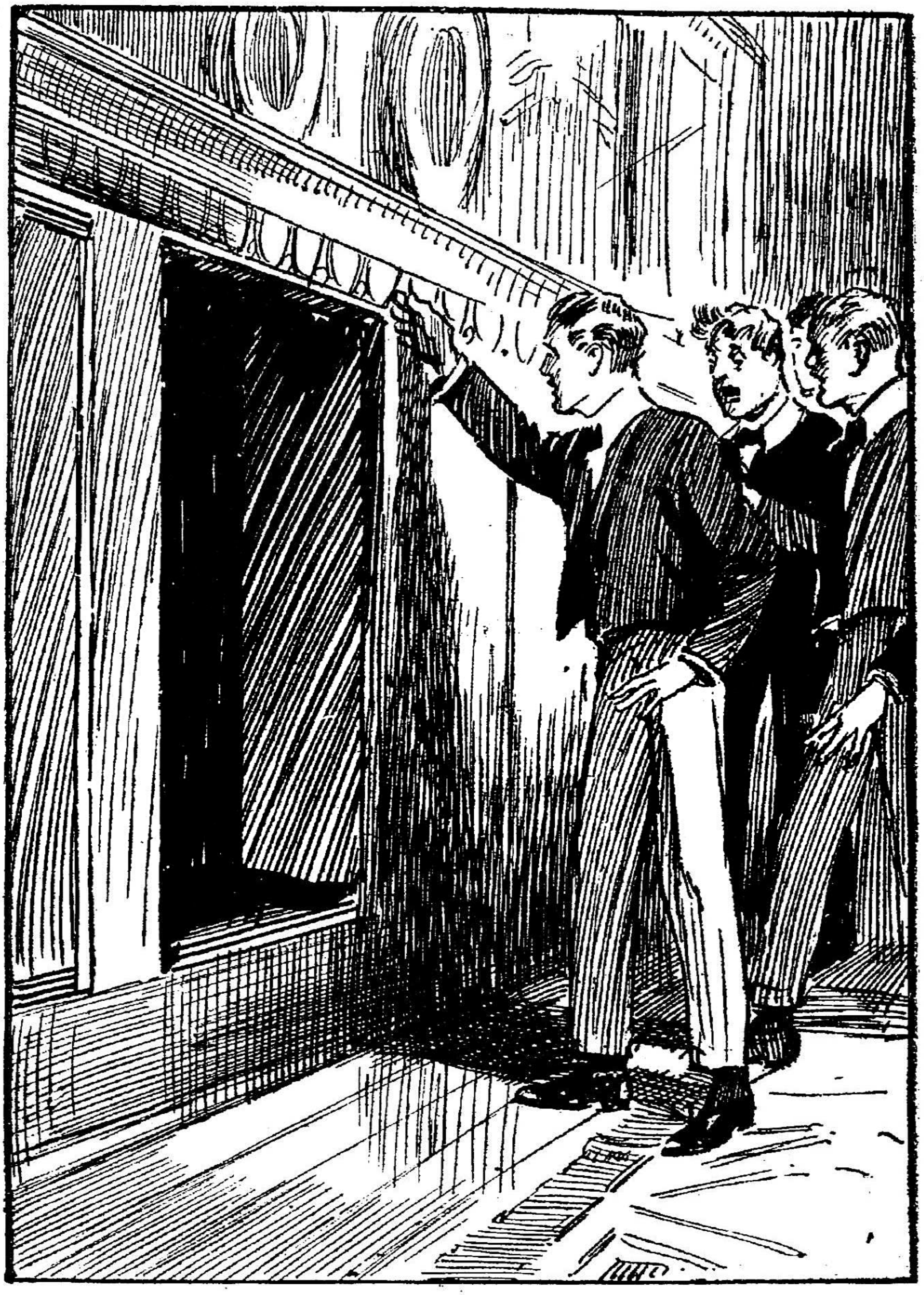
THE GHOST OF ST. FRANK'S!

This Week's Grand Story.

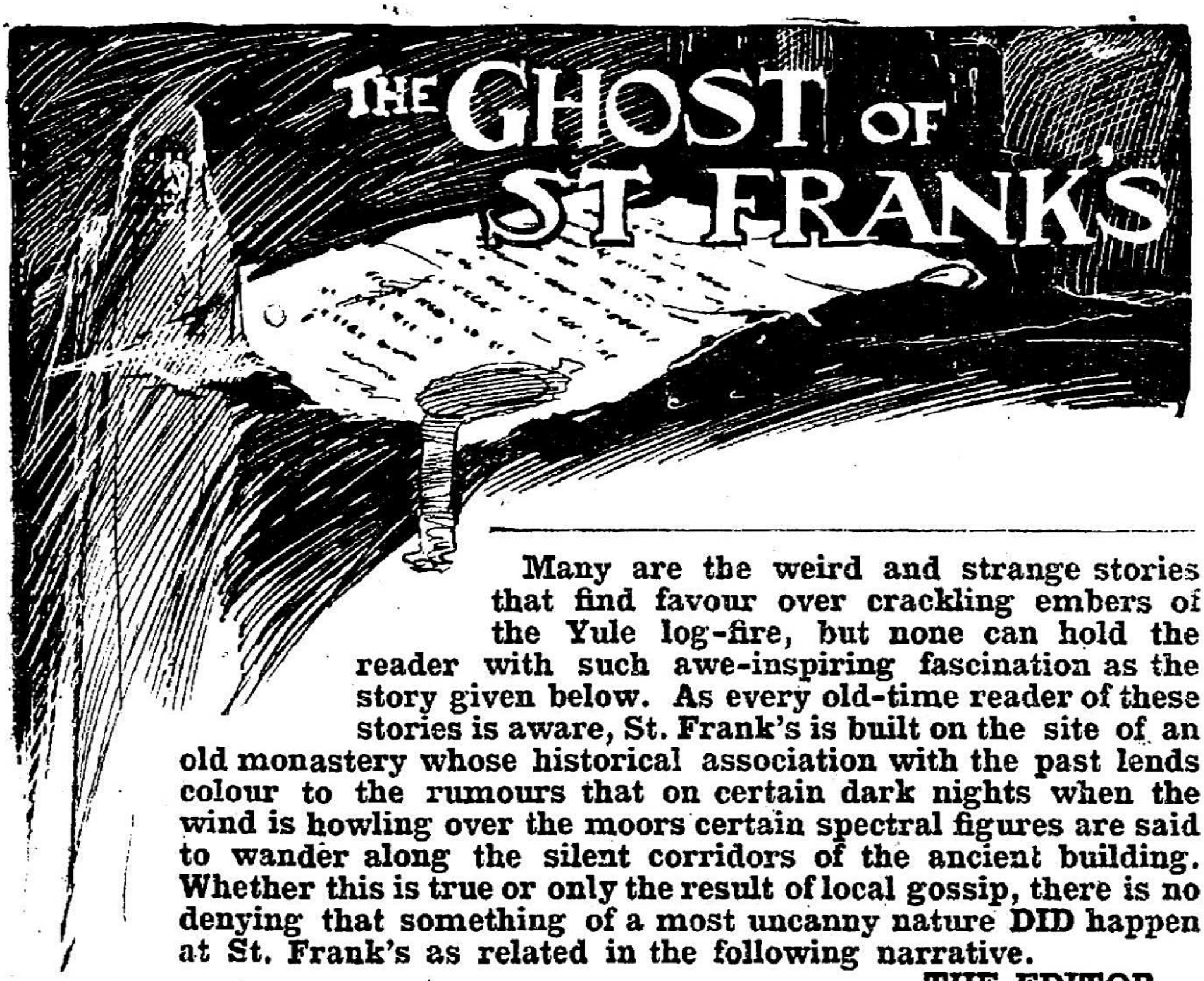
It was there, at the top of the staircase, and slowly, with a strange, uncanny motion, it commenced to float down the stairs.

(An exciting incident from this week's story.)

No. 447. EVERY WEDNESDAY. December 29, 1923.



A dull click sounded, and the next moment the whole panel flung inwards. A black, inky cavity was revealed.



Many are the weird and strange stories that find favour over crackling embers of the Yule log-fire, but none can hold the reader with such awe-inspiring fascination as the story given below. As every old-time reader of these stories is aware, St. Frank's is built on the site of an old monastery whose historical association with the past lends colour to the rumours that on certain dark nights when the wind is howling over the moors certain spectral figures are said to wander along the silent corridors of the ancient building. Whether this is true or only the result of local gossip, there is no denying that something of a most uncanny nature DID happen at St. Frank's as related in the following narrative.

THE EDITOR.

The Narrative Related Throughout by Nipper

CHAPTER 1.

SPOOKS AND SPECTRES.

SIR JASPER stood transfixed with horror.

"The ghost had appeared in front of him. And as Sir Jasper clutched at the oaken balustrade, the ghost slowly and deliberately advanced down the stairs towards him. It was a hideous apparition, with great, sightless eyes, and yellow fangs instead of teeth.

"It reached out one bony arm and clutched Sir Jasper by the shoulder. Then, with a demoniacal screech of supernatural fury, the ghost enveloped Sir Jasper within its grasp. And in the morning Sir Jasper was found there, at the foot of the stairs—dead!"

Jack Grey finished solemnly, and selected a chocolate.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Rotten!" grunted Handforth. "If Sir Jasper was dead in the morning, how could he tell anything about the ghost? I suppose there must have been a witness on the scene? Or perhaps he wrote a note with his dying breath?"

"I should think a pencil would be better," said Reggie Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ass!" snorted Handforth. "I don't mean he wrote with his breath; nobody could do that unless they breathed on a piece of glass."

"That's one way of writing a few words with your dying breath," I grinned. "But we don't want to go into an argument about that. Jack's yarn wasn't so bad. Nobody ever clears up mysteries in ghost stories. Authors look upon spook yarns as easy game."

"Unless they've got to provide an explanation at the end," grinned Pitt. "Then it comes a bit hard, of course. But these mystery stories about all kinds of occult happenings, with no threads drawn together at the finish make me tired. What's the time?"

"Only nine o'clock," said De Valerie. "Shove another log on."

Handforth nodded.

"That's the idea," he agreed. "Now,

I've got a ghost story to tell. I remember reading it in a magazine six months ago. Something that really happened—and pretty blood-curdling, too."

"Go ahead!" I invited.

"Look here, let's tell some cheerful yarns—something to make us laugh," put in Church, with an uneasy glance over his shoulder.

"Don't worry—that's what we're going to get," I said blandly. "You've forgotten that Handforth's going to tell the ghost story."

The great Edward Oswald was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he did not hear my insulting remark. And we all drew our chairs a little closer to the blazing log fire and prepared ourselves for something bloodcurdling.

Christmas was not over yet, and we were still at St. Frank's. In a day or two we should pack our grips, so to speak, and make our way to Tregellis Castle, to spend New Year with Sir Monty and his people.

There were fourteen of us altogether, including Willy Handforth. And we were by no means sorry that we had stayed at St. Frank's for the Christmas holidays. We had had a very enjoyable time, as I have already related elsewhere.

And now, in the late evening, after supper, we had gathered in a big semi-circle round the cheerful log fire in Dr. Stafford's drawing-room. The Head was a brick, and had given us the full use of many of his private rooms. He, himself, being away.

Indeed, there were very few people left in the great school. Just ourselves, Phipps, Mrs. Poulter, the matron, and a handful of servants. Never before had we enjoyed such liberty. The very novelty of this was alluring.

Somebody had suggested telling stories, and the idea had met with general approval. It seems the correct thing to do, somehow, to gather round the fire at Christmastime and spin yarns.

Only two soft electric lights were gleaming, leaving the greater part of the big drawing-room in subdued shadow. And the flickering light of the blazing, crackling logs had a very pleasing effect.

Pitt had told a football story, and Handforth had followed this by relating some anecdotes. Unfortunately he had got them somewhat mixed, and used the point of one joke for the wrong story. In the end he got so mixed up that he had to give somebody else a chance. And Jack Grey had obliged with the stirring yarn of Sir Jasper and the ghost.

This paved the way for other ghost stories. All the juniors told themselves that nothing on earth would make them nervous. They were made of sterner stuff than that. Besides, Christmas was the right time for telling ghost stories. They were seasonable.

And so, fortifying ourselves with roasted chestnuts, chocolates, and other dainties, we lounged comfortably back in our chairs, and waited for Handforth to turn our blood to water.

"Now, lemme see," began Handforth musingly. "This affair happened on the Yorkshire moors, one cold, dark winter's night, when the snow lay feet thick on the road. And it so happened that a weary wayfarer was trudging along, trying to get to Norwich before dark."

"That's a good beginning, anyway," remarked Pitt. "Sounds very promising."

"Don't interrupt, ass!" said Handforth severely.

"Sorry, but I was only going to ask how any chap could expect to walk from Yorkshire to Norwich before dark—especially when it was night already," replied Pitt. "Still, we won't quibble at trifles."

"It may not have been Norwich; what do I care?" snapped Handforth. "This chap was going somewhere, anyhow, and he didn't want to get there before dark. What I meant was, he was anxious to reach a wayside inn before supper."

"Sensible chap!" said Fatty Little, nodding.

"Before supper," repeated Handforth, glaring. "There wasn't a cottage in sight—just the bare, flat landscape. And it was so dark, the weary traveller couldn't see an inch in front of his face. And then, all at once, he caught sight of something a hundred yards along the road."

Handforth paused dramatically, and frowned as he observed the grins.

"Anything funny?" he asked sourly.

"I suppose the chap put spectacles on?" asked Grey. "You said he couldn't see an inch in front of his face, and then——"

"Ah! That's just where I've caught you," said Handforth triumphantly. "This thing that appeared a hundred yards away was capable of showing itself in utter darkness. It appeared as a blob of weird light at first, and the traveller paused, staring at it curiously.

"And as he watched his flesh began to creep. His hair stood on end, and his hat was pushed off. For that blob of mysterious light slowly and horribly shaped itself into the ghastly figure of an apparition. It was a skeleton, enfolded in a filmy cloak. And it approached the man with a hollow laugh."

Handforth shivered somewhat, and glanced round, hastily inspecting the corners of the room. He observed that his listeners were sitting tense and expectant.

"What happened?" asked Pitt hoarsely.

"I know," breathed Tommy Watson. "The ghost vanished!"

"Rats! The ghost didn't vanish," said Handforth tartly. "The ghost approached the traveller, and as it did so there came into his nostrils the strong earthy smell of the grave. It nearly choked him, and after fighting against it for five or ten minutes the ghost enwrapped him in the folds of his cloak."

"Thinking he was cold?" asked Pitt.

"No, you ass!" howled Handforth. "When that cloak descended upon the poor chap's shoulders he was struck absolutely stiff with fright. And he stood there, in the middle of the road, like a signpost. And he was nearly run over by a motor-car that came along half an hour afterwards. The motorists jumped out and tried to shift him but couldn't!"

"He'd taken root?" asked De Valerie, with concern. "No, I mean he was rooted to the ground?"

"He was frozen to the ground!" said Handforth impressively. "His face was ghastly, his eyes were fixed and staring, and at first the motorists thought he was dead. But after a lot of trouble they freed him and got him into the car. And the motor sped over the hard, icy road and soon arrived at the village."

"And the poor chap died on the way?" I asked sympathetically.

"No. He was thawed out, and to the horror of everybody, he was a raving lunatic," said Handforth sadly. "He told his story clearly and concisely——"

"In spite of being a raving lunatic?"

"Yes," said Handforth stubbornly. "That was the funny part of it. He raved like the dickens when they tried to give him some grub; but at the first mention of ghosts he grew quiet, and told what had happened. And then the old inn-keeper, shivering with fright, explained that two hundred years ago a highwayman had brutally murdered a bank messenger on that road."

"Did they have banks two hundred years ago?" asked Pitt thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it was only fifty years ago—what does a few years matter?" demanded Handforth. "Anyhow, that's the yarn."

"Good!" said everybody, with relief.

"And now comes the sequel——"

"Oh!" groaned the circle.

"The sequel," repeated Handforth firmly. "This chap—this poor traveller who was sent dotty—was immediately shoved into a lunatic asylum. But he escaped, and found his way back to that moorland road. And for weeks he haunted the place and scared everybody stiff. And at last he was found dead in the heather, with the marks of bony fingers on his throat. Everybody said he's been killed by the ghost, but that's all rot. He strangled himself!"

Handforth's story, in spite of its inconsistencies, had undoubtedly got a few of the juniors into a slightly jumpish state. When they spoke, they used hushed voices, and somebody suggested turning on more lights.

But Pitt began a yarn then, and it was a real creepy story, that held the chaps tight in their chairs. Pitt told it in a mysterious, gripping way. It was a ghost story he had read in a magazine a week earlier. And although it was a piece of pure fiction, even I felt a bit nervy at the end. The other fellows were beginning to get quite scared.

Handforth laughed when Pitt had finished—a catchy kind of laugh.

"It's all rot, of course," he growled. "Just the same as that ghost story of mine was all rot. I don't believe in ghosts; there aren't such things. People who see spooks and spectres are merely subject to hallucinations. It's marvellous what the imagination can do."

"Oh! What—what was that?" gasped somebody in a startled voice.

The rest of the fellows jumped in their seats.

"I—I thought I heard a creak over in that corner," muttered the culprit. "I say, it's about time we chucked these giddy ghost stories. Who—who knows a funny yarn? Let's talk about pantomimes, or something."

"Better to talk about bed," I declared. "My hat! It's half-past ten, and we've planned to be up at seven."

"Yes, by George!" said Handforth, jumping up. "We've arranged to go skating with Irene and the other girls at half-past nine. Let's get upstairs to bed. We've had enough of this spook business."

Church glared at Reggie Pitt.

"These ghost stories are all very well, but that one of yours was a bit too creepy for my liking," he said. "The way you told it, too. I don't mind admitting I'm a bit nervy."

Pitt grinned.

"I've got another yarn, if you like," he said generously. "This one's about a skeleton that came out of a crypt in the dead of night and walked about with the sound of rattling bones——"

"Shut up!" yelled half a dozen voices.

Reggie shut up, and we prepared for bed. We were not, of course, sleeping in the Remove dormitory. That part of the school was entirely empty and deserted. The headmaster had placed several of his own private bed-rooms at our disposal, and we were all distributed along the north corridor in Dr. Stafford's house. Sir Monty and Watson and I occupied the room next to Handforth & Co., with Pitt and Grey and De Valerie on the other side. The rest were in close proximity. So there was no chance of our feeling lonely in bed.

But it's an absolute fact that the creepy ghost stories had got nearly all of us in a condition of nervousness that was obvious. Some of the fellows made painful efforts to appear indifferent.

"Who—who's going out first?" asked Watson carelessly.

"Yes, it is a bit dark and gloomy in the hall," I chuckled. "Come on, you chaps, pull yourselves together. There are no such things as ghosts. And St. Frank's isn't haunted, anyway."

I opened the door, and we all passed out into the cold, gloomy hall. Most of the fellows were talking rather noisily—the sound of their own voices evidently serving as a bracer.

"Ghost stories," said Archie, as we went along the hall—"ghost stories are rather priceless things to read on a summer's afternoon, lolling by the river. I mean to say, a chappie doesn't mind that. He laughs at the dashed things. But at Christmas-time, in a big place like this, with dark corners looming in the offing, and so forth, it's a bit on the foul side."

"Dry up about ghosts!" growled De Valerie.

"Oh, absolutely!" said Archie. "Rather! I was only just remarking that these stories about rattling bones, and what not, are calculated to make a chappie on the bally jump. What should we do, for example, if a headless spook suddenly whizzed forth out of the surrounding gloom?"

Archie's cheerful babbling did nothing to alleviate the general nervousness. And we had just got to the foot of the great staircase when Tommy Watson glanced upwards towards the blackness of the upper corridor.

He caught his breath in, went as pale as a sheet, and stood as though frozen.

"Look—look!" he panted hoarsely.

"What—what is it?" gasped Church.

"Oh!"

There was something in Watson's tone that made the other fellows nearly jump out of their skins. I caught Tommy by the shoulder, and he gave a great gulp.

"Steady!" I said sternly. "Don't be an ass, old man!"

"Something moved up there!" breathed Watson chokingly. "Some—something white! Oh! It's—it's coming down! Look out!" he added in a scream.

