THE GHOST OF SOMERTON ABBEY!

By
EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

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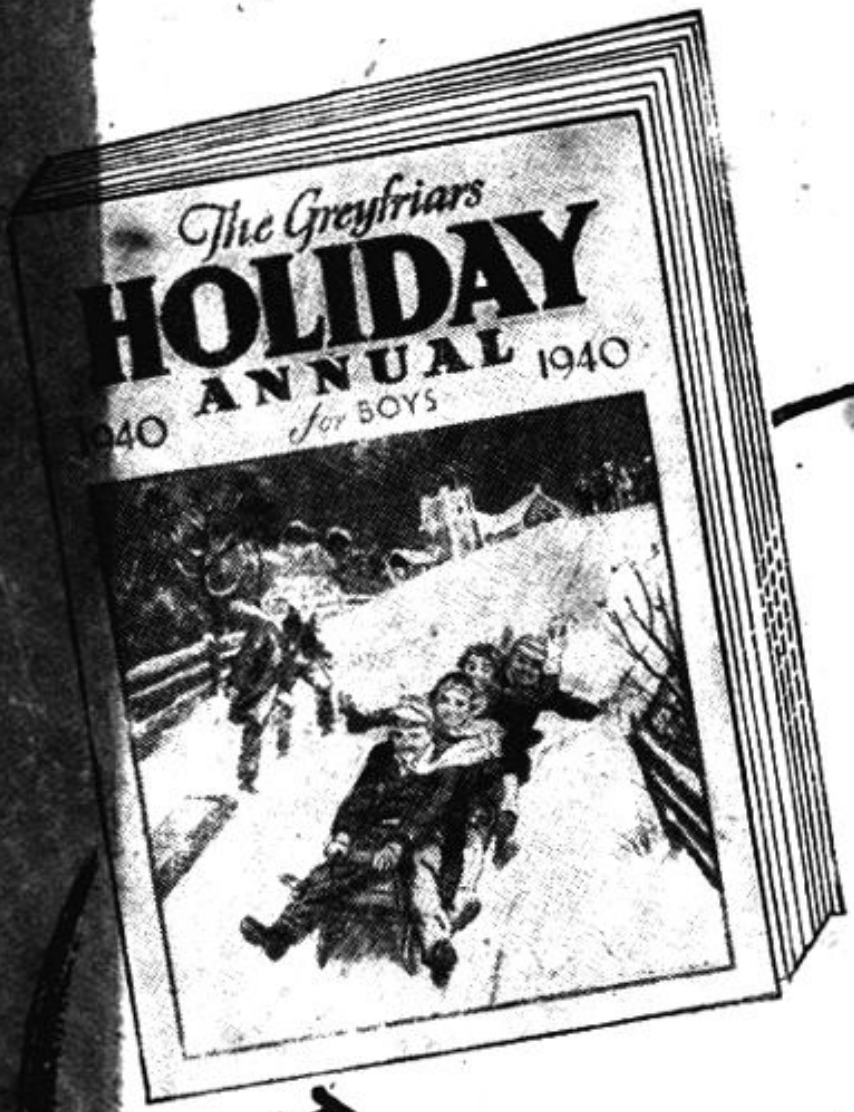

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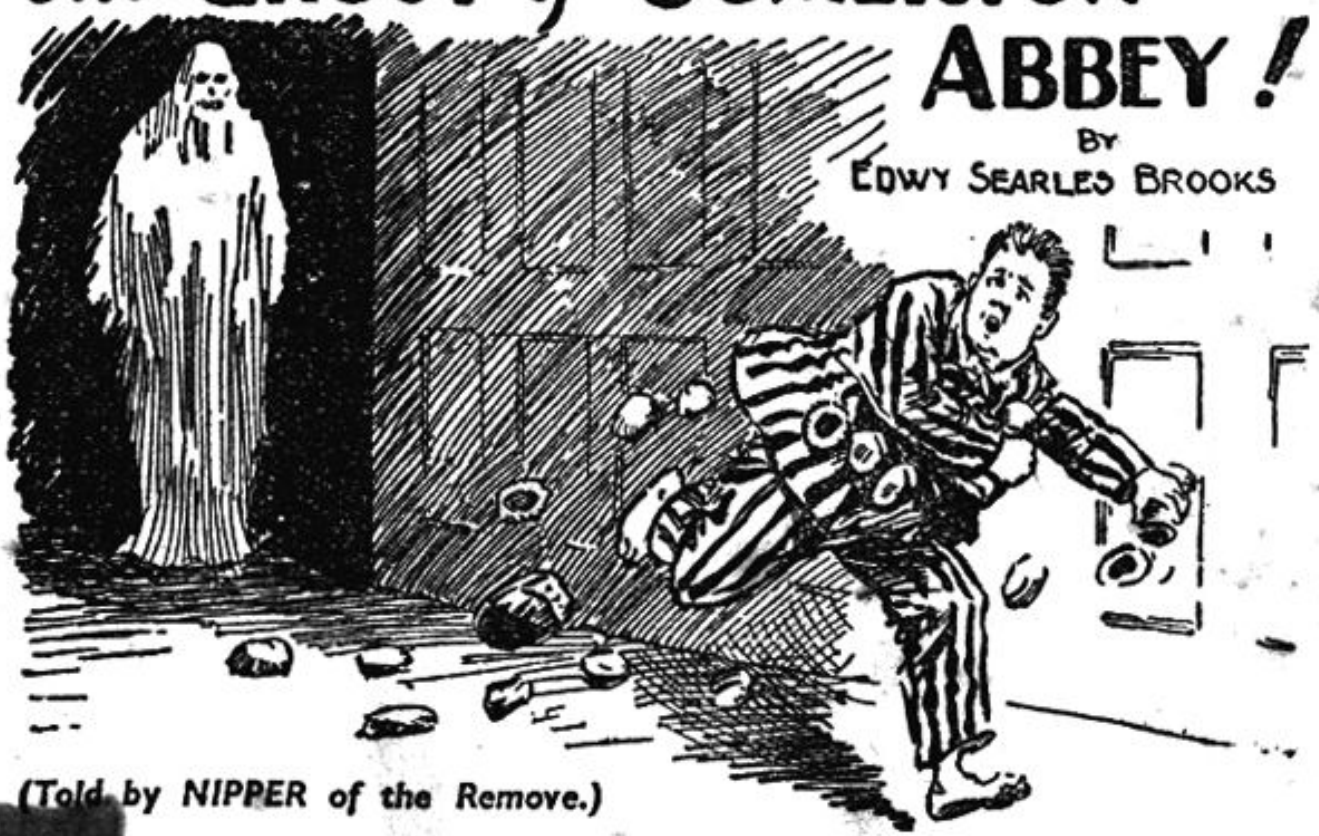


(Told by NIPPER of the Remove.)

Gripping Yuletide yarn of mystery, fun and eerie adventure, featuring the cheery chums of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.
Willy's Busy Evening!

"GREAT pip!"

Owen minor, of the Third Form at St. Frank's, paused in the doorway of Willy Handforth's study. His mouth was open, and his eyes staring. And certainly there was sufficient reason for him to be startled.

Handforth minor was bending over the study table, so engrossed in some strange occupation that he was utterly oblivious of other things. He didn't even notice one of his study mates had opened the door.

Willy shared this little apartment with Owen minor and Chubby Heath. Except for about fourteen unholy rows daily, the trio got on very well together.

"My only hat!" panted Owen, staring blankly.

There, hanging from the electric light globe, was something which dangled on a fine thread. And it was only a few inches above Willy Handforth's tousled hair. It hung there, sinister and horrible.

The thing was an enormous spider.

Owen minor was scared. He had never seen such a spider in all his life. It was a great, massive, hairy affair, covered with fur, and simply horrifying to look upon.

He had fears for Willy's life. He dashed into the study, grabbed at the fine thread, and the spider swung away.

"Got it!" roared Owen.

Willy looked up, and then he let out a terrific yell.

"Hi! Leggo!" he roared. "You—you silly ass!"

Biff!

Owen minor's reward for saving his study chum was to receive a punch on the nose which sent him staggering across the study in a wild career. He finally collapsed over the coal-box, and sat in the fender, and one of his hands unfortunately entered an empty saucepan, which had recently contained something which was alleged to be coconut ice.

"Yarooh!" roared Owen minor wildly.

Willy Handforth had seized the spider as it hovered between safety and destruction. And now it was lying peacefully on the study table, and Willy gazed at Owen with aggressive contempt.

"You funny fathead!" he said tartly.

Owen minor was not in a position to answer in a very adequate manner. He was engaged in disentangling his hand from the saucepan. That frightful mixture—which Chubby Heath was guilty of concocting—was as sticky as treacle. Owen's hand clung to the saucepan. But he succeeded in getting it free at length. He gazed at his fingers as though they were contaminated.

"You—you rotter!" he said thickly, as he got to his feet. "That's all I get for saving your life!"

"The spider's dead, you dummy!" said Willy. "It's about as dead as the inside of your giddy napper! It's a West Indian spider—it came from Jamaica, or Malta, or somewhere like that! It's been dead for ages! It's a specimen!"

"Then what the dickens is it doing in this study?" demanded Owen.

"It's mine—I bought it!"

"Bought it!" yelled Owen. "You paid good money for a rotten thing like that!"

"Rotten!" retorted Willy sourly. "It's a prize specimen, my lad! It's got one leg missing, and half its head's gone, but that's nothing! I bought it off one of the Bannington Grammar School chaps. At least, I gave him a couple of beetles for it."

Owen minor looked round miserably.

"And have we got to put up with this kind of thing in our study?" he asked. "I say, Willy, it's getting a bit thick, you know! Draw the line, old man! You can't keep on like this."

"What do you mean?"

"We shall be finding snakes in the coal-scuttle next!" complained Owen minor, as he thoughtlessly placed a hand on the table. "Only yesterday ——"

"Look what you're doing, fathead!" snapped Willy. "Take that filthy paw off the table! Great Scott! You're smothered in glue, or something! Only about half an inch off my best ladybirds, too!"

"Well, it was your own silly fault—pushing me in the fender like that!" said Owen minor. "I'll jolly well punch Chubby's nose when he comes in, messing up our saucepan! The rotten cokernut ice of his will hang about the study for weeks!"

"Do you think I care anything about cokernut ice?" demanded Willy impatiently. "Can't you see I'm busy? Clear out, you disturbing fathead! And go and wash that muck off your hands!"

"Are you going to be here long?" asked Owen, glaring.

"Yes; all the evening."

"What about doing my prep.?"

"Blow your prep.!"

"I can tell you, we're getting a bit fed-up with your blessed insects!" grumbled Owen minor. "We can't come into the study without finding spiders all over the table! Only yesterday we found a tadpole in the condensed milk!"

"That was Chubby's fault, because he put the tin in the wrong cupboard!" said Willy. "How do you expect me to

keep my specimens in order if you put things in the wrong places?"

"And what about Tuesday?" asked Owen minor.

"Well, what about it?"

"Didn't I come in here directly after morning lessons and find three beastly grasshoppers buzzing round in the sardine tin?" asked Owen minor, with righteous indignation. "As if that wasn't enough, as soon as I shoved my footer boots on, I squashed about a dozen earwigs!"

"Oh, you're always grumbling!" said Willy. "A fellow can't have a hobby now without his studymates kicking up a fuss! But I'm boss here, and I'll do as I jolly well like! If you chaps touch any of my specimens, I'll slaughter you! I'm going to fetch some slugs in to-morrow!"

"Slugs!" roared Owen.

"Of course!" said Willy. "A chap's got to have all kinds of specimens. I've got my eye on a jolly good adder, too. It's a beauty, and it's alive! I'm going to train it to be a pet!"

Owen minor breathed hard.

"We don't mind standing grasshoppers and tadpoles and beetles!" he said. "But if you bring any rotten adders in here, we'll jolly soon clear out!"

Willy nodded.

"That's why I'm going to bring the adder in!" he said calmly.

Owen minor was quite lost for words. He stood there, gazing at his study leader as the latter bent over a horrible-looking mass of beetles and grubs and other horrors of the earth.

To Owen minor they seemed to be too ghastly for words. But, judging from Willy's expression, he loved every one of them. The fact of the matter was, Willy Handforth had suddenly developed a craze.

Without any warning, which was rather unfair to his chums, he had sprung all sorts of insect surprises on them. He had been reading a book written by a naturalist, and it had so impressed him that he had immediately turned into a naturalist himself. And, nowadays, all Willy's spare time was occupied in grubbing about for any new specimens he could dig out.

The worst part of it was, he brought everything into the study. He scouted the idea of using an outhouse. His chums complained bitterly and continuously, but they might just as well have appealed to the four walls.

Unfortunately, they were not in a position to seize Willy's specimens, and consign them to the dustbin. Such a course would have been possible, but very unsatisfactory.

In the first place, Willy would fish them out of the dustbin again, and in the second place, Owen minor and Chubby Heath were not particularly fond of going about with both their eyes closed up, with swollen noses, and with thick ears. Of two evils, they chose the lesser—and Willy's specimens remained in the study.

Strictly speaking, the Third Formers had no studies. But Edward Oswald Handforth's younger brother, who was a remarkably alert young man, had converted a number of disused box-rooms into studies.

They were small, but they enabled the fags to have a certain amount of privacy. Furniture, of course, was of a rough-and-ready order. Willy's study was the most luxurious of all. It contained a table made from a large packing-case, two stools, a chair without a back, and a couple of soap-boxes. Pocket-money in the Third would not run to furniture of the ordinary kind.

However, old bits of cloth had been utilised in a cunning way, to say nothing of green paint—which Josh Cuttle, the porter, had mysteriously missed for some weeks past. He was still wondering where it had got to.

For Willy Handforth to start a collection of beetles and moths and butterflies was rather disconcerting. But when he added spiders to it, and talked of bringing in a few slugs, and a

tame adder, Owen minor thought it about time to protest.

Not that this would do any good.

"I say, look here," began Owen. "About these beastly insects. Can't we do something about it? I mean, wouldn't it be a good idea to take up stamp collecting instead?"

"A beauty!" said Willy abstractedly. "Just look at the legs! There's only one broken, and——"

"I was talking to you!" interrupted Owen minor tartly.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Willy. "Are you going to buzz off?"

"Yes—when I'm ready!"

Handforth minor opened the door, pushed back his sleeves, and clenched his fists.

"Going?" he said suggestively.

Owen minor went. It was just as well to go peacefully, because if he objected he would arrive in the passage on his neck.

In the ranks of the Third, Willy Handforth was king. His word was law—he ruled with an iron hand. Yet, although he was very hasty with his fists, he was extremely popular, nevertheless. Most of the fags knew how to deal with him, and escaped his wrath.

Willy was just getting interested in some choice-looking ants, when the door opened, and two fags came in. They were Chubby Heath and Lemon.

"I say, Willy!" said Heath. "We've heard——"

"Clear off!"

"It's about——"

"Scoot!"

"I tell you——"

"Your voices worry me!" snapped Willy. "Another word, my son, and you'll get biffed!"

"Cheese it, Willy!" protested Heath.

"It's about some beetles," put in Lemon. "We thought you might like to know."

"Beetles!" exclaimed Willy sharply.

"Yes."

"Well, choke it up!"

"You know that little second-hand shop just as you go into Caistowe?" asked Lemon. "It's only a tiny place, with a dusty window, filled with old bits of china and stuffed birds——"

"I know it!" said Willy. "Don't be so long-winded! What are you trying to get at?"

"Dicky Jones and young Kerrigan were over in Caistowe this afternoon," explained Lemon. "They happened to see a small glass case in that window. It's full of gloriously coloured beetles—about a dozen of 'em. They're tropical specimens, I think, and the lot's going for five bob!"

"My hat!" said Willy eagerly. "That's just what I've been longing for. English beetles are all right, but you get so fed-up with them. But look here, if you're trying to pull my leg——"

"Fathead! It's true—honour bright!"

That, of course, was good enough for Willy. If that fellow said "honour bright," it settled all arguments. He made all sorts of inquiries about the beetles. How many were there? How big was the glass case? Were the specimens in good condition?

He couldn't get any very definite answers. But he was certainly determined to have that glass case. There was, however, one serious problem to be solved. At the moment, Willy possessed sevenpence-halfpenny.

A frantic whip-round in the Third only resulted in the production of another fivepence, including six farthings.

This was not exactly satisfactory. So something else had to be done. And it only took Willy about five seconds to make up his mind.

"It's too late to get the things tonight, anyhow," he said. "I'll buzz over to Caistowe directly after dinner tomorrow—good thing it's a half-holiday. And I'll trot along now and interview Ted."

Willy was a fellow who believed in doing things at once. There was no sense in delaying matters. So, about five minutes later he marched confi-

dently into Study D, in the Remove passage.

Handforth & Co. were busily engaged in doing their prep. Edward Oswald laid his pen down with a sigh as he saw the identity of the visitor.

"My hat!" he said testily. "As soon as we get sat down, this young ass blows in! I don't care what you want, Willy, you won't get it! Close the door after you, because there's a draught!"

Willy closed the door—with himself inside.

"Just a little matter concerning cash," he remarked calmly. "I'll only take about a minute, so I shan't worry you for long."

"You won't!" agreed Handforth grimly. "And if you think you're going to borrow some money off me——"

"Just a little matter of five bob!" said Willy.

"Oh, well," said his brother, thawing. "That's not so bad. But what do you want five bob for?"

"I'm going to buy something," replied Willy vaguely.

"Well, I didn't expect you wanted five bob to chuck down a drain," said Handforth tartly. "But I've been hearing rumours about you, my lad. They say that you've been spending money on moths and beetles and butterflies!"

"Something like that," agreed Willy. "In this case I want to buy some beetles."

Church and McClure grinned as Handforth deliberately returned two half-crowns to his pocket.

"You won't get any money for beetles out of me!" he said firmly. "Why, you cheeky young ass! Of all the nerve! Expecting me to advance tin to squander on filthy things like beetles!"

Willy held out his hand.

"I don't want to be sick!" said Handforth, with a shudder. "Don't hold that ghastly looking paw in front of my eyes! I'll bet you haven't washed for a week!"

Willy pushed his hand a little nearer.

"Five bob!" he said briefly.

"You—you young ass!" roared Handforth. "If you don't take that thing away——"

"As soon as I get five bob!" said Willy.

Handforth hesitated. He was trying to decide whether he should rise in his wrath, and administer a well-deserved thrashing or whether he should get rid of his grimy minor by shelling out the five shillings. Willy, seeing his advantage, thrust his hand still nearer. It was the last straw.

Handforth gave a curious gulp, and turned pale.

"Great pip!" he breathed. "Here you are—take it. And go! For goodness' sake, buzz off!"

He flung the two half-crowns on the table, and Willy casually picked them up.

"That's the way!" he said severely. "And the next time I come to borrow any tin, don't be so long about it! That's one of your main faults, Ted—you always waste such a blessed lot of time!"

And, with this remark in lieu of thanks, Willy departed.

CHAPTER 2.

Introducing Dr. Ryland Grimes!

DIRECTLY after dinner the following day Handforth minor set out from St. Frank's on his bicycle. To be more exact, he set out on his brother's bicycle. But Handforth didn't know anything about this.

Willy went on the principle that if he got the bike first there couldn't be any argument about it—especially if he was well away before Handforth discovered it. He knew quite well that his major had decided to go into Bannington, and so he had lost no time in rushing out to the bicycle shed.

As he rode along on the road to Caistowe he mentally resolved to tick Handy off pretty severely later on

The front brake wanted adjusting, the back brake was clicking somewhere, and the bottom bracket was atrociously loose. How on earth could any bicycle run properly with so many defects? Willy would tell his brother sharply what he thought of him.

Considering that Willy had borrowed the bicycle without any kind of permission, the ticking-off would be rather like adding insult to injury.

He arrived in Caistowe all right, and he was delighted to find that the case of beetles still remained in the window of the little second-hand shop. His eyes gleamed as he examined them.

The specimens were well preserved, and many of them were highly coloured. Handforth minor was thrilled with the true collector's emotion, and his one desire was to possess those beetles.

"Cheap as dirt!" he muttered. "Five bob! Why, they're worth a quid, at least! All the same. I'll try to beat 'em down a bob!"

And, with this cheerful object in view, Handforth minor entered the shop. An elderly woman appeared from a rear doorway after a few moments, wiping her hands on an apron. The junior informed her that if he could have a closer look at the case of beetles he might be disposed to purchase them.

So the beetles were fetched out, and Handforth minor cast a critical eye upon them.

"A bit mouldy!" he observed.

"They didn't ought to be, young sir!" said the woman. "They've been kept dry enough——"

"I don't mean exactly mouldy!" interrupted Willy. "That's just an expression. Still, they're rather old and battered about. And I'm not sure that they're exactly the kind that I want. I suppose five bob is the lowest price?"

"I couldn't take no less, young gentleman."

"How about four bob?" asked Willy. "The beetles aren't quite as good as they might be."

The good lady hesitated for a short time, and then observed that she couldn't take anything less than four-and-sixpence. A little further haggling followed, and Willy diplomatically placed four shillings on the counter, trusting that the sight of so much money would tempt the lady to close the deal. Willy had taken good care to change his brother's two half-crowns into smaller money. He had anticipated a move of this character.

In the end, the shopkeeper agreed to take four shillings—mainly in order to get rid of her persistent customer. For Willy talked on and on, and disparaged the beetles so much that he seemed to be doing her a favour by taking the things away at all.

"Good!" he murmured, as he got outside the shop. "That leaves me a bob to buy a tin of salmon with. Used cautiously, it ought to last two or three days. Besides, I expect salmon will be rather good sort of grub for the slugs!"

The case of beetles was not particularly large, and he slipped it into his overcoat pocket with comparative ease. It was a square, flat box, with a glass top, and fixed to the base within were eight bottles, ranged in rows.

Willy remounted his bicycle, and started off on the return journey. He had travelled just over a mile of the return trip, and was nearly half-way on the journey to St. Frank's, when his attention was attracted by the figure of a man rather high up to the right of the lane. The formation of the country just here was somewhat curious.

The lane rose up sharply. On the left there was a flat stretch of meadowland, but on the right there was a wood, bearing away from the very border of the lane. Being winter time, it was quite possible to see between the trees, for they were not at all closely set.

Willy had explored many of the woods round about, and he knew that just beyond this rising hill there was a steep, sharp gully. This gully was quite invisible from the lane, and one came upon it suddenly.

At one point the side of this gully was like a cliff, descending sheer for fifteen or twenty feet. And there was a choice collection of rocks, too.

Handforth minor idly wondered what would happen if the stranger pushed on and lost his foothold. And the junior had hardly had time to give the matter a thought when he heard a sudden cry of alarm.

He looked up again—quickly, with a fast-beating pulse. And he was just in time to see the man throw up his arms and vanish like a figure in a Punch and Judy show. But for the gravity of the situation, Willy would have laughed. The man seemed to disappear so abruptly.

As it was, Willy jumped off his bike in a flash. Then he broke through a gap in the hedge, and the next moment he was tearing away up the rise. His heart was in his mouth, for he believed that the unfortunate man had met with a serious accident.

There was not another soul in sight. He was the only person who could possibly be of any assistance. He hurried through the trees, and then arrived at the very edge of the sharp gully.

"Great pip!" he muttered.

He leaned over just at the section where the man had vanished. He expected to see a still form lying on the ground, some distance below. But, instead, the man was only about six feet from the cliff-top—hanging there in the most precarious position imaginable.

For the tails of his thick overcoat had caught on a sharp projection of rock. And in this way he was held—suspended in mid-air. But at any second the coat might give way, for its owner to fall to the rocks twenty feet below.

The stranger was elderly—well over sixty, at least. He was a small old fellow, attired in black, with masses of snowy white hair, and an intellectual, clean-shaven face. His spectacles were all anyhow, and nearly falling off.

Willy took in the situation at a glance.

"Hold on, sir!" he exclaimed. "I'll soon have you safe and sound."

The junior was quite certain that if the old gentleman slipped, he would go down to certain death. The shock of such a fall would undoubtedly be fatal to a man of his age. He would never be able to withstand it.

As far as Willy could see, there was only one possible thing to do.

He would have to climb down the cliff, and then gradually hoist the old gentleman up, inch by inch, until he was able to pull himself over the edge of the gully. But this was by no means an easy task.

And it said much for Handforth minor's pluck that he essayed the task without a second's hesitation.

He glanced rapidly up and down, and found that there was a spot, a few yards to the left, where he could swarm down without quite so much peril. All the same, a hasty step would mean a very nasty fall.

The junior lowered himself over the edge, and then slipped down, foot by foot. In a few moments he reached a point which was below the level of the unfortunate old gentleman.

Clinging to little corners of rock, digging his toe-caps into every available crevice, Willy edged his way along. And at length, he arrived at the spot where the other was hanging.

"Here we are—soon be all serene now, sir!" said Willy cheerfully.

"Brave lad—brave lad!" said the old gentleman in a husky voice. "But be careful—I'm not so young, and one slip and it will be the finish!"

Handforth minor gradually took up the weight of the old gentleman. And then, inch by inch, he edged him away,

so that his coat-tails became disentangled. At last the old gentleman was quite free—but now the real peril commenced.

If Willy made one false step, both he and the old gentleman would crash down to the bottom of the gully. They were crouching on the face of a cliff, over six feet from the summit.

And the only possible hold was to be obtained from little crevices and ledges. But the junior did not flinch. He made certain of every step before he took it. He was as cool as ice.

And Willy did not know the meaning of the word fear. He was just like his elder brother in that respect. He was absolutely lion-hearted, and didn't care what odds he faced.

Hardly uttering a word, Willy hoisted the old gentleman up inch by inch. He did not make the mistake of hurrying himself, and at every fresh hold, he paused for a few seconds and rested himself.

He was thankful that the old gentleman was small and slightly built. He was, indeed, scarcely any bigger than the junior himself. He was one of those wizened, white-headed old chaps who looked very studious and thoughtful—and Willy set him down as a professor.

At length they had made such progress that the old man was able to reach out and grasp the actual summit. Willy continued helping him, although he was well nigh spent with the exhausting work.

"Just a little farther—two inches—an inch!" panted the old gentleman. "Splendid, splendid! My dear lad, how thankful I am that you saw my predicament and came to my aid."

"That's all right, sir!" gasped Willy. "Up we go!"

He gave another hoist, and this time the old man was able to take hold of a sapling which grew near the edge of the cliff. And he hauled himself up out of the danger zone. But, unfortunately, in making a heavy pull upwards, he allowed one of his feet to thrust itself out.

Willy was hardly prepared for this. The stranger's boot caught him a sharp blow on the jaw, and he instinctively put a hand to his face on the instant. As he did so, a piece of rock crumbled under his foot.