Before anybody could move, a streak of whiteness glided noiselessly down the staircase—a swift flash of something unaccountable. It was a white, silent glimpse of an intangible thing. It shot by, and was gone into the gloomy depths of the hall before we could recover.

"A—a ghost!" muttered somebody hoarsely.

"Oh! What—what was it?" said Watson, his teeth chattering.

"Well, you chaps must be in a rocky condition," I said grimly. "Don't be such blithering idiots. Fancy getting scared over a cat!"

"A cat!"

"Yes—Mrs. Poulter's white Persian cat!" I said, with a laugh. "It's just about time we all went to bed, I think!"

CHAPTER II.

AT THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT.

HANDFORTH looked round the bed-room with a casual glance.

"Nothing to be scared about," he said scoffingly. "The way you chaps are looking over your shoulders makes me grin. Just as if there'd be any ghosts at St. Frank's! As for Watson and that cat——"

"Oh, let's talk about something else!" growled McClure.

The chums of Study D were in their own bed-room, and Church and McClure were already getting undressed. Individually, they were rather anxious to investigate the wardrobe, and peep under the beds, and take a look in the corner cupboard. But to do any of these things was impossible. It would only bring the scornful laughter of the others upon his head.

And McClure's remark was rather incautious. For the most certain way to make Edward Oswald Handforth pursue a subject was to ask him to drop it.

"Rats!" he said. "I don't believe in all this tommy-rot! It's simply a matter of will-power—nothing else. If you make up your mind not to be scared, nothing on earth will scare you. I've a jolly good mind to write a ghost story for the mag—just to show you chaps how it ought to be done. I'll bring a vampire into it, and the ghost of a beheaded knight—one of those spooks who go about carrying their heads under their arm!"

Church leapt into bed.

"If you like to go on talking all night you're welcome to the job!" he said. "Why, you haven't started undressing yet! And if you're so brave about ghosts, you'll do something to prove your pluck!"

"Something to prove it?"

"Yes."

"Are you suggesting that I'm afraid of ghosts?" demanded Handforth aggressively.

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Church, snugly in bed. "But everybody knows there's something creepy in going downstairs in the darkness of an old house. For example, you wouldn't even go downstairs here—alone, and at midnight."

"Wouldn't I?" snapped Handforth.

"Of course you wouldn't—so what's the good of jawing?" said Church, with a yawn. "I wouldn't do it, anyway—not for ten quid!"

"Coward!" sneered Handforth.

"I'm not a coward—and you know it!" exclaimed Church indignantly. "But it's a bit of a tall order to go downstairs in a dark house like this, just as the clock is striking twelve! And you've got the nerve to call me a coward! Why, you wouldn't do it yourself!"

Handforth glared.

"That's a challenge!" he said fiercely. "I'll show you whether I'll do it! Do you remember I left that Christmas annual of mine in the breakfast-room? All right! At five to twelve I'll walk downstairs in the dark, and come back here with that book. If I bring it it'll prove that I've been right downstairs, won't it?"

"Of course it will!" grunted Church. "That book's in the breakfast-room—no question about that. But don't be a duffer,

old man. I wasn't issuing a challenge, and I'll take back what I said, if you like. Get undressed and slip into bed."

But Handforth was obstinate.

"Not likely!" he said grimly. "You've doubted my courage—you've practically called me a funk! And I'm going to prove to you that I don't care a snap about ghosts. Understand? Not a giddy snap!"

"Oh, I say!" protested McClure. "Chuck it up, old man! It's hardly eleven yet—and we don't want to keep awake for another hour. Church didn't mean any slight on you. Did you?" he added, turning to Church and winking fiercely.

"Of course I didn't!" said Church promptly. "It was Handy himself who started the argument. Let it drop. It's time we went to sleep."

But Handforth was firm. Inwardly, he was rather startled at the prospect of going downstairs at midnight. But the very idea of withdrawing now was unthinkable. His chums would say nothing at the moment—but on the morrow they would probably chip him unmercifully. Handforth couldn't risk anything like that. His dignity was too valuable.

"I'm going!" he declared stoutly. "And what's more, I'll go downstairs without a match, or without any light at all! By George! That'll prove to you whether I'm afraid of these fatheaded phantoms!"

"Well, if you must go—go now, and get it over!"

"No—I'll go at midnight!" said Edward Oswald curtly.

And all the persuasive powers of Church and McClure combined could not shift him from his purpose. At last they gave it up, and lay in bed somewhat sulky. They were sleepy enough to go off into dreamland at once, but their anxiety over Handforth kept their heavy eyelids from completely closing.

Handforth sat there, on a chair before the fire, his jaw firmly set. And Church and McClure knew that expression. To talk would be useless—indeed, worse than useless.

And so the minutes ticked by—until the old school clock chimed out the three-quarters. Handforth got up from the chair, and commenced pacing up and down. And his chums regarded him uneasily. They weren't very nervous regarding his safety, but the whole thing struck them as being foolhardy.

"Five to twelve!" said Handforth at last, glancing at his watch. "Now, my sons, I'm going down, and I shan't come back until midnight has boomed out! Huh! Afraid of ghosts, am I?" he added scoffingly.

But the very tone of his voice gave him away. The prospect of creeping down the dark, silent stairs appalled him. It was just on the hour of midnight, and although St. Frank's wasn't haunted, the idea was by no means cheerful—particularly after the

For something soft touched him. He felt it press against his shoulder. And then cold, bony fingers gripped Handforth by the arms. He staggered back.

imaginative ghost stories that had been told, and which were still painfully vivid in Handforth's mind.

Church and McClure, now thoroughly awake, sat up in bed as their leader walked towards the door.

"Handy!" said Church hoarsely. "Don't go!"

"Why not?"

"It's—it's silly!" muttered Church. "Something might happen, you know! I don't suppose you'll see a ghost, but——"

Handforth grunted, opened the door, and passed out. He did so hurriedly—because he felt himself slipping. Another moment, and he would allow his chums to persuade him. And it spoke well for his will-power that he curbed the desire to give way.

Once outside in the corridor, he closed the door and padded silently down the corridor in his slippers towards the head of the stairs. And now that he was actually out of the cosy, well-lighted bed-room, his courage oozed away with startling rapidity.

He was nervous, and he knew it. The knowledge that midnight would boom out in a minute or two struck a chill into his very blood. And if ever a night was eerie, this one was.

There was nearly a full moon, and the pale light slanted in through the corridor windows, giving everything a ghostly effect that was enhanced by the utter and absolute stillness of the great school.

Handforth paused near the head of the stairs, his heart thumping rapidly. A creak came to his ears—a distinct, palpable sound.

It floated up from somewhere down in the hall, where all was black and intangible. And Handforth's courage faltered.

Faint and far away, coming like a mournful echo on the still night air, the howling of a dog sounded. Handforth knew well enough that the cry was from one of the kennels at the rear, and there was really nothing alarming in it. But that howl had an unnerving effect. He felt himself on the verge of a panic, and was ready to turn and shoot back to the bed-room in an access of unreasoning fear.

Then he thought of Church and McClure—the way they would roar with laughter on the morrow. The very idea of that pulled him together, and he strode boldly forward and descended the stairs.

With every step he took there came mysterious, unaccountable creaks. He heard rustlings and whisperings—the majority of these sounds being figments of his own imagination. And small wonder! The whole project was foolhardy, but quite the kind of thing that Handforth would indulge in.

As he went down the hall, he fancied he saw mysterious figures crouching behind the various odds and ends of furniture. He had an overwhelming desire to look constantly over his shoulder. He wanted to squeeze into some recess, so that nothing was behind him but a solid wall. He had a feeling that ghostly hands would come out of the blackness and clutch at him.

He passed a half opened door, and his heart nearly stopped beating. He caught a glimpse of the moonlight streaming into the room, and he was willing to swear that something had moved. Of course, he was wrong—his common sense told him so. But it was a trying experience.

After he had got past that doorway he wanted to whirl round, to be prepared for the awful thing that might spring out. Exactly how he reached the breakfast-room door he wasn't quite sure.

But reach it he did, and his heart gave a throb of thankfulness as he turned the knob and walked in. His first thought was for the electric switch. Light was what he needed—strong, brilliant light. The weird eerie moonbeams had wrought their work on the junior's nerves.

Click!

He pressed the electric light switch down, and again his heart nearly stopped beating. For there was no result! The light failed to come on! And if panic had been near to Handforth before, it was almost overwhelming him now.

He stood stock still, hardly daring to breathe. He knew that the Christmas

annual lay on the small table against the fireplace, but he simply couldn't move. The failure of the electric light had proved too much. For he had been absolutely relying on that to steady him.

And then, solemn and clear on the night air, came the first chimes of the midnight hour!

Handforth stood there, his flesh feeling cold and shrunken. There was a most extraordinary sensation on his skin, and he was almost sure that his hair had become crisp.

He tried to move, but couldn't.

And he listened to the chimes—and the following solemn strokes.

One—two—three—four——

It seemed to Handforth that those strokes would never finish. He was held by some uncanny grip. And then came a rustle—a distinct and unmistakable rustle from the other side of the room.

There was no imagination about it this time.

Perhaps it was the cat—perhaps a rat crawling along the wainscotting. But Handforth did not think of these things. His mind was running on ghosts. And that rustle was utterly terrifying.

Handforth felt more alone than he had ever felt in his life before. The booming of the school clock had ceased now—midnight was over. And he felt himself capable of movement again. And his one thought was to turn on his heel and run—run for his very life.

But he made a last effort.

"Any—anybody here?" he asked breathlessly.

He spoke in the merest of whispers, but his voice sounded like the roar of a cannon in his own ears. There came no reply. But once more there was that faint, uncanny rustle—followed by a curious creak.

And by now Handforth was almost on the verge of collapse. The experience was the most terrifying he had ever passed through. From utterly nowhere a cold draught came to him—a sudden feeling of icy air.

He knew the window was closed—he knew there was no means by which any normal draught could blow upon him. But it came, and with it Handforth's nostrils were filled with a dank, horribly earthy smell.

In a flash, his mind went back to that ghost story—the one that concerned the earthy smell of a crypt! The junior was certain that his imagination was not running riot. That odour was unmistakable, and it chilled him to the marrow.

And the climax came a second later.

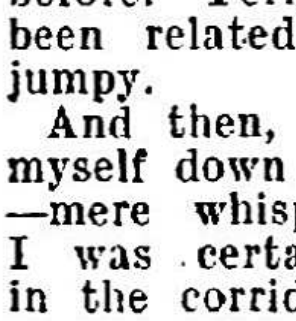
For something soft—something utterly silent—touched him. He felt it press against his shoulder. And then cold, bony fingers gripped Handforth by the arms. He staggered back.

And from his overwrought lungs there came a wild, shouting cry of fear. It rang out loudly—just that one great shout.

Handforth hurled himself back, tripped, and fell prone to the floor. A thousand flashes dazzled his vision, and he lay there motionless.

CHAPTER III.

HANDFORTH'S STARTLING STORY!



WITH a start, I sat up in bed.

Something had aroused me from sleep. I didn't know what, but I seemed to have a fleeting recollection of a cry. The bed-room was dark, except for the moonbeams gliding by the chinks of the blind.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were apparently sound asleep. Their steady breathing came clearly to my ears.

I listened intently. But no other sounds broke the stillness of the night. Cautiously, I felt under the pillow, and took out my watch. The luminous dial told me that the time was just three minutes past twelve.

It was an eerie hour.

And after a few seconds I came to the conclusion that it was the chiming of the school clock that had awakened me—although this in itself was strange. For I had never known the clock to awaken me before. Perhaps the ghost stories that had been related earlier had left me slightly jumpy.

And then, just as I was about to settle myself down again, I fancied I heard voices—mere whispers. In a very short time I was certain. Somebody was whispering in the corridor, just outside my door.

This was obviously a time for investigation. I slid out of bed, and felt for my dressing-gown and slippers. In the meantime, Church and McClure were in a fine state of anxiety.

After Handforth had gone they had sat up in bed, calling him all sorts of uncomplimentary names. The booming of the midnight hour had made them quiet for the moment. And they momentarily expected Handforth to come charging triumphantly into the bed-room with his Christmas annual.

"It's queer—he ought to have been back before now!" muttered Church, at length. It must be five-past twelve! Perhaps the silly ass has got lost."

"Rats!" breathed McClure. "He knows his way about the house as well as he knows his own palm! I'll bet he's doing it on purpose—just to keep us on the stretch. Why the dickens doesn't he come?"

They sat there, alert and concerned. And then, clearly but far away, came the sound of a startled cry. They recognised Handforth's voice at once. But in vain they listened for any other sound. Just that one shout—eloquent of terror and alarm—and nothing more.

Church and McClure looked at one another with scared, startled eyes.

"That—that was Handy!" whispered Church fearfully.

"Oh, my goodness! Perhaps he's seen something——"

"Don't be an idiot!" muttered Church. "There's nothing to see! Just his nerves, I expect—he fancied he heard some queer sound or other. Do you think we'd better go and look for him?"

McClure was doubtful.

"We'll take a light, if we do!" he said nervously. "I'm not scared, or anything like that, but we're not bound by any giddy challenge! I know! You've got an electric torch, haven't you?"

"By jingo, yes! In my bag!" said Church.

He nipped out of bed, switched the electric light on, and went straight to the door and opened it. He stood there listening.

"All quiet!" he exclaimed softly.

McClure came and joined him.

"Ugh! Doesn't it look gloomy?" he muttered. "What a fatheaded chump Handy was to go at all! Absolutely asking for trouble! Got that torch? I suppose we'd better creep downstairs!"

"Yes, and we'll slip our dressing gowns on, too," said Church. "It's a bit cold in these corridors. Buck up—and don't make a noise. We don't want any of the other fellows to know. They'll only cackle!"

Hurriedly, they slipped into their dressing gowns, and Church had just got the electric torch out of his bag, when McClure gave a startled gasp.

"Who—who's that?" he asked, his voice hoarse and tense.

Church spun round.

"You fathead! You scared me——" he began.

"Keep your hair on!" I said, slipping into the room. "I'm not a ghost! Don't stare at me in that way! What's wrong here? Where's Handforth? What's the idea of being up at this hour of the night?"

The relief in their eyes was obvious, and I instantly guessed that something was wrong.

"Oh, thank goodness it's you!" said Church, running up and clutching my arm. "Have you seen anything of Handy?"

"No, of course not."

"Did—did you hear him yell just now?" breathed McClure.

"Something woke me up—I wasn't sure what," I replied. "You say that Handforth yelled? What for? Where's he gone to?"

As hurriedly as possible, and one helping the other, they told me of Handforth's foolhardy trip downstairs. At any ordinary time a visit to the breakfast-room to get a book would have been a mere trifle. But on this particular night, after the narration of those bloodcurdling ghost stories, it was a most reckless proceeding.

"You brainless idiots!" I said angrily. "Why did you let him go?"

"We couldn't help it—when Handy makes up his mind, nobody on earth can stop him," growled McClure. "He went downstairs in the dark, and said that he'd be back a few minutes after midnight——"

"You told me that just now," I interrupted. "It was a mad thing altogether—but just like Handforth. Before now men have been driven insane by doing a thing like this. It's just the imagination that does the harm. When the mind is wrought up with ghost stories, the slightest creak is liable to make anybody jump. And a rat or a cat will absolutely send a highly strung person into a panic. Come on! We've wasted enough time here."

I turned to the door, and strode out. Church and McClure followed, and I needed no telling that they were intensely glad to have me as a leader. They had been scared stiff at the thought of going downstairs alone.

Not that Church and McClure were funks—or nervous. In any ordinary fight, or on any occasion when pluck was necessary, they were to the forefront. But an affair like this reduced them to mere weaklings.

"Wait a minute—I'll get my torch," I said, pausing.

"No—I've got mine," said Church.

He switched it on, and it proved to be a good one, with a strong dazzling beam. I took it, and we strode along the corridor, and then descended the stairs. Even with that light to accompany us, the surrounding gloom seemed ghostly and eerie. All sorts of fantastic shadows flitted about in the corners.

"I don't know how the dickens Handy came downstairs alone—he's got heaps of pluck!" muttered Church. "I'm not a coward, but I wouldn't have done it for a fiver! I never knew St. Frank's could be so weird!"

"Don't let your thoughts dwell on spooks!" I said curtly. "Forget the darn things! Pull yourself together, and confine your attention to the matter in hand. We've got to find that lunatic!"

"Goodness! I hope he hasn't gone dotty!" said Church fearfully.

"You needn't worry—he was dotty before he started!" I snapped. "And you were just as dotty to let him go!"

By this time we were in the vicinity of the breakfast-room. I was the first to arrive, and I strode in, and pressed the switch down. But no flood of light followed, as I had expected. Everything was intensely quiet. I flashed the light of the torch round, and then gave a startled cry. For there, lying prone on the floor, was Edward Oswald Handforth.

"Good Heavens!" I muttered huskily.

"Handy—Handy!" gasped Church, push-

ing past me, and kneeling on the floor. "Handy—what's happened to you?"

McClure had knelt on the other side, and between the pair of them they raised Handforth up, until he was in a sitting position. To their intense relief, he opened his eyes and looked at them in a bleary kind of way.

"Lemme alone!" he growled. "I'm tired!"

"Wake up, old man—you can't sleep here!" I exclaimed. "Great Scott! You don't mean to say that you've been dozing on the breakfast-room floor? What's the matter with you, Handy?"

Handforth looked at me rather dazedly, then stared at Church and McClure. He seemed to be just coming to himself. Slowly, he felt the back of his head, winced, and then became aware of his true surroundings. Gazing at him keenly, I could see a shadow of apprehension pass over his face.

"Get out of here!" he muttered. "There—there's something queer about this room. Get out, I tell you!"

"Don't get into a panic," I said, quietly, "There's nothing wrong with the room, Handy. The light won't switch on, but that's a trifle. You must have been imagining things—and I don't blame you. It was a ridiculous idea to come down here alone, all in the darkness."

For some minutes Handforth said nothing. He just sat there, gently rubbing his head, , and gathering his scattered wits together. I was immensely relieved to find that he was practically himself.

It was fairly obvious that he had given way to sheer panic, and had fainted. But it would have been very unwise to tell him this—or even hint at it. Handforth was not the kind of fellow to faint. But I had heard of cases where great, strong men had swooned when under the influence of unreasoning terror.

While Church and McClure talked to their leader, I rapidly unscrewed the cap of the electric light switch, and had a look at the contact. Three lights were fitted into the electrolier, and it was out of the question to assume that all three had "burned out" together. Obviously, the trouble was in the switch.

It only took me a second to find out that the contact was not complete. One of the little slides was bent. I just gave it a slight push, pressed the switch down, and on came the lights—in a sudden dazzling flood.

"My hat! That's better!" said Church, with relief. "How did you do it?"

"It was nothing—only a trifle, anyway," I said, screwing on the brass cap again.

"I say, he's got a terriffic bump on the side of his head," said Church, with concern. "Come and look at this, Nipper. No wonder he was pretty nearly unconscious!"

Handforth struggled to his feet, and sat down heavily in one of the easy chairs. And I soon examined the bump on his head. I whistled as I looked at it. The bump was, indeed, enormous—and it was clear that Handforth must have received a very heavy blow.

I glanced round, and remembered that Handforth had been lying with his head in close proximity to the table. And one look at the nearest leg assured me that he had caught his head a fearful crack in falling. The table legs were ornamental, with knobby projections.

"Poor beggar!" I said. "You must have had a pretty nasty biff here. Of course, you slipped, or something."

Handforth looked round, and his eyes were fearful.

"The smell!" he muttered. "It's gone now, but—but——"

"Smell?" I repeated curiously.

"The smell of a vault!" muttered Handforth. "It—it was earthy—dank—ghastly! I tell you it came all over me. And then—and then——"

He paused, shivering violently.

"He's cold!" muttered Church.

But I knew that it wasn't coldness that had made Handforth shiver.

It was something else—something that he hadn't spoken of yet. But he had given us hints, and these were significant enough. Gradually, he recovered his usual composure. As the effects of the blow wore off, he became more like his old self.

"Look here, old man, the best thing you can do is to tell us exactly what happened," I said quietly. "There's no need for the other chaps to know—we'll keep it just to ourselves. Church and McClure told me why you came down. It seems that you had a fright of some kind."

"This—this room is haunted!" said Handforth, in a whisper. "No, don't look at me like that—I'm not a chap to get scared over nothing. But I tell you the room's haunted! Those bony hands——"

"Bony hands?" whispered Church, with a catch in his voice.

"Yes—they—they took hold of me!"

McClure looked over his shoulder, and I could read fear in his eyes. He was thankful that the electric light was full on. Personally, I must admit that there was a creepy feeling in the air. But in my adventures with Nelson Lee, I had come across many ghostly experiences. And I was convinced that Handforth was merely the victim of his own imagination. Again I advised him to tell us exactly what had happened.

"There's not much to tell—and I don't suppose you'll believe it, anyway," growled Handforth, at last. "I wasn't scared as I came downstairs although I heard one or two funny creaks——"

"That's nothing," I said. "In the dead of night every old house makes all sorts of queer sounds."

"I know," agreed Handforth. "Well, I got to the door of this room, and I

don't mind admitting I was a bit jumpy. Nothing in that—who wouldn't be jumpy? But when I pressed the switch down, there were no lights. That gave me a bit of a turn."

"Just a coincidence," I explained. "I suppose the switch has been getting out of order for weeks, and when it was turned off this evening the contact jogged out of position. That's why the lights wouldn't come on."

Handforth nodded.

"Well anyway, it was pretty rotten for me," he muttered. "I wasn't nervous—I've told you that before. But it was a bit startling to be here in the darkness, when I expected the light to come on. Then twelve o'clock started booming out, and somehow I felt that I couldn't move."

"Just the effect of mind over matter," I smiled. "You're not the kind of fellow to let your imagination get the better of you, old man, but the darkness and the hour of midnight had their combined effect. Without being actually frightened, you were——"

"Scared," suggested McClure.

"Fathead! I wasn't scared!" snorted Handforth indignantly.

"I wasn't going to say scared—it's my idea that you were just transfixed with the solemnity of the occasion," I went on diplomatically. "And it was only natural that every tiny sound would come to you in an exaggerated form. I've had the same kind of experience at dead of night. This part of the school is centuries old, and in the darkness there's a weird atmosphere about it. And that's enhanced, of course, by the fact that St. Frank's is nearly empty."

Handforth made an impatient gesture.

"Rot!" he said. "I wasn't thinking of anything like that. I don't believe in ghosts—at least, I didn't until to-night. Well, as I was telling you, I stood against the door in the dark, and I heard something. It was over on the other side of the room—a kind of unearthly rustle."

"A rat scampering along the skirting," I suggested.

Handforth glared.

"Do you think I can't tell the sound of a rat?" he demanded.

"Under those circumstances, the noise made by a rat would sound mysterious and supernatural," I replied quietly.

"You may be right—but even a rat can't take a chap by the shoulders," said Handforth, with a shiver. "Even a rat can't cause a cold, earthy draught, smelling like the grave!"

Church and McClure glanced at me.

"Look here, old man, the best thing you can do is to get back to bed," I said gently. "In the morning you'll be feeling better——"

"Don't you believe me?" asked Handforth, with a glare.

"I believe you think you smelt something——"

"You—you hopeless ass!" snapped Handforth. "I did smell it—without any question! And there was that draught, too—a cold, icy wave of air came over me bringing with it the dank smell of a churchyard! Look here, Nipper—I'm not a frightened baby! I don't get into a panic over nothing. I tell you, honestly, that it wasn't imagination."

Handforth spoke with unusual seriousness, and there was something in his tone which made me reconstruct my view.

"Well, go on," I said.

"I hadn't had time to recover from that horrible smell before something brushed against me," said Handforth, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. "I'll confess that I was absolutely startled, and I let out a terrific yell. I felt two bony hands grab my arms."

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Church huskily.

"And didn't you see anything?" I asked. "Was this thing with the bony hands a man, or what?"

"I—I don't know what he was," muttered Handforth. "With a terrific effort I managed to wrench myself away, and I tripped. And that's all I seem to remember. I must have bashed my head against the table leg."

I nodded slowly.

"Well, Handy, I don't want to offend you, but the yarn's a bit more than I can swallow," I said frankly. "I can easily understand about the shuffling noise, and it's quite possible that you felt a draught. But as for the earthy smell and the bony hands—well, imagination can do wonders, you know, when your nerves are at a high pitch."

Handforth grunted.

"Of course, I knew you wouldn't believe me," he said bitterly. "To-morrow the other chaps will yell with laughter. Let 'em! I know jolly well that there's something horrible about this room."

"You needn't worry about the other fellows—we won't say a word," put in Church. "We'll keep this little affair to ourselves—won't we, Nipper?"

"Of course," I replied promptly.

"Thanks," said Handforth, with relief. "But I'd like you chaps to believe me. It's rotten to know that you suspect me of being in a blue funk, and getting scared over absolutely nothing. Great Scott! It's true, I tell you—everything's true! That dank smell wasn't imagination—and something—I can't tell what—grabbed me by the arms and tried to hold me. It's all true!"

I looked at him curiously.

"Where did the draught come from?" I asked.

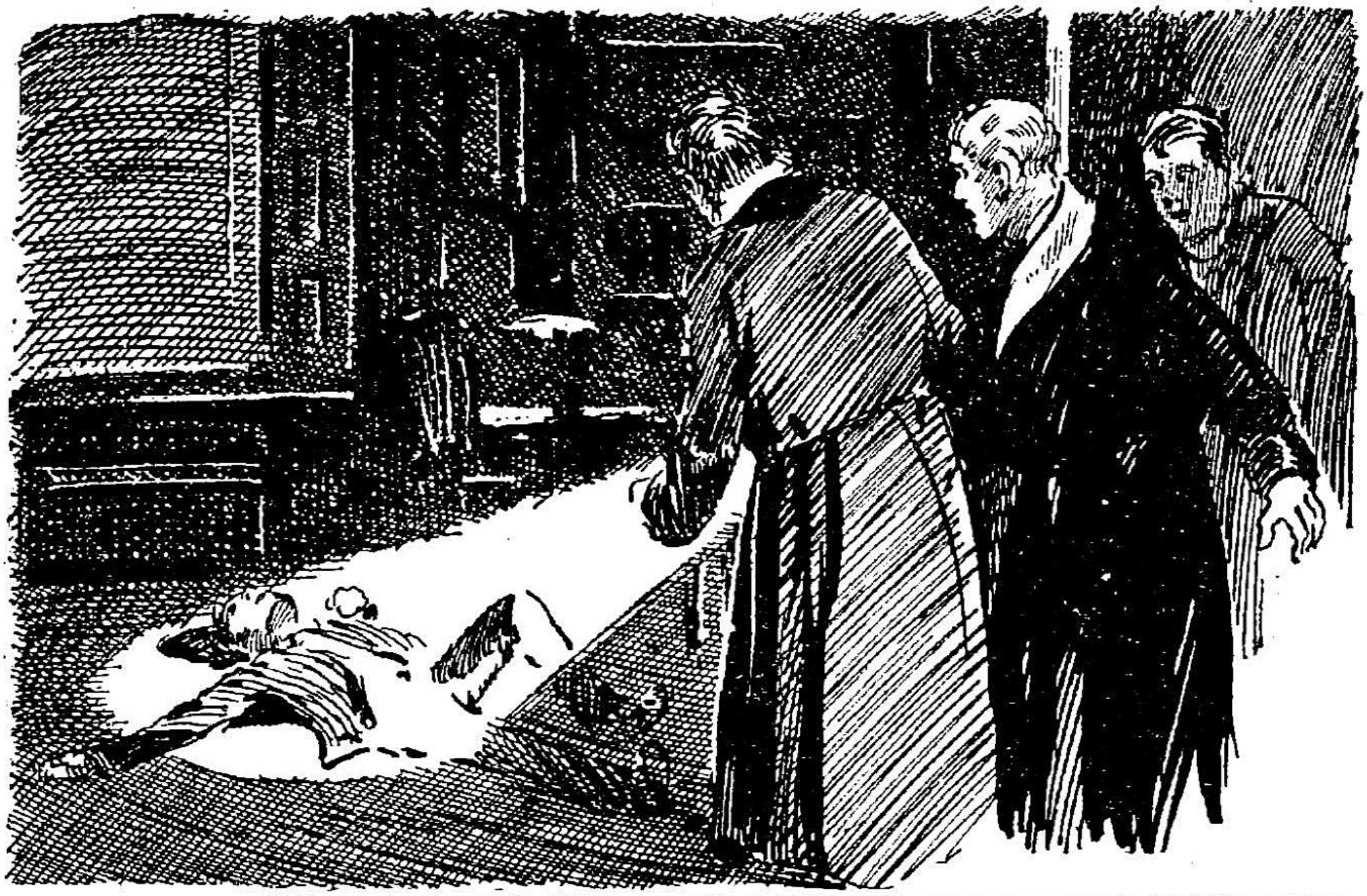
Handforth got up, walked to the door, and pointed over to the opposite wall—in

quite a different direction from either the window or the fireplace. The wall he indicated was solid and bare of any opening.

"The draught came from over there," he declared. "It cut straight across the room to the door—where I was standing. Oh, I know you'll grin again. How can a draught come from that blank wall? I don't know how—but it did!"

I walked across the room to the opposite wall, and examined it closely. But although I spent five minutes on the job, the result was barren. After that I went over the entire room—trying to find some clue or other that would help to substantiate Handforth's extraordinary story.

But there was nothing of a suspicious character.



Everything was intensely quiet. I flashed the light of the torch round, and then gave a startled cry. For there, lying prone on the floor, was Edward Oswald Handforth.

"Sorry, old man, but I can't see anything to corroborate your yarn," I said. "I think we'd better go to bed, and make another examination in the morning. There's no sense in staying down here any longer."

Handforth agreed, much to the relief of Church and McClure, and a few minutes later we were in the upper corridor. The chums of Study D went into their own bedroom, and I smiled grimly to myself as I heard the key turn in the lock. Then I went back into my own room, and was soon in bed.

But I didn't immediately go to sleep.

I lay there, wondering what the explanation of Handforth's strange adventure could be. And there was little doubt in my mind that it was just a simple case of overwrought nerves.

But was there something more—something really tangible?

CHAPTER IV.

THE PARCHMENT WITH THE RED SEAL!

"GOOD-MORNING, Mrs. Poulter! Frostier than ever, I believe."

I made that remark as I strolled into the breakfast-room on the following morning. The buxom figure of Mrs. Poulter was bending over the breakfast-table, making certain that the maid had committed no mistakes.

"Indeed, yes, Master Nipper," said the matron, after she had returned my greeting. "I declare there was ice on the milk this morning. Still, I suppose we mustn't grumble—it's seasonable at this time of the year."

"Grumble?" I exclaimed. "You'd hear a few grumbles if a thaw set in, I'll bet. The more it freezes, the better the chaps will like it. We're going out skating again this morning, Mrs. Poulter."

She looked at me severely.

"You be careful of that river, Master Nipper," she said, shaking a warning finger

at me. "Many's the tale you hear of reckless young men going through the ice! I don't rightly approve of all this skating. It fairly frightens me, young gentlemen—that it does! That ice isn't more than an inch or two thick, and the water's ever so deep underneath!"

I laughed.

"The River Stowe is as safe as a tarred road, Mrs. Poulter," I replied. "With a frost like this, a traction-engine wouldn't crack that ice! And we're having some good old winter sport while we've got the chance. The English weather's so fickle that we can't afford to miss it."

"Ah, well, don't say I didn't warn you," declared Mrs. Poulter, as she bustled out.

I strolled over to the window, and looked out over the snowy cloisters—for the breakfast-room overlooked that part of the school. I was the first fellow down, and I had hurried over dressing on purpose.

For I wanted to have a look at the breakfast-room before the other fellows put in an appearance. Moreover, I was rather keen upon having a few private words with Mrs. Poulter.

Once more I examined that wall—where Handforth had indicated. Now, with the clear sunlight of the winter's day streaming through the windows, the story seemed more ridiculous than ever. And I had half an idea that Handforth would meekly confess that his imagination had run away with him.

Mrs. Poulter came in again a moment later, and this time I didn't let her go.

"Did you ever notice a peculiar damp smell about this room, Mrs. Poulter?" I asked casually.

The matron sniffed the air with suspicion.

"A damp smell, Master Nipper?" she repeated. "No, not that I can remember. Seems sweet enough now——"

"There's nothing wrong with it this morning," I hastened to add. "What I mean is, have you ever come into this room early in the morning and noticed an earthy kind of odour?"

"Never!" declared Mrs. Poulter. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, young man! There's always a fire here, and Dr. Stafford's most particular about ventilation. Nobody ever said this room was damp before."

"I'm not saying it's damp now—I only asked if there was ever any peculiar smell," I smiled. "I suppose you've never noticed any draughts, either?"

"Only when the window's been left open, Master Nipper," said the matron. "Some of these young hussies are that careless, you can't do anything with them! I'm sure I don't know why you need to worry about draughts, though. A strong, healthy boy like you oughtn't to think about such things!"

I chuckled, and strolled over to the wall.

"This panelling looks rather good, doesn't it?" I asked casually. "It must be an age, too. And yet the oak's as strong and as solid as ever it was. This is a fine room, Mrs. Poulter."

"That it is, Master Nipper," agreed the buxom lady. "And very considerate and very generous of the Headmaster to let you young gentlemen use it. I'm real afraid sometimes, when Master Handforth starts some of his tricks."

"Yet this room must be hundreds and hundreds of years old," I went on reflectively. "Shouldn't be surprised if there's an entrance to a secret passage behind one of these panels, Mrs. Poulter."

I made the remark quite casually, just to see what the effect would be. I didn't want to ask any questions outright, in case the matron became suspicious. To my surprise, she nodded.

"Very likely, Master Nipper," she said, pausing and looking at the panelled wall. "They do say as there is a passage, too. Maybe it's only one of them tales you hear, but it wouldn't surprise me a bit."

"Why, who's told you there's a secret passage leading into this room?"

"Well, nobody's exactly told me," confessed Mrs. Poulter. "But I've heard Dr. Stafford talking about it at times. It's never been discovered, and I doubt if it ever will. But there! I'm wasting my time, talking to you, when I ought to be in my kitchen!"

She bustled off again, and I regarded that wall with renewed interest, and with my theory concerning Handforth undergoing a process of reconstruction.

Perhaps, after all, Edward Oswald had really felt a cold draught; had really been gripped by bony fingers! If there was a secret panel, it was just possible that some unknown marauder knew of it. And Handy, coming down unexpectedly at midnight, had disturbed the rascal at his work—whatever that happened to be.

I decided to spend some time in the breakfast-room when I had the opportunity. There would be no chance before breakfast, and none during the morning. For the juniors were already coming down, and it would look strange if I stayed behind while they all went skating. Perhaps I should be able to get a chance during the afternoon.

Handforth & Co. were the first fellows to appear, and I instantly noticed that they were more sober than usual. Handforth was quite silent, in fact, and he entered the breakfast-room with something that was akin to reluctance. He looked round grimly, and nodded to me.

"Morning!" he said briefly.

"Same to you, and many of 'em!" I replied. "Feeling better now?"

"Nothing wrong with me," said Handforth tartly.

"How about the bump?"

"It's gone down—and don't mention it in front of the other chaps, for goodness sake," said Handy. "I don't want to be questioned all the morning. I feel just the same about

this room now as I did last night," he added defiantly.

"The sunlight hasn't made any difference?" I asked.

"Not a bit."

"Then you stick to everything—even the earthy smell?"

"Even the earthy smell!" agreed Handforth. "Do you believe me now? Or do you think it was just a piece of imagination?"

"I'm beginning to believe that it really happened," I said slowly. "And what's more, we're going to thoroughly examine this room some time this afternoon. If there's any secret about it, we'll rout it out into the daylight."

Handforth looked eager.

"Good!" he said. "But why not this morning?"

I explained that it wouldn't be advisable to be so hasty. And before we could discuss the subject further, Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey and Fatty Little arrived. Other juniors followed.

Except for one or two remarks that Handforth was not looking quite himself, breakfast passed off without any comment. And Edward Oswald livened up considerably during the meal. The brilliant winter's morning was having its reviving effect upon him.

And the unexpected arrival of Irene Manners completed Handforth's cure. Under the influence of her sunny smiles, he recovered his usual colour, the sparkle returned to his eyes, and in a short time he was off, out, laden with skates.

Irene's girl chums, Doris and Marjorie, had accompanied her. And they were escorted down to the River Stowe by the whole crowd of St. Frank's juniors—including myself.

And for the rest of the morning we forgot all about ghosts and secret panels and such like. We gave ourselves over to the keen enjoyment of the excellent skating.

And we returned at dinner-time with healthy appetites and with our veins pulsing with vigorous health. And the amount of food that disappeared was astonishing. Mrs. Poulter, who had known what to expect, had provided ample fare; but it all disappeared, and more was asked for.

In the afternoon a few of the fellows decided to go off to the river again. One or two others thought it would be better to stay in and have a cosy read in front of the fire.

Handforth & Co. were among those who preferred to stay indoors—and I kept them company. By about three o'clock we had the opportunity we needed, for the breakfast-room and that part of the Head's house was quite deserted. We wanted to make our investigations in secret—without the other fellows knowing.

"Well, we've kept it quiet so far," I remarked as I closed the breakfast-room door. "Not much fear of our being disturbed here. Now, Handy, are you still of the same opinion?"

"Yes, I am!" replied Handforth firmly. "You can think it was imagination if you like, but I'm not such a duffer as all that. I'll admit I was scared, and the failure of the electric light made things bad. But that rustle I heard was a real rustle—and I was gripped by something powerful—and I smelt that horrible earthy niff!"

"Good enough!" I said crisply. "Well, I don't believe in ghosts, so I'm not going to work on any supposition that you were beset by a spectre. We'll work on the hypothesis that the affair was the result of trickery."

"Hypothesis—that's a good word," said Handforth approvingly. "Of course it was trickery."

"But you said the mysterious thing wasn't human," put in Church.

"Never mind what I said—I've changed my mind now," declared Handforth. "Hang it all, it must have been human! I had an idea that one of the chaps might have been playing a practical joke—but I dismissed that long ago. We should have heard some hints during the morning if that was the case. Well, supposing the whole affair was a fake, where do we stand?"

I looked round.

"We stand in the breakfast-room," I replied. "And since this is the spot where the affair took place, this is where we must begin operations. I got hold of Mrs. Poulter this morning, and pumped her a bit, and she admitted that there's a secret passage leading into this room."

Handforth stared at me excitedly.

"A secret passage!" he echoed. "But—but we've never heard of it before!"

"That's not surprising," I pointed out. "This is the first time we've really been in Dr. Stafford's own quarters. He wouldn't make a thing like that public. I'm sorry the Head's not here, because he'd tell us exactly where to find the entrance. As it is, we shall have to search."

"Good!" said Edward Oswald. "Let's get busy!"

"A secret panel!" exclaimed Church, his eyes gleaming. "That would explain the sudden cold draught—and the earthy smell! This passage is probably damp and musty with age."

"Exactly!" I agreed. "The draught couldn't happen without somebody opening the panel. And we don't admit that a ghost could do that. So we've got to assume that somebody—some person unknown—came out of that secret exit, crept up behind Handforth, and grabbed him."

"By George, yes!" said Handforth tensely. "That's the size of it! Look here! Until a little while ago I was ass enough to believe that the whole affair was the result of a ghostly manifestation. But it wasn't—there's human agency at work. And we'll find out the truth."

Now that Handforth was thoroughly convinced that the whole affair had a natural explanation he was as happy as a sandboy. For it entailed an investigation—and Hand-

forth loved anything of this nature more than he could possibly explain. Without delay, he started nosing round the breakfast-room like a hound on the scent.

But his methods, after all, were crude. Handforth was a kind of living edition of Trackett Grim—his own fictitious, serio-comic detective. He always went to work in the wrong way.

But I used different tactics. I confined my attention to the wall exactly opposite the door, whereas Handforth looked in the most unlikely spots.

After a thorough examination, I narrowed down the search to a small section of the wall. By mathematical calculation—taking the formation of the building into consideration—I came to the conclusion that the entrance to the passage must be there and nowhere else.

This helped considerably. But the three panels to which my search was now confined were all apparently solid and immovable. When tapped, they only gave out a dull sound, proving that brickwork lay behind.

It took me a full hour to gain my object.