"Look out!" roared Willy. "Whoa! Oh, my goodness!"

Frantically, he tried to save himself—but it was too late.

He lost his grip with his hands, too, and then he fell down—slithering over the rocks, and crashing right down to the very bottom of the gully. He lay there, just visible from the top—utterly still and crumpled up.

"Great Heaven above!" muttered the old gentleman huskily.

It was impossible for him to go down direct. But he could see that by making a short detour he could reach the bottom of the gully with comparative ease. And although the old fellow was badly in need of a rest—for he was quite puffed—he hurried away at once.

And at length he commenced the descent, scrambling, slithering, and greatly perturbed about the accident which had occurred to his young rescuer.

At last he was at the base, and he hastened round a chunk of rock, and came within sight of Handforth minor.

To his infinite relief, the junior was sitting up, looking rather dazed and rubbing his head in a rueful manner.

"My hat!" said Willy. "That was pretty rough going! I was all knocked sideways for a minute! I thought I was in for a big packet!"

The old gentleman ran to his side, breathing wheezily.

"Brave lad—brave lad!" he exclaimed. "I owe you my life—and it is only by a miracle that you escaped terrible injury! I am proud of you, my boy—more proud than I can say!"

CHAPTER 3.
The Room of Wonder!

WILLY was still rubbing his head.

"I don't know about being brave, sir," he said. "There was nothing much in it—the cliff was safe enough until I had that skid. Still, I'm not hurt much. Just a bruise or two."

The old gentleman bent over him.

"Let me be quite certain," he said, with concern. "Let me make sure that you are only suffering from a few superficial abrasions. I am a doctor, and I shall soon find out the position."

Willy was suffering from a rather nasty graze on the back of his left hand. His right foot was numb, and there was an ugly cut on one of his knees. The white-haired old stranger examined him in true professional style.

"A doctor, eh, sir?" said Willy. "That's rather lucky, isn't it?"

"I cannot agree that the circumstances are lucky," said the old gentleman. "Considering how nobly you worked for my safety, it is an extraordinary piece of bad luck that you should have suffered in this way. My name is Dr. Ryland Grimes, and I live quite close to here."

"It's a funny thing how you came to skid down the valley, sir."

"Most remarkable—most remarkable!" agreed the other. "As a matter of fact, I was thinking deeply at the moment, and almost before I knew what had happened, I felt myself falling. Unfortunately, I am somewhat absent-minded. I must check myself—yes, I must certainly check myself."

"My name's Handforth, sir—Willy Handforth," said the junior. "I am from St. Frank's College, you know. Everything all serene? I'm not particularly crocked, am I?"

Dr. Grimes rubbed his hands together genially.

"I am delighted to say that your hurts are quite trivial," he said. "At the same time, my boy, you must come home with me. I will bandage your hand and give you some ointment for the bruises."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, sir!" said the fag.

"I insist—— Dear me!"

Dr. Ryland Grimes broke off, and Willy could see that his gaze was fixed upon the case of dead beetles, which was projecting out of the junior's pocket. A pang of great alarm seized Willy. Frantically he tore the case out of his pocket.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he gasped. "Not even cracked!"

By some extraordinary chance, the small, glass-topped box had come through the ordeal without any harm at all. And Willy looked at the gaily-coloured beetles with great joy and satisfaction.

"This is most curious—I might say, most remarkable!" exclaimed Dr. Grimes. "Is it possible, my boy, that by any chance you are interested in collections of this kind?"

"I'm a bit of an amateur naturalist, sir," said Willy proudly.

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Dr. Grimes. "It so happens, my dear lad, that I am an entomologist of many years' experience. I have studied insects from every corner of the world. I am also interested in other forms of zoology."

Willy stared.

"Well, that's queer, sir!" he said. "Birds of a feather, eh?"

Dr. Grimes smiled.

"An old bird and a young bird, my dear lad!" he exclaimed, rubbing his fingers together. "Splendid—splendid! I am always greatly interested in a lad who shows an aptitude for natural science. I insist upon your coming home with me—I really insist."

"But I'm all right, sir—honestly."

"It makes no difference," said Dr. Grimes. "You must come, and I can assure you that you will be greatly interested in my collection—which, I am

proud to say, is one of the very finest in the whole country."

That settled it.

The prospect of seeing the old entomologist's collection was so enticing that Willy simply could not resist it.

He had hesitated because he was dimly conscious that the name of Dr. Ryland Grimes seemed somehow familiar. And he had remembered soon afterwards that he had heard some queer stories about the old fellow. The country people who lived round about had all sorts of queer stories to tell about Dr. Grimes.

He was popularly supposed to be a mysterious old man—a really sinister character. And he lived shut up with a servant—who was nearly as old as Dr. Grimes himself—in a house known as the Cedars. So it was only natural that Willy should hesitate before agreeing to accompany the old naturalist home. But now that he had heard about the collection, Willy couldn't resist.

He concluded that all the stories were mere rumours—without any foundation in fact. After all, Dr. Grimes seemed a really jolly old chap, and he was bearing up extremely well after his mishap.

Willy himself felt rather full of aches and pains, but when he got walking they wore off a bit. As the pair walked they chatted on matters concerning beetles, butterflies, moths and so forth. They were kindred spirits. They had a bond in common, and they were naturally drawn to each other.

At last they arrived at the road, and there Willy recovered his brother's bicycle. Then, wheeling his bike, Willy accompanied Dr. Grimes along the lane until they arrived at a gateway which was almost concealed among thick evergreen trees. It was a small gate, and it was locked—for Dr. Grimes brought out a key and inserted it in the door before opening it.

Then they passed inside. The gate was locked behind them, and they passed along a laurel-bordered pathway towards an old-fashioned house which was nearly hidden among the trees. Willy could not help admitting to himself that the house looked sinister and strangely mysterious.

They arrived at the big main door, and Dr. Grimes entered. As he did so, another man appeared from a doorway. A thin, shrivelled-up individual with a crinkled face and a thin beard; he did not look very attractive.

"Sakes alive, doctor!" he said, staring at Willy. "What next—what next? It's the first time within five years that you've had a stranger, sir!"

"Quite so, Mordant!" said Dr. Grimes genially. "But it so happens that this stranger saved me from a most unpleasant death half an hour ago."

Mordant appeared to be a kind of butler, by his dress, and Willy took an instinctive dislike to the shrivelled-up old man. This was hardly to be wondered at, for Mordant was regarding Willy with open suspicion and disapproval.

"A boy!" he muttered. "A young schoolboy! It's bad, sir—very bad! I'll be more comfortable when he's outside—out in the road, with the gate locked upon him!"

"Perhaps—perhaps I'm intruding, sir!" said Willy doubtfully.

"My dear lad, nothing of the sort—nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Dr. Grimes cheerily. "You must take no notice of Mordant. He is my servant—rather eccentric in his behaviour, but invaluable. He dislikes all strangers, particularly boys. Hang your cap on the stand, and then we will spend a quiet hour together. I can assure you that you will be greatly interested. We shall get on well in one another's company."

Willy was beginning to feel slightly more at his ease. Mordant was still looking at him suspiciously, and the old fellow's brow was drawn down in a severe frown.

As Dr. Grimes moved towards one of the doorways which led out of the hall, the manservant started and looked round.

"Not there, sir!" he exclaimed sharply. "You're not going to take the boy in there?"

"That, Mordant, is precisely my intention!" said the doctor genially.

"But—but you have always said, sir ——"

"I have always said that I would never allow a stranger to pass this threshold," interrupted Dr. Ryland Grimes. "But the events of this afternoon have resulted in a complete reversal of my decision. This boy, at all events, will be welcome whenever he honours me with his presence."

Willy put his hands in his pockets, and looked at Mordant with fine unconcern.

"See?" he said calmly.

"This young man must always be admitted without question, and without delay!" went on the doctor. "To his bravery I owe my life. Furthermore, he is greatly interested in the same hobby as myself. It will delight me to show him my specimens, and to assist him in his own pursuits."

Willy suddenly felt that he had become much more important in the world, and he was rather glad that he had decided to come, after all. It pleased him to hear the old servant being ticked off so thoroughly.

They passed through the sacred doorway—much to the mortification of the old manservant, who stood there in a crushed kind of attitude.

Willy was certainly beginning to enjoy the affair now. There was an element of novelty about it—and a touch of mystery which rather appealed to him.

And a moment later he paused, gaping with wonder.

He had hardly known what to expect to see within the apartment. It seemed that he was a much favoured person, for no other stranger had ever been allowed to cross the threshold. Obviously, then, the room beyond was not of an ordinary character. There was something mysterious about it.

But now they were inside. And Handforth minor stood there, staring dumbly.

The room was a large one—a vast apartment which seemed to occupy half the floor space of the house. There were windows on two sides, but every other inch of wall space, up to a height of seven or eight feet, was occupied with glass-covered specimen cases. There were tables, stands, and other pieces of furniture—and every one contained objects of wonderful interest to Willy.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, in a kind of gasp.

In the first flash he was somewhat startled, for it seemed to him that thousands of living eyes were staring down upon him from every corner of the room. The eyes of strange-looking animals—the eyes of snakes and lizards and toads and frogs. The eyes of countless insects. For, whichever way he looked, there were glass cases filled with insects of every description. All the insects and animals were stuffed—highly prized and extremely valuable specimens. The smaller cases were filled with insects of every description, and from every part of the world.

And at last Willy found his voice.

"It's—it's wonderful, sir!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"I am gratified that you are of that opinion!" exclaimed Dr. Grimes, who was evidently enjoying himself tremendously. "You are interested in insects, and such like—eh?"

"Interested!" echoed Willy. "My only hat! I've been grubbing about for specimens for weeks, sir, and there's nothing I love better than this! Why, these—these things must be worth thousands!"

"I have never troubled to estimate their worth, my lad!" said the old man. "Many of them were obtained

with my own hands—in fact, the majority. I have travelled in every part of the world, and this is the result of my wanderings. Some will say that I spent my time foolishly—but I love my insects, Willy. I love my insects better than all the animals."

He bent over one of the glass cases in an affectionate kind of way.

"Beetles!" he said genially. "Ah! I rather fancy you are particularly keen on beetles—eh? Here is one that will interest you. Do you see him? This big fellow sitting on his throne in the middle?"

"Aren't they glorious, sir?" breathed Willy, gazing into the glass case with enormous interest. "Great pip! That's a whacking great bounder!"

"Quite so—quite so!" said Dr. Grimes. "That is the Golianthus cacicus."

"He's a beauty, sir!" said Willy. "That's a lovely one, just higher up, too—that one with the brown stripes, and the whacking great feelers."

"Ah, you mean the Acrocimus longimanus."

"Yes, I expect that'll be the one!" replied Willy. "And look at these little grey bounders, all covered with spots ——"

"Very interesting specimens," nodded Dr. Grimes. "That beetle is termed the Mouochammus versteegi."

Willy nodded.

"Of course, strictly speaking, I haven't got the names so that I can rattle 'em off like that, sir," he said. "I know that some of 'em have the most terrific names—enough to tie a chap's tongue into little knots."

The doctor laughed.

"Such as Stephanorrhina guttata—you will find him up in the right-hand corner—he has a blue back and white spots. Then there is is the Rhynchophorus ferrugineus—the rather curious-looking chap with the pointed nose. And I dare say you will be interested in the Psalidognathus friendii, to say nothing of the Anoplognathus viridaenea—the little beauty with the greenish back."

"Yes, sir!" said Willy hastily. "Those long words are apt to make a fellow feel a bit weak. My hat! I'm blessed if I know how you can reel them off like that. It's a mystery to me."

"After all my years of study, it would be rather remarkable if I could not remember the names of my pets by heart," smiled Dr. Grimes. "Probably you are interested in butterflies, too?"

"Rather, sir!"

The doctor moved across to another specimen case, and in a very short time Willy Handforth was deeply engrossed in gazing upon numbers of gorgeously coloured butterflies, including the Red Admiral, the Swallow Tail, the Silver-washed Fritillary, and the Camberwell Beauty. In fact, there were so many that Willy's brain almost reeled, and he longed for the time when he would be able to possess a few specimens of a like nature.

There was no mistaking his tremendous delight.

His eyes sparkled, and every other moment or two he uttered exclamations of wonder and joy. Dr. Grimes looked on, enjoying Willy's pleasure almost as much as the lad himself.

The time slipped by at an amazing speed. Willy had an idea that he and his new friend had been in that remarkable room for about an hour. Then, suddenly, he realised that lamps were burning, and that all was dark outside.

And he was brought to a full realisation of the time by the arrival of Mordant and a tea-tray, containing bread-and-butter, cakes, and a pot of fragrant tea. Dr. Grimes rubbed his hands at the sight.

"Somewhat late, but that does not matter—eh?" he smiled.

"Late, sir?" asked Willy, staring. "It's only about half-past four, sir, isn't it? Oh, it's dark——"

"The time, Willy, is nearly a quarter to seven," chuckled the doctor.

"What!" gasped the junior. "But—but I thought——"

"Never mind—never mind!" said the old entomologist. "What does it matter?"

"But—but I must be in by half-past seven, sir, for calling-over!" exclaimed Willy. "Well, I'm jiggered! I'd no idea the time had flown so quickly!"

"However, I dare say you will be able to manage a cup of tea and some bread-and-butter," said the doctor. "Sit down, Willy; and after tea I will give you a few specimens to take home with you. I have plenty, so I can easily spare a few for my rescuer."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Willy breathlessly.

The prospect of owning some of Dr. Grimes' specimens was overpowering, and Willy wouldn't have cared if he was booked for a thousand lines when he got back. He settled down to the tea with a will, finding that he was hungry.

And while he was busily engaged in eating bread-and-butter and cakes, he noticed a little volume lying on the other side of the table. It simply had the one mysterious word "Katsu" printed upon the cover.

He suddenly grinned, and Dr. Grimes looked at him inquiringly.

"Oh, nothing, sir," said Willy. "I was just a bit tickled about the name on that book. I thought it was about some kind of sauce at first—ketchup, I mean."

Dr. Grimes looked round sharply, and his smile vanished for a second. He picked up the volume, and quickly placed it in a drawer.

"It is not a volume that will interest you, my lad!" he exclaimed. "It is my intention to present you with a number of moths and butterflies. I will show them to you as soon as we have finished."

Willy wondered why Dr. Grimes had changed the subject so quickly—but, after all, it was no business of his. And he forgot all about it a few minutes later. For the specimens which were presented to him nearly sent him frantic with joy. And on the top of this Dr. Grimes produced some silver out of his pocket.

"How about a little pocket-money?" he inquired smilingly. "I don't know much about boys, but I believe they have certain uses for loose silver—eh? I don't want to offend you, Willy, but you will quite understand that my only thought is to please you."

Willy was rather dazed as Dr. Grimes pressed ten shillings into his hand—just a little trifle to carry him on for the week. Willy didn't refuse; he was nearly broke.

"And you must promise me that you will come here whenever you feel lonely—whenever you feel that you would care to examine more of my prizes," said Dr. Grimes. "You will always be welcome, my lad; and you have not seen a hundredth part of my collection yet."

"I'd just love to come again, sir!" said Willy eagerly.

"Then come—any time you wish," said the doctor. "But you must give me your solemn promise that you will not say a word to your fellow schoolboys. You must not tell them where you have been, or anything about my little gifts to you."

"But why not, sir?"

"Because I do not wish to be bothered with hosts of youngsters," replied the other. "Good gracious me! If this news gets about, I shall be surrounded by youthful collectors, and my life will not be worth living. No, Willy, I've taken you into my confidence, and I rely upon you respecting my wish."

"All right, sir—I promise," said Willy. "I understand just what you mean, and I'll keep as mum as an oyster. Thanks awfully, sir!"

Five minutes later he was out in the road, hardly able to believe that the thing had really happened.

CHAPTER 4.
The Grim Secret!

WILLY arrived at St. Frank's only just in the nick of time for calling-over—after he had ridden hard along the cold, frosty roads. Still, he had managed it, and that was all that mattered.

And the very instant the Third was free he found himself surrounded by numbers of excited, inquisitive fags. They swarmed about him like a collection of wasps. The air fairly buzzed.

"My hat!" said Willy. "What's the matter? What the dickens are you all jawing at once for? Don't get excited ——"

"We want to know where you've been!" said Chubby Heath.

"Little boys should be seen and not heard!" replied Willy.

"You—you——"

"Besides, what's it got to do with you?" asked Handforth minor. "Have I got to come here and account for all my movements? I've been out. And I've enjoyed myself grand."

"Did you go to Caistowe?" demanded Owen minor.

"Yes."

"Get those beetles?"

"Yes—but they're not half so good as the moths and butterflies I picked up later on," said Wily calmly. "Have a look at these." He produced his other specimens, and the fags gazed at them with wondering eyes. They were not very experienced in such things, but they could easily tell that these specimens were of an extra fine quality, and absolutely perfect in condition.

"Where the dickens did you get them from?" asked Chubby Heath, staring.

"Oh, somewhere!" replied Willy evasively.

"You—you bounder!" exclaimed Owen. "Don't be so secretive!"

"Oh, there's something else!" put in Willy. "How do you like the look of this?"

He pulled out four half-crowns and showed them round.

"Ten bob!" gasped Chubby. "My goodness! I thought you were broke!"

"It only shows that you mustn't take things for granted," replied Willy.

And, grinning hugely, the leader of the Third strolled away, leaving his chums very unsatisfied and as curious as ever. In fact, they were ten times more curious than they had been originally.

And Willy hadn't gone far up the passage before he ran full tilt into the very person he wished to avoid more than any other. Needless to say, this person was Edward Oswald Handforth.

The leader of Study D sprang forward like a kangaroo.

"Got you!" he exclaimed darkly, as he grabbed Willy by the arm. "What's all this I've been hearing?"

"Some rot, I suppose!" said Willy.

"Where have you been all the afternoon?" asked Handforth, with a paternal kind of importance. "Out with it, my lad! And what the thunder do you mean by pinching my bike? You're going to be slaughtered for that later on. But we'll leave that for the moment."

"Life has some consolations," said Willy, with a happy sigh.

"You—you young rotter!" breathed Handforth. "Look here! No nonsense! Where have you been to all the afternoon? Come on, my lad—let's have it!"

"I thought those fatheads in the Third were inquisitive enough, but you take the biscuit!" said Willy. "I don't want to get your rag out, but there's nothing doing."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say!"

"You cheeky little bounder!"

"Oh, don't go over all that again!" groaned Willy. "Why not give it up? You know you can't force me to speak if I don't want to. So what's the good of trying? I went out on private business this afternoon, and——"

"And got yourself bruised and grazed?" broke in Handforth. "I suppose you fell off my bike?"

"Perhaps!"

"Eh?"

"There's no telling!" said Willy calmly.

He was certainly an exasperating young beggar, and Handforth glared at him in a manner that suggested that an act of violence was intended. But Willy stood this with perfect stoicism.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Yes, there's a lot else," replied Handforth. "I shan't be satisfied until I know what you've been doing with yourself this afternoon. You're younger than I am, and it's my duty to look after you and see that you don't get into any mischief. I don't allow you to go out on mysterious jaunts without telling me about it."

"What a pity!" said Willy. "So in future I shall have to go out without your permission."

"If I tell the pater——"

"It's no good saying that—you're not a sneak!" interrupted Willy. "I know you, Ted—and the most you'll do is to punch my nose. That'll do a lot of good, won't it? Chuck it, old man, and let's say no more about it."

It was as much as Handforth could do to keep his temper. Indeed, he would have fallen upon Willy without further delay, only it happened that Nelson Lee hove in sight at that crucial moment. And Handforth minor was enabled to stroll easily away as though he had been in no danger whatever.

There was a slightly strained feeling in the Third that evening. But it was completely forgotten by the following morning. The fags were not possessed of very long memories. And Handforth minor was left in peace.

Two evenings later, however, on a particularly unpleasant night, Willy mysteriously disappeared directly after tea. In fact, he went before tea, because there was practically nothing to eat in the study—and Owen minor and Chubby Heath had done all that was necessary to the food before Willy had a look in.

However, he didn't mind. He casually mentioned that he was popping down to the village, and no more was seen of him until a minute before calling over.

He came back looking flushed, well pleased with himself, and it was a noticeable fact that some money jingled in his pocket. Yet he had gone out penniless. What could it mean?

Of course, Willy had paid a second visit to Dr. Ryland Grimes. He had enjoyed himself immensely, revelling in the thousand and one specimens which the old entomologist took keen delight in showing him.

Dr. Grimes had sent Willy off with five shillings—and Willy was a junior who didn't believe in refusing good sound silver when it was offered to him. Money was none too plentiful in the Third at the best of times.

Chubby Heath and Owen minor happened to be in the Triangle as Willy calmly walked in. But though they questioned him they could get nothing out of him.

It was not until later on in the evening that Edward Oswald learned about this second mysterious absence.

Handforth was on the trail like a shot. He searched for Willy high and low—sublimely unconscious of the fact that Willy was following behind him everywhere he went. Consequently Handforth had no luck. His young brother was as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp.

At last, however, Handforth sighted him. And then it was too late, because Mr. Suncliffe was gathering the Third together to march them up to bed. Handforth couldn't very well question Willy in the circumstances.

So he stood there looking on, and Willy grinned cheerfully in return.

Edward Oswald was greatly exercised in mind over these goings on. It wasn't mere curiosity now. He learned all

about the money and the butterflies. And it seemed impossible to him that his young brother could be acting in a straightforward way. There was something behind it all.

And Handforth was worried.

A couple of days afterwards he was worried even more. For Willy once again disappeared in the same mysterious fashion.

This time he didn't wait for tea—he vanished immediately following afternoon lessons. A couple of Remove fellows had seen him going out of the gateway, but nobody knew his movements since then.

For hours Handforth haunted the Triangle, but there was no sign of Willy returning. Calling over came, and Willy was absent. And then, just as Handforth was really beginning to get quite alarmed, his younger brother walked into the Ancient House as calm as ever.

"What-ho, Ted!" he said cheerily. "How goes it?"

Handforth gulped.

"Well, my hat!" he ejaculated. "You—you young rotter! Why weren't you here for calling over?"

"Ask me!" said Willy.

"I am asking you!" roared Handforth.

"Then what's the answer?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A few other juniors were looking on, and they yelled. It was always very entertaining to listen to a chat between Handforth minor and Handforth major. Edward Oswald tried to bore holes through his brother with his glare.

"Look here, Willy, I don't want any rot!" he said thickly.

"Then if you stop asking questions you won't get any," said Willy. "So that's simple enough, isn't it? Sorry, old son, but there'll be nothing doing if you start shooting questions at me. I've got nothing to tell."

"If you don't tell I'll ask Mr. Lee to question you!" said Handforth grimly. "You're up to something that isn't good for you!"

Willy grinned.

"Do I look bad on it?" he asked.

"It's not a question of looks," replied Handforth. "You're doing things that are harmful to the morals of a young fag. When you're at school like this you've got to remember that there's only one path to tread. I'm watching over you all the time, and ——"

Willy glanced at his watch.

"The lecture begins at nine sharp!" he observed, looking round.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The lecture begins now!" roared Handforth. "Don't forget that I'm talking to you for your own good——"

"I'm feeling rotten on it!" said Willy. "It's not doing me good—it's doing me harm. What's the good of you watching over me all the time if you can't find out what my game is? The fact is, Ted, you always watch in the wrong direction. I think you must have been born with a blind eye or something."

Handforth nearly choked.

"If you weren't my brother I'd—I'd pick you up and smash you to fragments!" he said, with a slight amount of exaggeration. "I'd punch you until your nose vanished! I'd make you black and blue!"

"Whenever there's an argument all you can do is to make all sorts of lurid remarks about black eyes and thick ears," said Willy. "But why waste time in words? You won't wipe me up, and you know it. And I won't answer any of your questions. So we seem to be going round in a kind of circle."

It was as much as Handforth could do to contain himself. But fortunately perhaps for Willy he did.

And as talking to Willy was absolutely useless, Handy was rather at a loss. But although failure had crowned his efforts so far, he was grimly deter-

mined that Willy's secret should soon be his.

And when Handy really got started on a thing he was a stayer!

CHAPTER 5.

Handforth on the Trail!

McCLURE grunted.

"What's the good of harping on it?" he demanded impatiently. "It won't do any good, Handy. And I don't think your young brother is the kind of kid to get into any serious mischief."

"Of course he isn't!" agreed Handforth. "He's one of us—one of the Handforths—and it's impossible for him to do anything wrong. At the same time, there's no telling! A kid of his age is liable to be led away!"

"By all I've seen of Willy, he's the one to do most of the leading!" remarked Church. "Oh, he's got all the confidence in the world. But as your young brother, he ought to heed your words, and obey you in every respect. You're a year or two older than he is, and have a right to expect humbleness and humility from a kid in the Third."

"That's just my argument!" said Handforth. "Of course he ought to treat me with respect. It's all very well for the fellows to say that I'm making a fuss over nothing—but I'm not. Willy is getting mixed up in some business that might lead to trouble!"

"How do you make that out?"

"How do I make it out?" repeated Handforth. "Why does he come back here every other night with money in his pocket, and with valuable beetles and earwigs and cockroaches?"

"Cockroaches aren't valuable," said McClure. "They're a pest!"

"Don't quibble!" snapped Handforth. "When I say cockroaches, I mean butterflies, and things of that sort!"

"How do we know what to say, when you——"

"Don't argue!" bawled Handforth, exasperated. "The fact remains that Willy is an obstinate little mule! I can't imagine who he takes after!"

"I can!" exclaimed McClure.

Happily, he made the remark under his breath, and so there was no trouble.

But Handforth was looking grim and determined. Questioning Willy was about as much use as asking a chimpanzee to sing "Home Sweet Home." The process only succeeded in making Handy ill-tempered with everybody.

And so he came to a positive decision.

"I'll tell you what I'll do!" he declared suddenly. "I'll watch!"

"You'll which?"

"I didn't say 'which,' I said 'watch'!" retorted Handforth. "I'll watch and wait! And sooner or later my chance will come. Both you chaps know that I'm jolly smart at detective work——"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Church. "He's got it again!"

"For goodness sake don't start that now, Handy!" pleaded McClure.

"Both you chaps know that I'm jolly smart at detective work," repeated Handforth deliberately. "And I'm not going to waste any more time. I mean to hang about, and watch that young bounder morning, noon, and night! And the next time he goes out, I'll follow him!"

"It ought to be interesting," said Church casually. "I wish you luck!"

"And don't forget that you chaps'll have to help," said Handforth. "When I'm off duty, you'll have to take my place. One of us has got to be stationed in the Triangle every minute of the time after lessons. Then we shall be able to catch my minor as soon as he bunks off."

Church and McClure rebelled at the idea.