My hands ached with pressing, and my fingers were stiff with pinching and pushing every knob that I could see. One of these projections, without doubt, was faked, and would cause the mechanism to move when operated in the correct way. And it was by sheer perseverance that I gained my reward.

Handforth & Co. were thoroughly fed up; they frankly declared that I must be wrong, and the whole thing was dotty. And just as McClure was suggesting that we should give it up, I felt a slight "give" beneath my fingers.

For the tenth time I was working at the centre panel of the three. The ancient oak was beautifully carved, with all sorts of ornamentations. And I had hold of a knobby projection—similar to scores of others in the immediate vicinity. And on this occasion I had given it a sideways push. It seemed to slide back a trifle. But when I gave it my undivided attention it again seemed solid.

However, I was keen now, and felt convinced that this was the key to the puzzle. With persuasive fingers I worked at that knob—pushing, pulling, and using considerable strength. I knew that it was just a matter of knack. The craftsmen of the Middle Ages had been cunning in their work, and even now, centuries later, these wonderful pieces of mechanism were as good as ever.

At last when even I was despairing, the knob shifted. And it did so when I was putting hardly any pressure on it. It slid sideways, and I was quick to take advantage of the movement. I applied a gentle, increasing pressure. A dull click sounded, and the next moment the whole panel swung inwards. A black, inky cavity was revealed.

"Great Scott!" gasped Church, staring. "You've done it!"

"Thank goodness!" I said with a sigh. "And I thought I was beaten, too. Phew! You were right about that earthy smell, Handy! My word, it's enough to give anybody the creeps!"

A distinct draught came upon us from the opening, and it reeked of mould and dampness—a kind of unhealthy odour of rotting fungus. Handforth & Co. were staring eagerly into the opening.

"Shall—shall we go inside?" asked Church breathlessly.

"You bet we shall!" retorted Handforth, making for the opening.

"Hold on!" I put in. "You've got no light, Handy—let me go in first. And wait a minute—there's no hurry."

I stepped into the secret passage, switched on my electric torch, and gently moved the door. It was heavy and solid—being, in fact, a great slab of stone, with the oak firmly fixed to it. A brief examination of the other side of the door put me at ease. There was a big wooden handle in view. I touched it, and the mechanism readily moved.—crude, wieldy mechanism, but astonishingly effective. I closed the door, and the catch went home with a heavy snap.

Handforth & Co., on the other side, were rather startled—for that wall had become as solid as ever. And they didn't know which knob to move! They had watched me at work all that time, but the ornamentation was so similar that they couldn't find the actual spot.

I opened the door again, and glanced out.

"You ass!" said Handforth, with relief. "We thought you'd got yourself imprisoned, or something."

"I was just seeing how the catch worked," I explained. "It's all right—come in. We can all explore and close the door behind us. If any of the other fellows come into the breakfast room, they won't see anything queer. "We've got to be pretty careful, remember."

Handforth and Co. entered the passage, and then the secret door was closed to. On one side of us there was a blank wall, for this was the end of the passage. On the other side the narrow tunnel stretched away for some ten or twelve yards, turning sharply at that point.

The passage was only two feet wide, and no more than five feet high—so we had to go along in single file, crouching down. The air seemed very unhealthy; but was quite breathable. And the very fact that a draught came along proved that there was quite a circulating current.

Having turned the corner, we went straight for another six or seven yards, and then I found a set of roughly hewn steps leading downward. They were steep and treacherous, and I warned the others to be careful.

We went down and down, until I was quite certain that we had reached a point well below the school cellars. And now a real tunnel stretched in front of us—crudely cut out of the solid earth, with a support here and there. The floor was lumpy, and in many places the tunnel was only a foot wide.

We progressed slowly, feeling that we were on the verge of a discovery. There were other secret passages at St. Frank's, and we had known of them for long past. But this was a new one to us.

Instinctively, I felt that we were being led in the direction of the old monastery ruins—we were, in fact, passing far beneath the Triangle. And the air became more dank as we progressed—fairly reeking of that earthy odour which had so impressed Handforth.

With my electric torch casting a beam of light straight ahead, I led the way. And at last the tunnel opened out into a wide vault-like cavity. It was ten or twelve feet square, and built with great blocks of stone. The roof was arched, with peculiar supports. And there was no other exit. This secret passage just led from the Head's breakfast-room to this vault.

And the place itself was bare—with the walls slimy and damp, and with fungus growing freely. But in the very centre of the roof there was a crack-like opening. Placing my hand against this, I felt a powerful current of air. So this was how the mysterious crypt received ventilation. The other end of that air shaft was no doubt cunningly hidden somewhere in the ruins, far overhead.

"Well, it's pretty interesting, but we don't seem to have progressed very much," I remarked, as I looked round. "There's no stranger lurking here, and no ghost, either."

"Perhaps there's another exit," suggested Handforth.

"That's possible; but we should never be able to find it," I said. "This time we haven't got any clue, and it would take days and weeks to examine the place thoroughly. Hallo! What's that over there, against the wall?"

My attention had been caught by something of a slightly yellowish tinge—something that was tucked in a niche, between two of the rude blocks of stone. I crossed over, and looked more closely.

"It's an old piece of paper!" said McClure.

"Hold the torch," I exclaimed.

Church took it, and I carefully pulled out the folded object from the crevice. Spreading it out, it gave forth a crackle, and I could see at once that I held a piece of ancient parchment in my hands.

At one time it had been rolled up, for the top and bottom still curled slightly. The edges were jagged, and the whole parchment was stained and brown with age. And there was writing upon it—queer, old English writing, with a crude sketch at the top. And at the right hand bottom corner a red seal was affixed—still intact, although centuries old.

"This looks interesting," I said softly. "A parchment with a red seal! Hold the light steady, McClure—we'll see if we can read the words."

And Handforth and Co, eager and excited, craned over my shoulder.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF THE NORTH CRYPT.

THE scene was a curious one.

Anybody coming along that passage just then would have been struck by the intentness of our attitudes. We were standing in a group, McClure holding the torch, and Handforth and Church craning to get a full sight of the parchment—which I was holding stretched out between my hands.

"Perhaps it's a fake," suggested Church.

"That's what I thought—but I'm pretty well certain it isn't," I replied. "These things can be prepared very cleverly, but there's no sign of it here. I believe this is a genuine parchment—hundreds and hundreds of years old."

"What does the writing say?" demanded Handforth impatiently.

"We'll come to that in a moment," I went on. "Of course, it stands to reason that it hasn't rested in that crevice all these years. It would never have been in this dry condition. Somebody must have left the parchment there only a few hours ago—probably last night."

I gazed at the parchment with interest.

"What are those words along the top—in printed characters?" asked Church, pointing. "They're a bit faded, but I can see——"

"The ghost of St. Frank's!" I exclaimed. "Yes, they're the words—can't you see? And there's a picture underneath—it's supposed to be a drawing of a ghost. Look, the scene is a passage, with the ghost floating along—a horrible looking thing with bony hands and ghastly face, all covered over in a kind of white cloak. Can't you see?"

"Yes!" said Handforth, with a shudder.

He probably remembered that grip that had come upon him from the rear the previous night. And the picture of the ghost was certainly startling. Underneath were the words—quite a number of them. They were very neatly written in a crabbed,

faded handwriting, and in old English characters.

Line by line we made out the message, and although it took us a full twenty minutes to read to the bottom, I'll set down a copy of it straight away. This is what we read on the parchment:

"This fateful night of December twenty-seventh 1575, have I seen the apparition of horror which guards the bones of Brother Bartholomew, of St. Frank's Monastery, and which have I attempted to picture on this parchment.

"My most honoured brother lies at rest below the vault of the Northern Wing, and with him the treasures of his earthly being. 'Twas to enter into devout prayer for his good and kindly soul I entered the crypt, when, lo, the spectre arose and affrighted me, and spake, saying: 'Go thou hence, and disturb not these poor bones. Let them lie in peace, and all shall be well. But if these remains be touched, then will I return to haunt all who dwell within these sacred walls.'

"Thus did the apparition speak, and with fear did I depart. And the spectre has appeared not since, and will dwell in peace whilst the bones of Brother Bartholomew remain undisturbed.

"Here my seal is placed.

"Jacob of Belleton."

"My only hat!" breathed Handforth. "I—I'm beginning to wonder if it wasn't the ghost that appeared. It looks as if somebody has been disturbing these bones, and the spectre of old Brother Bartholomew has been getting busy."

"That's what it looks like; but I can't swallow it," I said thoughtfully. "It's far more likely that you were grabbed by some unlawful rotter who was prowling about in here."

"But who would want to come down into this horrible place at dead of night?" asked Church, with a scared look round. "It's beginning to get on my nerves already even now, in the afternoon!"

"It all depends why the marauder came here," I replied. "He wasn't ghost hunting—that's a certainty. It's far more likely that he was looking for treasure."

"Treasure!" repeated Handforth, breathlessly.

"Yes! This parchment says that Brother Bartholomew's earthly treasures were buried with him," I pointed out. "How do we know that some brute hasn't made up his mind to violate the crypt and find the treasure?"

"But—but that's horrible!" said McClure huskily.

"No more horrible than opening the tomb of an Egyptian Pharaoh," I replied quietly. "And that's what they're doing even now. Why, we've even got a mummy and some other relics coming to St. Frank's You heard about it, didn't you?"

"No."

"Oh, well, Lord Dorrimore's been over in Egypt for a good many months past, exploring the tombs," I said. "And in the generosity of his heart Dorrie has sent a mummy and some scarabs and other things for the school museum. They'll be here before the next new term starts."

Little did I imagine, as I lightly referred to this subject, what startling events were to occur coincident with the arrival of those relics of Ancient Egypt!

"But we don't want to talk about that now," I went on. "We're confining our attentions to this little mystery. Considering that the parchment was in the vault, I should imagine that Brother Bartholomew is buried somewhere near by, he must have been a pretty big pot to have a place like this all to himself."

The other juniors looked round apprehensively.

"I—I think we'd better get out of here!" muttered Church.

"We will—after another look round," I agreed. "We want to say as little of this as possible—the best thing is to keep the other chaps in complete ignorance. But if we're to make any discoveries we shall have to set a watch."

"For the ghost?" asked Handforth.

"No; for the mysterious person who's been down here, and who grabbed hold of you last night," I replied.

I carefully folded the parchment, and put it in my pocket. Then we began a search over the strange tomb. And now that we had something definite to look for, it was not long before we spotted a disturbance in the centre of the crypt. Apparently some of the stones had been recently moved.

A closer inspection revealed a stone ring—a big, heavy thing set inside a hollow—the hole being covered in damp rubbish. It was only by looking closely that we detected it.

I took hold of the rim, lifted it up, and pulled with all my strength. And a heavy slab of stone came up, revealing a dark cavity below. Church and Handforth helped, and the slab was turned right back.

"This is another tunnel!" said Handforth excitedly.

"No—I don't think so," I replied. "Let me have a light."

I flashed the beam downwards, and then started. For the cavity was quite shallow, and there lay some disturbed bones.

"Good heavens!" gasped Church. "It's—it's that old monk!"

"Brother Bartholomew!" whispered McClure.

We stared down, rather fascinated. There was nothing horrible about it, because this tomb was centuries old. And it was as clear as daylight that the bones had been recently disturbed, for they lay in confusion. And in one spot there were indications that a pickaxe, or some such implement, had been

at work. The affair was becoming quite clear.

"This is no ghostly work," I said grimly. "Somebody's been here, and has been looking for that treasure. The bones of Brother Bartholomew have been disturbed."

"Then—then the ghost will walk again!" said Church. "That's what it says on that parchment! If these remains are touched, the ghost will return and haunt everybody in the place!"

"Rubbish!" I said, noticing the startled looks of the juniors. "That's only what this old chap, Jacob, wrote. I expect he had a dream or something, and it was so vivid that he thought it real."

"Jacob of Belleton," said Handforth musingly. "I wonder who he was. And where's Belleton?"

"You're not much of a detective," I grinned. "It means Bellton—the name was evidently spelt that way in those days—but it was pronounced just the same. You mustn't take any notice of that legend about the ghost walking."

"Well, it looks queer," muttered Church. "The bones have been disturbed, and Handforth felt those bony hands——"

"I can feel 'em now!" said Handforth, with a shiver.

I decided that it was high time we took our departure. The mysterious, eerie crypt was getting on the nerves of my companions. And so, closing the slab again, we made our way back along the tunnel, up the steep stairs, and then through the narrow passages until we came to the end.

Very cautiously, I opened the hidden door. One glance through the crack was enough to show me that the breakfast-room was empty. We slipped through, one after the other, and the door was closed. I knew exactly how to open it again, if necessary.

"Thank goodness!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath. "It's fine to see the daylight again. That place gave me the creeps!"

"Same here!" said Church and McClure.

The breakfast-room was, indeed, wonderfully cheerful after the dampness and forbidding atmosphere of the vault. The cheerful fire blazing in the grate, the late afternoon sunlight outside, and the snow of the cloisters—all this looked very cheerful and comforting.

"Mum's the word," I said. "We'll keep this absolutely to ourselves, and I'll pop into your bedroom late to-night."

"You mean we'll go exploring again?" asked Church doubtfully.

"Not exactly—but we've got to keep a watch," I replied. "I don't believe all that bosh about a ghost. There's some human agency at work, and we want to find out who's responsible. And we can only do that by setting a secret watch."

And so the matter was left over for the time being. But I had an idea that some dramatic events would take place after bedtime. I certainly didn't imagine that a startling incident would occur in the early evening!

Whizz! The snowball, leaving Willy Handforth's grasp with unerring aim, burst in a beautiful array of powder over Lumpy Bill's face. The lout of the village collapsed with a howl.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HORROR OF BELLTON LANE!

WHIZZ!

The snowball, leaving Willy Handforth's grasp with unerring aim, burst in a beautiful array of powder over Lumpy Bill's face. The lout of the village collapsed with a howl.

"I'll show you!" said Willy aggressively. "Chuck another snowball at me, my son, and I'll give you what for!"

There was something rather comical about this diminutive Third-Former, openly defying the bully of Bellton. Lumpy Bill's chief delight was to perform mean and despicable tricks upon those who were his muscular inferior. And in Willy Handforth he saw an easy victim. He didn't know that Willy was a tartar.

Handforth minor had been to the village for the purpose of purchasing numerous varieties of sweets—with which his overcoat pockets were now bulging. And he was just on his way back to the school.

Tea was over, and Willy wanted to hurry, because there had been some talk of an impromptu concert. And the hero of the Third wanted to be present to do his own bit.

And Lumpy Bill, suddenly coming upon the fag, promptly hurled a snowball—which Willy dodged with calm dexterity. He was a most elusive young gentleman at the best of times. And, instead of bunking, Willy had calmly returned the fire.

Lumpy Bill picked himself up and charged.

"You little himp!" he roared. "I'll show yer!"

"What are you going to show me?" asked Willy, firmly standing his ground, and clench-

ing his fists. "If you want to fight, I'm ready. It'll only take me two ticks to knock you out!"

Lumpy Bill paused in sheer surprise. The very idea of Willy standing his ground was surprising enough. He was only about half the size of the village bully, and looked a mere infant by comparison. But his attitude of defiance made Lumpy Bill pause.

"You'd fight me?" he asked roughly.

"Yes; and I'm not waiting for you to start!" replied Willy. "Take that!"

Biff!

He leapt upwards, and his clenched fist smote Lumpy Bill on the nose. The village lout gave a roar and charged like a traction-engine. But in spite of his size, and his long reach, he could do nothing.

Willy was just like a live wire. He jumped this way and that, dodging the wild, swinging blows with comparative ease. And every moment or two he would dash in, and land a telling jab.

Lumpy Bill, to his amazement and dismay, found that he was getting the worst of it. This insignificant fag was winning! For whilst Willy was untouched, Lumpy Bill was feeling the effects of numerous blows.

And then a big form came looming out of the shadows of the High Street, and grasped Lumpy Bill by the scruff of the neck, and yanked him back.

"You infernal young ruffian!" exclaimed an angry voice. "What do you mean by attacking a mere child like that?"

With supreme disgust, Willy recognized the newcomer as Mr. John Hewitt, of Bellton Chase—the man who had created a mild sensation a few days earlier. Willy gave a snort of disdain.

"Just when I was whacking him!" he said indignantly. "I say, Mr. Hewitt, what's the idea of butting in like this?"

John Hewitt looked at the junior in astonishment.

"You do not appear to be very grateful, young man," he said very severely. "I was rescuing you from this bully——"

"Grateful!" snorted Handforth minor. "Why, I was just going to knock him flat! The cad chucked a snowball at me, and I was showing him that he's got to have more respect! You don't think he was whacking me, I suppose?"

Mr. Hewitt laughed.

"Under the circumstances, I can hardly be blamed for coming to that conclusion," he said drily. "Apparently I made a mistake—and I crave your pardon. Shall I allow your victim to go, or would you prefer to finish the job?"

"Oh, let him go!" said Willy, with a sniff. "He's not worth punching, anyway."

Mr. Hewitt released Lumpy Bill, and the lout slouched off, muttering to himself. At a safe distance he paused, and hurled a number of uncomplimentary remarks at Willy's head.

"That's all he can do—jeer like that at a distance," said Handforth minor, with disgust. "I've a good mind to chase him!"

Mr. Hewitt fairly roared. The thing was ludicrous—and there was no question at all that Willy was indeed the master. For as soon as he ran a few paces, Lumpy Bill hastily took to his heels.

And Willy, feeling that he had upheld the honour of the Third, cheerfully bade Mr. Hewitt good-night, and went on his way. Having crossed the bridge over the frozen Stowe, at the end of the village, he proceeded on his way up Bellton Lane, whistling shrilly.

Willy was under the impression that he was producing a fine tune, but, as a matter of fact, that whistle of his was famous for its extraordinary number of discords.

About half-way up the lane Willy finished his alleged tune, and paused for a few moments to get some more breath, and to think of another melody. And he trudged on over the frozen road, quite careless of the surrounding darkness. He was by no means nervous.

For a brief space he pondered as to whether he should venture upon another tune, or whether a burnt almond would be more acceptable. In a very few moments the burnt almond won the day. And Willy walked on, chewing contentedly—much to the relief of the night life in Bellton Wood.

There was no wind, and the sky was clear, the stars shining with a hard, twinkling brilliancy. The moon had already risen, and was casting a weak radiance across the lane where a few gaps occurred. All other portions of the roadway were intensely black.

It seemed to Willy that a most curious echo of his own footfalls came to his ears. He couldn't understand this, because he had never heard an echo like that before—and he had walked up Bellton Lane scores of times after dark.

As he strode along, he found himself listening, an uncomfortable impression forming itself in his mind that he was being followed. And once this idea took root, the impression grew.

Yes, he was sure of it. It wasn't an echo at all, but the sound of other footsteps. And they were peculiar—the most peculiar Willy had ever heard. By listening intently he could hear the footfalls.

Flap—flap—flap!

They were slow, deliberate, and sounded as though the owner of the walk was taking immensely long strides. For Willy himself was walking fast—a brisk, even gait. Even a man six feet high would take shorter strides than that mysterious stranger who was coming along in the rear!

Willy grinned, and told himself that he was a young ass. But the uncomfortable feeling grew, in spite of all his endeavours. He knew very well that the sounds were probably caused by some farm labourer, on

his way home. And at last Willy decided to put the thing to the test.

He came to an abrupt halt, and listened.

The strange footsteps ceased, and there was utter silence. This gave Handforth minor a bit of a turn. If the stranger was harmless, why had he stopped at exactly the same instant that Willy had stopped?

"Oh, rats! I'm getting nervy!" muttered Willy impatiently. "I expect it's only imagination, after all."

He stared back along the lane, but could see nothing. And once more he started walking. And a queer sensation came over him as he again heard that uncanny "flap—flap—flap!" in the rear.

He wasn't scared, but some instinct within him urged his pace, and the next moment he was running at top speed. Everyone who has raced along a country road at night is aware of the acute danger of panic. Willy felt it coming over him, in spite of his determination to keep calm. The faster he ran, the faster he wanted to run.

And his state of mind was further alarmed by the weird sound of those following footsteps. Even now, while running at full speed, he could hear the unknown follower.

And the most amazing thing of all was that the footsteps behind him were still slow and steady—a walk! And they were getting nearer and nearer, louder and louder.

The gates of St. Frank's were almost within sight, and the very appearance of them in the gloom ahead, made Willy lose all his self control. An overpowering desire to get indoors came over him. That steady footfall in his rear had caused his nerve to go.

Abruptly, unexpectedly, panic swept over him—stark, horrible fear. He didn't know why—he could never explain it afterwards. But his self control vanished like the cracking of a twig. And he ran—ran as he had never run before. And behind he could hear the horribly deliberate walk of the awful thing that followed. It was a ghastly experience.

Just near the gates Handforth minor turned his head. An uncontrollable desire came over him to glimpse this shadower. Without pausing in his mad race, he took a look behind.

And Willy nearly fainted with sheer horror.

For he saw something—he knew not what.

A black shape, near by—coming nearer to him with every stride. It was just a shape, like nothing human. Handforth minor thought he saw two enormous legs—legs that no human being could possibly own. And perched on these legs was a shapeless mass, with two arms outstretched.

And, although Willy was running like the wind, that ghastly thing was still walking. Instinctively the junior knew that he could never escape. He turned into the gateway of the Triangle, sobbing for breath, nearly spent.

And it so happened that the door of the Head's House opened at that moment, and two or three juniors appeared. They were Reggie Pitt, Archie Glenthorne, and Jack Grey. They had been discussing the possibilities of moonlight skating, and had come out to have a look at the sky.

But before they could glance upwards they heard the racing footsteps of Willy Handforth. And the next second the fag came tearing up, literally hurling himself into their arms.

"What on earth——" began Pitt.

"Behind—behind!" gasped Willy. It's coming!"

"Coming?" said Pitt sharply. "What's coming? Pull yourself together, you young ass! Great Scott! I believe he's fainted!"

Willy had gone all limp in his arms, and the light from the hall shone upon his white, drawn face, revealing the beads of cold perspiration.

Pitt stared across the Triangle towards the gateway.

But all was still and quiet—perfectly peaceful under that starry sky. There seemed utterly no reason for Handforth minor's panic. There was nothing behind—nothing coming, as he had intimated.

"Good gad!" exclaimed Archie, adjusting his monocle. "What's this? I mean to say, what's this? The dear old bean appears to be somewhat spent, if you know what I mean. This, I judge, is where we rally round!"

"Buck up, my son!" said Pitt sharply. "Here, steady!"

He supported Willy, and the latter was just a limp heap. He made no attempt to stand upon his own legs, but just hung there in Pitt's grasp. Reggie could see at once that the matter was serious.

"Come on—lend a hand!" he said crisply. "We've got to get him indoors."

Pitt was really very surprised. He knew that Willy Handforth was a self-confident, cheeky young beggar who had heaps of pluck, and the assurance of a dozen. He wasn't the kind of boy to be scared by his own shadow, or to get into a panic because of any strange sound in the darkness.

Something out of the common had happened—something of a very horrible nature, too. No ordinary scare would have reduced the valiant Handforth minor to this state of utter panic.

Willy had actually fainted; he was exhausted by fright and his hard run. And he recovered quickly. By the time Pitt and the other juniors had led him into the drawing-room he was capable of walking alone.

The rest of us were gathered round the fire, chatting. We looked at Willy in astonishment, and with concern. The paleness of his cheeks, the wild look in his

eyes, and his heavy breathing, all spoke of some unsuspected emotion. Edward Oswald jumped up and strode over to his minor.

"What's happened?" he asked bluntly. "What are you looking so scared about, my Lad? Great pip! You're shivering like a giddy leaf! And you're as pale as a sheet! What's the matter?"

Willy looked at his brother dazedly without speaking.

"Perhaps Reggie can tell us," I suggested.

"I don't know any more than you do," said Pitt, shaking his head. "We just went out to have a look at the weather. You know, we've been talking about moonlight skating. And we only got outside the door, when Willy came tearing across the Triangle, and he collapsed in my arms Said that something was following him."

"I expect he got into a panic in the lane," said De Valerie.

Willy gave a kind of gulp.

"I know you chaps are going to grin at me," he said quietly. "But I've had a horrible experience. You can laugh if you like—but there was something in that lane that scared me stiff. And you all know jolly well that I'm not a nervous chap," he added defiantly.

"Yes, we know that," I agreed. "You wouldn't be frightened at any ordinary object, such as a tramp, or a cow looking over a gate. Just tell us what happened, Willy. We're not going to grin."

"Spill it, kiddo!" prompted Adams.

Willy, unusually quiet and subdued, told us exactly what had taken place. He explained how he had heard the peculiar sounds of somebody following—somebody with uncannily long strides.

We listened in wonder, for this kind of spook was something unusual. Willy told us how he had stopped, and how the other footsteps had stopped. And a scared look came into his eyes as he came to a finish.

"I just caught one sight of it!" he said, his voice sinking into a whisper. "I was turning into the gateway, and I looked over my shoulder. And there it was, like some horrible shadow, just behind me!"

"But can't you describe it?" I asked.

"No," said Willy, with a shudder. "Except that it had terrific long legs, and a shapeless mass of something else—and I believe there were two ghastly-looking arms, with bony hands. I didn't see any face at all!"

Handforth & Co. exchanged startled glances, and I saw them looking at me. Their thoughts, I knew well enough, had flown to that mysterious crypt, and the message on the parchment—"but if these remains be touched, then will I return to haunt all who dwell within these sacred walls!" And Willy was one of those who dwelt within the walls of St. Frank's.

There was something sinister about it all, and I hoped that Handforth & Co. would not talk about the previous night's adventures in front of the others.

"And you say this apparition was just behind you as you turned into the gateway?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"Yes."

"H'm! That's queer!" said Reggie. "We saw you scoot in, but there was nothing following you. How would it be to go out and look for footprints?"

"No good at all," I replied. "There's been no snow to-day, and the old snow in the lane is beaten down as hard as concrete. No chance whatever of any footprints being left. Cheer up, Willy—perhaps it was only some fool of a tramp, just trying to scare you."

"It's decent of you fellows not to grin—and I'm blessed if I can understand it," said Willy. "It wasn't a tramp; I'll swear to that. The thing was like some awful monster—some creature from another world!"

He shivered, and went over to the fire. A glass of wine bucked him up a bit, and restored some of the colour to his cheeks. But there was still that scared look in his eyes, and I knew that no ordinary happening had taken place in the darkness of Bellton Lane.

CHAPTER VII.

THE THING ON THE STAIRS!

"JOLLY good!" said Handforth, with a yawn. "How many points have I scored?"

"Oh! About two million," grunted Church.

We had been playing Mah-Jong—the Chinese game that had been all the rage at Christmas parties. And we had found the game very interesting. The time had sped rapidly.

And now it was the hour for bed—ten o'clock. There was no hard and fast rule, of course, but we had agreed upon this time.

There had been no ghost talk to-night, as on the previous evening. The fellows had deliberately refrained from mentioning anything of a spooky nature. They remembered how unnerved they had been before.

"Thank goodness we're off to Montie's place to-morrow," said Tommy Watson. "I've enjoyed Christmas here, but it's about time we had a change."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth. "I wish we were going to-night."

"Begad! Awfully decent of you to say so, dear old boys," beamed Tregellis-West. "I hope we shall have a good time at my place. My uncle's gettin' up a thumpin' big party, I think, so everythin' ought to be all serene."

After a little more conversation we prepared for bed.

I noticed that Handforth gave me a significant glance as we went upstairs, and I

nodded slightly in return. He understood. And as soon as he and his chums were in their room they rapidly undressed and then donned their dressing-gowns. Church and McClure were looking rather dubious.

"It's all very well for Nipper to plan these affairs, but I'm blessed if I like it!" said Church. "I'm not scared—but at the same time I'm not going to be ass enough to say that I'm looking forward to this business."

"Same here!" muttered McClure.

"Well, I'm not looking forward to it as though it were a picnic," said Handforth sarcastically. "Nipper's right. There's something fishy going on, and it's up to us to make an investigation. For all we know, there might be a gang of crooks at work—planning to rob the school, or something."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Church. "I suppose we've got to go through with it!"

He and McClure could tell that Handforth was keen on the thing because it was something in the nature of an investigation. But even Edward Oswald couldn't entirely rid his mind of thoughts of the supernatural. The strange experience of Willy had renewed all his thoughts of ghosts.

A moment later I entered the room, and I was brisk and cheerful. When they started talking to me about the grim nature of our quest, I scoffed at them.

"Don't be silly!" I laughed. "There's nothing to be nervous about. This is simply and purely a detective stunt. Completely dismiss all idea of the occult. There's some crook at work—and, if possible, we're going to find out who he is. You fellows ready?"

"Yes," said Handforth. "Shall we go now? It's only a little after half-past ten, you know."

"All the better," I replied. "We shall be on the scene in good time. I've got my electric torch, and we'll go along that tunnel straight away. I'll explain my plans to you later."

Very softly, we tiptoed out of the bedroom, and found ourselves in the corridor. As on the previous night, the moon was shining slantingly in through the windows. I pretended to be absolutely free and easy—but I must confess that the very nature of our task had gripped me in a strange manner. But Handforth and Co. were similarly affected.

We went down the stairs, and I led the way across the hall to the short passage which led to the breakfast-room. Church cast a sideways glance at an ancient suit of armour which stood up one corner, and he drew closer to his companions. I was beginning to think that I should have been well advised to have had Reggie Pitt with us. But it was too late now.

I walked on, expecting the others to follow. But Church suddenly paused. In spite of his efforts, he was at the rear—and he didn't like being last. He grabbed McClure by the arm.

"Listen!" he said softly.

"What—what's the matter?" muttered McClure.

"I heard something."

Handforth turned, and the three of them walked back a yard or two into the hall and stood there. The moonlight was coming in through the leaded windows, and the whole scene was rather eerie. No lights had been turned on, because they might attract attention. And he wanted this investigation to be private.

Suddenly McClure gave a startled gasp.

"Look!" he whispered hoarsely. "What—what's that?"

"Eh? What's what?" breathed Handforth.

But one glance at McClure was enough. He was staring straight upstairs towards the landing. Handforth and Church looked up there, too. And they stiffened as they stood—transfixed.

For something strange was happening.

Just at the corner, where the corridor turned off, a kind of phosphorescent glow had become evident. There was nothing definite to be seen. Handforth tried to convince himself that that glow was merely a reflection of the moonlight. But somehow he knew that this explanation was wrong. And a moment later his heart nearly jumped into his mouth.

For a strange and terrifying thing appeared. It came apparently from nowhere. One second it was not—and the next second it was. It was there, at the top of the stairs, and slowly, with a strange, uncanny motion, it commenced to float down the stairs.

It was not a walk—but a weird, gliding motion that was absolutely silent. And the thing itself was horrifying. A hazy, phosphorescent figure—a figure that might have been a ghostly monk, with a cowl over its head. And as Handforth and Co. stood there, watching, the apparition halted—floating half-way down the stairs—and moving slightly to and fro.

There were no legs—the ghost trailed away to nothingness, and did not even touch the stairs. It hovered there, in mid-air. The juniors could see a face—a ghastly, terrifying countenance with glaring eyes and fang-like teeth. And then, slowly, two arms unfolded, and stretched out—showing the bony, claw-like hands.

And still Handforth and Co. made no sound—they were incapable of it. Pale as sheets, their hearts beating heavily, they stood there, unable to move hand or foot. Real terror gripped them.

In the meantime, I had reached the breakfast-room, and wondered what had delayed my companions. I turned back after a few moments, and silently walked along the passage to the hall.

I entered—and came to an abrupt halt.

"Good heavens!" I muttered huskily.

I've got to confess that I was utterly frightened by the sight of that horrible figure on the stairs. I had been expecting nothing of the sort, and the very sight of it made me catch my breath in as though I had plunged into a cold bath. I felt my heart thumping heavily.

And I stared—gripped by the sight of that thing.

It just hovered there on the stairs, indistinct, and yet so clearly visible. There was something about it that told me on the instant that it was certainly no human being painted up, or dressed in ghostly garb.

For one thing, no human being could hover in that way—and it came as a bit of a shock to me when I saw the stairs—right through the lower portion of the figure! Was it possible that this was a real apparition of the dead?

Something told me to dash forward, and put the matter to the test then and there. But I couldn't move. I was held by some hidden force, and the growing horror increased.

I detected a slight change in the phantom.

It seemed to me that it was growing smaller. And then, to my utter amazement, this process went on. As we gazed up at the ghost, it shrunk—there, in front of our eyes.

Smaller and smaller it grew—until, at last, it was a mere phosphorescent ball, floating in the air. Then, like the snuffing out of a candle, it vanished altogether.

The stairs were black and deserted. The moonlight gleamed in coldly, and not a sound broke the stillness of the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GHOST HUNT.

MY power of movement returned instantly.

A sense of anger assailed me for not jumping forward while the ghost was still in sight. But even now only a few seconds had elapsed since the apparition had vanished.

I gave one spring, and reached the electric-light switch.

Click!

The switch went down, and the gloomy old hall became flooded with electric light. I stared at the stairs and the opening of the corridor. There was nothing there—absolutely nothing!

With swift strides I raced up, and examined the very spot where the ghost had appeared. But there was no mark—no sign. In very truth, the awful thing had disappeared into thin air. Right before our eyes it had vanished on the open stairs.

"Oh! This—this is awful!" muttered Church, terrified.

"It was a ghost—a real ghost!" said McClure, his voice shaky with fear. "I'm not a funk, but this is more than I can stand!"

Handforth looked at me strangely.

"That was the thing that grabbed hold of me last night!" he said, in a choking voice. "That parchment's right, Nipper—somebody's disturbed the bones, and the ghost is haunting the place!"

"Nonsense!" I said sharply. "Pull yourselves together!"

I spoke in that way so that Handforth and Co. would get a grip on themselves. As a matter of fact, I was so startled by the unaccountable happening that I could hardly think clearly.

It was the most extraordinary phenomenon I had ever witnessed—and if it was the result of trickery, there was no apparent explanation. How could any human agency have been responsible? How could a trickster have caused that ghost to vanish in full view? It was not as though a door had been handy, or a black curtain. The thing had simply dematerialised.

"I—I don't think we'll do any exploring to-night," said Handforth slowly. "I don't feel like it. There's—there's something rummy about this house, you chaps. Thank goodness we're going to-morrow."

"Rather!" muttered Church.

"You can't kid me—there was no fake about that!" said McClure, his face still white and drawn. "It was a spirit—and the place is haunted! I've always scoffed at spiritualism, but I shan't after this."

I suggested turning the lights off, but they wouldn't hear of it. They were so unnerved by their experience that the thought of darkness appalled them. And they didn't want to go into the breakfast-room, either.

And while I was trying to get them to pull themselves together, Reginald Pitt awoke. He shared a bed-room with Jack Grey and Archie Glenthorne, and the three had gone to sleep in the ordinary way.

Pitt didn't exactly know what had awakened him. But he found himself with his eyes open, looking dreamily across the room. The moonlight was streaming in, for they had raised the blind before going to sleep. And although the floor was brightly illuminated just in front of the window, the other part of the room lay in dense shadow. The moonlight only enhanced the darkness in the other part of the room.

Archie was stirring, too, so it was pretty clear that something must have happened to arouse them. Even Jack Grey turned over in bed, and gave a long sigh of contentment.

Pitt suddenly sat forward, catching his breath in.

"Who's that?" he asked sharply, his voice rather strained.

"Eh? I mean to say, what?" murmured Archie, turning over. "Dash it all, kindly allow a cove to obtain forty of the best! It's a bit thick when voices come floating through the night—— Good gad!"

Archie broke off abruptly, and stared into the darkness—just as Reginald Pitt was staring. And Grey, awakened by the voices of the other two, was just as alert as they were.

They were staring at a curious, luminous ball which hung in the air some little distance from the foot of their beds. It moved slightly to and fro, without making the faintest sound. And then, as they watched, it quickly resolved itself into a ghost-like form—a horrible shape.

Just as we had stared at the phantom in the hall, these three juniors gazed with fascinated eyes at the horrible apparition. It just hovered there, not actually touching the floor, but near it.

Then, without a sound, the ghost slid upwards and sideways towards the fanlight of the door. This was partially open, and, to the utter amazement of the watching juniors, the phantom lost shape and became a long stream, like a whisp of smoke. It glided up to the fanlight and slipped out.

Instantly, Reggie Pitt leapt out of bed, dashed to the door, and switched the light on. He was a level-headed fellow, and he was not frightened—although his heart was thumping rapidly. His own common sense told him that there must be some trickery about this—it couldn't be a genuine spirit manifestation.

Barely three seconds had elapsed since the thing vanished, and Pitt tore open the door and gazed quickly up and down the long corridor. The moonbeams streamed in through the various windows, and Pitt could see that the corridor was bare and deserted. There wasn't a thing in sight, and it seemed impossible that any human being could have got away in such short time.

And once more he started walking, and a queer sensation came over him as he again heard that uncanny "flap, flap, flap!" in the rear.

"Phew! That was jolly queer!" murmured Pitt breathlessly.

Then he noticed that a dim reflection of light came from the end of the corridor—as though the hall lights were switched on. Jack Grey and Archie Glenthorne had joined him, and they were looking shaky.

"What was it?" asked Grey unsteadily.

"Goodness knows!" replied Pitt.

"Without wishing to be pessimistic, old lads, I must remark that we've had a visit from the ghost of some poor cove who was probably foully done to death in the old dungeons," said Archie. "I've heard that these chappies come forth now

and again and show themselves. Frightfully disturbing, but there it is! Or, to be exact, there it was. I'm dashed if I know what's become of it now!"

A door opened opposite.

"What's all the noise about out here?" asked De Valerie sleepily. "You know we're trying to let Willy go to sleep——"

"It's all right, old dear," interrupted Archie. "Only a ghost."

"A ghost!"

"Absolutely!"

"You're mad!" said De Valerie. "There aren't such things as ghosts."

Pitt briefly explained what had happened, and De Valerie looked rather queer. He was joined by Fatty Little, who decided that here was an excellent opportunity—and a good excuse—to buzz downstairs for a snack.

Pitt, having noticed the reflection of light at the end of the corridor, went along to investigate. The others accompanied him. And they suddenly appeared at the top of the landing like so many ghosts, and Church, below, let out a whoop.

"Look!" he gasped. "Oh, my hat! I—I thought——"

He paused, breathing hard.

"Now it's all up—the secret's out!" I said grimly.

The juniors came hurrying downstairs.

"What's the idea?" asked Pitt. "Are you chaps responsible for that awful apparition? If so, I don't think much of your sense of humour. It was a rotten trick to play."

"Apparition!" I said quickly. "Have you seen a—a ghost?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "A most frightful-looking object, which appeared in our bed-room, and then proceeded to vanish through the fanlight. I mean, respectable ghosts don't do that sort of thing!"

"Oh, goodness!" groaned Church. "They've seen it, too!"

Naturally, explanations followed, and by this time the whole crowd of us were present—including Ulysses Spencer Adams, who evinced a great interest in the proceedings.

"What's your opinion, Nipper?" asked Watson, at last.

"I don't know what to think—but I'm fairly well convinced that there's some devilry at the bottom of the whole business!" I replied grimly. "How it was done is a mystery—about the smartest thing I've ever seen. And if you chaps are game, I propose that we hunt the ghost now—straight away."

The juniors looked at one another—excited. They had all regained their composure by now. They felt that there was safety in numbers. And the effect of the bright electric light was also making itself felt.

"Good idea!" said Handforth. "It's a go!"

"You said it!" agreed Adams. "Listen! If this dope turns out to be some crooked work, I'll sure raise my hat to the guy who's put it over. I guess he's some magician!"

"You mean—we're going down into that vault?" asked Pitt.

"Yes," I said quietly. "But there's no need for a whole crowd of us to go—four will be plenty. The rest of you will remain on the watch up here. With all the electric lights going, you can't feel nervous, and a ghost never appears in the light. Or if it does, it loses its terrors. So brace yourselves up, and get ready for the fray."

"I shouldn't be surprised if Willy saw the giddy thing out in the lane," muttered Church. "Blessed if I can understand it. He said the thing had awful long legs, and was without any shape. And it wasn't luminous, either. And yet there can't be two ghosts."

The lights were switched on everywhere—not only in the hall and the passages, but the doors of the apartments were opened, and all the switches turned on. And with the whole place gleaming with electricity, the ghostly atmosphere was completely dissipated.