"Not likely!" said Church warmly. "What if it's raining?"

"We've all got mackintoshes!"

"If you think I'm going to waste my time like that, you've made a mistake!"

said McClure. "Why the dickens should we worry ourselves about Willy? We put up with a good few things from you, Handy, but there's a limit!"

Naturally, an argument followed. Sounds of strife and violence came from Study D. And shortly afterwards Handforth emerged, flushed and triumphant. Church and McClure were definitely engaged as his understudies. They felt that it would be better to agree than to risk further fistic encounters.

The next evening was very cold and blustery, and there was a trace of snow in the air. By tea-time—when most of the juniors were snug and warm in their studies—snow was falling and the whole Triangle was soon covered with a fine, powdery film of whiteness.

The wind cut like ice, and it howled mournfully round the angles of the Ancient House. And there, stamping up and down in a state of misery and rebellion, was Church, of the Remove.

He was just underneath the stark old elm-trees, and he was doing half an hour of sentry-go before tea. Handforth was due to relieve him in a few minutes. So far there had been no sign whatever of Willy.

"Blessed if I know why we stand it!" muttered Church fiercely. "All the ass can do is to think of a rotten idea, and he drags us into it! I'm jolly well going indoors, and I'll tell Handy to eat coke! And if he starts any rot, I'll punch him——"

Exactly where Church was going to punch his leader was not disclosed, for just then a small form emerged form the Ancient House in a furtive kind of way. It dodged down the steps, and paused for a moment.

Church caught his breath in, and looked keenly.

"It's Willy!" he muttered. "Well, I'm jiggered!"

The figure was certainly that of the Third Former. He was attired in a thick overcoat, with a warm woollen muffler, and with his cap pulled tightly down over his head.

And as he turned for a second Church saw the fag's features.

"Yes, it's Willy—no doubt about it!" muttered Church.

For a moment he thought about hurrying up and asking the Third Former where he was off to. But before he could come to any actual decision, Willy suddenly cut off towards the gateway and vanished.

"That's done it!" breathed Church.

He dashed at full speed indoors, tore along the passage, and then burst into Study D. Handforth and McClure were just settling down to tea. They looked up, rather startled, as Church crashed in.

"He's gone!" gasped Church.

"What!"

"Your minor—just bunked out of the Triangle!" said Church. "I was standing on watch, and he didn't see me, and——"

"Why didn't you follow him, you fathead?"

"Oh, yes, that's likely, isn't it?" snapped Church. "You expect me to stick out there on the watch, and then follow your minor——"

"You—you dummy! There's not time for arguing!" exclaimed Handforth. "We've got to rush off on the trail. Understand? This is a chance to find out where that young bounder slips off to. And we're not going to let the chance go by. Come on!"

His chums were inclined to object, but Handforth did things in such a whirlwind fashion that almost before they knew it they were out in the cold, snowy air, with the wind whistling cuttingly round them.

"Oh, what's the good of this?" demanded McClure. "It's an absolute waste of time. Willy went five minutes ago. We can't tell which direction he took, and it'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Will it?" said Handforth grimly. "What about these?"

He pointed to the ground, which was entirely covered with a thin film of powdery snow. And there, perfectly distinct, a trail of footprints led towards the gates. It was a solitary trail.

"There's been nobody out here since, as you can see!" exclaimed Handforth tensely. "And there's scarcely any chance of a soul being in the lane—or even in Bellton itself. Anyhow, we shall be able to follow these footprints until further orders."

"But—but——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "There's no time for argument! This is what detective training does! You can't teach me anything about detective work!"

"Nobody can teach you anything!" growled McClure.

However, they were compelled to go.

And so, a few minutes later, they were hastening down Bellton Lane. As a trail, the footprints were absurdly easy to follow.

Nobody else had used the lane, and the thin film of snow on the ground was just in the right condition to take footprints. The small impressions of Willy's shoes lay on the ground, clear and well defined.

In the village the trackers met with one or two momentary checks. The trail became confused in places, for here and there people were moving about. But there was really very small difficulty in keeping to the right track.

It soon became clear that Handforth minor had not paused in the village. He had gone straight on, evidently towards the station. The forked roads lay just ahead—one road leading to Bannington and the other to Caistowe.

"All this fuss over nothing!" muttered Church. "The kid's only popped into Bannington to buy something. Never known such a fuss!"

Church was beginning to regret that he had acted so impulsively. Mature consideration had led him to conclude that it would have been far better if he had mentioned nothing about Willy's appearance in the Triangle. But it was too late now to alter things.

"Bannington—eh?" said Handforth, as they reached the cross-roads. "Look at this! The footprints go right off towards Caistowe. We can't mistake them, because there's only one other pair of marks on the road—and they're coming from the opposite direction—with hobnails, too!"

Handforth was right. He seemed to think that he had made some wonderfully clever deduction—although, of course, there was nothing in it. The dullest witted novice could have seen that Willy had taken the Caistowe Road.

And so the three Removites set off briskly in this direction. Now and again, under trees, or at exposed corners, the road would be bare of snow. The trail would thus be lost for the time being. But it always appeared a bit later on—showing that Willy had been making straight for the seaside town.

However, before reaching even the outskirts of Caistowe, Handforth & Co. were rather startled to find that the trail had vanished. They had been passing along a dark patch, with thick trees on either side. But now they were on the open road again, with the snow laying at their feet. There were no footprints whatever.

Handforth halted.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed keenly. "What's the meaning of this? The young bounder must have turned off somewhere!"

"How could he?" asked Church. "We haven't come past any by-lanes. I shouldn't be surprised if we've overtaken him, and he heard us coming. So he dodged into the hedge."

This certainly seemed a likely explanation, but it did not prove to be the real one. For when Handforth & Co. went back, they found that Willy had turned off just against a kind of door-

way which was set well into a heavy wall, and almost invisible from the road. Evergreens overhung the doorway in thick profusion.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "He went in here!"

"Marvellous!" murmured Church.

"He went in here!" went on Handy. "And the door's locked, too! I seem to remember this place somehow——"

"You've passed it often enough," put in McClure. "There's a house just a little way back. It's called the Cedars."

"Old Dr. Grimes' place?"

"Yes!"

"Great pip!" said Handforth blankly. "Old Grimes! He's got a terrible name, you know. People say he's a miser, and all sorts of queer yarns are told about him. And Willy went in here! Oh, my hat!"

"Well, there's nothing to be scared about," said Church. "Grimes may have a queer reputation, but you know what gossips these country people are. I don't suppose there's anything in all that talk."

"But—but why should Willy come here, anyhow?" demanded Handforth.

"Blessed if I know!"

"It won't be long before I've discovered the truth!" snapped Handforth grimly. "I mean to investigate this matter thoroughly. I don't like the look of it. I'm worried!"

"But what are you going to do?"

"Get inside, and sniff round a bit."

"That ought to be easy!" said McClure sarcastically, as he pulled up his coat. "Ugh! This wind's like ice! How are you going to get in, Handy? The door's locked, and the wall's very high——"

"No wall will keep me from having a look round!" interrupted Handforth firmly. "You chaps give me a hoist up. I'll get on your shoulders, Church. Then, while I'm looking round, you two will stay out here on the watch. I don't suppose I shall be very long."

It was quite useless for Church and McClure to argue. The only thing was to let him have his own way. And the sooner it was done the better.

Handforth got over the wall all right. Assisted by his chums, he hoisted himself to the top, hovered there a moment, and then dropped down. He landed in the middle of a laurel bush with a crash, but the howling wind made it impossible for the sound to have been heard at the house. And Church and McClure, outside, crouched in the shelter of the doorway, and pulled their overcoats more tightly about them.

Handforth disentangled himself from the laurel bush, and soon found that he was on a kind of path. The house lay just in front of him, looking grim and sinister on that rough, blustery night.

He considered that it would not do much good if he approached the house in the ordinary way. Such an idea had never occurred to him, in fact. The only way was to creep round the house and attempt to find an opening. And so the junior got to work.

He was very lucky. After only about five minutes' searching, he came upon a small window, set in a kind of recess. It was at the side of the house, and all was darkness.

This particular window, much to Handforth's delight, was unfastened. There were a few remnants of wire gauze hanging about the edges of the frame. Probably the place was a kind of larder or store-room.

Handforth made certain of this a second later, for a flash of his electric torch revealed one or two bowls, a ham hanging from a hook, and other domestic articles.

Not that these things interested him. The window was very tiny, and at first glance it would seem impossible that such a big fellow could squeeze through it. But Handforth did so after a struggle.

He was quite convinced that the door of the store-room would be locked on the outside. But it wasn't. He passed

through into a passage, where the air seemed warmer and more comfortable.

All was dark, and Handforth crept along, beginning to feel a few qualms for the first time. It suddenly occurred to him that he might get into serious trouble if Dr. Grimes did not believe the explanation of his entry. But, after all, what did it matter?

Handforth was the most reckless fellow under the sun, and he never cared much for his own safety. He was still creeping along when he paused, holding his breath.

A voice had come to his ears—faintly and indistinctly. Then he noticed a glimmer of light from beneath a doorway farther along the passage. Handforth crept up, with his heart beating faster.

He arrived opposite the doorway, and stood there listening with his ears stretched.

"Yes, to-night!" a voice was saying, in a gloating tone. "How easily he was trapped! And to-night the boy undergoes the great experiment! If he dies, failure will be terrible—but if he lives, the world will know of a new wonder!"

Handforth stood there, and he felt queer all over. A kind of faintness came to him as the realisation of those words flooded into his mind.

It was his brother they were talking about! They were going to make some horrible experiment upon Willy!

CHAPTER 6.

The Terrible Truth!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH gripped himself firmly.

"Oh, it's rot!" he muttered. "I must have been mistaken!"

No other sound had come from within the room—at least, no voice. But he heard somebody moving about. And it was quite obvious to him that there were two men there.

He wondered what to do. Should he suddenly break in and confront them, or should he wait a bit longer, and listen? Handforth did not consider himself to be an eavesdropper. This was pure detective work, and it seemed to him that he had hit upon something very big. He finally decided to stay there and listen.

It was a wise decision.

For almost at once the voice started again. Although Handforth didn't know it, it was the voice of Mordant, the wizened old servant of Dr. Grimes.

"Ah, Roscoe, you don't know how cunning the doctor is!" came Mordant's voice. "And the way he trapped the boy was a masterpiece. Not a breath of suspicion did the youngster have!"

"Quite so—quite so!" said another voice.

That second voice made Handforth shiver as he stood. It was almost inhuman in its rasping coldness.

"Listen, Roscoe! I will tell you everything!" went on Mordant. "Oh, you will be interested—very interested! Dr. Grimes first met this lad while he was out for a walk some days ago. And from that moment he has been gradually edging him into the net—nearer and nearer! I thought the doctor meant to pounce two nights ago, but he refrained. But he has pounced now—and the lad is doomed!"

"Good!" said the other. "Very good!"

"Ah, but you do not know what this great experiment is to be," continued Mordant gloatingly. "Have you ever heard of a science known as Katsu? No, of course you haven't. It is Japanese—and the Orientals who practise Katsu claim that they can restore the dead to life by the means of this wonderful science."

"Quite so—quite so!"

"For months the doctor has been experimenting," said the old servant, in a voice that quavered with excitement. "He has tried this Katsu on rabbits and guinea-pigs, on rats and mice! He has deliberately killed them

by means of suffocation, or some such method—thus destroying no vital nerve centres or blood-vessels. Then, by means of Katsu, he has restored his victims to life. In every case but two he was victorious."

There was a short pause, and Handforth felt his hair almost standing on end with growing horror. At first he could not quite understand the purport of Mordant's story—but now he was beginning to suspect, and his thought alarmed him.

"Yes, he was victorious!" went on the voice. "But, after all, what was the good of experimenting on animals? It led nowhere. Dr. Grimes determined to obtain a human subject. And so, as this boy came into his life, he determined that here was the subject he required. And at last the hour has come. To-night—at once—my master will make his greatest experiment. He will suffocate this boy till death is certain. And then, with this marvellous Katsu, he will bring the youngster back to life. If he succeeds, his name will be the most famous in all the world, and science will benefit in the most wonderful way. The great test with the human life will be made to-night!"

Handforth felt sick with absolute horror. He did not know Dr. Grimes personally, but he had heard much about him. The country people declared that he was insane—that he was a harmless, crazy old man.

But was this right?

It seemed that the villagers were only swayed by their own gossip. Dr. Ryland Grimes was a scientist—a medical man. Apparently he had retired, and while engrossed in the hobby of entomology, he was really as keen as ever upon performing some dangerous experiment.

Katsu! Handforth seemed to remember the word. He had seen something about this extraordinary Japanese science in one of the leading monthly magazines. And Mordant was speaking the truth. The Japs actually did believe that they could restore human life after death.

Dr. Grimes had got the craze, and he was turning to Willy Handforth as a means of proving his theories. The St. Frank's fag was to be used as a kind of sacrifice!

If the experiment failed, Willy would never recover. If it succeeded, he might come to life again; but, even so, it was surely impossible for the junior to become his normal self once again.

Such an experiment was liable to affect him for life.

And Edward Oswald stood out there, dumb with the horror of it. According to the gloating voice behind the door, the experiment was to be made almost at once—indeed, perhaps Dr. Grimes was already in the middle of it. It was ghastly—it was terrible!

Handforth determined to act without delay.

He had no weapons, but he trusted to his fists to see him through.

And as the voices had ceased within the room, he determined, then and there, to enter, and trust to luck. He gripped the handle firmly, turned it, and swung the door open with a sudden wrench.

For a second he was almost dazzled by the light. It was, after all, only the comparatively dim illumination from an oil-lamp. But after the pitchy darkness, it rather blinded him. But he grew accustomed to the light in a few seconds.

He found himself in a small, cosy room, with a fire burning cheerfully in the grate. One glance round showed Handforth that the room was empty. A door on the other side stood half ajar.

Handforth stood there, hesitating.

And then a shrivelled-up old man appeared from the half-open door. He looked at Handforth in a dazed kind of way at first, then his brows came down in a frown of anger, and his lips drew tight.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly.

"I've come for my brother, you murderous old rotter!" replied Handforth curtly. "I heard all you were saying to that other man, and I know about this experiment! Dr. Grimes ——"

"Good heavens!" muttered Mordant, in a tone of horror. "You know? You have been listening? Foolish boy! You can do nothing now—it is too late! Dr. Grimes is preparing to commence his operation!"

Handforth gulped with sudden relief.

"Then—then he hasn't started yet?" he demanded.

"Not yet—not yet," replied the old manservant. "But no time will be lost, and in no circumstances must the master be disturbed. You young rascal! How did you get in? How did you get into this house?"

"Never mind how I got in! I'm going to put a stop to this devilry!" snapped Handforth curtly. "And if you think you're going to keep me here, you've made a mistake. My hat! There's my young brother in there—about to be killed, so that he can be brought to life again! D'you think I'm going to allow that?"

"Dr. Grimes must not be disturbed ——"

"Rot! I'm going to disturb him!" declared Handforth hotly. "It's—it's nothing less than murder! Horrible, cold-blooded murder! Supposing he can't bring Willy back to life?"

"He can—he will!" replied Mordant. "Dr. Grimes is clever—very clever! He can do anything like that! His skill is marvellous. Have patience, my boy—wait! You have nothing to fear."

Handforth was goaded into a fury. The calm, matter of fact way in which this old man was talking exasperated him. One might think that the experiment was to be made upon a sheep. Mordant did not consider the question of human life. He simply looked upon the affair as an experiment, and nothing else.

But Handforth was not going to stand it.

He rolled up his sleeves.

"Now, I don't want to be violent, but I'll give you just ten seconds!" he said grimly. "It's not my way to fight an old man. But my brother's life is at stake, and I'll punch your nose if you don't lead me straight to Dr. Grimes. Understand?"

Mordant backed away, shuffling, and with furtive eyes.

"You cannot see the doctor now!" he exclaimed sharply. "He must not be disturbed! This great experiment is about to commence! Within twenty minutes it will be started—Dr. Grimes is even now making his preparations!"

"You—you callous old ruffian!" said Handforth. "Thank goodness we've got twenty minutes! Now, are you going to lead the way or not? You'd better answer quickly, because I'm——"

"I shall not move from this room!" said Mordant curtly.

"All right—we'll see!" Handforth clenched his fist and advanced.

"No—no!" gasped the old servant. "Wait! You are a hasty young man! I will do as you say—I will lead you to Dr. Grimes."

"Good!" said Handforth curtly. "Buck up!"

Mordant turned, and passed out of the room, with Handforth close at his heels. They went along the passage, and Mordant paused in front of a heavy door. He looked round, with a finger to his lips.

"Go quietly!" he warned. "The doctor must not be disturbed by any sudden noise. Go very, very quietly!"

He opened the door, and Handforth took a step forward. Then he paused, for all beyond the doorway was darkness. And for a second Handforth suspected that he, too, was being led into a trap.

His suspicions came too late.

The old manservant gave a sudden,

rasping cry of triumph. He gave Handforth a fierce shove in the back. Vainly the junior attempted to save himself. But there was no time.

He plunged forward.

And, to his horror, instead of alighting upon a solid floor, he met nothing but the thin air. He plunged down and down. Then, with a crash, he struck a hard, brick floor, and rolled over. He was bruised and shaken, and for a few moments he lay there dazed.

In a bewildered kind of way he saw a dim light above. Then a door closed with a slam, and he was in pitch darkness.

He had been trapped!

And this was the result of his investigations! He picked himself up, aching and sore. But he was only bruised, after all. And Handforth was the kind of fellow who could stand any amount of bruises.

He was filled with a wild, horrible alarm. He didn't know what to do. Trapped like this, he was helpless. The dreadful experiment on his brother would go on, and it would be impossible to prevent it.

This mad doctor was about to murder Willy in the crazy belief that he would be able to restore his life afterwards!

CHAPTER 7.

The Rescue Party!

THE situation was a terrible one.

And Edward Oswald Handforth, trapped in that cellar, felt as though he could beat his bare fists against the stone walls. He had to do something. It was impossible to remain there, idle and helpless. And his first move was to feel for his electric torch.

He found it, and then groaned.

In falling down into the cellar he had smashed the little bulb. No light came when he pressed the switch. He stood there, breathing hard.

"Dished!" he muttered. "Oh, my goodness! And—and Willy is up there, with that horrible old man getting ready to kill him! I've never felt so helpless in all my life! Something's got to be done. We can't go on like this. But what? How the dickens can I help?"

He racked his brain for an idea.

And then, with a sudden gasp of triumph, he remembered that he had two or three loose wax vestas in his little ticket-pocket. He felt for them feverishly, found them, and hastily struck one against the wall. The little wax taper flared up, illuminating the cellar in a flickering, eerie kind of way.

There, five or six feet above the level of the floor, was the door. There was a kind of ladder fixed to the wall which led up to it. The match went out, and Handy groped his way to the ladder and climbed up. But when he got to the top he knew that the effort was useless.

For the door was locked and bolted on the other side. And it was quite impossible to attempt any violence. A sudden dash at the door with his shoulder was not practicable, for he could gain no purchase or leverage.

He climbed down again, and stood upon the cellar floor thinking hard. He struck another match, and this time looked round more thoroughly. Then he caught his breath in. For up in one of the far corners was a kind of hole in the stone roof a square shaft which seemed to lead upwards. He went across at it quickly, the match still burning.

Then, as he looked up, all his former hopes were revived. At the top of the little square shaft there was a round iron grating. The thing was a coal shoot, or some such device.

Anyhow, Handforth didn't care what it was. He only knew that here was a possibility of escape. The one serious question was whether he would be able to squeeze up the shaft.

He wasted no time in speculation.

The match went out. Handforth

climbed up to the shaft, and then commenced forcing himself upwards. It was a tight squeeze, and only grim perseverance could bring success. In Handforth's present frame of mind, he was ready to attempt the impossible, and this was by no means impossible.

So he succeeded.

It seemed to him that the job took him fifteen or twenty minutes. As a matter of fact, he wormed his way up the shaft in less than three. And he was tremendously relieved when he found that the iron grating at the top lifted as soon as he put his head against it.

One or two fine snowflakes blew into his face, and Handy thought he had never felt anything more delightful. After being trapped, knowing that his brother was in such sore straits, this freedom seemed twenty times more delightful.

To pull himself right out was only a matter of moments, and then he found that he was comparatively near to the spot where he had first entered the house. The window of the little pantry was only a few yards away.

Handforth stood up breathing hard.

What was to be done now?

There was no sense in wasting time—he had to act at once without a second's delay. For a moment he thought about entering the building by means of that window again, and doing the whole thing on his own.

But this would have been very unwise.

With Church and McClure so near at hand, it would have been madness itself to risk getting captured a second time. The three of them would be able to rescue Willy without much trouble.

Time was valuable, but the other juniors had to be fetched.

So Handforth whizzed off like lightning, dashing among the laurel bushes, blundering along in the darkness, until he reached the wall. He didn't exactly know how he scrambled up.

But at last he did so, and dropped over.

"Hallo—here he is!" came a whisper out of the darkness.

Church and McClure came up to him.

"Where the dickens have you been all this time?" demanded Church. "We're frozen to the marrow, you ass! All this messing about——"

"My brother's going to be killed!" interrupted Handforth, his voice hard and deadly serious. "This Dr. Grimes is going to make an experiment on him! I was collared and shoved down a cellar. But I escaped."

"What!"

"Don't try to pull our legs——"

"It's true, you chaps—it's true!"

There was something in Handforth's voice which Church and McClure had not heard before. They peered at him curiously in the gloom, and they could faintly see that his face was set and drawn, and that nearly all the colour had gone out of it.

"But—but it can't be true!" gasped Church. "I mean about your minor, Handy. You can't mean——"

"Listen!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "There's not a second to waste—but listen!"

And as quickly as possible he told his story.

Church and McClure were staggered.

"Oh, there must be some mistake about it!" said McClure at last. "No man in his right senses would do a thing like that!"

"But is he in his right senses?" demanded Handforth. "This old doctor may be rational enough to talk to, but he is dotty on this one subject of Katsu, or whatever they call it."

"That's right enough!" agreed Church. "I've heard of men like that. They don't realise what they're doing, you know, but—but we can't break into the house, Handy. Don't forget there are three men there—old Grimes and the two chaps you heard talking."

"If it came to a fight, we'd never

win!" said McClure. "About the best thing we can do is to dash into Caistowe for the police!"

"No—no. There's no time!"

"But we must!" insisted Church. "Think, Handy! Your young brother's life is at stake; If we get into this house by ourselves, we might all be collared—and then goodness knows what would happen. The only thing, in my opinion, is to dash away for help!"

Even Handforth, anxious as he was, realised the force of his chum's argument. And at last he agreed to go for help.

But luck was with them.

They had hardly started—in fact, they had only taken about two steps—when they saw several twinkling lights appearing round a bend. There were six lights altogether—bicycles, obviously.

"Hurrah!" roared Church.

They dashed up, and a moment later the three juniors were in the midst of the cyclists. It was a wonder they weren't bowled over, for they rushed up without any care.

The six cyclists practically fell off their machines. And to the intense delight of the chums of Study D, they saw the familiar faces. For the six newcomers were all Remove fellows from St. Frank's.

They were Reginald Pitt, Jack Grey, De Valerie, Levi, Somerton, and Tom Burton.

"What the dickens is all this about?" demanded Pitt. "What's the idea of charging into us like this? And how did you chaps get here?"

"We want your help—now!" panted Handforth. "I've found out where my minor has been going to recently——"

"You've probed his guilty secret?" grinned De Valerie.

"The poor kid's about to be killed!" gasped Church. "Old Dr. Grimes has got him in his house and he means to make an experiment on him! In fact, we may be too late!"

The six juniors looked at Handforth and Co. It could be easily seen that the chums of Study D were not attempting to spoof.

Their faces were drawn and pale.

"Look here, Handy. We're ready to do anything you want!" said Pitt quietly. "If it's serious, we're the chaps for the job——"

"It is serious—deadly serious! Listen!"

It took Handforth about one minute to give the brief details.

"Swab my maindeck!" exclaimed Burton dazedly. "It—it sounds like some piece out of a melodrama! That—that man must be as mad as a hatter! Souse me! What shall we do?"

"Go inside and rescue Willy!" replied Handforth. "Come on!"

"Wait a minute!" put in Pitt. "We passed a police inspector on a bike not far down the road. Two of us had better whiz along on our bikes for him. He was only going at about four miles an hour, so it'll be easy enough to overtake him."

"Good!" said Handorth. "We'll need the police here!"

There was no argument about who should go. All the juniors realised the importance of speed, and when Pitt suggested that Tom Burton and Grey should go after the inspector, they went off at once.

The others collected in a group.

The first thing was to get into the grounds of the Cedars. And, one by one, the fellows hoisted one another up, and dropped on the other side of the wall. At last the seven Removites found themselves on the right side of the wall, with the house rearing up in front of them against the gloomy skyline.

"There's no sense in wasting time!" exclaimed Handforth. "The best thing to do is to go straight to the

front door, and then we'll break it in, if we can't get any answer!"

"Good!"

"There's nothing like force in a case of this sort!"

"Come on!"

And the rescue party advanced towards the house with the grim determination to rescue Willy, dead or alive.

CHAPTER 8.
In the Nick of Time!

COINCIDENCE is a remarkable thing, and it was certainly lucky in the extreme that that party of juniors from St. Frank's should have been going in the direction of Caistowe at that particular time.

It was not often that the St. Frank's juniors went to Caistowe—especially on such a wild, blustery evening. As a matter of fact, a special lecture was being held at the Caistowe Town Hall that evening by a famous professor from London, and so the juniors had formed a party for the purpose of hearing the lecture.

And as it was for only one night, they could not put it off because of the snowy weather. Thus, it was solely because of this Caistowe lecture that the juniors had come along at such an opportune time.

And now they were within the grounds of the Cedars.

They crept on towards the front door, Handforth leading the way.

Before they actually arrived, they noticed a few chinks of light gleaming from a big window some little distance farther along. The curtains, apparently, had not been properly drawn.

"Hold on!" whispered Pitt. "Why not have a look in that window? We might be able to see something between the chinks of the curtain. There's no telling, you know! And it'll only take a tick."

"Good idea!" said De Valerie.

Handforth didn't like to agree at first, but the others crept away, and so he was compelled to go with them.

The window, as they could see upon close inspection, was a large one—french doors, to be exact. There were heavy plush curtains behind them, but in one or two places there were small gaps.

"Now, go easily!" whispered Pitt. "We don't want to be heard!"

They approached on tiptoe. Handforth was now leading, and he pressed his face close against the cold glass.

Yes, there was certainly a chink there, and the leader of Study D caught his breath in sharply as he made out one or two objects in the room.