At the same time, those juniors who had seen the ghost could not forget the sight of it, and they all declared that they would be glad when the morning came—for we were booked to depart for Tregellis Castle by the early express.

I soon arranged my men. I chose Handforth and Pitt and De Valerie to accompany me, and stationed all the rest at various places, to keep a lookout. If there was any sign of the ghost, or any mysterious occurrence, they were to send a scout down the tunnel, to give us warning.

And so, with my electric torch handy, I pressed the knob which released the hidden catch. The panel opened back. And the fellows who had not seen this before were greatly interested.

The four of us entered—Handforth coming immediately behind me, and Pitt bringing up the rear. The light from my torch cast a brilliant beam in front, and I made good progress.

Now and again I paused to have a look at the floor, hoping to find some trace of footprints. But it was hard, with very little dust, and there was practically no chance of making any discoveries.

"It's a queer thing we never knew about this passage before," remarked Pitt, from the rear. "It must have been here for centuries."

"Of course," said De Valerie. "This part of the school is about the oldest of all—even older than the Ancient House. Some of the walls are nearly a yard thick, and there's no telling what secret tunnels there are. Probably many of them have never been discovered."

"And won't be until the place is pulled down," said Handforth. "I don't mind telling you I don't like this affair at all. It's nearly midnight, don't forget, and we're going to a tomb!"

"There's no need to scare yourself by that talk," growled Pitt.

"Who's scared?"

"Oh, well, better not mention such things."

"I'll mention what I like," said Handy. "Down in that vault, there's a kind of grave, with human bones in it. If that parchment is right, the thing we saw was the ghost of Brother Bartholomew—and we're quite likely to meet him any minute. Ugh! The smell of this place is horrid!"

By this time we had reached the end of the narrow passage, and I commenced the descent of the steep stairs which led down to the lower tunnel.

I picked my way cautiously, in spite of the fact that I'd been before, and that my light was powerful. I descended half-way without any mishap. And then disaster came!

I put my foot on the next step, and instead of holding my weight, it toppled beneath me, and sent me pitching forward. In vain I clutched at the wall to save myself.

The electric torch went flying, crashed down, and was instantly extinguished. And I plunged headlong down the narrow stairs!

CHAPTER IX.

THE TREASURES OF BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW!

"OH, my goodness!"

I sat up painfully. Complete darkness surrounded me, and for a few moments I thought that I was really badly injured. My left leg felt as though it were broken, and one of my wrists was hurting tremendously. I had bruises everywhere, and a bump on the back of my head that nearly knocked me silly.

But after a moment or two I started to haul myself up, and found that there were no bones broken.

"Nipper!" came a husky voice from above.

"Ow! It's all right," I gasped. "I'm—ow!—I'm not hurt much!"

"You sound hurt!" came Handforth's voice. "What the dickens made you pitch down like that? You've smashed the torch now—and we're left in the dark!"

"It's all right—I've got matches," said Pitt.

By the time I had pulled myself completely up, my companions had succeeded in stumbling down to the bottom of the stairs. And my own wits had returned. The pain from my bruises became less.

"That was done deliberately!" I said grimly, as Pitt struck a match. "Oh, my hat! It's a wonder I'm alive!"

"You came a frightful cropper!" said Pitt. "But what do you mean—it was done deliberately?"

"There wasn't a loose stone there when we explored the place this afternoon," I replied. "It was loosened on purpose, so that if somebody came down they would trip up and fall."

"Good," said Reggie promptly.

"Oh, very good!" I agreed, with a rueful glance at him.

"I mean it's good, because it proves that we're up against something substantial," went on Pitt. "No self-respecting spirit would descend to such a mean trick. I think it's pretty clear that we're dealing with a flesh and blood trickster. And the sooner we rout him out the better."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth.

"Wait a minute, before we go on," I said. "We can't explore this crypt with only a few matches. It puts us at a disadvantage. Who's got a torch? I don't mean here—but one of you might buzz back——"

"What about a candle?" asked De Valerie. "I've got one here. Took it out of the breakfast-room as I came through."

"Good man!" I said approvingly. "That's what I call thoughtful. A candle will do fine."

We were left in complete darkness while De Valerie fumbled in his pocket for the candle.

But before he could bring it out that same mysterious phenomenon took place—down the tunnel we caught sight of a luminous shape, which gradually resolved itself into the fearsome figure of the ghost. This time I did not allow myself to become transfixed.

Without a moment's hesitation, I dashed forward.

I ran towards the ghost, intending to make certain, once and for all, whether it was real or unreal. I gave a tremendous grab as I came within reaching distance. And in the same second the apparition vanished.

I thought I felt something filmy between my fingers for a flash, but then it was gone. But how on earth the spectre could disappear in the space of a moment was beyond my understanding. For I knew that this tunnel was straight, with no cavities or recesses.

The juniors, further back, struck another match, in order to light the candle—but the light did not penetrate to where I was standing—and it only lasted for a flash, anyhow. It's generally the case that in such moments of emergency a match will fail to burn.

"Have you got anything?" came Handforth's eager inquiry.

"No—nothing," I replied.

Quite near to me, a soft, eerie laugh sounded. It gave me a turn, and I felt a wild impulse to flee. But before I could

move, two hands gripped my arms, and held me. The sensation was uncanny in the extreme.

But I didn't knuckle under—I struck out with all my strength. And, more by accident than design, my second blow struck something soft and human-like. There came a quick gasp, and a heavy body fell against my feet. And as I felt it, my apprehensions vanished.

"Quick!" I yelled. "Bring the candle!"

Handforth came running up, hastened by my tone. And he held the lighted candle—the flame of which was flickering perilously. It's a wonder it kept alight at all.

"It's all right, young gents—I give in," came a voice from my feet. "My! But you caught me one fair below the belt that time!" the voice added, in a groan.

We looked down, and found ourselves staring at a perfect stranger. At least, he seemed a stranger at first. But there was something familiar about his features that occurred to me a minute afterwards.

For the moment, we were interested with the man's appearance.

He was dressed entirely in black—a close-fitting sort of garb that completely enveloped him, and made his movements absolutely silent. Hanging from his shoulders there was a kind of hood, which, I judged, could be pulled over his head in order to make him completely invisible.

"You—you rotter!" said Handforth fiercely. "So you're the scoundrel who's been playing all these tricks? You'd better not try any more, because we'll soon put a stop to them."

The man sat up, obviously in pain.

"Give me a minute, young gents," he said feebly. "I haven't done any harm—I'm not a criminal. It's Christmas-time, and I hope you won't hand me over to the police. Don't be hard on a man, gents," he added, in a whine.

My chance blow had evidently caught him very severely in the stomach, knocking all the wind out of him. He had collapsed on the spot—and even now he was only slowly recovering. As I saw his face in the full candle-light, I suddenly whistled.

"Your name's Wilcox, isn't it?" I asked abruptly.

"Yes, young gents."

"Thought so," I said. "Don't you remember Wilcox?" I added, turning to the others. "He was in the Head's house as a footman about three months ago. He left suddenly in September for some reason. It didn't interest us, so we never inquired."

"By George, yes!" said Handforth. "This is the chap! And I thought he was a real crook!" he added, with disgust. "Only a giddy footman!"

"I'm not a crook, gents!" muttered the man. "If you'll let me go, I'll tell you the whole story, honest I will! I've had all my trouble for nothing, too," he added, with bitterness.

"Well, we don't want to talk here!" I said curtly. "We'll go up to the breakfast-room."

"I can't move yet—I'm in pain!" said Wilcox. "I'm sorry I frightened some of you young gentlemen—but I was desperate and I wanted to scare you off. I can see as you're made of sterner stuff!"

"You didn't scare us!" said Handforth contemptuously. "All the same, I'd like to know how you worked that dodge with the ghost."

Wilcox grinned feebly.

"That's the ghost, sir!" he said, pointing.

Something was lying on the floor, further down the tunnel. I picked it up, and found a long piece of cunningly shaped gauze in my hand. It looked quite ordinary gauze—but if the candle had been extinguished, I should have seen that it was prepared with some luminous stuff.

It was fitted to a cleverly devised collapsible frame, and when fully extended took on the appearance of a ghostly figure—face and hands complete. But it was possible, by a simple manipulation of the framwork, to pull all the gauze up into a little ball.

"It's what them mediums use, sir," said Wilcox. "A friend of mine goes to these 'ere spiritualist sceances, and he got hold of that contrivance when the medium was exposed, once. Those chaps don't produce real ghosts, sir—their spirits are only made of gauze and that kind of stuff."

"There's something in that—although we don't want to go into any discussion of spiritualism now," I said grimly. "I suppose you stood behind this thing and worked it?"

"When it was on the stairs, I had it on the end of a pole, sir," said the man. "It was easy enough to work the frame by a string. I was crouching at the top of the stairs, and being all black you couldn't see a sign of me. And it was only a second's work to whisk out of sight before you put the lights on. I put it through the fanlight of a door, too—hoping I'd scare you so much that you wouldn't do any more searching."

Seen there, in the candle-light, the apparition looked very harmless. But knowing no explanation, and appearing on a dark staircase, the effect had been staggering, as I have already described.

"And what was the idea of the ghost, anyway?" I asked.

"I didn't really want to use the ghost," replied Wilcox. "I only brought that fake with me in case of emergencies. You see, I expected this part of the school to be empty and deserted at Christmas-time. I didn't know as you young gents would be in possession."

"And so you tried to scare us away?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's a pity you didn't wait until to-morrow," grunted Handforth. "We're going in the morning—and then you could

have had the whole place to yourself for a week."

"Just my luck!" groaned the man. "I was a fool not to lie low and see how things went. But I thought you was going to stop here until the school opened again—and then things would be a lot worse for me."

"Do you know anything about that parchment?" I demanded.

Wilcox groaned.

"That's the whole cause of the trouble, young gent," he said mournfully. "You see, it was like this. I'll tell you why I was sacked at a minute's notice. I had a good job here, and I was a fool to mess about with that parchment at all! One day I was in the breakfast-room, and I was polishing the oak. And it gave me a rare start when one of the panels started opening. It didn't take me long to find out that I'd stumbled on a secret door."

"You found it by accident?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Wilcox. "I didn't have no notion of it—I never tried to find any secret passage, and I wish to goodness I never set eyes on it! But, naturally, I was a bit curious. So that night I came down after everybody was asleep, and did a bit of exploring. I found myself in that crypt, and although I was a bit scared, I had a good look round."

"And what did you find?"

"It didn't take me long to locate the slab in the floor," replied the man. "I pulled it up, and got a rare fright when I see the bones. But after a chap's been through the war, he don't take much notice of horrible things like that—I've seen worse out in No-Man's Land! And there was that parchment there, too."

"So that's where it was found?" asked Handforth.

"Yes, young gent—and I was rare excited, too," replied our prisoner. "Y'see, there was talk of treasure, and I figured that the old monk chap had been buried with a lot of his gold—a kind of hoard. So I took the parchment, and made up my mind to come again on the next night, and have a good search. But just as I was going to open the panel, who should come into the breakfast-room but the Head! I nearly sunk through the floor! He asked me what I was doing, and I had to stammer out some story about locking the window, which I'd forgot to do. But Dr. Stafford saw I was flustered, and he sacked me on the spot. The next morning I had to go off."

"So you never had a chance to look for the treasure, eh?" asked Pitt.

"That's the size of it, sir," agreed Wilcox. "But I figured that nobody else knew about the passage, and it occurred to me that it wouldn't do any harm to anybody if I came here at Christmas-time, when all was quiet. That's what I did—only to find you young gents here."

"And we rather spoilt your game?"

"That you did," said the prisoner. "I came out of the passage last night, and it didn't take me long to find out that one of the young gents was in the room. I did my best to scare him. And to-night I meant to frighten you so much that you'd clear off in the morning."

"We're clearing off, anyway," I said.

"If you'd had some sense, you'd have realised that the parchment didn't refer to wealth, but to the little things that Brother Bartholomew treasured during his life-time," I said. "They were treasures to him—but to nobody else. It serves you right for getting up to such a disreputable game. And you'll have to pay the penalty, too.

"There's one thing I want to ask you, Wilcox," I said. "Did you chase one of our chaps along the lane this evening?"

"No—I haven't been out," replied the man. "I decided that the best thing I could do was to lurk about indoors—it was easy enough, with the place nearly empty. No, sir, I didn't follow anybody."

The man was led away to one of the cellars, so that he could be kept in confinement until the police arrived. But on the way, he suddenly wrenched himself away from the fellows who were holding him, darted down the passage, and shot up the rear stairs.

We lost him—in some way, he slipped out of the building, and made his escape. And the majority of the chaps were not sorry—for it was Christmas-time, and we didn't quite like the idea of sending the wretch to prison. After all, he hadn't done anything that could be called a crime.

And so the affair was really kept quite to ourselves, and on the morrow we started off for Sir Montie's place in the best of good humours—well pleased that the ghost of St. Frank's was laid for all time.

As for Willy, his story about being followed by an extraordinary shape was discredited. The juniors took it for granted that Handforth minor had imagined the affair.

But, as we were soon destined to learn, Handforth minor's encounter in the lane had been a very real adventure, indeed! It was in no way connected with Wilcox and the faked ghost. But it was, in truth, a hideous menace of which we were to learn more at the beginning of the new term.

For strange and mysterious events were destined to occur—events that we could not even dream of in our wildest moments. With the coming of the New Year, St. Frank's was to be involved in a web of mystery such as had never before spun its weird spell around the old school.

THE END.

MY AMERICAN NOTE-BOOK

By the Author of our St Frank's Stories.

No. 4—New York—The Elevated Railroad.

THE New York Elevated Railroad—popularly known as the "L"—is older and much less modern than its speedy sister, the Subway. Indeed, I have heard many New Yorkers say that the company is still running the original coaches which were used when the line was opened, many years ago. This may not be true, so I do not set it down as fact.

But it is undoubtedly a fact that the Elevated is old-fashioned, with its short, open-ended coaches, and indifferent comfort. Recently, the Interborough Rapid Transit Company have re-painted the trains a bright orange colour, and labelled each coach "The Open Air Line"—but this, after all, is merely a camouflage.

The Elevated is exactly like any other electric railway, except for the fact that the double track is mounted high on steel or wooden structures which run about level with the bed-room windows of respectable citizens.

For the Elevated runs over the streets of New York, with the ordinary tram-car and other traffic underneath. As an example, let us imagine that this type of railway existed in London. You would get on at Charing Cross, in the Strand, and go right down the Strand, past the Law Courts, into Fleet Street, and so on to Ludgate Hill, or elsewhere.

And the result can be imagined. The streets of New York over which the Elevated runs are dark and ugly, some of them resembling tunnels. Every few yards the heavy steel supports rise from the edges of the pavements, and the track itself stretches overhead, sometimes in curves, reaching within a few feet of people's upper windows.

When a train rattles along overhead the din is tremendous—especially as a few street-cars are probably grinding along on the street level at the same time, to say nothing of the constant motor-traffic.

Walking along Sixth Avenue or Ninth Avenue in New York may be a novel experience to a newcomer, but any comfortable conversation is out of the question. The incessant din is apt to became nerve-wracking

At different points a station is perched high above the street, with two narrow stairways leading direct from the pavements up to it. It is difficult to imagine anything more depressing than a walk along Ninth Avenue on a wet day, with the Elevated roaring overhead and great drips of water falling in constant streams from the steel girders and supports.

But observe the Elevated trains on any day at, say, six o'clock in the evening! They are not merely packed with humanity, but literally jammed full. The overcrowding that is permitted in New York would never be sanctioned on this side of the water.

We are apt to grumble at the squash on the London Underground, but I can safely say that a ride on the District during the rush hours is a mere picnic compared to the terrible squash on the New York Subway or Elevated.

As I have mentioned before, the coaches on the "L" line are open at the ends, and after the carriages are full, the passengers crowd and jam on to the open platforms—pressed against one another like so many sardines. During my stay in New York I never braved a ride on the "L" during the rush hours.

As with the Subway, there is a uniform fare on this railway, five cents (2½d.) being charged for any distance, short or long. This dispenses with ticket collectors, for you merely drop a nickel—a coin equalling five cents—into a slot, and pass through a turnstile. You have no ticket, and at your destination you simply walk out.

Although I had many rides on the Elevated, I did not greatly care for the experience. I am by no means nervous, but, somehow, I never felt exactly safe on those vibrating steel structures, high above the streets. And the Americans are so terribly careless where their railways are concerned! As recently as this summer an Elevated train in Brooklyn, a suburb of New York, ran off the track—and, naturally, off the structure as well, dropping headlong into the street and resulting in a long list of casualties.

The ground level is quite good enough for me!

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY NUMBER !

No. 5. Vol. 1. Edited by Nipper. December 29, 1923.

St. Frank's Magazine

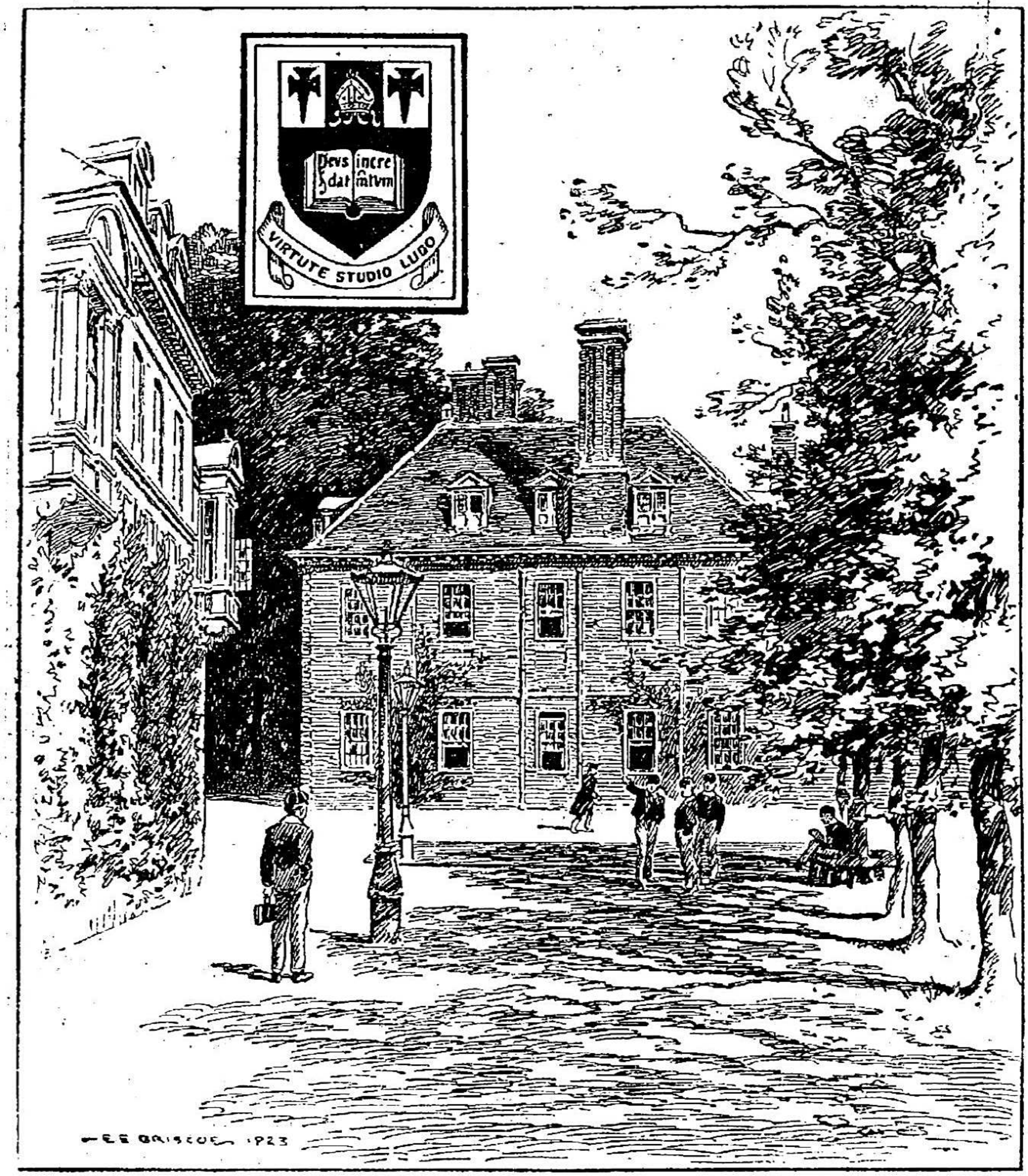
CONTENTS

A COPY OF THE MAG. ENSURES A JOLLY CHRISTMAS !

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

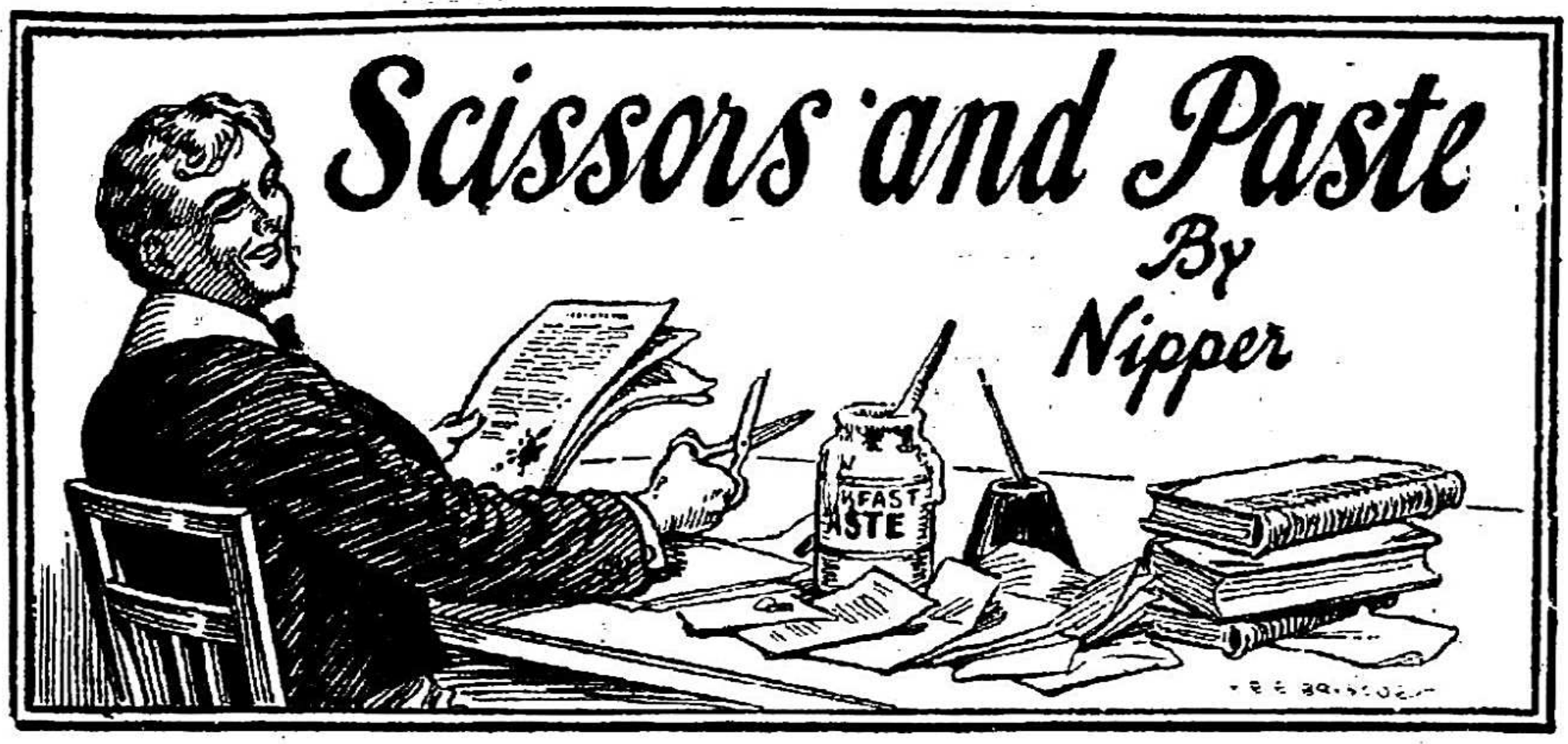
SPECIAL SERIES OF ART SKETCHES BY MR. E. E. BRISCOE.

No. 7. MARLBOROUGH.



MARLBOROUGH COLLEGE.

Although not possessing the old historical associations of Eton, Harrow, and other schools that have appeared in this series, Marlborough can claim to be regarded as one of England's famous public schools. For some years past the school has earned a reputation for the smartness of its cadet corps, and for the number of successes at marksmanship at Bisley. Situated at Marlborough, it possesses extensive grounds. Marlborough College was founded in 1843 for the sons of the clergy, but in 1853 the school threw open its doors to the sons of laymen. In College there are about 430 boys, divided into eight houses, and 230 boys in other houses outside. The school is divided into lower, middle, and upper, with a special military side for boys entering the Army. Other buildings include a chapel, built in 1886, and science laboratories, etc.



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

My Dear Chums,

I hope you are all having a Jolly Good Time, and that you found last week's Xmas Number of the Mag. quite up to expectations. Between you and me and the gate-post, I think it was the best number of the Mag. so far, with the exception of the one you are now reading. Both numbers are well packed with good things, and both have been specially written and illustrated for the Christmas holidays. It is a little early to speak of results, but if the first few numbers of the Mag. went like hot cakes, by the simple rule of three, the Christmas numbers should be devoured like mince-pies.

AN EXCELLENT SCHEME.

It has been suggested to me by several chums that the St. Frank's Magazine should bring out an annual. In any case, such an excellent scheme could not possibly be achieved before next year. In the first place, we should have to gather together an enormous amount of reserve copy—I mean, suitable copy. I get cartloads of the other kind, and the process of selecting therefrom is something like extracting radium from ore. Possibly I may be able to produce in the coming spring an enlarged Spring Number of the Mag. This is not a promise; it is merely a suggestion. I have other plans, too; but the time is not yet ripe to announce what they are.

HOW HANDY WOULD RUN THE MAG.!

While on this subject, I might mention that Handforth has sent me a long account of how he thinks the Mag. should be run. He wanted me to publish it in the Christmas Number, but, of course, I was not going to spoil our special number just to please Handy.

However, some of his ideas are very wonderful, but scarcely practicable. For instance, he thinks the pages should be four times as big as they are at present, so that we could use bigger type. He does not explain how we are to fit these pages in with the rest of The Nelson Lee Library.

Then he suggests that we have a competition, offering a prize of £500 for the best story sent in each week. Very nice! But he does not say who is going to stump up the cash!

And his last suggestion is that he should be Editor and write all the contributions himself. Well, I have told you the gist of Handy's article. I must leave it to you, my chums, to say whether you would like Handy to relieve me of my job. In fact, I have a mind to hand it over to him for one week. I think that will be quite long enough.

T.T. AGAIN!

You will note in this week's number that T.T. has been giving us some philosophical remarks on the The Folly of Christmas. I trust none of you will take him seriously. It is because I don't think you will that T.T.'s article has been published.

A NEW CONTRIBUTOR.

With the Special New Year Number of the Mag. coming next week, I am introducing a new contributor, whose name is Jarrow. He is a new fellow at the school, and may prove a rather useful copy merchant, for he possesses an extraordinary ability for reeling off large quantities of information at random—very much at random, you might say! There are quite a number of other things I would like to talk to you about, but I have come to the end of my space, and so I will conclude these remarks by wishing you all the best of luck during the coming New Year.

Your faithful Chum,
NIPPER.

THE FOLLY OF CHRISTMAS!

A Word of Warning

By TIMOTHY TUCKER

FRIENDS, I am writing this article in a spirit of grave apprehension. Pause, I say, and look at the wreckage and ruin which is yearly caused by the awful extravagances of Christmas.

You—you who sit down to a luxurious Christmas dinner, and afterwards pull expensive crackers (a shameful and wicked waste)—you, I repeat, do not realise what these reckless customs are leading to.

Let me tell you!

They are leading to ruin—stark, horrible ruin. While the idle rich loll about at their pleasures, while they ride about in Rolls Royce cars, while they spend money like water on needless luxuries, what is happening to the working classes? (Probably having a high old time of their own.—ED.)

Let me tell you, friends, that the working classes are the backbone of the country—the backbone of the Empire. Cause this backbone to break under the strain of pitiless oppression, and the whole structure of the civilised world—and also the British Empire—will crumble to pieces like a house that has been struck by a tornado.

And this backbone is suffering—suffering horribly while the ruling classes drink their wine and eat their plum pudding and play their foolish Christmas games! The working classes are held down like slaves of old. Their faces are ground into the dust! And what happens to these faces which are ground into the dust? What happens to them? (Our contributor's idea of writing an article seems to be to ask all sorts of questions that he can't answer. However, I'll do my best to oblige. The faces he mentions would probably be somewhat scratched and spongy.—ED.)

Christmas as a religious festival is to be honoured and respected. And why is it not confined to this splendid purpose? Is it necessary to make such an occasion an excuse for unnecessary gorging and wanton extravagance? No, it is not! I repeat, it is not!

Think! If you are capable of doing so, think! Reckon up the countless thousands of pounds which are spent on Christmas presents which nobody wants! Think of the fortunes which are poured into the gutter on food that nobody needs! Ponder over the wealth that is wasted on parlour fireworks and bad cigars and poisonous cigarettes! Money that goes up in smoke!

And, having weighed these facts carefully, I now urge you to think in another channel. Place all this wealth together—count it up! It will aggregate millions! And what could be done with this money? What could be done with it all? (We'll show you if you hand some to us.—ED.)

This vast array of wasted money, my friends, could be spent on the poor! It could be used for providing the poor with the bare necessities of life! It could be used for giving these starving creatures a chance in life!

Christmas time is the great wasting time! And I make this serious and appalling statement with due thought and consideration. Do you ever see the working classes enjoying themselves on Christmas Day? (Yes! We hear them occasionally.—ED.) Is it not a fact that the working classes are held down by bonds of misery and oppression?

How much do these poor, deluded people spend at Christmas? (Judging by the slate clubs, they spend a tidy bit, we imagine! ED.) And the paltry sums they do spend? What of it? What is that money used for? Just the meagre necessities of the moment! Do they spend this money on beer? The very idea is preposterous! (Our contributor is now not mild, but bitter.—ED.)

Let me repeat that Christmas is a time of wilful waste—a folly to our great civilisation! Civilisation? Pause, and think! Is there any civilisation while such oppression is permitted——

(Sorry, old man. No more space. But the rest of your article proved very useful for lighting the Editorial fire. By the way, didn't you spend a sumptuous Christmas at your uncle's town house in Belgrave Square? Oh, these Uplifters!—ED.)

Handforth's Christmas Entertainment!

By JACK GREY

HANDFORTH has had one of his usual brainwaves. This time, unfortunately, other people besides himself have suffered. His idea was that the Remove should give a special entertainment on the last night of the term.

He first looked up Nipper in Study C, and after a bit of jaw got his support and that of Sir Montie and Tommy Watson. After that he and Church and McClure canvassed the other members of the Remove. And the result was that it was arranged that they should give a variety entertainment in the large Lecture Theatre, to which Nelson Lee and Mr. Crowell and other big people were to be invited.

Now there was nothing against the idea. Some of the chaps could sing and recite a bit. It seemed quite all right. Nipper and Watson and Tregellis-West and Pitt offered their services, and most of the chaps in the Junior Forms were going to turn up. Also some of the Fifth and Sixth.

Personally, I was all for the idea, except—well, except for the fact that old Handy was running it. And not only that, but because he and his brother Willy were going to do turns. Handy was going to do some conjuring tricks, and Willy was going to give a ventriloquist show.

I told Nipper that these two were enough to ruin any programme, but Nipper only laughed. Anyway, the show was held, and this is what happened.

There was a very crowded attendance at eight o'clock when the show began. Everybody was there. The Head would have come but he had a previous engagement.

We had rigged up a small stage, and Clarence Fellowe had come forward as a pianist. The piano, a jolly good grand, was just under the stage—from where Fellowe could see all that was happening.

The first turns were quite good. Nipper gave a monologue. Watson, Pitt, Sir Montie, and Bob Christine did their bit, and the show was going with a swing. It was then Archie appeared. Handforth announced that he was going to sing a sentimental song entitled "An Old-Fashioned Town." (Loud applause.)

Fellowe played the opening chords on the piano, and Archie appeared, looking a complete nut in evening-dress and his eye-glass. Archie bowed, and the opening chords were played again. Then Archie opened his mouth and began in a nervous voice:

"There's an old fashioned mouse in a——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Somebody giggled in the front row. Archie blushed and started again:

"There's an old-fashioned street—I mean to say, an old-fashioned house in an old-fashioned pair, so to speak, in a——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Poor old Archie was utterly mixed and upset.

"You silly fathead!" roared Handforth from the wings. "You've jolly well ruined the show!"

"Not a bit!" cried a voice from the audience. "Go on, Archie!"

"I'll begin again," said Archie, "if Fellowe will play the opening music."

After the laughter had died down, Fellowe began again and Archie took a pace nearer the edge of the stage. He cleared his throat.

"There's a pair of old-fashioned," he warbled, "streets in a—absolutely not. I can see their two faces, so to speak, and I love every winkle——"

"My--ha, ha, ha!"

"Hold me up, someone, I'm dying!"

Chaps were rolling in their seats with laughter. Archie looked haughtily through his eyeglass, but Fellowe had stopped playing. Nevertheless, the genial ass went on:

"And though I must go, if you follow me to and fro through the world, and all that rot, I—Yeeeeeeeep!"

The last expression was not in the song. It was caused by Archie suddenly and unexpectedly tripping over the edge of the stage in his excitement. The next moment he pitched head first on to the piano.

The piano was pretty strong, and didn't like Archie's circus performance. It must have given him a push, for he rolled off on top of Clarence Fellowe, who wasn't nearly so strong. The two, clasped in each other's arms, slithered to the floor with a thud that shook the hall.

"Good gracious me! They will both be killed!" cried Mr. Crowell in alarm.

But they weren't killed. They picked themselves up, to the enthusiastic shouts of the audience.

The next moment he pitched head-first on to the piano.

"Encore! Encore!" yelled the Removites. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Archie refused to give an encore, and the next turn was quickly ushered on. This consisted of Willy Handforth. He brought with him a dummy figure representing a sailor. Willy put the figure on an armchair.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced confidently, "I will now proceed to hold a conversation with my friend, Sailor Jack. In reality, he is not alive. He is——"

"He's made out of my bolster!" piped a treble voice from the back of the hall.

"Shut up, young Owen!" hissed Willy. "I'll jolly well biff you when I've done. Ladies and gentlemen," he went on, in a louder voice, "my friend, Sailor Jack, is in reality only a dummy figure, but I will make him speak to you."

Willy bowed to great applause, and there was a silence as everyone waited for the great performance to begin.

"Hallo, Jack!" began Willy in his normal voice. "How do you like being on the stage?"

There was no immediate reply. Then a voice came from the middle of the hall.

"He's gone to sleep, Willy. It's a shame to keep him out so late."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Willy took no notice. He screwed up his face and tried to speak as though he were not opening his mouth.

"I like it very much, sir," came the reply in a husky squeak.

"I thought you would," replied Willy again in his usual voice. "But why have you left the sea?"

"Because it made me sick," mimicked the voice from the middle of the hall.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Willy began to get annoyed, and determined to get his own back.

"Who is the silliest fathead in the room?" he shouted at the silent figure of Sailor Jack.

"Your major!" came the voice from the middle of the hall, like lightning. By this time all the chaps were shouting with mirth. Willy lost his temper completely.

"All right, young Owen," he bellowed; "I know it's you. Take this, then!"

As he spoke, he picked up Sailor Jack and hurled him into the audience. The dummy shaved past Mr. Crowell's head and caught Owen minor full in the chest. Then Willy dashed down after Sailor Jack.

But stout hands caught him, and he was calmed down. Not too soon, for it was seen that Handforth was shouting hard words from the stage. When order was restored, Edward Oswald came forward and made his announcement.

"Now you'll see something!" he roared. "I'll jolly well whack my minor for ruining the show. But if you will kindly give me your attention for one moment, I will give my performance of Conjuring Magic. Allow me to introduce my two assistants."

At this moment Church and McClure were pushed on to the stage from the wings. They looked very downcast. Church brought in a small table, and McClure carried a Union Jack flag, a glass, a bottle of water, and a top hat. Church put down the table and took the other things from his assistant. Then McClure departed and came on again, walking sideways, with his hands behind his back.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said Handy, "I will show you the most wonderful trick in the world, and which has never been produced before in this or any other country."

He moved to the table and stood by McClure.

"I proceed to put a little water into this glass," he announced, picking up the jug. "As you see, there is absolutely no deception."

He held up the glass in his right hand, and smiled at the audience.

"I now put the glass on the table and proceed to cover it with the Union Jack given to me by my assistant."

Church handed over the flag.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I am simply going to pass my hand over the glass three times. I make three slow passes, and at the end of the third pass I will produce for you, out of the glass, a real melon!"

Sensation!

"One!" Handforth passed his left hand across the top of the glass. His right hand was by his side, almost touching that of McClure.

"Two!" continued Handy, and he added in a whisper: "Pass along that melon, the moment I say 'Three.'"

"Three!" said Handforth. "And now, ladies and——"

Bumpety—bumpety—bump!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

At the critical moment, McClure had dropped the melon he had been holding behind his back! It slipped from his hand and rolled leisurely towards the edge of the stage. McClure's expression looked like that of a man who has seen a ghost.

The audience was convulsed with laughter. It was the funniest conjuring trick they had ever seen. Handforth glared for a moment at the shouts of laughter. Then he turned on his assistant.

"Arnold McClure, I'll teach you to drop my melon and spoil the finest conjuring trick in the world!"

In a moment he had turned up his sleeves and aimed a terrific blow at McClure's head.

"Shurrup, you fathead!" shouted McClure.

At the same moment Church caught hold of his leader's arm.

"Don't be a fathead!" he hissed. "Get on with another trick!"

"Oh, very well!" Handy agreed.

"I have here upon the table," he said, "an elegant top-hat. I shall put it upon my head to show that there is no deception. I shall then," Handy proceeded loudly, "hand it to one of my assistants, who will then hold it brim downwards in his right hand. You will then be most surprised to see emerge from the empty hat——"

"I know, a melon!" yelled a voice from the back of the hall.

"No, you fathead!" bellowed Handy, very much annoyed. "A real live rabbit!"

He leant forward, and took the hat from the top of the table.

"I will proceed to put it on my head, to show that it is empty," he said.

"Ha ha, ha! We know your head's empty!" cried the voice.

Taking no notice, Handy suddenly lifted up the hat and set it on his head. Then next moment he let out a yell of anger. For out of the hat poured an avalanche of soot.

The audience roared. But Handy was furious.

"That soot was the next trick, you fathead!" he roared. "My—my hat! McClure, You've done it now!"

As he spoke he let out at McClure's head.

"Here clear out of it!" yelled the latter.

"All right, young Owen!" he bellowed. "I know it's you! Take that, then!" As he spoke, he picked up Sailor Jack and hurled him into the audience.

He dodged the blow, and jumped lightly down to the floor. After him came Handy. That finished the show. Handy had forgotten Nelson Lee, who grasped him firmly by the shoulders.

"That'll do, my boy," he said. "We'd better sing 'God Save the King,' and get off to bed."

"But I've got ever so many more jolly good tricks to do!" gasped Handy. "That was only one of the simplest ones."

"I think it was quite hard enough for you," observed Nelson Lee drily, and Fellowe began to play the well-known strains of the National Anthem.

Handforth's Christmas entertainment was over. It will be a long time before it is forgotten—especially by McClure and Willy!

E. Sopp's Fables

By Edgar Sopp of the Fifth

No. 5—The Fable of the Host who was Too Boisterous.

THERE was once a Christmas Party which promised to be a Huge Success. All the guests were Young People, and they had come to the Party with the intention of having a Ripping Time.

The Host was a Jolly Chap. He had a Knack of making you feel Comfortable as soon as ever you stepped into his House. He had a Boisterous Manner, a Loud Voice, and a Hearty Laugh. One of those Good Sorts you hear about but very seldom meet.