"Good heavens!" he muttered huskily.

"What—what's the matter?"

"It's like a nightmare!" panted Handforth.

The others crowded round.

They could see a section of the opposite wall of the room. And from that wall eyes gleamed down—all sorts of eyes. They seemed to fascinate the watchers. Then Pitt, who allowed his gaze to stray, uttered an exclamation.

"My goodness!" he murmured.

He could just see the lower half of a couch—a kind of lounge. And, upon this couch, were two legs, fully stretched out. Without any question at all, they were the legs of Willy Handforth.

And they were absolutely still.

"Look—look here!" whispered Pitt.

Handforth was already looking, and he groaned aloud as he saw that still figure.

"We're too late!" he muttered miserably. "He's dead—Willy's been killed already! And that murderous scoundrel has put him on the couch there, thinking that he'll be able to bring him back to life."

"No—no!"

"It can't be as bad as that, Handy!"

"Of course not!" said Pitt. "There's no need to jump to conclusions, Handy. I expect the doctor's only just started. If we break in now we shall just be in time!"

"Oh, good!" said Church. "I was thinking——"

He paused, for at that second a figure had crossed the room, thus coming into the line of vision. It was the figure of Dr. Ryland Grimes. The old fellow was carrying something in his hands which gleamed and glittered. He passed over towards the couch and went out of view.

"Did—did you see that?" breathed Church.

"See what?"

"Old Grimes. He just went across the room!" said Church tensely. "And he was carrying a kind of medical instrument in his hand—like they use in hospitals. Quick—quick! We shall be too late!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Handforth was desperate, and he had no intention of wasting time. He took a step back, raised his foot, and sent it crashing through the glass of the french windows.

The noise was tremendous.

"Open this door—open this door!" shouted Handforth desperately.

"Good gracious me!"

The voice came from within, and the figure of Dr. Grimes appeared there. He pulled the curtain aside and stood fully revealed in the opening. He was looking startled, and he peered out into the gloom.

"What—what is all this?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"You know what it is!" shouted Handforth. "You—you murderous old rotter! You've got my young brother here, and you're practising this Katsu business on him!"

"Katsu?" repeated the doctor in a choking voice.

"Yes!" shouted Handforth. "Open the door! We know all about it—I heard your servant talking! You've trapped Willy here, and you're going to suffocate him, so that you can try to bring him to life again. If you've done my brother any harm, I'll—I'll ——"

"Good heavens!" muttered Dr. Grimes.

He glanced round him quickly, pulling the curtains to, as though afraid that the juniors should see within the room. Then he turned back, and his face became convulsed with anger.

"You're all mad!" he exclaimed harshly. "Go!"

"Not likely!" rapped out Handforth. "We know that Willy is here, and we're going to save him from your demoniacal game! If you don't open this door at once, we'll smash it in!"

"You — you impudent young puppies!" snapped Dr. Grimes. "I will have the law on you for trespassing on my property. I have done no harm to your brother—I never intended any harm. He is safe!"

"Open the door, or we break it in!" exclaimed Pitt tensely.

"If you dare——"

"Come on!" roared Handforth.

Again he kicked at the door—this time at the woodwork. It shook and shivered under the powerful drive. But it did not come unfastened. Dr. Grimes started back as two or three fragments of glass fell.

"You—you young wretches!" he panted. "You destructive ruffians! Very well—very well! I will open the door for you."

"Then be quick about it!"

Dr. Grimes fumbled with the catch and then pulled a bolt. The door swung open, and the juniors flooded into the room. Dr. Ryland Grimes took care to stand well back.

At first the St. Frank's fellows were startled at the appearance of their surroundings. Hundreds of specimen cases, with their life-like, stuffed occu-

pants, with the eyes gleaming down from every quarter. It was all very strange and extraordinary.

But Handforth had no time to look round him.

His sole attention was given to the couch. And there lay the still form. But now a great gulp rose in Handforth's throat. For the form was lying as still as death, and over the upper part of it a white cloth had been placed, covering head and shoulders.

"Oh!" panted Handforth. "He—he's there!"

Dr. Grimes stood in front of the couch.

"Don't touch him!" he exclaimed, his voice hard and grim. "Don't dare to lift this cloth! You were talking about an experiment, my boys. What would you say if you learnt that this very experiment was half through?"

"You—you mean that Willy is dead?" asked Church huskily.

"I forbid you to touch the body. I—I mean——"

"Then he is dead!" shouted Handforth despairingly.

He pushed Dr. Grimes aside and tore off the covering. Willy Handforth lay there, still and silent. His face was set in perfect repose, his eyes were closed ,and there was no pallor on his cheeks.

"Willy!" exclaimed Handforth huskily.

"What's the matter. old son?" asked Willy calmly.

He opened his eyes, grinned, and sat up.

"You seem to be making a blessed lot of fuss!" he went on. "You can always be trusted to put your blessed hoof into things, Ted. Never saw such a blundering ass in all my puff!"

Handforth staggered.

"You're—you're alive!" he shouted.

Willy grinned.

"What rot!" he said. "Alive? My dear chap, you don't seem to understand. I'm dead—absolutely as stiff and cold as Rameses the Fourth! Dr. Grimes is just going to put the fluence on and bring me back!"

"You—you young spoofer!" exclaimed Pitt breathlessly.

"Spoofer?" repeated Willy. "Well, it was your idea about the cat's meat stuff—Katsu, or whatever you call it! As soon as I heard that you expected to find me defunct, I thought I'd oblige. So, although I seem alive, I'm really as dead as about five doornails! Dr. Grimes, you might do the necessary and bring me back to life!"

"Now, it seems to me that you boys have been labouring under a very grave misapprehension regarding my character," said Dr. Grimes genially. "But I assure you that I am not the vile monster you have apparently taken me for. Neither do I blame Willy's brother for accusing me. In the circumstances, he was possibly justified."

"Justified!" echoed Handforth. "It's true! I heard these men talking ——"

"Come!" interrupted the doctor. "We will go to them at once!"

He led the way out of the room, and all the juniors followed him in a group. They passed down a wide passage, and then Dr Grimes suddenly paused and held a finger to his lips.

"Quietly—quietly!" he whispered. "Listen, my young friends!"

They all collected round a door which was closed. And as they held their breath they heard a voice from within.

"Yes, Roscoe, the doctor's not going to be interrupted!" came the voice of old Mordant. "We've got that young man in the cellar, eh? He won't escape from there, Roscoe. Oh, no! And the experiment can go on!"

"You bet!" said Roscoe.

"There you are!" exclaimed Handforth loudly. "What did I tell you? They're the same two men who were

talking before. They think I'm still in the cellar!"

"Wait!" said Dr. Grimes.

He opened the door suddenly. And all the juniors saw into the room. There was Mordant, the wizened old servant. He was seated in front of a big cage, and within the cage, stolidly sitting on a perch, was a parrot.

The parrot looked up and gave a squawk.

"There you are, then!" it remarked, by way of greeting.

"A parrot!" yelled Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But—but——" Handforth paused, gasping.

"Yes, my young friend, a parrot!" said Dr. Grimes. "It is a great pity you did not come to my door in the usual way, in order to make your inquiries. If you had done that, all would have been well. It is my own fault, I fear, for making Willy promise that he would not divulge our little secret. Am I right in assuming that you followed him, as you were concerned regarding his mysterious night jaunts?"

"Yes, sir!" said Handforth feebly.

"But—but about the Katsu, sir?" he asked. "I don't understand!"

"First of all, I will explain that Mordant is not an ordinary manservant," exclaimed Dr. Grimes. "He is a medical man of great skill. But drink was the cause of his downfall. He and I were students at the same hospital, forty years ago. I came across him ten years back—a derelict. He was penniless and a pitiful wreck."

"Oh!"

"So I took him in. I cured him of his craving for drink, and since then he has been as faithful to me as a dog," said Dr. Grimes. "But the influence of his drunken years left his mind just a little weak. He is the most harmless old fellow in the world. But, being a medical man, he understands much. It was he who purchased the volume on Katsu, the Japanese science of restoring life. I took it away from him."

"Why, sir?"

"Because I found that Mordant becomes obsessed with the wild fancies," said Dr. Grimes. "Similar things have happened before. At one time he was mad on Spiritualism, and became quite convinced that ghosts walked about in every passage. With regard to Katsu, he read the volume, and firmly believed—in spite of all my denials—that I had experimented on animals, and that I was only waiting for a human subject."

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Handforth blankly.

"So, my dear boy, when your young brother came here, Mordant believed that he was to be the victim," smiled Dr. Grimes. "He got it firmly fixed in his head, and I had to be severe with him—although, as you have seen, it was of little use."

"You asses!" said Willy. "Dr. Grimes is one of the dearest old gentlemen in the world! I've had a glorious time here, looking at his specimens, and all the rest of it! Just like you, Ted! It's a pity you can't mind your own giddy business! I can look after myself all right!"

"You—you young rotter——"

"Now, now!" smiled Dr. Grimes. "No quarrelling, please. The affair is over, and I shall be delighted if you boys will remain here as my guests for an hour or so. With regard to Mordant, this little affair has convinced me that he is getting beyond hope. I shall take pains to have him cared for elsewhere."

But it had been a rather dramatic business, in spite of the somewhat humorous ending.

It was the talk among the juniors for a few days, but it was soon forgotten, for Christmas was near and the juniors gave all their attention to the coming holidays and the festive season.

CHAPTER 9.

The Fatal Telegram!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST beamed.

"The fact is, dear old boys, I'm feelin' as happy as anythin'," he remarked genially. "It's real Christmas weather, an' we're all fixed up for the holidays. I'm frightfully glad we're goin' to Tregellis Castle—I am really!"

"Well, that's all right, then," I smiled. "As long as you're satisfied, Montie, you can bet we are. We've been to Tregellis Castle before, and we know we shall have a fine time."

"Pity your governor won't be there, though," said Tommy Watson.

"I think he may be coming later," I said. "It all depends on how things go at Somerton Abbey. He was invited there, you know."

We were talking in Study C, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. Outside, snow was falling in tiny, feathery flakes. The air was keen and crisp. And there had been a good deal of snow during the past two or three days.

The whole countryside was white with it. And Sir Montie had been quite correct in describing the weather as seasonable. It was the real, old-fashioned kind of Yuletide scene.

St. Frank's was bustling and humming with activity.

For to-day was the last day of term, and all the fellows were packing off to the four corners of the kingdom—many going home, many others going to other fellows' homes.

And good cheer was general. Smiles illuminated all faces, for this was generally considered to be the best holiday of the year. Going home for Christmas was rather a wonderful event.

Sir Montie was particularly pleased because all arrangements had been made for us to spend Christmas with him at Tregellis Castle—his ancestral pile. There were ten of us in the party—all Remove juniors. Handforth & Co., of course, were included. The chums of Study D generally managed to be in anything good that was in the wind. Another distinguished guest would be Archie Glenthorne.

Time was already getting short, for we had to start comparatively early in order to reach Tregellis Castle. The journey was a long one, and we had already decided upon our train, and final arrangements had been made at the other end.

Handforth & Co. were busy in Study D.

They had packed their boxes, and were now stowing away a few odds and ends in their suit-cases—which contained all the necessary articles for immediate use.

They had just finished the task when the study door opened, and a small young gentleman entered with a brisk stride. His face was cheerful, his manner was breezy, and he carried a small suitcase, and was wearing an overcoat and gloves.

"Ready?" he inquired briskly.

"Eh?" said Handforth. "Ready for what? The best thing you can do, my son, is to pack off at once. I don't want to be bothered with you. We're not going by the same train, anyhow."

"I thought we were," said Willy Handforth calmly.

"Of course I always knew that your brains were limited, but I didn't think you were quite such a young ass as this," said his brother. "You know jolly well that we go in another direction altogether. We're going to Cornwall with Nipper and Archie and Tregellis-West."

"Exactly," agreed Willy.

Handforth stared.

"What do you mean—exactly?" he demanded.

"I mean that I'm taking the same direction."

"Don't be a young fathead!" said Handforth tartly. "What's the good of going to Cornwall if you want to get to London?"

"Not much good, I'll admit," replied the Third Former. "Only a born lunatic would travel to London via Cornwall. But what's all the jaw about? I'm not going to London."

"Not going to London!"

"Of course not!" said Wally.

"Do you mean to tell me that you're coming with us?" demanded Handforth, with a deep frown. "I want to enjoy myself at Tregellis Castle. I don't want you hanging on my heels all the time. It's bad enough to have a young brother at school, but it's absolute agony to have him during the holidays."

Wally grinned.

"Well, we won't press the point," he said smoothly. "The question is, are you ready? Because, if you don't buck up, we shall miss the train. I never knew such a chap for messing about and wasting time!"

"Why, you cheeky young sweep!" roared Handforth. "I didn't know anything about this! Tregellis-West didn't tell me that he'd invited you. I wouldn't have agreed to go if I'd known."

"It's right, you chaps," said Willy, winking at Church and McClure. "You know him, of course. Just a little exhibition of brotherly love. He doesn't mean it—it's only his usual habit!"

"Babble!" roared Handforth.

"Of course," grinned Willy calmly. "You mentioned Tregellis-West just now. He didn't tell you anything about it because he didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

"That I'm going to his place for the holidays," said Willy. "It was only a trifle—it wasn't worth mentioning. No need to bother a fellow over little details like that."

Handforth stared.

"Do you mean to tell me that you've got the nerve to imagine that you'll come to Tregellis Castle?" he asked, his brow growing black. "Why, you cheeky young bounder! You haven't even been invited! And you come sailing in here as though it was all fixed up!"

"Well, it is fixed up, in a way of speaking," said Willy. "I'm your brother, and it stands to reason that Montie will be only too glad to have me in the party. I shall be able to keep you in order a bit."

Handforth was at a loss for words. His minor was renowned for his cool, calm cheek. But this was rather too much. The leader of Study D breathed very hard.

"I'll give you just ten seconds to clear out!" he exclaimed thickly. "By George! If this isn't enough to make a chap's hair stand on end, what is? You're not coming to Tregellis Castle—that's absolutely flat! Understand?"

"Exactly!"

"What?"

"I understand that you're talking out of your hat!" replied Willy. "It so happens that the matter doesn't rest with you at all. If Montie doesn't want me I won't go. We'll ask him——"

"Oh, no, we won't!" said Handforth. "Montie's a soft, fat-headed, dotty kind of a chump——"

"Begad!"

Unfortunately, Tregellis-West had just entered, and the only words he heard were extremely uncomplimentary to himself. He adjusted his pince-nez, and regarded Handforth blankly.

"Dear old boy, that's rather unkind—it is, really!" he protested.

Handforth turned red.

"I—I didn't mean that exactly!" he said hastily. "I was just telling Willy that you're a soft-hearted, good-tempered chap!"

"Begad!" said Montie. "It didn't sound like that!"

"That's what he meant," grinned Willy. "So you mustn't take any notice, old son. Ted always was a bit of a fathead, you know. By the way, about going to the castle——"

"As a matter of fact, dear old boy, I was comin' to see Handforth about that very question," put in Sir Montie. "It

suddenly struck me that I'd forgotten all about you. Pray accept my apologies, dear fellow. It was inexcusable—it was, really."

"Don't mention it," said Willy.

"Naturally, I'd like you to come—quite delighted!" went on Tregellis-West. "So I just popped along to fix it up. I hope you can come to the castle with us, Willy. Is it all serene?"

"Oh, better than that!" replied Willy. "It's a go, in fact."

"You—you young sweep!" roared Handforth. "I told you that——"

"Never mind what you told me," interrupted Willy. "The thing's wangled, old man. It's settled—squared up! Montie has realised the error of his ways, and has requested me to grace the party with my manly presence. Thanks muchly, Montie. I'm your man!"

"Good!" beamed Sir Montie. "So now we're all satisfied!"

"Especially Handy!" grinned Church. "You can see it on his face!"

Handforth looked rather murderous.

"You—you little tadpole!" he exclaimed, glaring at his grinning minor as Montie departed. "You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself. This means that my holidays are ruined—absolutely messed up!"

"How sad!" said Willy, sobbing.

"You—you——"

Handforth simply couldn't think of adequate words. At least, he couldn't on the spur of the moment. He thought of scores two minutes later, but it was too late then, because Willy had gone.

A few minutes later Reginald Pitt and De Valerie and I came bustling round to give Handforth & Co. a jog. It was time we were starting.

Archie Glenthorne was already waiting on the Ancient House steps. The genial ass of the Remove was well wrapped up, cheerful as ever, and his sunny face was beaming with smiles.

"What ho, what ho! So here we all are—what?" he exclaimed breezily. "I mean to say, here I all am, as it were. In other words, what about it, laddies? Is this where we trickle forth to the ancestral home?"

"It is!" grinned Tommy Watson. "And we shall have to do something more than trickle or we shall never catch the train."

"But, my dear old carrot, you surely don't mean to suggest that we've got to rush forth with considerable lumps of energy?" asked Archie in dismay. "Dash it all, that's somewhat thick, if you grasp my trend. Rather calculated to exhaust the old tissues. It's frightful work, whizzing after trains."

"Don't worry," Archie—we'll do it comfortably," I put in. "We've got nearly twenty minutes. All here? Good! Then we might as well be making a move at once."

"Rather, dear old boy," said somebody.

There were eleven of us now, and we set off across the Triangle, shouting cheery good-byes to other fellows who were in sight. We were off to Tregellis Castle, to enjoy the hospitality of Sir Montie.

But we had hardly reached the gate when a telegraph boy arrived, and he jumped off his bicycle. He caught sight of Sir Montie at once, and produced an orange-coloured envelope.

"Telegram for you, Master Tregellis-West," he said, handing it over.

Sir Montie took it, looking anxious.

"Dear old boys, I hope it's nothin' serious!" he exclaimed. "Begad! It'll be truly shockin' if somethin' has gone wrong. I hate telegrams—I do really. They always make me feel so frightfully nervous!"

"That's all right, Montie—open it and read what's inside it!" I chuckled. "I expect Lady Helen has made some new arrangements about meeting us at the other end, or something like that."

Sir Montie tore open the envelope, pulled out the flimsy sheet and gazed at it rather anxiously. We all gathered

round, watching him. And Sir Montie's face changed colour.

He went red, and then pale. Finally, he dropped his arm limply, and stared round in a dazed, bewildered kind of way, and with acute consternation. He looked as though he had received a blow.

"What is it?" I asked quickly.

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie faintly. "Begad! It's—it's all up, dear fellows!"

"All up?"

"We can't go!" said Tregellis-West feebly.

"What!" roared ten lusty throats, including my own.

"We—we can't go to Tregellis Castle!" groaned Sir Montie. "This wire's from my aunt—and she says that scarlet fever has broken out at the castle, and it's impossible for us to go there for Christmas!"

We stared at Tregellis-West in blank dismay.

CHAPTER 10.
Somerton to the Rescue!

HANDFORTH was the first to find his voice.

"What rot!" he exclaimed, with his usual abruptness. "There must be some bloomer about that. You must have read the telegram wrong, Montie."

"Dear old boy, I wish I had!" said Tregellis-West sadly.

"Let's have a look at it."

Three or four fellows grabbed at the telegram, and they read the words upon it eagerly and with much concern. The wire was rather a long one and it ran in the following way:

"Tregellis-West, St. Frank's, Bellton, Sussex.—Visit here quite impossible. Scarlet fever case among servants. Castle quarantined. It is out of question for your party to come. We cannot leave. More sorry than I can tell you. Am writing fully.—AUNT HELEN."

"Yes, there's no mistake about it!" I exclaimed. "There's no two ways of reading that message. We're properly done brown this time. But what a good thing the telegram arrived before we started."

"But—but it's impossible!" said Tommy Watson. "We've got everything packed, and it's too late to make any other arrangements!"

"Dear old boys, I'm too thunderstruck to think!" groaned Sir Montie.

"Oh, it must be a joke! It can't be true!" said Handforth gruffly. "I never heard of such a thing. On the last day of term—just when we're on the point of setting off!"

"Don't be silly, Handy!" said Church. "Nobody but a lunatic would send a telegram of that sort if it wasn't true. It's rotten for everybody—including Montie's aunt. Anyhow, we're stranded!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "It appears, laddies, that the bally old skies have fallen, what? I mean to say, the situation appears to be dashed poisonous, and all that kind of rot! In other words, we're in the jolly cart!"

"Great pancakes!" said Fatty Little dolefully. "And I'd been counting on Christmas-pudding and mince-pies, and turkey, and jam-puffs, and custards and doughnuts, and cream-buns, and bananas and apples——"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Pitt. "Dry up, Fatty! There's no need to string out a list like that. The thing's bad enough without you making it worse. The great question is—what's to be done?"

But nobody had an answer.

And while we were standing there in a disconsolate, glum-looking group the Duke of Somerton rolled up. For once in a while he was looking almost tidy. He had a clean collar on, and he was well wrapped up in a thick overcoat and fur gloves.

"I thought you chaps were going to catch the 11.5?" he asked curiously.

"We were—but it's off now," said De Valerie.

"I should think it is—eleven o'clock struck three minutes ago," said Somerton. "And what's the matter with you all? You look about as happy as though you'd been condemned to remain at school for Christmas."

"You've guessed it!" said Pitt sadly.

"What?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "At least, nearly. I mean to say, the whole thing is rather too much for the old bean to tackle in one fell swoop, as it were. The fact is, laddie, we've received it in large chunks where the jolly old bottle got the cork!"

"Eh?" gasped Somerton.

"To be exact—in the neck!" explained Archie. "It so happens, Somerton, that someone unknown has filled himself up with red fever, and our visit to Tregellis Castle is absolutely off the menu. There's nothing doing!"

The Duke of Somerton listened with much concern as we explained.

"I say, that's fearfully rough!" he said sympathetically. "Just on the last day, too—when it's too late to make any fresh arrangements. I'm awfully sorry."

All the juniors were silent and forlorn.

And then the duke's face cleared. The concerned expression vanished, and he broke into a pleased, cheerful smile. After that he chuckled, and looked round with twinkling eyes.

"Funny, isn't it?" said Handforth gruffly.

"Not exactly funny, but I think I can suggest a way out of the difficulty," said Somerton calmly. "In fact, it's quite simple."

"What do you mean?" asked Reginald Pitt.

"You've simply got to come with me—that's all!" smiled the schoolboy duke.

We all stared.

"Come with you?" I repeated.

"Exactly!"

"Where to?"

"The old ancestral pile!" grinned Somerton.

"What!" yelled Pitt. "You're joking, Sommy!"

"It's quite simple!" said Somerton. "I'm just off to Somerton Abbey, and you chaps have been left in the cart. So why not come with me to Somerton Abbey?"

"You—you really mean it?" yelled Handforth.

"Of course!"

All the gloom vanished in a flash. The faces of the disappointed juniors were flushed with sudden excitement and joy. They gathered round the Duke of Somerton in a shouting throng.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Sommy!"

"He's just saved us in time!"

"Chair him, you chaps—he deserves it!"

"Steady on—steady on!" gasped Somerton as he backed away. "Chuck it, you asses! There's no need to get so excited."

The juniors managed to hold themselves in check.

"Look here, you fellows, don't get too excited!" I said quietly. "Somerton's a brick—one of the very best——"

"Hear, hear!"

"At the same time, we've got to consider this thing carefully," I went on. "In the goodness of his heart, Sommy has come to the rescue——"

"Stepped into the old breach, what?" said Archie chattily.

"If you like to put it that way, yes!" I agreed. "But we all know what a careless chap Somerton is. Happy-go-lucky, thoughtless, and with a heart of gold. He hasn't considered what this invitation will mean."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Handforth gruffly. "Are you trying to make out that we shouldn't accept? You silly fathead——"

"Wait!" I interrupted. "I'm not trying to make out anything of the sort. But there'll be twelve of us in the party, including Sommy himself—

and what will his people say when we pile in unexpectedly?"

The schoolboy duke grinned.

"Well, of course, there'll be a bit of a mess-up," he said calmly. "At the same time, you needn't let that worry you. There's going to be a fairly big party at the Abbey, I believe, but we shan't be a quarter full. If I invited fifty chaps, there'd be heaps of accommodation."

"So that, in a way of speaking, is that—what?" beamed Archie.

"Certainly," I said. "But it might be a bit too thick to——"

"To pile in upon my people, eh?" chuckled Somerton. "Not a bit of it, Nipper. In fact, I won't even send a wire. We'll all go there, and take pot luck. It'll be rather interesting to see my mater's expression when we invade the grim old walls of the ancestral home."

"Good old Sommy!"

"So you're squashed, Nipper!" said Handforth with a sniff.

"Not at all," I smiled. "There's no squashing about it. But these things ought to be considered. I thought perhaps Somerton had overlooked the point. If he takes full responsibility, there's an end of it. You're a good 'un, Sommy, and we're all grateful."

"Hear, hear!" grinned the juniors.

Somerton looked as pleased as anybody. As a matter of fact, he had been expecting a rather quiet Christmas. He would have been the only boy at Somerton Abbey—and had anticipated a lack of congenial companionship.

If he had had his own way, he would have definitely decided to accept Sir Montie's offer—for Tregellis-West, a week or two earlier, had included Somerton in his list of guests.

But the duke was required at his own home—very particularly. His uncle and guardian, Lord Norbery, had emphatically insisted upon it.

So Somerton was rather pleased that some unfortunate individual had contracted scarlet fever at Tregellis Castle. For he had a party of juniors all ready made, so to speak. And it filled him with delight to know that he would carry them all off to Somerton Abbey.

As for the rest of the fellows, they were overjoyed.

They were in the highest possible spirits as they boarded the train for the new destination. Somerton Abbey was situated in Somersetshire—apparently the ancient title had originally been derived from the county.

And this, of course, was distinctly better from our point of view, for we had a very much shorter journey to make. It was practically an all-day affair to get to Montie's place. We should not have arrived until late evening.

But Somerton was comparatively a small trip, going by way of Salisbury. We should arrive hours sooner. Another important point was that the fares were only about half.

And as all the fellows had been provided with money by their people for this purpose, they were much in pocket. So, from every point of view, the new arrangement was far better.

We thoroughly enjoyed the journey across the snow-covered country. It was real winter time, and the skies were leaden during the whole trip. And when we finally arrived at the little town of Somerton we found the snow falling in earnest.

The abbey was situated several miles from the town itself, but our young host was by no means worried about the question of getting us all home. As he explained, his uncle would certainly send a big limousine—and if twelve of us couldn't pile into such a vehicle, it would be a pity.

Sommy was right. The limousine was waiting—to convey him in solitary state. The car was so loaded up that the chauffeur nearly had a fit.

There were about eight of us inside, and the rest crammed in with the driver. The car had a big list to port—but Pitt suggested that this was

caused by Fatty Little, who sat on that side.