In fact, he was the Life and Soul of the Party. He reeled off jokes by the Dozen, keeping everybody in Fits of Laughter. And the Guests all considered that he was the Finest Host that ever Happened.

This, be it noted, was in the opening stages of the party.

The Guests, being all Young People, as we have before Hinted, were Jolly Keen upon having All Sorts of Christmas Games. They had come prepared for Charades, Musical Chairs, Hunt the Thimble, Blind Man's Bluff, and other Games of a similar Frothy Nature. At a Christmas Party one is supposed to leave Brains at home, and to indulge in Extraordinary Antics, which at any other time would be Most Undignified. At Christmas Parties you want to Let Yourself Go.

But behold! When one of the Young People lightly suggested a Game of Musical Chairs, and the Other Guests applauded, the Host gave one of his Hearty Laughs and spake, saying that the Suggestion was Nonsense. But he said it with such Jolly Good Humour that it was robbed of all Offence.

And the Host proceeded to talk, making numerous Jokes, and keeping everybody in a state of Chuckles. And, lo, he called upon one Unfortunate Youth to get upon his Hind Legs and recite "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

The Unfortunate Youth, much flustered, declared Stoutly that he did not know the "Charge of the Light Brigade." Whereupon the Host uttered one of his most Boisterous Laughs and again said that the statement was Nonsense.

Furthermore, he Firmly Declared that he had heard the Unfortunate Youth recite the poetry only a Week Ago. Thus, seeing that Fate was against him, the Unfortunate Youth stood up and Held Forth.

Now, it was not a Fact that he could Recite. It was only a Rumour. He made Ghastly Mistakes, and his Audience, whilst being Entertained, were also considerably Fed Up.

The Host, however, was Roaring with Glee all the time. In his Bluff, Hearty manner, he demanded an Encore, and the other Guests were Staggered. It was Fortunate that the Youth knew no more Poetry.

This unhappy incident being over, another Guest suggested Charades, and he was Acclaimed a Hero. But the Host, fairly Bursting with Enthusiasm, thrust aside the Scheme, and Insisted upon a Thin Young Lady singing a song.

Now, the Thin Young Lady, while believing that her Voice was Exquisite, really had less Entertaining Power than the Unfortunate Youth. Her singing was not even a Rumour.

Like a Starving Dog grabbing at a Bone, she Dashed to the Piano, and proceeded to send her fellow Guests into a State of Coma. This was not because they were Enchanted by her Voice, but because they were suffering Silent Agony. But the Host was Enthusiastic, and was Fatuous enough to believe that his Guests were Simply Enraptured.

And when the Thin Young Lady had finished her Diabolical Work she received a hearty Round of Applause—which, you will understand, was given out of Mere Politeness. If the Thin Young Lady had got what she deserved, Somebody would have brought in a Bath of Boiling Oil.

Now, the Host, still Boisterous and Hearty, was delighted at the Hand Clapping, and thereupon requested the Alleged Singer to Oblige with another Ditty. And she, with Simpers, shyly Consented.

And the Christmas Party resolved itself into a Second Edition of Purgatory. At the Suggestion that the Thin Young Lady

should sing again, several Guests were observed to Visibly Wilt, whilst others Turned Pale.

And behold! The Thin Young Lady performed her Dread Purpose, and sang until the Audience wa. in that Condition which is popularly known as Sold Out. In other words, they were Weak at the Knees.

The applause was Feeble, chiefly because the strength of the Guests had Ebbed Away. And the Host, failing to see the Danger Signs, thanked the Thin Young Lady with much Enthusiasm, thereby earning a smile from Her, and Evil Glares from the rest of the Young People, who were rapidly coming to the Conclusion that the Host was a Wash Out.

Again came a suggestion regarding the Time Honoured games that are played at Christmas. And the Host laughed, and spoke, saying that such Childish Pastimes were too Infantile for a Party composed of Big Boys and Big Girls. Therein he proved his Lack of Human Knowledge. For at Christmas Time we all love to be Children.

But the Host did these things with such Good Humour, and with such Laughing Jollity that nobody exactly realised why the Party was becoming a Fizzle.

And thus the evening Sped.

After the Thin Young Lady had retired to a chair, her Fell Work accomplished, the Host insisted upon playing the Gramophone. At this the Party brightened up, until it was discovered that the Records were Ancient and Obsolete, many of them having been used, in earlier times, by Noah in the Ark.

And it came to pass that when the Guests departed, wandered forth to their Various Abodes, they felt that they had been Absolutely Swindled. The Party that they had looked forward to so much had turned out to be a Failure.

And behold! The Thin Young Lady performed her Dread Purpose, and sang until the Audience was Sold Out.

But it must be recorded that the Host firmly believed that it had been a Huge Success. He had enjoyed himself—and he made the mistake of believing that Everybody Else had enjoyed themselves. He had not perceived that his Guests had only Pretended. He had failed to Observe that they had Suffered Torture, and all because of his Boisterous Habit of Taking Everything Into His Own Hands.

MORAL: ALWAYS LET YOUR GUESTS CHOOSE THEIR OWN PLEASURES.

Answers to Correspondents.

WEARY WALTER.—Your letter makes me pity you greatly. Your chum is in the habit of punching you on the nose. As you say, it is very difficult to keep on friendly terms with your chum. We can only suggest that you have patience and try to show him the brutality of his action. Talk to him kindly but firmly, and I am sure he will see the error of his ways.

* * *

SLY TED.—So they squirted red ink into your face, did they? And you can't get the stains out. We are glad to hear it. Rotters who spy and listen at fellows' keyholes deserve all they get. Hope everyone in the college knows how the stains got there.

* * *

ALGY.—Absolutely, old fruit! And it's getting better and better every week, and in every way, so to speak, as it were, we mean to say.

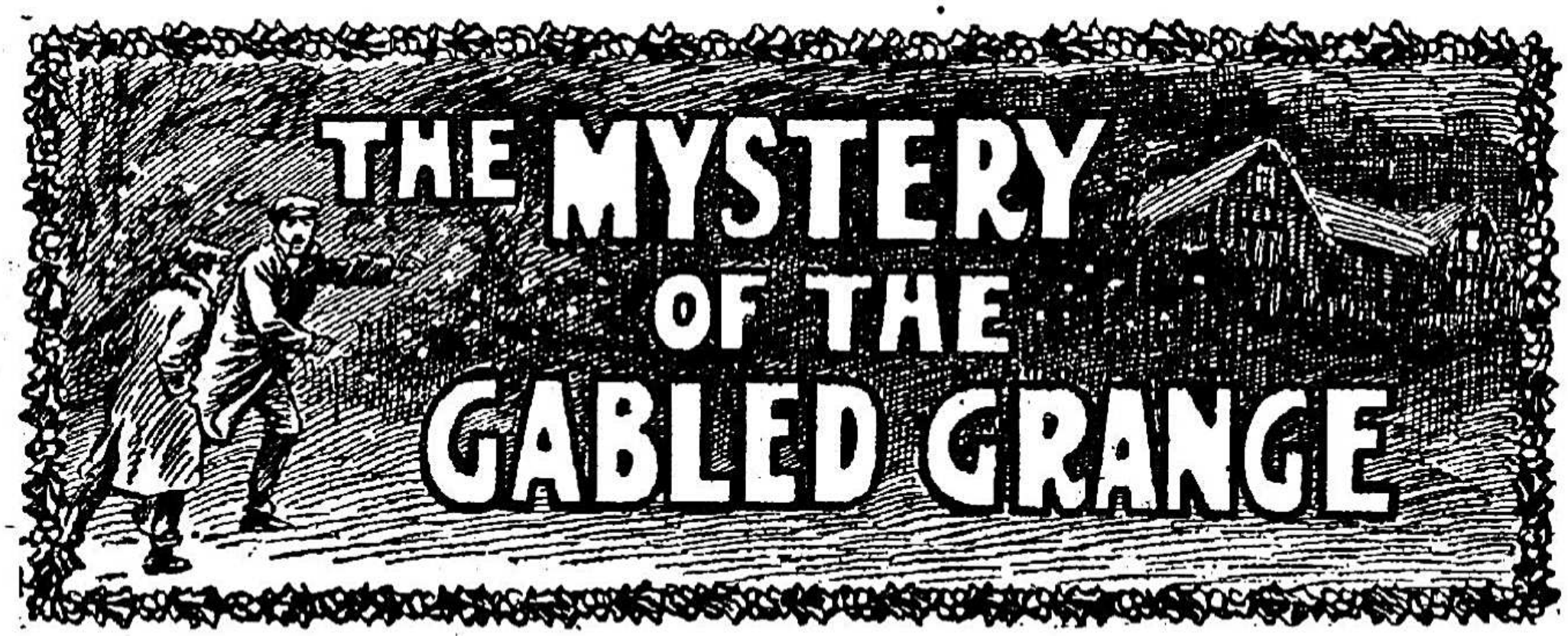
ACHING ARNOLD.—So your study mate often strikes you, often without provocation. Only yesterday he gave you a black eye. And the day before he knocked you against the table and nearly sprained your wrist. Take heart, dear reader, and have patience. (Also see reply above to Weary Walter.)

* * *

HANDSOME (Study D.)—(1) Sorry to hear your chums are so argumentative. It must be very annoying for you to have to put up with their constant bickering and squabbling. Have you tried a little physical force? It might have some effect. (2) We quite agree with you that people who think a lot of their own opinions are a great nuisance.

* * *

TEA TEA.—Haven't had time to get all through your letter yet. It's rather like a serial story. Suggest you divide it up and send the bits to various daily papers.



A Christmas Story in Two Parts.

By Cecil de Valerie

PART 2.

(NOTE.—In the first half of this story, which appeared last week, De Valerie related how he and his uncle had met with serious mechanical trouble while on a ride by motor-bike and sidecar from Ipswich to London. It was Christmas Eve, and the snow lay thick, and was falling heavily. After the final mishap, late at night, De Valerie and his uncle had come upon an old gabled grange, where they sought shelter. After a little trouble they were admitted by a wizened old man, who apparently lived alone in the quaint manor. He offered them no food or drink, but simply led them to a bedroom. De Valerie couldn't get asleep, although his uncle dropped off at once. And while our author sat up in bed, startled by a loud creak, the door slowly opened, and the bent old man appeared, holding a candle. He looked at De Valerie with an expression of evil intent, and something that he clutched in his hand transfixed our author with horror. De Valerie continues his narrative from this point.—ED., St. Frank's Magazine.)

I CAN tell you, I was scared pretty stiff. I'm not a nervous chap as a rule, and it takes a good bit to frighten me. But the very atmosphere of that old house had got into my bones, and I felt there was something sinister about it.

And there was the old ogre, peering at me in a blood-curdling way; and that thing in his hand caused me to sit there, stiff with apprehension.

For the old man held a heavy, wicked-looking dagger. The blade glinted in the candle-light, and then he slowly advanced into the room. I remembered having seen the dagger hanging on the wall down in the big lobby.

Our host walked past me, went to the window, and commenced prizing it up with the point of the dagger.

"Most unhealthy to sleep without fresh air," he muttered, turning and nodding to me. "Just remembered it—and this window stuck. Thought perhaps you couldn't open it. Go to sleep, boy; what are you staring for?"

I sank back upon the pillow, relief surging through me. I suppose it was the weird atmosphere of the place that had made me put a wrong construction on the old man's appearance.

But, hang it all, wouldn't you have thought the same thing, when that old beggar slid into the room, holding a dagger? How was I to know that he merely wanted to use it as a lever for the rotten window? Anyhow, I was jolly relieved, as you chaps can imagine.

He went out after he'd opened the window a bit, but even then I couldn't get to sleep. I suppose I must have dozed on and off, but it really seemed that I was awake all the time. You know how it is when you can't sleep properly.

The chiming of an old grandfather's clock disturbed me, and I lay in bed listening, expecting to hear the hour of midnight boom out. But I was surprised when I heard only two strokes.

Two o'clock in the morning!

Naturally, I'd been asleep, but hadn't realised it. And by now the ancient grange was wrapped in stillness, to say nothing of

being wrapped in a covering of snow as well. Our host was no doubt in bed, and there was no necessity for me to have any more silly apprehensions.

And just as I was going to turn over and snuggle down again I heard a curious thud from below—a heavy, unaccountable bang. I sat up in bed, wondering what on earth the old fellow could be doing downstairs to cause such a noise. And then I realised why I hadn't slept well.

It wasn't because I was nervous, but simply because there weren't enough blankets on the bed. You can never sleep properly on a cold night if you're not warm enough. And I remembered that Uncle John's coat was thick and heavy, and that it was hanging in the hall.

For about five minutes I had an argument with myself. Should I go through the rest of the night with insufficient warmth, or should I nip downstairs and get that coat? I wouldn't have hesitated a minute, only that curious thud had startled me a bit.

I didn't want to come face to face with our old host, especially if he carried that dagger. But in the end I decided to risk it. I couldn't get warm at all, and a brief search of the bed-room revealed nothing that would serve as an extra blanket. I tried to shut the window, but it wouldn't budge.

It only took me a minute to slip my trousers on, and to put a jacket round my shoulders. Then I cautiously opened the door and slipped out into the corridor. I knew that the bed-room was a few yards from the head of the stairs, and I was soon descending.

It struck me as being queer that some candles were burning, and I had only got halfway down when I noticed that all the furniture was in a state of disorder. And a cold draught was blowing, too.

I got to the bottom of the stairs and saw that the big front door stood wide open. It was so jolly rummy, at two o'clock in the morning. Still, it wasn't my business, and I reckoned that we were lucky enough to get shelter of any kind. There was nothing to be scared of; the old man couldn't say much to me for coming down to get a coat.

But just as I was going to slip across the hall a man entered—a stranger. He was a big chap, in a heavy coat with a collar turned up, and his cap was pulled down over his eyes. He came to an abrupt halt as he caught sight of me, and for a second we stared at one another.

"Who the deuce are you?" demanded the man harshly.

Before I realised it I was telling him that uncle and I had sheltered in the place for the night, having had a smash-up. And as soon as I said it I realised I was an ass, because it wasn't anything to do with him.

For the old man held a wicked-looking dagger. The blade glinted in the candle-light as he slowly advanced into the room.

Somehow, he seemed relieved after I had told him.

"Oh!" he said slowly. "So you were just strangers, eh? Going in the morning?"

"Of course we're going in the morning," I told him. "And now it's my turn to do some questioning. What are you doing here? What's the idea of disturbing all the furniture like this? I shall go and tell the old man——"

"By Heaven you won't!" rapped out the fellow.

His tone made my suspicions even more acute. There was something very fishy about the affair. I caught sight of a big motor van standing out on the drive, and I realised, with a shock, that all the furniture was being taken away!

Burglars! In all probability, these pieces of furniture were antiques, and the robbers had selected Christmas Eve as the best time, because nobody would suspect them of burglary at such a time. I turned away, intending to race up the stairs. And I had already opened my mouth to give a shout of alarm.

But the man seemed to read what was in my face, for he made a grab, hauled me back, and clapped a hand over my mouth. He gave a hoarse, low call, and another man came, a burly ruffian who made short work of me. I didn't stand a chance, and almost before I knew it I was bound up, and a big scarf was tied round my face. Then I was unceremoniously bundled into another room and laid on a couch. But the brutes had generosity enough to cover me with rugs, so that I shouldn't freeze.

Sleep was impossible, and I could hear the furniture being moved, stealthily and

carefully. Hours must have passed. And you can imagine my feelings. Stuck there, helpless, unable to give any warning, and I knew that these rotters were clearing every valuable article away.

It must have been about six o'clock when the door opened. The man who had first grappled with me came in, holding a candle. His appearance was different now. He had taken off the coat and hat, and I could now see that he was not a bad-looking chap, and well dressed, too. He grinned at me as he unfastened the scarf and the bonds that held me.

"Sorry to have trussed you up like this, young 'un; but if you had given the alarm to your host my game would have been spoilt. And I didn't hurt you; you've been quite comfortable," he exclaimed with a chuckle.

"Perhaps I have. But you're a scoundrel——" I began.

"Nonsense," he laughed. "Come and look here."

He led me out into the hall, and I stood there blinking. The change in the place was so extraordinary that I simply caught my breath in, I stared, dazzled by the beauty of it.

The musty old furniture had gone and the place was transformed. It was a lounge hall, and a really superb apartment. On the floor lay a rich carpet, with rugs that your feet simply sank into. The furniture was modern and of the most exquisite kind. Wonderful pictures hung on the wall, a great log fire burned in the grate, and altogether the place was a dream of comfort.

"But—but——" I began, startled.

"Sit down, youngster, and I'll explain," said the stranger quietly. "No doubt you assumed that I was up to some mischief, eh? I'm not. Your host is my father, and for five years I have been estranged from him. Under the circumstances it is necessary that I should tell you all this. I married a girl whom my father didn't approve of, and he refused to set eyes on me again; shut himself up in this old house, and lived the life of a recluse—lonely and miserable.

"Well I'm blessed!" I managed to exclaim.

"Well, in the course of time a little baby arrived, and I thought that my dad might be touched," went on the other quietly. "But he was hard; he wouldn't answer any of my letters, and I believe he tore them up without reading them. Even now he doesn't know that he has a grandchild. Christmas after Christmas went by, and every time I failed to break the estrangement. He wouldn't even see me. If I came to the house he slammed the door in my face. But don't assume that he is hard-hearted or cruel—it is just his obstinate nature."

"I understand," I said, thinking of Uncle John.

And he went on to tell me how he had decided to take the bull by the horns this Christmas. While his father slept he had come in the night, bringing vanloads of furniture and comforts. His idea was to give his father a surprise when the old man came down on Christmas morning.

The man made a grab, hauled me back, and clapped a hand over my mouth.

And what's more, it worked. The wife and the little child—a sweet little girl of about four—arrived just as dawn was breaking. And when the old man came down he was startled to find his son and daughter-in-law sitting on the lounge with the little kiddie between them. I was watching from a corner.

And it was a pretty touching scene, I can tell you. I'm no good at explaining anything like that, so I'll leave it to your imagination. Ah first, the old man growled and grumbled, but it was the child who won him over. She crawled on his knees, kissed him, and finally he broke down like a giddy kid himself and sobbed. And then uncle came down, to see what all the commotion was about. They insisted on us staying, but Uncle John's a pretty wise chap, and we slipped off. It was better that the reunited family should be alone.

And that's all there is. Anybody else got a yarn to tell?

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

SPECIAL NEW YEAR NUMBER OF THE MAG.

PAINFUL PARODIES

PERPETRATED
By
Clarence Fellowe.

A LAY OF THE ANCIENT HOUSE

The snow lay thick upon the ground,
And the battle fiercely surged;
The Fossils, four chaps strong and grim;
And Nipper strongly urged
His chums to hold the path until
The reinforcements came.
The Monks were there in masses thick
Intent upon the game.

For 'twas a snow fight furious
'Twixt deadly rivals keen.
The Fossils held the pathway firm,
And the Monks—full seventeen—
Were bent upon the mighty task
Of beating down their foe.
They steeled themselves for one big rush,
Their enemies to mow!

And the skipper's brow was mad,
And his speech was jolly low
As darkly looked he at the Monks,
And darkly at the snow.
"The crowd will be upon us
Before the help arrives,
And if they once may win the path.
We'll be buried to our eyes!"

Then out spake good old Handy,
The boss of Study D.
"Don't let these chaps get past, you ass,
Just leave it all to me!
In this old path a thousand
May well be stopped by three.
Now who will stand on either hand
And keep the path with me?"

Then out spake Church and Clurey,
Old Handy's faithful chums:
"Ho, we will stand on your right hand
Until the rescue comes!"
And out spake valiant Nipper,
A good old sport was he:
"I will slide on your right side
And keep the path with thee!"

And straight against that great array
Forth went the Fossils four,
And gave the Monks a dozen rounds,
And after that some more.
Then out a shout rang clearly
Upon the winter's air;
The reinforcements had arrived,
And the Monks all tore their hair.

They found themselves surrounded
By Fossils good and true,
Who came along in mighty force;
And the Monks felt cold and blue.
And later on they staggered back,
A motley crowd of wrecks;
And well did they remember how
They'd got it in the necks!

Printed and Published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, the Amalgamated Press (1922), Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement Offices, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad, 11/- per annum; 5/6 for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Co. (Canada), Limited.

No. 447. D/R **December 29, 1923.**