Our luggage was left behind, of course—there wasn't even room for a handbag. Not that it mattered—the car would come back for the luggage.

We were greatly interested in the new scenes. We passed through the little town—which has about two thousand inhabitants—and then got out into the open country. In the dim ages of the past, Somerton was the residence of the historic Saxon kings. Indeed the schoolboy duke's ancestors were themselves descended from these old Saxon monarchs.

Splendid as Tregellis Castle was, it could hardly bear comparison with the magnificent ducal residence we soon reached.

The abbey was an enormous place—a great, turreted castle with surrounding parks and estates and a permanent staff numbering hundreds.

We could easily understand why Sommy had been so unconcerned. Our tiny party of twelve was a mere nothing, arriving at such a great mansion. There were large numbers of guests there already.

For Sommy's mother, the duchess, was entertaining on quite a large scale for the Christmas holidays. Her brother, Lord Norbery, was the host for the occasion—the young duke himself being more or less of a nonentity in the scheme of things.

I was tremendously pleased at the turn of events, because the guv'nor had been invited to the abbey. He was there already, in fact, and I grinned as we all piled out upon the wide terrace which fronted the magnificent building. I could easily picture Nelson Lee's astonishment.

"Well, here we are, all merry and bright!" said Somerton cheerfully. "How do you feel, my sons?"

"Hungry!" said Fatty Little promptly.

"Of course, you would feel hungry!" grinned Handforth. "But, as it happens, I rather fancy we're all in the same boat this time. I say, Sommy, I hope your mater won't cut up rusty."

"She'll welcome you all with open arms!" replied the duke.

And he was right. The Duchess of Somerton proved to be a homely, kindly soul of about forty—surprisingly young looking and handsome.

Lord Norbery, Sommy's uncle and guardian, was one of the nicest men I have met. He was big and bluff, more like a country farmer than anything else. He was quite delighted to welcome us all, and seemed as pleased as a schoolboy. He chuckled and slapped our backs, and called Somerton a young rascal and a sly young dog, and a few similar things.

As for causing any muddle, the very idea was absurd. With such a great staff of servants, the arrival of an unexpected hundred would not have upset things very greatly.

It was simply a matter of giving a few orders, and affairs worked as though on oiled wheels. In next to no time we were escorted up to our bed-rooms in the east wing. And we had hardly finished washing and brushing ourselves up when all our baggage arrived.

"Well, I hope you chaps will enjoy yourselves here," said the duke genially. "You can bet that the mater and my uncle will do their best to give you all a merry and happy Christmas!"

"Rather!" exclaimed the juniors. "It's too gorgeous for words!"

"We're going to have the time of our lives!"

"Sommy's one of the best!"

"Well, absolutely," said Archie, nodding. "I mean to say, that, as it were, is somewhat established. A priceless ripper, if you know what I mean. A gilt-edged cove of the absolute top-notch order. To put it in a single word, and to be absolutely precisely exact, he's one of the absolute ones!"

And, laughing and cheerful, we all crowded down the great staircase. We could picture ourselves enjoying a really jolly Christmas.

Little did we know of the startling turn events would soon take!

CHAPTER 11.
The Legend of the Somertons!

NELSON LEE shook his head gravely.

"Well, Nipper, I hardly know what to say!" he declared. "It is, of course, perfectly outrageous for all you boys to come invading the place like a horde of cannibal islanders."

"It was Somerton's idea, sir," I protested.

"Quite so, and so you all took advantage of his youthful exuberance," said the guv'nor sternly. "But what of our hostess? She was not considered—she was not consulted. Somerton has no authority—and that practically stamps the whole crowd of you as uninvited guests. A most disastrous state of affairs!"

But I could see the twinkle in Nelson Lee's eyes, and the next moment he allowed himself to break into a quiet chuckle. He patted me on the back in his own pally kind of way.

"All right, Nipper, I'm exceedingly pleased to see you all here," he said confidentially, "and you can be quite assured that the duchess is delighted, too. You'll be able to enjoy yourselves to the fullest extent, I imagine. At all events, there will be plenty of life and good cheer."

"Well, that's all right, sir," I said comfortably.

Dinner was over—a really superb meal which we had enjoyed with the full gusto of youthful appetites. There were no formalities at present, as the more distinguished guests would not arrive till the morrow, or the day after.

Most of the juniors had distributed themselves in the various reception-rooms. They were writing letters home, explaining the change of plan—for it was quite necessary that their people should know.

And Nelson Lee and I were lolling back on one of the luxurious couches in the great lounge hall. An enormous log-fire burned, crackling and blazing. On the opposite side, Archie Glenthorne lay at his ease, dozing peacefully. But quite suddenly he started up.

"Great gadzooks, and all that sort of rot!" he ejaculated blankly.

"What's the matter, Archie?" I grinned.

"The matter!" panted Archie. "I mean to say, what? Hardly the word, old onion—hardly the correct expresh! The fact is, I've just thought of something that I'd forgotten! I mean a perfectly ghastly idea has come sliding briskly across the plates of memory. What I mean is—Phipps!"

"Phipps!"

"Phipps!" said Archie firmly. "The thing's somewhat ghastly!"

"But I don't understand——"

"Scarlet fever and what-not!" said Archie in a hollow voice. "I mean to say Phipps is a part of my life. I can't exist without him. A brainy cove, who slings out the old clobber and all that sort of rot. What, I mean to ask, shall I do?"

"What will you do without Phipps?"

"Absolutely!"

"How should I know?" I asked. "He's coming on, isn't he?"

"Absolutely not!" replied Archie faintly. "Possibly you're dense, old lad, or I may be somewhat the reverse of lucid. But I'm just trying to spill the information that Phipps has gone to Tregellis Castle!"

"What!" I shouted, grinning.

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "Hardly the occasion for the old smile, what? It's a tragedy, old son—a frightful posish for any chappie to be in. You see, I bunged Phipps off

to Montie's place by the first train this morning! Absolutely pushed the old beggar on the trip with all the odds and ends and all the what-nots!"

"Collars, shirts, neckties, and other things, I suppose?"

"Absolutely the entire menagerie!" agreed Archie. "And the poor cove has gone to this place where scarlet fever is running loose about the countryside. Even if I sent him a wire, he can't come. The poor old cove will be absolutely contaminated!"

"I hardly think it will be as serious as that, Glenthorne," smiled Nelson Lee. "When Phipps arrives at Tregellis Castle there will be no danger of his contracting scarlet fever—and, naturally, he will be informed of the change of plan. Tregellis-West wired to his aunt before leaving Bellton, and so Phipps will be immediately sent on here."

Archie lay back, breathing with sighs of relief.

"Now that, as it were, is what a chappie might call tidings of good cheer," he murmured. "Large quantities of gratitude, old darling—— I—I should say, thanks in large lumps, Mr. Lee. You've set the old mind at rest, and the heart department is now going at the normal two hundred and fifty thumps! I breathe again—I live! Phipps has not vanished over the horizon!"

And Archie, much relieved, calmly went to sleep.

Nelson Lee was about to speak when Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson strolled up. They took their seats on the lounge beside us, and I noticed that both of them were looking rather thoughtful and serious.

"A penny for them!" I said after a few moments.

"Eh?" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "Oh, my thoughts! Nothing, Nipper, at least, nothing much."

"Out with it!" I demanded firmly.

"Well, the fact is, some of the chaps have heard a few things," said Tommy, in an uneasy kind of way.

"Heard a few things?"

"Yes," said Watson. "I think Pitt was talking to a footman, or something. Anyhow, it seems that there's some talk going on about a ghost!"

Nelson Lee sat forward quickly.

"What have you heard about a ghost?" he asked, frowning.

"Nothing much, sir," replied Tommy. "I questioned one of the footmen, but he didn't seem to like it. I thought he was rather uncomfortable, so I dropped the subject. Lots of the servants seem uneasy."

Nelson Lee was silent for a moment or two, and then bent forward.

"Look here, my boy, I was hoping that none of this would get to your ears," he said quietly. "And I must take this opportunity of warning you not to pay any regard to the ridiculous gossip which finds its origin in the servants' hall. It is very unfortunate that the servants should be so foolish."

"I don't quite understand, guv'nor," I said.

"There is really nothing in the affair," replied Nelson Lee. "This is a very old building—one of the most ancient ducal castles in England. And no doubt you have all heard of the famous Somerton ghost story?"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "Ghost story, sir?"

"Yes," said Nelson Lee. "There have been magazine articles written about the famous Somerton locked room. It is a tale which has been told for hundreds of years. And, being Christmas-time, it is popularly supposed to be the correct period for ghostly visitations."

"But is there a real ghost at Somerton Abbey, sir?" asked Watson uneasily.

"Well, I don't know whether there is such a thing as a real ghost," replied Nelson Lee, smiling. "Can a ghost be described as real? There is certainly a celebrated phantom which is popularly supposed to walk the upper corridors of

the north wing of the abbey. But Lord Norbery informs me that he has never seen the ghost personally, and knows nobody who has. At different times chambermaids and nervous footmen and pageboys have stated, with bated breath, that they have met the apparition. Some have sworn that they saw the ghost as plainly as they see a human being. But the family set this down as sheer imagination."

"It can't be anything else, sir," I said.

"No, I don't suppose it can," agreed Nelson Lee. "For some years there have been no such alarms. But, strangely enough, this Christmas the scare has broken out afresh. Quite a number of the servants have seen the ghost—at least, they think they have. I set it down as sheer gossip and nervous tension. So I don't want you boys to catch the fever."

"There's no danger of that, sir," said Watson.

"I hope not," agreed Nelson Lee. "You see, the whole thing arises from the well-known Somerton tradition. In the north wing there is a mysterious room—a room which is always kept securely locked. Nobody but a holder of the ducal title can enter this locked apartment."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "That sounds frightfully eerie, sir!"

"Well, in a way, it is eerie," said the guv'nor. "I understand that the rule is that the dukes of Somerton shall enter this room for the first and only time in their lives upon their accession to the title. In a case like the present one—where the title is held by a boy—the duke shall not know the secret of this room until his fifteenth birthday. Previous to that age he is too young to withstand the ordeal."

"Is it so dreadful, sir?" I asked interestedly.

"It may not be dreadful at all—nobody knows," replied Nelson Lee. "But the fact remains that nobody on this earth but a Somerton shall enter the sealed apartment. And it is only the duke himself who can pass within the locked doorway. The history of the Somertons shows that more than one duke has hesitated at the ordeal, and has afterwards suffered from serious nervous prostration. Other holders of the title have displayed no effects whatever. I think it is largely a question of courage and nerve—and imagination."

"But what do they see inside the room, sir?" asked Watson.

"My dear lad, that is the mystery which has remained a mystery for centuries," replied the guv'nor. "We shall never know, because we shall never be permitted to go beyond the locked door. You see, it is said that this sealed room contains some terrible secret of the family—a kind of skeleton in the cupboard——"

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie. "A skeleton, sir?"

"I was somewhat unfortunate in my choice of an expression," smiled Lee. "I did not mean the word literally. It is just a term which is commonly used to express a private family secret. And at certain times of the year—particularly at Christmas—a ghost is said to pass out of the sealed room and wander down the corridors."

"That's cheerful!" muttered Watson, glancing over his shoulder.

"But you need not be worried about that," went on Lee. "You boys will have no occasion to visit the north wing—and the ghost never walks elsewhere. But, as I have said, the whole thing is sheer superstition and imagination. It is particularly unfortunate that it should have gained ground just at this time. I was hoping that you boys would not hear anything about it."

"Oh, we're not babies, sir!" I said. "I think you can trust the fellows to laugh at all this kind of nonsense. After all, one expects to hear about ghosts at Christmas-time, particularly in an historical old place of this sort."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, dropping his pince-nez.

"What's the matter?"

"Mr. Lee was sayin' somethin' about the rules of the family a minute or two ago," exclaimed Tregellis-West. "If there is a Duke of Somerton who succeeds to the title as a child, he must enter this sealed room on his fifteenth birthday?"

"That is so," replied Nelson Lee, looking slightly annoyed.

"Well, sir, it's Sommy's fifteenth birthday on the twenty-seventh—the day after Boxing Day!" said Sir Montie. "That's frightfully interestin'—it is really! So he'll go through the fearful ordeal while we are here!"

"Bless my soul!" said the guv'nor impatiently. "You boys know everything! I was hoping that you were unaware of Somerton's birthday, but I can see that it is no use. Yes, the young duke will pass through his trial during these holidays."

"Does he know it, sir?" I asked.

"Of course," replied the guv'nor. "It is because of this private family performance that the boy was instructed to come home alone. But, in the circumstances, his mother could not send you all back. I was having a chat with Lord Norbery just before dinner, and he was quite relieved. He said that he was delighted the other boys were here—since Somerton would not feel his trial so greatly. However, at the appointed time I shall make certain that you are all out skating or otherwise engaged."

"Well, it's something to look forward to, anyhow," I said. "And you can rely on us to lay the ghost if we happen to spot him. But the only ghost we shall see will be in our dreams, I fancy."

Nelson Lee warned me not to talk much about the matter, and I promised. However, all the other juniors knew the facts, and this was not very surprising.

For we soon discovered that the whole abbey was discussing the situation. The very fact that the young duke was to go through his ordeal this Christmas was sufficient reason for any amount of gossip.

It was an event.

Such a thing only took place once in a great number of years, and not one of the present servants had been in the Somerton employ on the previous occasion of the kind. Outwardly sedate and matter-of-fact, the whole staff was actually agog with suppressed excitement and curiosity. And the stories of the ghost having been seen caused a great many of the nervous ones to be on the jump. Many of the maids absolutely refused to go near the north wing, even in the broad light of day.

I tried to get the fellows to talk on other subjects, and succeeded.

Before going to bed we arranged a programme for the morrow. We should go out for a long tramp, have a look at the park, and see if the lake was any good for skating.

There was plenty for us to do, anyhow.

And so, at about half-past ten, we all went up to our bedrooms for the night. It was cold and bitter outside, but within the abbey walls the lights glowed and the fires crackled and burned. All was cheerful and gay.

Of course, we had come down fairly early—that is to say, there were several days before Christmas yet. But this was all the better, as we should be thoroughly settled down before the Yuletide festivities actually commenced.

We were all tired out after the journey and the excitements of the day, and there was not much question of our sleeping soundly.

We had three bed-rooms, all adjoining, in the east wing. There were four of us in each room. The beds proved to be absolute havens of comfort in comparison to those at St. Frank's.

The three juniors with me were Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and Fatty Little. We had bade good-

night to the others, and now stood round the crackling fire in our pyjamas.

"Well, we've got nothing to grumble at," said Watson, yawning. "It was jolly decent of Sommy to come to the rescue as he did, and perfectly ripping of his mother to give us such a welcome. I've got an idea that we're going to spend a ripping Christmas."

"Unless the ghost walks, dear old boy!" smiled Sir Montie.

"Don't talk about the ghost, especially at this time of night!" I exclaimed. "It doesn't do any good, Montie."

"Dear boy, merely a joke," said Tregellis-West.

"D'you think I take any notice of it?" said Fatty Little. "Ghosts don't worry me, I can tell you. I was thinking about some grub. The fact is, I'm getting peckish."

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "But—but you ate about three times as much as anybody else at dinner-time."

"You ass!" snorted Fatty. "That was about two hours ago! By this time I've got another terrific appetite. I suppose it must be the change of air. I'm blessed if I know how I shall get through until the morning."

"I think you'll survive," I said dryly.

"I noticed heaps of good things on one of the sideboards downstairs," said Fatty regretfully. "You know, a kind of cold buffet, where a chap can go and have a snack. I tried to get near, but there was a butler or a footman or somebody dodging about. I didn't like to look greedy!"

"Marvellous!" I said. "You deserve a medal, Fatty. I didn't think you had such self-control!"

"Great pancakes!" sighed Fatty. "You see, I thought I could go back when the coast was clear, but Mr. Lee came and carted us all off to bed. I can tell you, it's a bit rotten!"

"You won't fade to a shadow by the morning," chuckled Watson. "Get to bed, and give grub a rest for a change."

"Sandwiches!" said Fatty Little dreamily. "There were piles of them, all on silver dishes under glass covers! Ham sandwiches—fish sandwiches—and goodness knows what else! There were some ripping looking meat patties and sausage rolls, and every kind of pastry you can think of. And cakes with pink ice on the top, and with coloured fruits on 'em! I can see 'em now—absolutely gleaming under the glass covers! And I was dished out of a snack like that—dragged away just when I was feeling faint!"

We settled Fatty on the spot. Grasping him gently but firmly, we led him towards his bed, and literally hurled him upon it. Rather remarkably, the spring did not break. After that I put the light out, and told Fatty in a firm voice that if he mentioned grub again we should empty the cold water jug over his head.

And then we went to sleep, cosily tucked away down among the sheets and blankets, with the cheery crackle of the fire in our ears, and with a feeling of complete comfort and peace.

It seemed to me that I had only just dropped off when I was aroused into full wakefulness.

I lay in bed, with my eyes open, gazing at the ceiling, with its oaken beams stretching from side to side. The fire had died down to a mere glimmer—a dull red glow which cast strange and mystic shadows upon the ceiling. The very dimness of the fire told me that I had been asleep for some time.

And then, far away in the abbey, a deep-toned clock boomed out the hour. I counted the strokes—nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

Midnight!

It was the hour for ghostly visitations, and this set me wondering why I had awakened. It wasn't usual for me to be aroused over nothing, although a very slight sound is sufficient to awaken me from the land of slumber.

Faintly, mysteriously, a rustle sounded on the other side of the room.

I started, and a curious feeling went up and down my spine. Then I shook myself and called myself a fathead. I sat up, and it was only with difficulty that I prevented a muttered cry leaving my lips.

There, in the deep shadows in the far side of the great room a whitish figure lurked, moving silently and uncannily!

CHAPTER 12.

The Phantom of the North Wing!

FOR a few tense seconds I sat there transfixed.

The mysterious thing looked very ghostly and indistinct in the faint glow from the fireplace. Then a board creaked. The slight sound seemed to break the spell. I knew very well that a ghost of any respectable pedigree was very careful about causing creaks. Ghosts don't do that kind of thing.

A glance at the other beds put me at ease.

"Who's that out there?" I whispered. "I'll bet it's you, Fatty!"

"Eh? I—I—— Great bloaters!"

The ghost turned round and stood looking at me. And now that my eyes had grown accustomed to the dimness, I could clearly distinguish the bulky figure of Fatty Little. He was attired in his pyjamas, with a blanket wrapped round him. This was what had given him such an unusual appearance.

"What the dickens do you think you're doing?" I demanded warmly.

"I—I—I——" Fatty paused.

"What's the idea of getting out of bed?" I inquired. "I suppose you know it's midnight? You woke me up, you fat ass! Get back to bed, and don't roam about the room, looking like the ghost of Mr. Pickwick!"

"I'm hungry!" said Fatty plaintively.

"You greedy glutton!" I snapped. "Well, of all the idiots! Hungry! Midnight, and all you can do is to walk up and down the room with a blanket round you! That won't appease your appetite, will it?"

"It's all right, don't talk so loud!" murmured the fat junior. "I—I'm just going to pop downstairs."

"What?"

"I—I can't sleep, you know," groaned Fatty. "I've got a feeling of horrible emptiness inside me. You can't expect a chap to sleep when he's dying from starvation! I—I've been thinking about that cold buffet. It's still there, you know—all that lovely grub under the glass dishes! It won't take me two minutes to nip down and get a few sandwiches."

"If you go out in those corridors, you'll meet the ghost!" I said, in a deep, hollow voice.

"Frying kippers!" gasped Fatty. "The—the ghost!"

"The phantom of Somerton!" I went on impressively.

"Oh, rot!" exclaimed Fatty, shaking himself. "I hadn't thought of the ghost—but what does it matter, anyhow? A few sandwiches and some cakes and pastries are more important than any giddy apparition! It takes more than a ghost to keep me away from grub!"

"My only hat!" I said. "If there was a goblin round every corner, and a skeleton rattling in every recess, you'd brave the lot! I believe you'd rob a bank to get a doughnut! This gluttony of yours will lead you into evil ways, Fatty! You'll come to a nasty, sticky end!"

"I'll be back in five minutes!" said Fatty.

He rolled to the door, opened it, and was outside before I could even push the bedclothes aside.

"Why should I bother about the overfed dummy?" I asked myself. "If he's so keen on the grub, he'll have it, sooner or later. Better get the blessed thing over and done with."

At the same time, I felt a bit uncertain about Fatty. And while I was thinking about him, he was slipping noiselessly down the dim corridors.

The corridors and staircases were not in complete darkness, although the electric lights were all switched off.

Outside, the night was calm and still, the whole landscape smothered in thick snow. And now the moon was shining from between feathery clouds. There were many big windows on one side of the corridor, and the moonlight streamed in coldly and almost brilliantly.

In the privacy of our bed-room, Fatty had felt very brave and absolutely careless of ghosts. What did he care about spectres while there was a great pile of lovely grub to help himself from?

But, somehow, the lure of that glorious food didn't seem quite so strong now. As Fatty paused there, at the top of the stairs, he thought of the eerie stories which were being told about the family apparition. He half expected to see a shadowy figure emerge out of the blackness. It wouldn't have surprised him greatly if a skeleton or two had walked upstairs.

He was very nearly on the point of going into a minor panic. He shivered, and all his skin felt queer. He half decided to bunk back into the bed-room as fast as his fat legs would carry him.

And then he pulled himself together.

Clearly and vividly a picture arose before him. He saw it as though it actually existed. A superb oaken sideboard, laden with silver dishes, with glass covers. And underneath these covers there was an unlimited supply of grub. Fatty felt a strange and awful emptiness in his centre.

That settled it.

"Ghosts!" he sniffed. "A fat lot I care about ghosts! There aren't such things! Why, if I went back now, Nipper would chip me to death! He'd call me a funk—and he'd be right! I've got to show something."

The lure of the tuck was even greater than the momentary fear which had possessed him. And now that he had fought the battle and won, he laughed at himself for ever having had any fears.

Phantom or no phantom, there was only one thing to be done.

Fatty boldly descended the stairs and hit upon a very excellent method of keeping his mind away from unpleasant thoughts. He concentrated upon ham sandwiches and beef patties and doughnuts.

More by luck than anything else, he located the big lounge hall. For there were so many staircases and corridors that even Somerton himself was liable to get lost. Fatty was a stranger in the building, and it wasn't to be expected that he should know his way about.

It was sheer instinct which directed him towards the food supply. He found it as surely as a homing pigeon discovers its cote. And once there, among all the good things, the very idea of ghosts was ridiculous.

He couldn't resist the temptation to partake of a few sandwiches on the spot. He did so, and felt tremendously stimulated. The empty feeling vanished, and a comforting glow warmed his body.

Then he thought about the fire in the bed-room—low, but a fire, nevertheless. It would be far better to have his midnight snack in comfort. So he proceeded to gather the snack up.

According to the amount of stuff he loaded himself with, one might have been excused if one had thought that Fatty was planning to feed the whole crowd of St. Frank's chaps.

He wasn't. This was just sufficient for himself—to keep body and soul together until the morning. When he left the buffet, he was so loaded that he was obliged to walk slowly. Even then he was in danger of shedding a few fancy cakes.

And now a problem faced him.

It was a problem which had not occurred to him earlier. Instinct might lead him to food, but no amount of instinct would lead him back to bed.

He realised, with a sudden start of dismay, that he was extremely hazy in his knowledge of the geography of the abbey.

There were one or two obvious facts which couldn't be missed. He had to go upstairs, and he had to pass along various corridors, and turn various corners. But for the life of him he couldn't remember which door he had to go into. He had closed the bed-room door—and that was a silly thing, now he came to think of it. How would he be able to get back?

However, he didn't despair.

He went upstairs—that was the first move in the right direction, he told himself. Unfortunately, he was too optimistic. It was a step in the wrong direction. In his ignorance, he had mounted the wrong staircase, and was heading straight for the north wing instead of the east wing. A most unhappy bloomer.

Fortunately for Fatty, he didn't know it. He kidded himself that he was on the right track, and passed along the upper corridors cheerfully and safe in the knowledge that he had the precious booty with him.

A stock of grub in hand was far better than a sideboard full in the far distance. That was Fatty's idea. And he kept a sharp watch on the doors, hoping that he would be able to recognise the one he had passed through some time earlier.

The trouble was that every door looked alike. Some corridors were shorter than other corridors, but they had a particularly nasty habit of going on for ever.

It didn't matter which way he turned there was always another moonlit corridor stretching ahead. He kept turning corners, and he never seemed to reach any definite objective.

Fatty came to an abrupt halt as he found himself at the head of another staircase. This one was much narrower and he was certain he had never seen it before. And now he came to think of it, these corridors looked a bit dusty and neglected.

He realised, with a start, that they weren't carpeted in the same luxurious way. And, although it gave him a fearful jar, he was compelled to admit that he was hopelessly lost.

He had been wandering about for something like twenty-five minutes by now. But it seemed hours to him. And, as he stood there a faint and far-away chime sounded. It was the half-hour.

Twelve-thirty! And the chime was much farther away than it had seemed before. This was quite understandable—but not to Fatty. For he was now situated in the farthest corner of the north wing.

"Oh, my only frying-pan!" muttered Fatty. "I—I don't know the way back! I think Nipper's a rotter. He might have opened the door, so that I could see which way to come!"

He decided, after a moment or two of thought, that he couldn't do better than turn back. His chief idea now was to find the main staircase again. It was hardly possible that he could go wrong a second time.

He wandered on and on, passing from corridor to corridor until his legs ached, and his arms were stiff with cramp. But nothing short of absolute paralysis would make him drop his load.

He had just turned one of the interminable corners when he came to an abrupt halt, frozen to the spot. And as he stood there his breath ceased to come—or so it seemed to him.

Right at the far end of the corridor—a long one with windows—there was a figure. It was so dim and indistinct that it seemed to have no body or form. It was just a filmy, whitish shadow, edging its way along the corridor towards him.

There was not a sound—the Thing came along with absolute stealth.

For the life of him Fatty couldn't

move. He tried to shout, but the muscles of his throat were rigid. He felt that his hair was standing on end. And a kind of cold gust swept over him.

Something seemed to tell him that this whitish apparition was not human. It couldn't be human. It wasn't one of the fellows looking for him—although Fatty tried to convince himself for a moment that it was.

The object came nearer—and came to a silent stop just as it reached one of the windows. The moon came from behind a cloud and cast a full flood of radiance upon the mystic figure.

And then Fatty Little nearly expired.

He had been scared once or twice in his life—but never to the extent that he was scared now. Wild and desperate panic seized him. There the Thing stood—with shadowy clothing wrapped round it, like winding sheets. And as the moon cast its light upon the ghost, Fatty could see that there was no face—only a ghastly skull, with grinning teeth and hollow eye spaces.

And then an arm was raised— a horrible, bony arm, without any real substance. The spell was broken, and Fatty uttered a wild gasping shout. It was not loud, because his vocal chords would not function properly. But it was expressive of his sheer terror.

He turned, pale as a sheet, and fled.

He ran as he had never run before. He absolutely forgot about his precious grub. He shed pastry and cakes as he ran.

Cakes, fancy pastries, sausage-rolls, doughnuts, beef-pies, sandwiches, and all manner of other things were left lying in his wake—a perfect stream of excellent food along the dark and lonely corridors.

And then, almost before he knew it, he came to one of the staircases. It was a big one this time, and even in his panic he knew that he had seen it before. He had a feeling that the ghost was at his very heels—reaching out a bony hand to grasp his shoulder.

CHAPTER 13.

The Mystery of the Sealed Room!

"WAKE up, Tommy—wake up!" I shook Tommy Watson's shoulder gently, and after a moment or two he roused himself from a deep and peaceful slumber. He sat up, blinked at the brilliant light, which I had switched on—and then stared at me.

"Hallo! Wasser matter?" he mumbled drowsily.

"Fatty's gone!" I said. "We've got to find him."

Tommy gathered himself together.

"It's not time to get up yet!" he grumbled. "What's that about Fatty? Gone? Gone where? What's the idea ——"

"The silly chump said he was starving, and went downstairs about twenty minutes ago," I put in. "He dodged out before I could stop him, and by this time he's had enough time to clear out the whole larder! There's only one explanation—he must have got lost."

"Lost!" repeated Tommy, now fully awake.

"Of course—or he'd have been back before this," I said grimly. "He might have expected it—the greedy fathead didn't think of getting back. And now he's probably wandering about in every corridor but the right one. He couldn't mistake our door, because I opened it so that the light should stream out as a guide."

"Then what's the game?" asked Tommy. "What did you wake me up for?"

"Because I'm getting anxious," I said. "We can't have that greedy idiot rolling about the place all night. There's no telling what trouble he'll blunder into. And if Sommy's mater gets to know about it, it'll be rotten. We don't want her to know that one of our chaps was such a glutton that he had to go downstairs in search of grub at midnight."

"But how can we find him?"

"I don't know—but we can try," I replied. "Come on!"

Tommy Watson didn't exactly like it, but he gave way, and we donned our dressing-gowns.

We went out into the corridor, but left our door wide open, so that we should know our way back—although I wasn't afraid that I should get lost. We hurried along until we came to the main staircase.

It didn't take us long to get down and make a search. There was no sign of Fatty. But I came upon a definite clue soon afterwards. We were just passing the staircase which led to the north wing, when I trod on something soft and spongy. Bending down, I found that it was a small cake.

"Hallo!" I murmured. "Look at this! My hat! It seems to me that Fatty must have gone up this staircase. He made a bloomer—and went the wrong way!"

"How do you mean?" asked Watson.

"Why, if he went up this staircase he simply found himself in the north wing instead of the east wing," I replied. "And he could wander about there for hours without any hope of finding the bed-room. Besides, the ghost is supposed to walk in the north wing."

"Shall—shall we call some of the servants?" asked Tommy uneasily.

"Rather not!" I said. "We'll look for Fatty on our own We don't want the whole household to know that the overfed glutton came down at midnight to get some grub!"

A moment later we were mounting the stairs. We soon found ourselves in the wide corridors of the haunted wing, and I must admit that the long, deserted passages looked very eerie in the faint moonlight which streamed in through the long windows.

This section of the great mansion was very different from the other parts we had visited. There was no rich carpet upon the floor—no costly paintings hanging on the walls. Every corridor had a cold, deserted appearance. It was musty and even the atmosphere was different.

"There's no sign of the fathead here," muttered Watson, glancing over his shoulder with a start. "What was that? I—I heard something——"

"So did I—but it was simply the wind rattling one of the windows," I replied. "Hallo! What's that lying on the floor over there?"

"Lying on the floor!" repeated Watson.

I walked forward as I spoke. Just in the moonlight from one of the windows, and in the very centre of the corridor, lay a solitary ham sandwich.

"Well, this shows we're on the right track, anyway," I grinned. "Deduction, my dear Watson! Fatty Little—ham sandwiches! The two go together."

"They seem to have parted company this time," said Tommy. "Well, I'm jiggered! There's another one a yard or two up! Look! The whole giddy floor seems to be strewn with grub."

We were extremely puzzled. For, a moment later, we were following a perfect trail of food along the corridor. After turning a corner, we came upon a big heap of pastry. I stood there, looking at the floor with a frown.

"Well, it's pretty easy to guess what happened," I said. "Fatty lost himself in these long passages, and he must have been suddenly scared over something. He dropped half his load here, and then bunked, shedding the rest as he went along. I can't think of any other solution."

"Yes, but where is he?" asked Watson. "That's the question. Why didn't we see him as we came along?"

"My dear fathead, he might have dodged down any one of these corridors," I replied. "If Lord Norbery gets to hear about him, there'll be ructions. We've got to find Fatty, and smuggle him back—and deal with him privately."

"He deserves to be starved for a fort-

night!" growled Tommy Watson. "That's about the worst sentence I can think of—unless we starved him for a month."

We turned back, and took the first right angle passage, so that we should cover fresh ground. And we had not gone far before we knew beyond any shadow of doubt why Fatty Little had fled.

I took good care to note the corners we turned—for there was a distinct possibility of our getting lost ourselves. It was amazing, the number of corridors there were in this north wing alone. The place was a perfect maze.

An extra wide passage stretched in front of us. The bulk of it lay in pitchy darkness, for there were no windows. At the far end, however, a beam of moonlight lay athwart the floor, coming down from a kind of skylight. And we hesitated before venturing farther.

"Not much good going down here, I'm afraid," I said. "He certainly wouldn't have gone this way, because it's different from the other passages ——"

I broke off abruptly, the words dying in my throat. And, somehow or other, I felt all my muscles becoming rigid, and it seemed that my hair was crackling on my very scalp.

Tommy Watson said nothing, but I knew that he was similarly affected. He just gave one clutch at my arm, and his grip remained fixed. He stood there, absolutely motionless, rooted to the spot.

At the far end of the passage, where the beam of moonlight streamed down, a kind of indistinct figure had appeared. It was like nothing human—a whitish shadowy figure which made absolutely no noise. It seemed to glide over the floor like a mere shadow.

I thought I could detect something which looked like a grinning skull, and there were a pair of bony hands. But it was impossible to see much, for the apparition only remained in the moonbeam for a mere second.

The Thing was coming along the corridor—coming towards us!

It passed out of the moonbeam, and instead of being white and filmy, it now looked black, and almost indistinguishable from the semi-darkness. And Tommy Watson uttered a gasping cry.

"Steady — steady!" I muttered tensely.

If I had not clutched him tightly he would have rushed away. I felt like bolting myself, for the whole experience was horribly uncanny and ghostly. But, by a supreme effort, I kept myself under control.

Then, as though by magic, the corridor in front of us was clear.

But during that last second I had noticed that the figure had passed clean through one of the doors. I'll swear it didn't pause to open the door—and I was so quick in action that I proved this.

I dashed forward, and arrived at the doorway before it could have been closed by any human agency. Not a single sound had broken the stillness except my own movements.

I grabbed at the door-handle and pushed.

The door was locked securely, and it seemed as though it had never been opened for months.

"Well I'm hanged!" I said breathlessly.

For a few seconds I stood there, gazing about me with a feeling of utter bewilderment. I was positive that the ghostly visitation had disappeared through this door. And yet the thing was impossible. After a short while I gathered my wits together and looked down the corridor.

"It's all right, Tommy," I called. "All clear now."

It was some moments before Tommy Watson plucked up enough courage to join me. When he did so I could see,

in the gloom, that he was very pale and shaky.

"It—it was the Somerton ghost!" he whispered huskily.

"It was something, anyhow," I agreed. "But we don't believe in ghosts, Tommy——"

"I do now!" said Watson, grabbing my arm. "You can't get away from it, Nipper—the Thing was there. We both saw it. Haven't you read about these old family ghosts? Most people scoff at such ideas, but I shan't scoff any more! I've seen something I never want to see again!"

"Well, we won't argue," I said. "Before I go I'd like to have a look at this door."

I had brought a small electric torch with me in my dressing-gown pocket, and I flashed this out, and cast the brilliant beam of light upon the door handle. After examining it closely, I gave my attention to the sides, where the door itself met the framework. And I uttered a soft whistle.

"Well, this beats me!" I murmured. "Look here, Tommy! The door's as dusty as the dickens—and up there, against the top, there are a couple of cobwebs. They must be ages old, and they're stretched from the frame to the door. That proves that this door hasn't been opened for months. And the ghost went in here. What do you make of that?"

"It was a real ghost, I tell you," said Watson nervously. "And a real ghost can pass through a brick wall!"

"In that case, why did it take the trouble to come to the doorway?" I asked pointedly. "No, Tommy, you're not going to convince me that the thing we saw was a genuine apparition. Either there's some trickery at work, or else we were deceived by an illusion, or something like that."

Even while I was speaking the words, I realised that they sounded unconvincing. How in the world had this amazing thing happened?

"Let's—let's get away from here!" muttered Watson.

I only examined the door for another moment or so. I was certain that the apparition had vanished through this portal--and I was just as certain that the door had not been opened for many months.

We walked away, with an uncanny feeling that strange and mysterious things were creeping behind us. This feeling, of course, was mere imagination. We had the entire corridor to ourselves.

I think we must have walked rather aimlessly for awhile, for we were very deep in thought. Anyhow, I suddenly realised that unless I kept my eyes about me, we should go wrong.

But at last we came to the big staircase. And we were just about to descend—still wondering what had become of Fatty Little—when we were brought up short. A hollow moan, weird and uncanny, sounded from a dark recess.

"Oh!" panted Tommy. "Did—did you hear that?"

"Yes," I breathed. "And it was very human, I can tell you!"

I strode across to the recess and peered into the blackness. A kind of shapeless form lurked in one corner.

"Who's that?" I demanded sharply.

"Great frying chestnuts!" muttered a shaky voice. "Is—is that you, Nipper? Oh, thank goodness! I—I thought that——"

"Come out of that corner, you fat ass!" I interrupted briskly. "There's nothing to be scared about—I'm not a ghost. We've been looking for you for ages. What the dickens made you get in here?"

Fatty came out, and stood there like a semi-deflated balloon.

"I—I saw it!" he whispered tensely. "The ghost, you know. A horrible thing with teeth about six inches long. An awful monster without any eyes. It had bony hands, and I could hear its joints rattle as it walked. Oh, I shall

never get over this! Nothing but grub will pull me round!"

"You've had a fright, Fatty," I said crisply. "Nothing but a scare would cause you to drop grub!"

Fatty told us, in a feeble voice, how he had met the ghost after losing himself among the interminable corridors. He had collapsed into the recess without knowing that he was within sight of the main staircase.

"This ought to be a lesson to you," I said severely. "We've seen that ghost, too, Fatty."

"I wish I'd never come out of the bed-room," moaned Fatty.

"It's the evil results of burglary," I said. "You don't seem to realise that you've committed a crime. Taking the grub was bad enough, but it practically amounts to an insult to our hostess."

"But I was hungry," said Fatty plaintively.

"Rats! You thought of that buffet, and you couldn't control yourself," I declared tartly. "Well, you've had your reward! We've got to go and collect up all that stuff and hide it away. Then we'll go to bed."

"Hadn't we better waken Mr. Lee, or —or somebody?" asked Watson. "I think we ought to tell them about the ghost——"

"My dear chap, I'm not going to drag the guv'nor out of bed at this hour—or anybody else, either," I interrupted. "I'll admit that the mystery is a bit puzzling. But it will wait until the morning. We'll get back to bed as soon as ever we can. And this time I'll lock the door on the inside, and hide the key! Fatty mustn't escape again!"

Watson and the fat junior didn't like returning up the ghostly corridors. But I insisted. After we had picked up all the food, so that there were no traces, we made our way back to the east wing, and so to our own bed-room. The household knew nothing of the midnight adventure.

Fatty recovered so thoroughly that he demolished all the grub before turning in. He explained that he needed something to bring him back to life. And it was just as well to get rid of the food, because we didn't want any odd sandwiches or cakes to be lying about in the morning.

But after I got back to bed, and while Fatty and Tommy were breathing regularly in sleep, I lay there wondering about the strange apparition.

Had we really seen something, or had our imaginations played us false?

CHAPTER 14.

The Ghost-Hunters!

THE cheerful light of morning made our adventure of the dark hours seem more like a dream than ever before. Indeed, when I first woke up I had an idea that I must have dreamt the whole thing.

A word or two with Tommy Watson, however, convinced me that the affair had really occurred. The sun was shining with the cold radiance of a clear winter's day. Outside, everything was a picture of dazzling whiteness—alluring and wonderfully beautiful.

From our bed-room window we could see right across the great courtyard and the park beyond. And there, nestling down amid numerous trees, lay the mere—a long stretch of water, which was now covered with strong, inviting ice.

I could see that we were going to have a perfectly glorious time, providing the frost held. And there seemed every prospect of this.

At the very first opportunity, after going downstairs, I took Nelson Lee aside. We went out for a bit of a stroll on the snowy terrace, while the guv'nor smoked an early cigarette.

As briefly as possible, I explained what had happened. I didn't go into any exact details as to the real nature

of Fatty Little's expedition downstairs. After all, that was beside the point.

"Are you trying to hoodwink me, Nipper?" asked Lee, after a while.

"Of course not, sir—it really happened."

"You are absolutely sure of this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then the matter is well worth looking into," said Nelson Lee, frowning. "If any of the other boys had told me a similar story I should be inclined to smile indulgently, and allow it to pass. But I know well enough that you are not an imaginative fellow."

"I don't mind telling you, sir, I was a bit scared," I said, with feeling.

"You are quite positive the phantom vanished through that certain doorway?"

"I'll swear to it, guv'nor."

"Would you know the door again?"

"Why, of course; but, in any case, I scratched a tiny cross on the framework," I replied. "I didn't like to trust my memory too much, sir. So I marked the place."

"That was very thoughtful of you, young 'un," said Lee approvingly. "So this ghost is capable of passing through oaken doors—eh? H'm! After breakfast we will have a little investigation."

I was very pleased that the guv'nor had taken me quite seriously. And I was glad, too, that none of the others knew anything about it. It would not improve their peace of mind if they got talking about ghosts and allowed their imaginations to run loose.

After breakfast the juniors collected together in front of the roaring fire in the reception-room which had been set aside for their especial benefit. Nominally, it was known as the Blue Room, but at present it was a kind of common-room for the St. Frank's fellows.

"Heard about the ghost?" asked De Valerie.

I came in just as he was saying it, and I looked at him sharply.

"Ghost?" I repeated.

"Some of the fellows are saying there was a ghost prowling about during the night," put in Pitt. "You ought to know all about it, Nipper, because you saw it. That's what Fatty says, anyhow."

"Confound Fatty!" I said, frowning. "I distinctly told him to keep quiet, and he's let the cat out of the bag! A chap like that needs gagging! Talking doesn't do any good."

"He says that you told him to keep mum until this morning," said McClure. "But there's no truth in it, is there? Handy threatened to shove a whole banana down Fatty's throat if he kept on jawing!"

Since Fatty had spoken, it was quite out of the question for me to deny the affair. And so I gave them a guarded account of it. They all listened with considerable interest and excitement.

And, a bit later, Handforth strolled out upon the terrace with his two chums. The leader of Study D was looking thoughtful and abstracted. He hardly noticed that his younger brother was present also.

"Yes!" he said abruptly. "It's up to me!"

"Eh?" said Church. "What's up to you?"

"An investigation is needed at once," declared Handforth. "In fact, I've made up my mind to find this ghost, and lay it."

"Ass!" growled McClure. "You couldn't lay an egg!"

"This isn't a time for cheap humour!" said Handforth tartly. "There's a ghost prowling about, and it's up to somebody to settle its hash. Where's Nipper? He's got to tell me where this locked room is. The ghost vanished through a solid door—and I want to see it."

"The door, or the ghost?" asked Church.

"Both!" said Handforth.

"I don't suppose you'll get much out of Nipper," remarked Church, shaking his head. "It's ten to one that he

won't show you that room, Handy. And the best thing we can do is to go down to the lake."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "This ghost——"

"You want to be taken to that locked door?" put in Willy, confronting his brother. "That's easy. I can show you the way to it, if you like, Ted. I was thinking about making a little examination on my own."

Handforth regarded him coldly.

"Oh, were you?" he growled. "I'm blessed if I know why you came! You're only a giddy nuisance, dodging about where you're not wanted! Who told you to butt in?"

"Nobody," said Willy calmly. "I was just trying to do you a favour. Of course, if you don't want to know where this ghostly door is, I'll leave it at that. So long! I'm going to find the ghost!"

Willy strolled away, and his elder brother gave a roar.

"Come back, you young idiot!" he shouted. "Who told you to go? I never knew such an obstinate young rotter in all my life! Can't say two words without you getting in a huff!"

Willy paused, and yawned.

"Well, I'll give you another chance," he said generously. "Do you want me to show you that door, or not? Just say the word—you've got ten seconds. I can't waste my time messing about with you!"

Handforth seemed to have great difficulty in swallowing something.

"You—you cheeky young sweep!" he roared. "As soon as you've shown me the way to this locked door, I'll knock the stuffing out of you."

"Good!" said Willy. "It ought to be interesting—although you've got more stuffing than I have. I can do a bit of knocking when it comes to a pinch. My only hat! I've never known anybody like you for arguing! Let's get at something, instead of standing here."

Handforth realised that if he obeyed the dictates of his mind, Willy would be in no condition to guide him anywhere. So he swallowed his wrath, and gave his minor a glare that was intended to shrivel him. Willy didn't seem to be shrivelled in the least bit. He bore up wonderfully.

"Now then, lead the way!" growled Handforth.

Willy nodded, and, incidentally, he winked rather elaborately at Church and McClure. They couldn't quite understand the reason for that wink, but they were quite certain that Willy had some little game on foot.

"This way!" said the Third Former briskly. "First of all, we've got to go to the north wing. As soon as we're there we shall easily get to this door. Leave it to me, and I won't disappoint you."

They went indoors, and passed straight upstairs. Handforth remarked that they were in the east wing—but Willy smiled in a superior kind of way, and told his brother to wait.

They went along corridor after corridor. In fact, they seemed to be going on for ever, and Church and McClure had a kind of hazy idea that Willy was leading them round in circles. But Handforth had no suspicions. His thoughts were well ahead, planning how he should collar the ghost.

Suddenly, Willie came to a halt in front of a strong oaken door, and there was a key in the lock. It was at the end of a long, deserted passage, and a great distance from the ordinary, inhabited portions of the abbey.

"Here we are!" said Willy cheerfully. "This door's locked all right. The ghost's inside, I expect. Better go easy!"

Handforth seized the key, turned it, and then stealthily and cautiously opened the door. All was darkness within.

"What did I tell you?" grinned Willy. "If that wasn't a locked door, what was it? It may not be the one

you were looking for, but that's a detail. I think you'll be safer in there, Ted!"

Handforth minor gave a chuckle, and as his brother turned round, filled with sudden suspicions, he received a terrific push in the back which sent him lurching forward into the darkness.

"What the——"

"Trapped!" grinned Willy. "The master detective of the age has fallen into the giddy coils! Sorry, old son, but you rather get on my nerves! An hour's peace is just what I want!"

The door closed with a slam, and the key turned in the lock. Edward Oswald Handforth, to his dismay and consternation, found himself in a large cupboard. There was no window, and the darkness was complete.

"Let me out of here!" he roared wildly.

"Sorry, old son!" came Willy's voice. "Hope you find the ghost! Good luck, and don't overtax yourself! I'm going skating!"

Some confused sounds came out of the cupboard. Handforth was trying to tell his young brother what he thought of him—but he thought so much that he couldn't possibly get all the words out at once. His articulation, therefore, was rather imperfect. He nearly choked himself.

Willy, in the corridor, grinned all over his face.

"Couldn't resist japing the fathead!" he said confidentially, to Church and McClure. "He was asking for it, you know—he always does ask for it. Just give me twenty seconds to get clear, and you can let him out!"

Willy strolled off unconcernedly, whistling shrilly and shockingly out of tune. Church and McClure grinned, and silently approved. But when they opened the cupboard door, they took good care to stand well aside.

Handforth, hot and flustered, gave one look round, and then charged away like a bull in search of Willy.

In the meantime, a more sedate inquiry was on foot. In short, Nelson Lee had taken our host into his confidence, and we were discussing matters. Lord Norbery had listened with great attention. But now his bluff, boisterous manner was gone, and he was looking quiet and thoughtful.

"I was a bit startled, but I saw the thing right enough, sir," I replied. "But I think the best plan will be for us to go to the north wing at once. I can point out exactly where we saw the apparition."

And so we went.

As we turned into that curious, windowless corridor, I noticed that Lord Norbery was looking even more startled than before. I couldn't help feeling a slight chill as I walked along. Even in full daylight this passage was dim and sinister. There was something indescribably eerie about it.

"We were standing just about here," I said, coming to a halt. "The spectre appeared from the other end, and we saw it in full view as it passed under that skylight. Then it came along to the third door, and went clean through it."

Lord Norbery was looking far more startled than before.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "That—that is the sealed room of the Somertons! The room that only the holders of the title can enter! For anybody to have passed in there is impossible! The lock on that door is one of the most intricate in existence, and utterly burglar proof."

"Well, that's the door, sir," I said. "I'll swear to it!"

We approached, and I pointed out the cobwebs, and explained to the guv'nor how impossible it was for the door to have been opened. Even Nelson Lee looked at me dubiously.

"I'm afraid you were mistaken, Nipper," he said, shaking his head. "Nothing human could have passed through——"

He broke off abruptly, and took out a small pocket lens. The next moment

he was examining the door with close, careful attention. And when he looked round, I could see a strange little gleam in his eye.

"Of course, it is not our business to cast doubt upon these things," said Lord Norbery gravely. "For centuries it has been said that a spirit of one of our ancestors has haunted this particular corridor. Is it possible that the boys really saw such a spectre?"

"I hardly like to say anything definite now," replied Nelson Lee. "But I certainly intend to be concealed in this passage to-night—after twelve o'clock. I will watch, and wait for the ghostly visitant to appear."

"And, by gad, I will be with you!" declared his lordship.

Nelson Lee promised to let me join the vigil.

And for the remainder of the day the subject was not even referred to. Of course, some of the juniors talked a bit, but they soon forgot all about it.

And at night, after the whole household had gone to bed, and when Fatty Little and Tommy Watson were asleep, I slipped out and dressed. I had arranged to meet the guv'nor in the lounge hall at midnight.

The big clock was just chiming the hour as I appeared. Nelson Lee and Lord Norbery were already there. They were both dressed.

"Punctual, as usual, Nipper?" said Nelson Lee cheerfully. "Now, please understand there is to be no talking while we are on the watch. We shall probably have to wait some considerable time, but that will not matter."

"I shouldn't be surprised if we waste our time completely," said Lord Norbery.

Ten minutes later we were settled down. We chose two shallow recesses, just at the entrance of the corridor. It was possible for us to squeeze into these and remain completely hidden. Yet, at the same time, we could see right down the corridor, watching for any unusual movement.

It was a strange vigil. We did not speak, and there was very little wind outside. So the great mansion was quiet and still.

An hour passed, I think—it might have been less—when I heard a faint, almost indistinguishable, intake of breath from Lord Norbery, who was close beside me, in the same recess. My own gaze was glued upon that mysterious door. The very associations of the room were sufficient to make a fellow imaginative and fanciful. On two or three occasions I had been prepared to swear that I had seen some ghostly shape emerge out of the blackness.

But I had succeeded in keeping myself in hand.

And now I knew well enough that my former visions had been the result of an excited mind. For there was no question about the thing now. A moment before it had not been there. And yet, as I looked, I could see a dim, indistinct shape. It had come from the mysterious door.

And, silently, it flitted up the passage, and took on a whitish, spectral appearance as it passed under the skylight. Then it was gone.

"Good gad!" muttered Lord Norbery. "Amazing! Astounding! That thing was no human being!"

"I beg to differ, Lord Norbery," said Nelson Lee, in a soft whisper. "Ghosts do not cause boards to creak—even faintly. Didn't you notice two distinct creaks as the apparition went round the corner?"

"But—but I tell you it's impossible!" said his lordship. "That door leads into the famous sealed room, and no human being could pass in or out. Quick! We will go to the door, and make sure!"

We went. The cobwebs and the dust were not disturbed.

"Very interesting—very interesting indeed!" murmured the guv'nor tensely. "We must get back to our concealment! This ghost has come out

—it will return! We will watch, and act then."

I was feeling alert and clear-headed. There was something about the guv'nor's presence which made fear impossible. He inspired me with a confidence which was little short of wonderful.

Fifteen minutes elapsed. Then, in the same mysterious way, the figure appeared. I knew that Nelson Lee was preparing to spring out. He did so, with me close at his heels. And I saw the spectral figure glide like lightning to the door. Nelson Lee arrived only three seconds later. But the thing had gone—and the door was locked and fast!

CHAPTER 15.
Somerton's Ordeal!

NELSON LEE took a deep breath.

"That was quick work!" he exclaimed softly. "I missed him by a mere fraction. "I never imagined he would be so active!"

"My dear Lee, you never had the slightest chance of capturing the phantom!" said Lord Norbery, his voice shaking. "It was the ghost of the Somertons! I don't like it—I don't like any of this business! We'd better not probe too deeply."

"I perceive, Lord Norbery, that you are still of the opinion that we have been gazing upon a shadowy figure from another sphere," said Nelson Lee. "I can assure you that the ghost was flesh and blood."

"Absolutely out of the question!" said our host. "Good gracious me! Don't I keep telling you that no soul on earth but a direct Somerton can enter that apartment. You are mistaken, Mr. Lee——"

And then, while we stood there, an extraordinary thing happened.

From behind the great oaken door we heard a wailing, sobbing cry—a sound which sent an absolute shudder down my spine. It was utterly unexpected and terrible.

Instinctively, we backed away from the door. Nelson Lee had his pocket torch out, and the bright light was flashed upon the ancient doorway. And as we looked, the centre part of the door itself swung out like a panel. A figure came staggering through.

It gave one panting gurgle, and collapsed to the floor, shivering and quivering in every limb. I was so startled that I could only stand there, staring down, my heart in my mouth.

The figure was clothed in a kind of white sheet—a sheet which had been roughly put together into the form of a cloak. And, within the folds of this simple disguise, there was a man.

I could just see his face—a face which was whitened by some kind of chalky substance. It was smeared on in such a way that in a dim light the face would look like a ghastly skull. But in the full radiance of the guv'nor's torch, there was no mistaking the trickery.

"Bless my soul!" gasped our host.

He was startled by the abrupt appearance of this man, and he was also startled by the opening of that sacred door. Nelson Lee was on his knees, and a moment later he pressed his brandy flask to the lips of his "ghost."

"Don't—don't leave me!" panted the man wretchedly. "I—I heard something—inside! Oh, Heaven help me! For ten days I've stood it—for ten days I've lived through purgatory! And I couldn't stand it another minute!"

"Pull yourself together, man!" said Nelson Lee gently. "You're quite safe now—there's nothing to fear."

"I—I'd rather go back to prison than live another moment in that terrible room!" muttered the man, his breath coming and going in gasps. "I heard something, I tell you—something within the sealed inner room."

"Inner room?" repeated Lord Norbery.

"Yes, my lord, there are two—the

outer one is empty," panted the man. "It doesn't matter much about this door—anybody can enter it. It's the inside room that's never opened. The inside room! I heard a sound in there—a sound like rattling bones! Oh, I shall go mad—mad!"

While Nelson Lee was trying to calm the stranger down, Lord Norbery looked at the door. The inside of it formed a kind of hinged panel. In a way, there were two doors in one. There was nothing to be seen beyond except a small, bare apartment. But in the opposite wall there was a vast door of thick, solid oak—a door which was studded with massive nailheads. And there was a lock of enormous size, to judge by the keyhole.

Twenty minutes later we were down in the lounge hall, with the electric lights full on, and with our prisoner seated on one of the lounges. He presented a wretched, forlorn picture.

The white stuff had been rubbed from his face, and we could now see that he was a smallish man of about thirty-five, with rather a refined-looking face. But his eyes were hollow, his cheeks sagged, and he had obviously passed through great hardship and privation. And there was a look in his eyes which clearly told of acute mental strain.

"I don't suppose you'll remember me, my lord," he said, after a while. "My name is Norton; two years ago I was second footman at the abbey here, my lord."

"Norton—Norton!" said our host, rubbing his chin. "Yes, I remember the name, but I cannot seem to recollect—— Good gracious! Why, yes, of course! Now I come to look at you I can see that you are the same man. But you are as thin as a rake, Norton—you've gone to a shadow!"

"It's prison, sir—prison and——"

"Prison!" repeated his lordship sharply. "Yes, yes! I remember distinctly now. You left the abbey to go into the service of Sir Rodney Halstead. And while you were with Sir Rodney you were arrested on a charge of stealing a valuable diamond necklace. I think you were sentenced to ten years' penal servitude."

"Yes, my lord," said Norton slowly. "But it wasn't true—I never took the diamonds! It was all circumstantial evidence!"

"You were convicted!" said his lordship coldly.

"Oh, I know it's no good expecting any mercy, my lord!" said the man, in a bitter voice. "Heaven knows I've been through enough! I escaped from prison a fortnight ago—yes, I got away in a fog! Got away from Dartmoor! Not very many get away from there!"

"I remember reading of the affair," said Nelson Lee. "So you are the convict who gave the Dartmoor warders the slip—eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Norton miserably. "I didn't know what to do, and then it came to me that Somerton wasn't such a great distance away. I walked in the darkness—creeping along the lanes and fields. Well, I got here, sir. And I knew that I should be safe once I got into the house."

"Why did you know you'd be safe?"

"Because, when I was in service here I found out that secret about the locked door, sir. I knew that nobody would go near it—it was as safe as being on a desert island. I managed to get in, and when I got into that room I was all right. I hadn't slept for days, and I was a wreck. I slept for forty-eight hours right off, I believe. When I woke up I was starving with hunger. So I crept downstairs in the night, and got some food. And I found that sheet, too, and put some white stuff on my face—in case I was seen. All I wanted was to stay here until the hue-and-cry was over."

"A very cunning plan," said Nelson Lee.

"But I reckoned without my imagination, sir," said Norton, glancing

round with a wild look in his eyes. "After two or three nights I couldn't properly stand it. I kept thinking about that locked room, and the awful things it's supposed to contain. My nerves were giving way. Then, to-night, I heard a sound—I heard something behind that door! Something seemed to go in my head, sir. I dashed out, and I didn't care what happened to me! I'd rather go back to prison than be locked in that room again, sir!"

The guv'nor was silent for a few minutes.

"I am glad the little mystery has been cleared up," he said at length. "But you quite understand, Norton, that the police will be informed in the morning. In no circumstances can we allow you to go free. It was very foolish of you to come here at all—but I will say no more. I think you have suffered enough."

Norton was placed in a ground floor room at the rear of the east wing. It was a kind of store-room, and the window was barred. And there, locked in, he was left for the night.

As the guv'nor had said, the mystery was cleared up, but I was not feeling particularly satisfied with the result. Somehow, I couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor chap. He had eluded the warders—he had braved the horrors of the sealed room. And now his only reward was to be handed back to his captors. At any ordinary time it would have been sad enough, but now, with Christmas just upon us, it seemed immeasurably more pitiful.

In the morning, in spite of my short night, I was up in good time. I found that the whole abbey was agape with the news—for such a thing could not possibly be kept secret. The convict was to be handed over.

The St. Frank's juniors discussed the matter with animation.

"I call it a rotten swindle!" said Handforth warmly. "Why wasn't I asked to join in the affair? There's going to be a row about this, I can tell you! I've a good mind to tell Mr. Lee what I think about it."

"It's Sommy's birthday to-day, too!" said Pitt. "It's rather unfortunate that this should happen just now. Sommy's got to go through his ordeal, too. Let's hope he comes through it all right."

"You needn't worry about me," said the schoolboy duke quietly. "I know it's a very solemn occasion, and I'm not going to joke about it. But I think my nerves are pretty strong. I'm ready."

"Absolutely!" said Archie, nodding. "But, I mean to say, about that poor blighter in the store cupboard—or wherever he is. It's rather deucedly fearful, what? Or don't you think so?"

"It's rough on him, I'll admit," I said.

"Rough!" repeated Archie. "Dash it all! Somewhat mild, as it were. Personally, I think the thing is most badly poisonous! I mean to say, it may be wrong and wicked, and all that sort of rot, but I admire the chappie. Absolutely! I positively admire him!"

"A convict!" said Church.

"Absolutely twice!" replied Archie stoutly. "A cove who could elude warders and charge a score of miles over ploughed fields, and get into a place like the abbey—well, I mean to say, he's rather a brainy lad!"

"But that doesn't alter him being a criminal."

"A somewhat foul word!" said Archie. "I mean to say—criminal! It gives a chappie a bit of a start, you know, and puts him off his stroke! Absolutely! All the same, I feel sorry for the blighter!"

He strolled off, and passed outside. The chief thought in his mind was to get to the rear of the east wing. An idea had come to Archie.

He located the window of Norton's temporary prison after a little trouble. To his joy, the window overlooked a secluded kind of enclosed yard, and there was very little fear of his movements being seen. His search was

aided by Norton himself—who was looking out of the window as Archie turned up. One glance at the man was enough to melt Archie's soft heart. He looked absolutely forlorn and hopeless.

Norton, after a moment or two, pushed the window up. The bars quite prevented any escape.

"What-ho!" said Archie cheerfully. "Greetings, old onion! That is to say, what about it? It seems to me, laddie, that you're in several kinds of a particularly vile predic.! Bolts and bars, and all that rot! In dungeons deep, and what not! In other words, it seems to me that you're for it!"

"It isn't fair, sir!" said Norton miserably.

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "I mean to say—Christmas-time! The good old period when chappies are supposed to shake the glad fist, and warble large supplies of good will, and hand out chunks of cheeriness! Dashed rotten! I mean, for you! It appears that you're going to be yanked off to choky again."

"Don't, sir!" muttered Norton. "I'm thinking of the wife and kids!"

Archie started.

"What! What! I mean to say, what!" he stammered. "Wife and kids! But, really! You can't mean to tell me, as one chappie to another, that the folks at home are to be without daddie! What a perfectly dashed scheme! Something must be done! In fact, something shall!"

"It's no good, sir—the police'll be here any minute now!" said Norton, in a voice that contained no hope. "And I'm innocent, sir—innocent!" he went on, with a sudden change of tone. "That's what makes it so terribly hard! It was somebody else who took those diamonds."

"I believe you, laddie!" said Archie. "Anyhow, it's Christmas-time, don't you know. Chappies ought to be let out on bail, or something. It's perfectly rotten to be shoved in prison while the old Yule log is crackling somewhat merrily. In other words, old bottle of gum, Archie is about to supply a few choice lumps of assistance."

The genial ass of St. Jim's waved his hand, nodded, and strolled away.

And while this was going on, the youthful Duke of Somerton was going through his ordeal. His uncle and his mother had advised him to wait until later in the day. But he insisted upon getting it over at once. We saw nothing of it—and it is quite impossible for me to set down what Somerton saw behind that iron-studded door. It was a secret which he could never tell—so I can't set down any record of that interesting event.

I can only say that the young duke was looking pale and shaken after he came down. And, incidentally, he was not himself for two or three days. He went about looking thoughtful and grave. But we were very glad that the effects wore off before the holidays were over.

There was one thing he could tell, however. He provided an explanation for Norton's flood of panic while in the outer room. He explaineed that there was a large rat-hole against the skirting in the sealed apartment. So it was fairly obvious that the sound which Norton had heard had been caused by a rat. But to his excited imagination it had sounded like the rattle of ghostly bones. It must be remembered that Norton had been nearly crazed with fear.

And so the mystery part of the whole business was over.

But Archie Glenthorne hadn't finished yet!

CHAPTER 16.

Peace and Goodwill!

"ABSOLUTELY!" said Archie mysteriously.

"Absolutely what?" asked Reginald Pitt.

"The fact is, there's something on!" went on Archie. "Gather round, laddies—lend me about a dozen ears, and I'll proceed to chatter! In other words, a perfectly priceless scheme has surged into the old bean!"

We were all grinning at Archie. Breakfast was over, and we had heard that two warders would be arriving very shortly, in order to take Norton away. The sooner this was done the better, for the convict's presence cast rather a gloom over the Christmas house party.

The warders had been in Somerton itself—scouring the little town for any information concerning the missing man.

"Well, out with it, Archie!" said Handforth firmly. "I expect it's a lot of rot, anyhow!"

"A somewhat ghastly insult, but we'll let it pass!" exclaimed Archie. "There's no time for argument, dear old lad. The fact is, what about the poor cove who's languishing behind the iron bars—what?"

"The convict?"

"Absolutely!"

"Well, what about him?"

"I mean to say, it can't be allowed," said Archie. "I've been having a confidential chat with the poor merchant, and his tale of woe is somewhat calculated to make a chappie indulge in a few sobs. It's Christmas-tide, you know—the time when people extend peace and goodwill. That's the idea! The old carol—what? 'Peace and goodwill towards all men!' What about it?"

"If you use plain English we might be able to understand," said Tommy Watson. "What on earth are you trying to get at?"

"Well, I rather think it's up to us to rally round," said Archie.

"Rally round that convict?"

"Absolutely!"

"But, my dear ass, what can we do?" I asked.

"It seems to me that between the whole gang of us we ought to do quite a lot," replied Archie. "I mean to say, the old rescue stuff. I've thought it all out. I don't mind admitting that the old think tank has been doing a large quantity of overtime."

"Are you suggesting that we should rescue Norton?" asked Pitt.

"Precisely and exactly! In other words, absolutely. You see, it's this way. The poor blighter appears to have a quantity of wives and children ——"

"What!"

"To be exact, a wife and a good supply of kids," went on Archie hastily. "Now, this family is expecting the pater home to get busy on carving the old turkey. Just think, laddies! What a frightfully poisonous thing if daddie doesn't turn up! I mean, who's going to do the carving, what?"

"You dotty lunatic——"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Dear old tin of fruit, I know it! From a certain point of view, it's frightfully risky to assist a convict to elude the arms of the law! In fact, we might all be bunged forthwith into the old prison cell! At the same time, what about it? This is a time when ordinary things ought to be shelved, if you grasp the trend. Isn't it worth the risk? Besides this poor cove is innocent—he told me so!"

"Of course he would!" said Handforth.

"But the chappie had tears in his eyes!" said Archie, deadly serious. "I mean to say. I couldn't resist him—absolutely not!"

"Well, of course, I understand what you mean, Archie," I said thoughtfully. "I feel the same way myself, to tell the truth. It's hard lines on the chap to be lugged back to prison."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "You see, he's told me he's innocent. Why not believe it, old dears? Then we

shall be justified, what? You see my meaning? We'll take the chappie's word, and extend the glad fist. But 't wants a bit of wangling. That's where the old bean fails. I want you coves to buzz across with a few schemes!"

"By jingo!" said Pitt. "You're a good chap, Archie! But I really don't see how we can help the convict. He's locked up, and the warders will be coming for him almost at once."

"That, as it were, is the absolute truth," said Archie. "It seems to me, darlings, that about half a dozen of us could waylay the warders—what?"

"Waylay them?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie shrewdly. "Hang about the drive, if you grasp what I mean, and keep the lads engaged in the good old chat for about half an hour. In the meantime, I shall be getting frightfully busy with a few of you others and sundry crowbars. What about it? A few hefty jerks, and the thing could be done. We can supply an overcoat and a few other choice articles, and buzz the poor cove home!"

I looked thoughtful.

"It's all very well, Archie; but you don't seem to realise what it means," I said, shaking my head. "From a legal point of view, the thing's out of the question."

"But don't you know, Christmas-time, and all that?"

"Certainly—but that's no justification," I replied. "So far as we know, this man is guilty of a serious crime, and he hasn't served his full sentence. We should be working against the law if we lifted a finger to help him."

"What-ho!" said Archie. "I mean to say, the law? Is it absolutely ness, to be so dash partic."

"I'm afraid it is," I said. "I'm sorry for the man—and I think we all are. But we should be absolutely wrong if we helped him to get away from justice. You're a good chap, Archie, but it can't be done."

Archie looked very crestfallen.

"You really don't think so?" he asked sadly.

"I'm sure of it."

"Well, of course, that's most frightfully frightful!" said Archie. "I mean to say, all the old hopes are shattered. But I quite realise the point, old dear. Absolutely!"

And Archie Glenthorne walked away, shaking his head. Of course, he didn't actually realise the serious nature of the whole business.

In the goodness of his heart, all he thought about was Norton's dire plight. And Archie wanted the man to have a chance—he wanted him to get away so that he could spend Christmas with his wife and children. Of course, the thing was impossible.

Archie didn't realise this. Norton had been tried by a British judge and jury, and convicted. It was right that he should serve his sentence.

But I didn't know that Archie was so deep.

He went off quite by himself, and pottered about in one of the garages, at the rear of the Abbey. To his satisfaction, he was left alone for a few minutes.

And he jammed his monocle into his eye and gazed with satisfaction at a large crowbar which leaned against the wall.

"What-ho!" murmured Archie. "Absolutely the goods! I mean to say, any chappie is liable to lay a thing like that on a window-sill and forget all about it. Lots of coves are absent-minded!"

Archie carelessly picked up the crowbar, and then strolled away with it, assuming an air of exaggerated carelessness which was rather comical. But there was nobody present to see him.

And, three minutes later, he was in the little secluded yard—where the window of Norton's prison was situated. And Archie strolled along, and arrived opposite the window.

It was closed again, but Norton was within.

"Now, as it were, for the wheeze!" murmured Archie.

He fumbled in his pocket, placing the crowbar on the window-sill so that his hands should be free. And he took out a big notecase and extracted two or three Treasury notes.

Then, very carelessly, he dropped them. They blew about the little yard without any danger of being wafted farther.

"Dash it all!" said Archie blankly. "How frightful!"

He suddenly looked up.

"Hallo! Hallo!" he shouted. "Somebody calling? Right-ho, laddie! I'm coming—absolutely!"

He hurried away, feeling that he had performed his little task very creditably. He even tried to convince himself that he had left the crowbar on the window-sill by accident. Anyhow, Norton—behind the bars—understood.

With gleaming eyes and fast-beating heart, he opened the window, and pulled the crowbar inside. And his gaze was fixed for a moment upon the loose currency notes which were lying upon the ground. Archie was certainly thoughtful.

And while the genial ass of St. Jim's was wandering about the park, Norton made good use of his time. It did not take him long to force the iron bars apart.

He had a chance to escape—and he took it.

And just outside the entrance to the little yard he found an old overcoat and a cap, placed against the wall. Norton could not help believing that Archie was responsible for this gift, too.

Wandering about the park, Archie chuckled with satisfaction as he saw a figure dodging away through the trees.

"I mean to say, it makes a chappie feel pretty decent—what?" he murmured, with a little sigh of satisfaction. "I shall bally well enjoy the holidays fifty thousand times more! Good cheer, and all that sort of stuff!"

He watched the retreating figure with a kindly eye.

"The dear cove is now sliding into the next landscape," he told himself. "That's the idea, old bean! What you've got to do is to whizz home to the family. Christmas by the old fireside—what? So-long, and may my blessing go with you! And don't forget a few toys for the jolly old Christmas tree!"

And Archie, feeling frightfully bucked, walked round to the big terrace in front. He was just in time to see two or three of us coming along with a couple of warders.

We had met the prison officials farther down the drive.

Archie came up full of smiles, and exuding good nature.

"News, laddies!" he exclaimed. "Frightful news, in fact! I believe that the bally convict has buzzed off like one o'clock! Anyway, I just saw a mysterious chappie whizzing across the park."

"What!" I exclaimed suspiciously.

"Absolutely!" replied Archie. "In fact, the stable's empty, don't you know? The old horse has gone, and these poor blighters have gathered at the fountain, so to speak, for absolutely nothing!"

And Archie winked at me in an unmistakable manner.

One of the warders looked round sharply.

"What's that?" he demanded. "Are you talking about the man we're after?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie.

"He's here, isn't he?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Why, we were told——"

"He was here ten minutes ago, but the bird has flown!" smiled Glenthorne. "You see, dear old tin of fruit, I've been rallying round. Christmas-time, you know——"

"Confound it!" shouted the warder. "Is this true?"

"Absolutely!"

"We shall have to look sharp now!" exclaimed the warder, turning to his companion. "It won't take us long to get the fellow if he's out in the open. You silly young rascal! I can understand your motives, but it would have been better if you hadn't interfered."

"I hope you don't catch him!" growled Handforth.

"We shall catch him, never fear!" said the warder. "It'll be all the better for him, too. The fact is, young gentlemen, we came here on purpose to tell Norton that he's as good as a free man. Just one or two formalities, and he'll be able to get home in time for Christmas."

"What?" I yelled.

"It seems to me that your young friend has had his trouble for nothing," grinned the warder. "We've been looking for Norton for over a week—so that we could give him this news. The police have been expecting him to give himself up—they thought he'd have read about it in the newspapers."

"Read about what?" asked Pitt curiously.

"The man is innocent—and it's been established, that's all," said the warder. "The diamonds were stolen by a chambermaid—and she was injured in a motor-cycle accident last week. She blabbed the whole truth, and Norton's a free man."

Archie dropped his monocle.

"Well, that, I mean to say, is dashed good!" he exclaimed. "A free man—what? A foul trick upon me—but that's nothing! I mean to say, we might have been told about this before!"

"Never mind, Archie—all's well that ends well," I said cheerfully. "I'm absolutely delighted about Norton—he looks a decent chap. Poor beggar! What a time he's been through!"

But the knowledge that Norton was to be set free made us all feel good. And later on in the day we learned that he had been captured in the town. And the next morning he was free. Lord Norbery at once offered to help the ex-footman. Anyhow, Norton's Christmas with his family was destined to be a happy and joyous one.

As for our Christmas at Somerton Abbey, all the disquieting mystery was over. And we were left to enjoy the party to the absolute full.

And I think it is hardly necessary to add that we enjoyed a merry and glorious Christmas under the Duke of Somerton's hospitable roof.

But our Yuletide adventures were by no means over. Further excitement, this time in London, came our way before the new term began at St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 17.

A Somewhat Foul Predic!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH grunted.

"Disgraceful!" he exclaimed, glaring. "They've got the nerve to call this an up-to-date railway, and they keep you waiting half an hour at a giddy junction!"

"Well, after all, half an hour isn't so long," said Church. "At some junctions a fellow is kept waiting for a couple of hours. And don't forget that when the train does comes in, it'll be a non-stop right to London."

"That's no excuse," said Handforth. "If I was the managing-director of this line I'd soon make a few alterations."

"I expect you would!" grinned Reginald Pitt. "For instance, the trains would be about five hours late, and the ticket collectors would be trained boxers, so that they could punch the heads of the dissatisfied passengers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Handforth's always got a policy of violence!" went on Pitt with a chuckle.

"If ever he becomes a business man, he'll be a terrific tyrant!"

"I'm not so sure!" I put in. "Handy's got a soft heart."

"Thanks awfully!" sneered Handforth. "I don't want any sarcasm! And what the dickens do you mean by squinting at me through that fat-headed eyeglass?" he added, turning to Archie who stood near by.

"What? What? I mean to say, talking to me, old lad?" inquired Archie Glenthorne mildly. "Dash it all! Rather a priceless thing to say that I was squinting, don't you know."

"You worry me!" said Handforth roughly.

"Absolutely!" replied Archie. "That is, I mean——"

"Oh, take it away!" interrupted Handforth. "It gives me a pain!"

He made a grab at the cord which secured Archie's monocle. It came away completely, although Handforth hadn't expected it. He put the monocle into his pocket, and condescended to grin.

"A chap with perfect eyesight doesn't need a Piccadilly window!" he said. "You won't get that eyeglass again till we're in London, my lad! It's about time somebody taught you a lesson!"

And Handforth strolled away, leaving Archie gazing after him in blank dismay. This was quite a characteristic example of Handy's autocratic methods. Yet he really hoodwinked himself into believing that he was doing Archie a good turn.

"I say, that was a bit high-handed!" protested McClure.

Handforth sniffed.

"Monocles!" he sneered. "They ought to be prohibited by law! They give England a bad name!"

"A bad name?" asked Church, staring.

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth. "Look at the American films we see in our cinemas! If the Yanks put an English character into their pictures they make him a silly looking fop with an eyeglass! In America they seem to think that every Englishman is a giddy Piccadilly Johnnie! And chaps like Archie are the cause of it!"

Handforth was rather indignant, and he stamped up and down the platform—partly to work off his feelings and partly to keep warm.

For it was a cold winter's day and snow lay thickly over the whole countryside. There were twelve of us in the party—twelve St. Frank's juniors—and we were bound for London.

We had had a perfectly glorious Christmas with the youthful Duke of Somerton. And now, with the festive spirit still with us, we were bound for Reginald Pitt's place in London.

Pitt's pater had very decently asked us to spend a few days with him before sorting ourselves out and going to our various homes for the conclusion of the holidays.

We were in the highest possible spirits and looking forward with lively anticipation to our stay with Pitt and his people.

Half an hour's wait on a junction platform was not a very great hardship, and nobody thought of grumbling except Handforth. But, as Handforth was always grumbling, it didn't matter.

Archie hardly knew what to do for a few moments—after the pugnacious leader of Study D had taken his monocle. But at length Archie pulled himself together and squared his shoulders.

"Now that, so to speak, was dashed uncalled for!" he observed stoutly. "I mean to say, when a chappie pinches another chappie's eyeglass it's time that something was done. In large quantities, what? It seems to me that Phipps ought to be here."

"Poor old Archie!" grinned Pitt. "Where are you without the faithful Phipps?"

"Absolutely like the chappie on the

Atlantic liner—that is to say, at sea!" replied Archie. "It begins to surge into the old bean, dear ones, that I was slightly unwise in sending Phipps on ahead with the old bags and packages. I need the blighter—absolutely!"

Archie walked up the platform, determined to recover his monocle at all costs. But before he had gone far there was a rumble and a roar, and the fast train for London pulled up against the platform with a grinding of brakes and a hissing of steam.

"Here we are!" sang out De Valerie. "Plenty of room, you chaps. Jump in! Here's an empty compartment!"

Half a dozen fellows crowded in after Cecil de Valerie. Church and McClure were about to make for the same door when Handforth pulled them up.

"Not likely!" he said. "We don't want to travel with that crowd! Here's another empty compartment—we'll be by ourselves. Don't let Fatty Little in."

"You needn't worry about Fatty," grinned Church. "He's still in the refreshment-room!"

They entered the compartment and sat down. Handforth took a seat near the window and glared out with a fierce, forbidding expression. He had an idea that this would stop anybody else from entering.

But it didn't stop Archie.

Archie was determined to get his eyeglass. He considered it a piece of perfect impudence on Handforth's part to take the thing at all.

"Clear out!" said Handforth as Archie presented himself.

"Absolutely not!" said Archie firmly. "The fact is, old thing, I'm frightfully keen upon getting that eyeglass back. You see, I'm bally well lost without it. So I've just flowed in, what?"

"You can flow out again!"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "I mean to say, dash it all! It puts a chappie off his stroke, don't you know! Not long ago I was feeling considerably braced. I mean I've been thinking of this and that, and it seemed to me that everything in the garden was somewhat lovely. And now, as it were, you proceed to shove the old lid on it!"

"His name ought to have been Brook—he goes on for ever!" groaned Handforth. "Did you ever know such a chap for jawing? I'll give you just three seconds to clear out, Archie!"

"But I mean——"

"We want this compartment to ourselves!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "And I want my monocle to myself!"

"Clear out!" roared Handforth.

"Absolutely! When you've handed over——"

"I'm fed-up with you!"

"I mean to say, the old feelings are somewhat reciprocated!" said Archie mildly. "That is to say, what about it? The old eyeglass, as it were? I think I've explained——"

"I've had enough of this!" snapped Handforth grimly. "Grab him, you chaps!"

"What for?" grinned Church.

"We'll shove him under the seat—he's too noisy!"

"What-ho!" said Archie hastily. "Absolutely not! I mean to say, I positively refuse to allow—— Dash it! Dash it! In fact, kindly take the old digits away, lad!"

But Handforth was determined. Why he should persecute Archie in this way was a bit of a mystery, and probably Handforth himself didn't understand.

Much to Archie's dismay he was grasped, and before he could offer any serious resistance he was gently pushed under the seat of the compartment. And Handforth & Co. spread themselves out in such a way that their legs prevented Archie from getting out.

"Now you can stop there!" said Handforth triumphantly. "And if you

dare to move we'll give you something else!"

A murmur came from beneath the seat, remarking that the whole thing was becoming dashed poisonous. And then Church, who was looking out of the window, gave a bit of a start.

"I say, there are two men coming towards this compartment!" he said hastily.

"Keep 'em out!" snapped Handforth.

"We can't keep 'em out if they mean to come in!" said Church. "Better keep still, Archie. It wouldn't look well if anybody saw you under there. They might think you were trying to travel without a ticket!"

"How absolutely ghastly!" came a mumble from beneath. "The fact is, laddies, I'm feeling dashed rotten! Shabby treatment, and what-not! Rather beyond the limit, if you know what I mean! Don't you think so?"

"Dry up, fathead!" hissed Church.

Archie groaned as he heard the door of the carriage wrenched open.

"Yes, this one'll do, Radmore," said a deep voice. "The train seems to be filled up with these infernal boys! There's more room here than anywhere else, anyhow."

"You can't come in here!" said Handforth aggressively.

"Oh!" retorted one of the men, staring. "Why not?"

"Er—these chaps are lunatics, and I'm just taking 'em to the asylum!" said Handforth, indicating Church and McClure. "They're rather dangerout, too!"

"Fathead!" said McClure indignantly.

The men entered and sat down. Handforth glared at them; he glared at his chums, and then he gave an expressive snort.

"Well, I'm blessed if I'm going to stop here!" he said sourly. "Come on, you chaps—we'll find another compartment. I'm rather particular about whom I travel with."

And Handforth & Co. bustled out and slammed the door. But as they were looking for another compartment, Church suddenly stopped.

"My only hat!" he gasped. "We left Archie under the seat!"

Handforth grinned.

"Yes, I know," he said heartlessly. "Rather rich, eh?"

But Archie didn't think so at all!

CHAPTER 18.
The Unwilling Listener!

"GOOD!" said one of the men in the compartment. "I am glad those boys have gone, Radmore. If the train gets off quickly now, we shall be by ourselves all the way."

"That's fine," said Radmore. "We've got plenty to talk about."

And Archie crouched under the seat, confused and bewildered, and with a dim realisation that a somewhat poisonous trick had been played upon him.

He reviewed the situation. Should he make a dive for it, and get out at once? Or should he wait a bit? It was rather a knotty problem. The whole thing was ghastly and absolutely fearful. For a chap to slither out from beneath a railway carriage seat was a horrible sort of thing. Archie hadn't the nerve to attempt it.

And while he was trying to make up his mind the train started.

"Gadzooks!" he groaned, as he felt the motion. "I mean to say, this is what a lad might call the absolute essence of all that's fearful! Here I am, as it were, absolutely in the old soup! I mean to say, I daren't move, or these blighters will find me!"

Archie could not remember having been in such an unpleasant predicament before. And he lay there, hoping against hope that he would not be discovered. His only chance was to remain in concealment.

Thus, if he were lucky, he would be

able to get to London without these two men knowing anything about him. So he resolved to remain quiet.

The two men were quite convinced that they had the compartment to themselves, and they had settled down, and were smoking comfortably.

"By the way, Radmore, you were telling me something about that man Reynolds!" exclaimed one of the strangers. "Have you fixed him up yet?"

"Of course I have," said Radmore. "A pretty good thing for me, too. Do you know, Gilbey, I shall draw in a clear hundred over that man? I've settled a contract for him that'll take him to some of the best halls in the country. Only a small turn, of course, but he's the right stuff."

"Oh, I agree," said Gilbey. "I met him in the Strand the other day, and he seemed a bit downcast——"

"That was before I fixed him up," said Radmore. "But I haven't told you about that girl yet. Why, man alive, it's the finest snip I've ever come across! If I work the thing properly, I'll make a fortune out of her!"

Archie felt very uncomfortable. In spite of the roar of the train, he could hear every word that was being spoken. This was quite understandable, because the two men were talking loudly to make themselves heard.

It appeared to Archie that the men were somehow connected with the stage. He didn't quite like it. He was compelled to listen to a conversation which was not intended for his ears. At the same time, there was nothing particularly private about it so far.

"A fortune—eh?" exclaimed Gilbey. "You're rather optimistic, old man. There aren't many fortunes to be made by a theatrical agent."

"You don't know this kid!" said Radmore confidently. "She's a youngster—a beginner—and she's got the talent. I don't mind betting you a level fiver that she'll be topping the bills in another three years. Topping them, my lad—at the best halls, too!"

"As clever as that?"

"Clever isn't the word!" said Radmore enthusiastically. "She's simply a kid—a child. And she can sing in the most amazing way, and she gets hold of her audience as only a true artist can. When she's on the stage, you can hear a pin drop. She's a perfect little genius."

"Some of these perfect little geniuses peter out," said Gilbey.

"This kid won't!" replied Radmore, with conviction. "I could have got her an engagement for the pantomime season at ten quid a week—but I didn't. I worked things deliberately, and she's appearing as a fairy in one of the London theatres at a salary of two pounds."

"But what on earth was the idea of that?" inquired the other, in surprise. "What about your commision?"

Radmore chuckled.

"Ah, my boy, you don't understand!" he exclaimed. "If I let her know her true worth, she might rumble things. I know what she can do, and I know what she'll become in the course of a few years. A star—a tip-top star, booking at the highest figure. But I haven't told her! I've made her believe that she's just ordinary, and that she's confoundedly lucky to get an engagement at all."

"But my dear man, she'll soon find out the truth—unless she's a fool."

"You can take it from me she isn't a fool," said Radmore. "She will find out—and probably within a week or two. But I mean to have that contract signed to-morrow—a ten years' contract!"

"But will she sign it?"

"Good heavens, no!" laughed Radmore. "She hasn't got to. Haven't I told you that she's a kid? Her father's got to sign the contract. He's her legal guardian. He's a drunken sort of fellow who doesn't understand the value of his own child. I shall be able to wangle him without any trouble!"

"And make a good thing out of it?"

"I'll make a fortune!" said Radmore comfortably. "It'll be a ten year contract at five quid a week. Think of that my lad! Five quid a week! And at the end of a couple of years she'll be worth fifty quid a week! I'll be booking her as the star turn at the finest halls in five years, and I'll be living on the fat of the land—with a Rolls Royce to take me about!"

"Good luck to you!" said Gilbey. "Of course, it's a bit hard on the kid, but that's all in the game!"

"Oh, I'll treat her well!" said Radmore, with a chuckle. "But she'll be absolutely under my thumb; and in another two or three years she'll be a nice little thing—eh? I can raise her salary a bit, too. She'll get her reward when the contract's ended."

"Yes—perhaps!" said the other. "By that time she'll be past her glory, I should think."

"That's why I'm making the contract for ten years," said Radmore, with oily satisfaction. "You won't find any flies on me, my boy! It's absolutely amazing how you can fool these people. If this man Wickham had any sense he'd know that his girl was worth a mint of money. But he's always drunk—which it good for me!"

"I think you mentioned you had a photograph of the kiddie," said Gilbey. "I'd like to have a look at it."

There was a silence, and Archie judged that the other man was searching through his pockets. The unfortunate junior had been growing hotter and hotter with indignation as he listened to the conversation.

He knew practically nothing about theatrical agents, and still less about contracts. But he had enough sense to realise that there are black sheep in every walk of life.

And Mr. Radmore was very obviously an exceedingly black sheep. For he had plainly stated that he was determined to make a fortune out of some innocent child by getting her father to sign a contract which had been devised for the especial purpose of benefiting the agent.

The girl herself—the young actress who was destined to become a star—would receive nothing but a miserable five pounds a week, even after she became famous. And she would be compelled to fulfil the contract by law.

It seemed to Archie that these two men in the train were about as despicable a pair of rogues as one could meet in a day's march. And the unfortunate part about the whole business was that he didn't know who the girl was, or where she was appearing. In the goodness of his heart, Archie felt that he would like to warn the child of this plot.

And he was just puzzling how he could get to work when something dropped down from above, and slipped half underneath the seat. He gave a gasp, and crouched farther back.

For he had an awful fear that the men would bend down, recover the object, and see him at the same time.

But the thing which had fallen remained there. And after five minutes had elapsed, Archie came to the conclusion that the loss had not been noticed. He turned his head slightly, growing more confident, and was then able to see that the thing was a photograph.

"What-ho!" he murmured. "It's the girl's photograph! It seems to me that the first job on the programme is to grab the thing and give it the jolly old once-over!"

He reached out his hand, and cautiously edged the photograph farther and farther under the seat. Then, when he felt that it was safe to do so, he picked it up and held it close to his face.

There was quite sufficient light for him to see the likeness

The picture was that of a charmingly pretty girl—a girl dressed in short

frocks and short white socks. She was about ten years of age, at the most, with a mass of golden curls hanging about her shoulders.

So this was the child they had been talking about. These scoundrels were planning to live in luxury upon her earnings—at least, Radmore was. It was a despicable business.

It seemed a shame to Archie that the law allowed a drunken father to sign a contract which would mean poverty for his daughter—poverty, even when she was at the pinnacle of fame.

After that the men got talking about other subjects. It was clear enough that Radmore thought that he had put the photograph back in his pocket. It must have slipped down unnoticed, and Archie was glad.

Radmore and his companion talked about golf, and then entered into a long discussion on racing. This made Archie nearly weep with boredom. He heard nothing but the names of horses and racecourses and jockeys. But, somehow, the time passed. And at last the train drew up with a grinding of brakes. And the two men gathered up their bags, opened the door, and passed out.

CHAPTER 19.

The Pantomime Party!

"ALL here?" I asked briskly. "We don't want any stragglers—— Hallo! Where's Archie?"

"Haven't seen him for ages," said Pitt.

Handforth grinned.

"He was under one of the seats when we started from that junction," he observed with a chuckle. "Of course, he showed himself after a bit, I expect, but he shouldn't be such an ass!"

"Under a seat?" I repeated staring.

Handforth explained, amid much laughter. I could hardly help grinning on my own account.

"It was rather a dirty trick on Archie," I said severely. "But where is he? Why hasn't he appeared?"

We had arrived at the terminus. We were in London—with the noise and bustle of the great station in our ears. And all the St. Frank's crowd, with the exception of Archie Glenthorne, had gathered together in a group.

We looked up and down the wide platform, but we could see no sign of Archie's elegant figure. And so, at last, we set out upon a systematic search. Handforth couldn't remember the compartment, and so we had to look through every one, and after about five minutes we met with success.

Something dark and bulky was tucked away beneath a seat in one of the empty compartments. I put my head into the carriage and looked closer.

"That you, Archie?" I inquired.

"What-ho! What-ho! What-ho!" gasped Archie, popping his head out from beneath the seat. "So there you all are, what? And here am I! Absolutely! Are we there? I mean to say are we here? Kindly extend a few dozen helping hands!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "Hardly the occasion for ribald merriment, what? I mean, you don't seem to realise that I've been having a perfectly foul time! All the same, I'm glad!"

"Because you were pushed under this seat?"

"Absolutely!"

"You liked it?" I grinned.

"Absolutely, twice!"

"Well of course, there's no accounting for tastes!" said Pitt.

"I don't mean to say that I liked the journey — absolutely not, with the addition of knobs!" said Archie. "The journey was ghastly. All the same, I'm glad!"

Archie was hauled out. And before allowing him to step out on the plat-

form we gave him a good brush down—using our caps for this purpose.

Nobody could quite understand what he was glad about, but there was no question regarding his gladness. After being brushed down, he positively beamed. And yet I could detect a certain worried look in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Archie?" I asked curiously.

"She's dashed pretty!" said Archie, in an absent kind of way. "Curls, and so forth—— Gadzooks! I—I mean——"

He paused and blushed furiously.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I—I mean to say!" gasped Archie.

He gulped, and said no more. But I couldn't help being rather surprised. It wasn't like the genial Archie to talk about girls of any kind. And I wondered whom he had been referring to when he mentioned the "dashed pretty" person. As it happened, it wasn't necessary for me to wonder long.

We were just outside the station, and had paused in the big courtyard to decide whether we should go to Pitt's house by bus, or by taxi. Furthermore, we were waiting for Fatty Little, who was paying a visit to the refreshment-room. Unless we dragged him away, he would never leave.

Archie was quite himself again now, and looked just the same as ever. It was Pitt who asked him about a certain ticket—an invitation-card which had arrived while we were at Somerton's place.

Archie dived his hand in his pocket at once, pulled out the ticket, and something fell to the ground. Handforth bent down and picked it up. Then he stared at it. Handforth was not one of those polite fellows who could be trusted to return a thing without looking at it.

"Hallo! What's this?" he demanded.

"Looks like a photograph," said Church.

"By George! She's a pretty looking kid!" said Handforth enthusiastically. "What the dickens was it doing in your pocket, Archie?"

Glenthorne went as red as a beetroot.

"I—I—I—— That is, you—you——"

He paused, realising that he was somewhat incoherent.

"Well?" said Handforth.

"Gadzooks! You fluster me, dear old tulip!" said Archie, breathing hard. "You absolutely put me all of a doo-dah, don't you know. The good old red corpuscles are chasing about like one o'clock!"

"What!"

"I mean to say, the rich blood of the Glenthornes is stirred!" said Archie vaguely. "In other words, I'm dashed hot and bothered! The photograph, what! Oh, rather! Absolutely!"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing!" said Archie hastily. "That is, no! Not exactly, if you grasp my meaning! The fact is, precisely! You see, the—the photograph dropped—— No, not at all! I don't mean that, old fruit. It just slipped out, as it were."

"But where did you get it from?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, I see!" said Archie, becoming more involved. "Where did I get it? The old bean, as it were, is grasping the trend. Of course! Well, what about it? Shall we be staggering?"

"You haven't answered my question yet, you fathead!"

"Question?" said Archie vaguely. "Oh, ah, yes! How ridic.! You want to know, old thing, where the photograph came from? Of course! The fact is, it dropped out of my pocket."

"I know that, you dummy!"

"Then, as it were, why ask?"

"But how did it get into you pocket, you exasperating fathead?"

"Well, that's rather a lot!" said Archie. "I don't mind standing a few gentle terms of friendliness, but when a chappie calls me an exasperating fathead—well, hardly the thing, what?"

Handforth fairly danced.

"If you don't tell me——"

"Dry up, Handy, for goodness' sake!"

interrupted Pitt. "Why the dickens can't you mind your own business? There's no reason why Archie should go into a long, detailed explanation over a kid's photograph. If he doesn't want to tell you, you oughtn't to press him. Don't be so nosey!"

"By George!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "Why, you ass, I'll punch your nose if you talk to me like that! Still, I don't want to inquire into Archie's business if he doesn't want to tell me! But it's the first time I knew he had secrets about girls!"

"Well, dash it all!" gasped Archie, "That's rotten——"

"Peace, children—peace!" broke in Pitt. "Don't argue so much—we shall never move a yard! I want to get home, and my people are expecting us, too. Come on! Here's Fatty Little, for a wonder—and we'd better buzz off before he gets hungry again!"

We managed to bring the discussion to a close—much to Archie's relief. And he was tremendously glad, too, to get the photograph back into his own possession. He stowed it away very carefully.

And so, after crowding on to a bus, we departed for Pitt's home. When we arrived we were accorded a very cheery welcome, and we were all made to feel very much at home.

It was impossible not to be comfortable in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Pitt. Our host was a fine, well-built man, and Mrs. Pitt was a dear, motherly soul, who seemed to take particular delight in making us feel comfortable.

And we were soon sitting down to a solid, substantial tea.

"Well, boys, I'd glad to see you all, and I'm going to give you a treat while you're in London," said Mr. Pitt genially. "I hear you've been enjoying yourselves down at Somerton Abbey."

"Rather, sir," said De Valerie. "We had a ripping Christmas."

"And now you've come up to London for the shows, eh?" smiled Mr. Pitt. "Good! I mean to take you to a pantomime this evening—I've got the seats all booked in readiness."

All the fellows were overjoyed.

"Pardon the old interruption, but I've heard something about a genius, sir," said Archie. "Possibly you can tell me her name, what?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, my boy."

"The fact is, to be absolutely exact, a rather priceless little girl!" said Archie boldly. "You know what I mean—curls, and what-not! Short frocks, and all that kind of rot. A priceless singer, and a genius on the jolly old stage! I thought, perhaps, you could put me on the track, sir."

Mr. Pitt looked thoughtful.

"You want to see this girl's performance, eh?" he said. "Well, I'm sure I don't know who you mean. I'd like you to be a little more definite, Archie. What is her name?"

"Wickham, sir, I believe."

"Wickham!" mused Mr. Pitt. "No, I've never heard of her."

"Then she can't be very famous!" said Handforth. "Blessed if I know what's the matter with Archie to-day! I believe he must have fallen in love."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, we won't discuss the matter," smiled Mr. Pitt. "We shall see plenty of clever young ladies at the pantomimes—and clever comedians, too. I can tell you, my boys, this will be a crowded week."

But even Mr. Pitt didn't dream of the unexpected events which were destined to take place in the immediate future.

CHAPTER 20.
Handforth at the Panto!

"TOPPING!" said Reggie Pitt cheerfully.

We had arrived at the Majestic Theatre, in the heart of the West End,

and we were already in our seats. Mr. Pitt had done the thing properly, and we found ourselves in luxurious, comfortable stalls, ten or twelve rows from the stage. And our host had booked the seats in such a way that we occupied the central portion of two rows—which was better than stretching us all out in a line.

"Ten minutes before the curtain goes up!" said Handforth. "That's good, because I want to pop out and get some ginger-beer. I'm thirsty."

"Good!" said Fatty Little. "I'll come with you."

"No, you won't!" declared Tommy Watson grimly. "Why, you walking barrel, you had three bottles only five minutes ago! And you'd better not go out, Handy—you'll only disturb everybody in the row."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm not going to be hemmed in here."

He proceeded to push his way past the unfortunate people who were seated between Handforth's place and the central gangway. Handforth's method of getting out was quite simple.

He swept along the row, utterly careless of the confusion he caused.

In about ten seconds he had knocked an old gentleman's cigar half down his throat, he had trodden on the feet of two ladies, and he had swept somebody's coat completely away.

And he went on, serenely indifferent to the confusion. He marched up the gangway as though he owned the whole theatre, and nearly knocked one of the programme-girls into somebody's lap. Handforth thought that the single word "Sorry!" was quite sufficient to meet the demands of the occasion.

About five minutes later he was back, refreshed, but just as clumsy as ever. I watched him with rising wrath as he pushed his way along the row.

I could see that the unfortunate people were getting rather irritable. The old gentleman with the cigar saw Handforth coming, and he hastily took his cigar out of his mouth—just in time for Handforth to sweep it away with his coat-tails. The cigar, emitting countless sparks, disappeared into the old gentleman's gaping waistcoat.

"Good gracious me!" gasped the luckless old chap. "I—I—how dare you, sir! I shall complain to the manager! It is positively disgraceful, the way you come pushing past, as though nobody else existed!"

Handforth looked round in surprise.

"Oh, sorry!" he said casually.

He stood watching while the old gentleman rescued the cigar and threw it down. And Handforth didn't seem to realise that he was standing firmly in the middle of another gentleman's bowler.

"Sorry!" stuttered the old gentleman. "And so you ought to be! So you ought to be! A clumsy young jackanapes, sir! That's what you are!"

"Why, what the thunder do you mean?" demanded Handforth wrathfully. "It was your own fault for holding the cigar out like that. I'm not supposed to look after your cigar, am I?"

"Don't be impertinent, boy!"

"Sit down, Handy—sit down!" hissed Church, from along the row.

"I can't sit down here, can I?" roared Handforth, so that the whole house could hear him. "Hallo! What the dickens is this kicking about down here? Great pip! Who shoved a hat under my foot?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Half the audience roared, highly amused.

Handforth picked the hat up, and there was a perfect yell of merriment. The bowler hat was a crumpled-up wreck. And a gentleman in the next row turned round and gazed at it in utter dismay and anger.

"That—that is my hat!" he gasped. "How dare you tread on it, young man!"

"Well, that's the limit!" said Hand-

forth. "If you shove your hat on the floor, how can you expect anything else?"

"What do you say?" demanded the owner of the hat.

"It's no good blaming me, is it?" said Handforth. "Here's your hat—sorry I crumpled it. You'd better hold it in your lap!"

"Nap?" said the other. "Certainly not! This is not the place to indulge in a nap!"

"I said you'd better keep it in your lap!" shouted Handforth. "You can understand plain English, I suppose?"

"How dare you refer to my nose?" snorted the gentleman.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was quite obvious that the man was very deaf, and it was a bit of a puzzle why he had come to the theatre at all—he certainly wouldn't be able to hear much.

By this time Handforth had got to his seat and he sat down with a shock which nearly broke the springs. Church and McClure glared at him with fierce indignation.

"I knew what it would be!" muttered Church angrily. "That ass can't go anywhere without creating a disturbance."

"Yes, do sit quiet, Handy!" begged McClure.

"Why, you thumping idiot, I haven't done anything!" said Handforth warmly. "I can't be responsible for these fidgety people, can I? By George! I've forgotten something!"

"What?" gasped Church, in alarm.

"I haven't got a programme——"

"It's all right, there's one here," said Watson hastily.

"Keep it," said Handforth. "I want one of my own."

And, just as the luckless people in the row had become settled, Handforth came sweeping past again. From the point of view of the bulk of the audience, the whole thing was very amusing. But the victims did not think so.

The old gentleman had got quite enraged.

"This—this is monstrous!" he stormed. "I can't sit comfortably in my seat for a minute without this clumsy young hooligan elbowing past! The thing's unbearable!"

"Hear, hear!" said the other victims.

"I shall call upon the manager to throw him out!" shouted the old gentleman. "Hi! You!" he added, waving to an attendant. "Have this young man turned out at once!"

Handforth turned round and stared.

"Did you call me a hooligan?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir, I did!" shouted the old gentleman.

"By George! I'll—I'll——"

"Now then, sir—now then!" exclaimed somebody at Handforth's elbow. "I must request you to keep quiet."

"Oh, must you?" said Handforth, turning round and staring.

A huge attendant stood before him, looking massive in a brilliant uniform. The man's size rather took Handforth's breath away.

"We can't allow this, young gent," said the attendant severely. "You're creating quite a disturbance. It won't do."

"I'm creating a disturbance!" repeated Handforth faintly. "Why, it was these people here. I can't walk down the row without they kick up a terrific fuss! I can't help people being clumsy, can I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, sir, but I can't argue here," said the attendant. "If you can't go back to your seat quietly, I shall have to ask you to leave the theatre. Better sit down," he added, in a low voice. "I shouldn't like to do anything drastic."

"You'd better try it, that's all!" snorted Handforth. "My hat! All this silly fuss over nothing! Blessed if I can understand why people want to be so unpleasant! Blow you! Go and eat coke!"

He turned his back and surged up the row again. A yell of laughter went up as all the people in the row jumped hastily to their feet, so that Handforth could have a clear passage. He needed it!

But at last he got back to his seat and sat down. I was sitting just in front, and I turned round and glared at Edward Oswald.

"I'm not going to start an argument, but you ought to be skinned!" I whispered severely. "Mr. Pitt takes us out like this, and all you can do is to upset everybody! For goodness' sake, keep still!"

Handforth was about to make some rejoinder when the orchestra opened fire with a perfect blare of music. And Handforth contented himself with an answering glare, and then he buried himself in the programme.

Five minutes later the curtain went up.

CHAPTER 21.

The Falling Scenery!

THE show had started, and we settled down to enjoy ourselves thoroughly. And, glad to relate, Handforth created no further uproar. He was too engrossed in the show to make himself objectionable.

And it certainly was an excellent pantomime.

The comedians were really funny, the music was tuneful, and the songs went with a swing. Almost before we knew it the first part was drawing to a close.

The last scene of the opening half was a glimpse into fairyland, according to the programme. And, judging by the effects on the stage, the producer of the pantomime knew quite a lot about fairyland. It was a wonderful piece of stagecraft, and there was much applause.

And then, when about fifty fairies of assorted colours were gathered about the stage in various formations, another fairy appeared. This fairy was obviously of greater importance than the others.

She was small and dainty, all dressed in gleaming stuff which reflected thousands of lights and flashes.

She danced her way on to the stage, and the very instant she appeared I could see that this girl was the star dancer. There was something exquisitely finished and graceful about her movements.

Not only this, but her smiling face was very pretty, and her eyes flashed as she began to dance.

At the same time, Archie Glenthorne appeared to be suffering from some kind of internal complaint. First of all, he clutched at the seat in front of him. Then a queer little gasping sound came from between his lips. His face was flushed and excited, and, finally, he jumped up.

"What-ho! What-ho! What-ho!" he observed loudly. "I mean to say, so here we are! Bally amazing, if you follow me!"

"Sit down, young man—sit down!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "The very image of the old photograph! What I mean to say is, she's here! Absolutely on the jolly old spot!"

"Sit down, you fathead!" hissed Pitt.

"Eh?" said Archie, as he felt a tug. "I mean——"

"Don't stand up like that, you duffer!"

"Stand up! Oh, sorry!" gasped Archie, coming to himself. "In fact, huge consignments of sorrow! You want me to sit down? Absolutely!"

He sank back into his seat, confused and excited. But he still kept his gaze fixed upon the girl on the stage.

It may have been a somewhat remarkable coincidence that we should visit the very pantomime in which the girl was playing a part. But, after all, there was nothing much in it. Coincidences of a far more extraordinary nature are always taking place.

Archie didn't exactly know how to sort out his feelings. He was pleased—certainly he was pleased. And, at the same time, he was confused in mind. He wanted to get the hang of the thing a bit more clearly. So this was the child performer that the rascally Mr. Radmore was determined to exploit—and get into his power!

"Why, dash it all, it's a shame!" muttered Archie, hot and indignant. "A priceless little cove like that! I mean to say, a perfectly ripping kiddie of about ten, you know! Five pounds a week for ten years! Dash it all, she's worth four times as much already! Absolutely!"

He stared at the stage, entranced.

The child was singing now—singing in a sweet, clear voice which brought a complete hush over the great audience. There was no doubt about the power of this little girl to "get over" the footlights. She held the audience with perfect ease.

And her singing and her dancing were perfection. But the management did not seem to realise her capabilities, for she was only allowed two or three minutes. And then several larger fairies arrived.

Archie lay back, frowning deeply.

"Something's got to be done!" he told himself. "This can't go on! Absolutely and positively not! It seems to me that we've got to rally round and do a few things, what!"

Archie was so engrossed in his thoughts that he paid practically no attention to the show. But, suddenly, he sat forward. He pulled himself out of his trance-like condition.

For he could see that the little fairy was dancing again. But now there was something different, somehow. She swayed in a peculiar kind of way. It seemed to Archie that everything was not right.

A moment later he was certain of it.

For the little girl stumbled, fell sideways, and clutched at a piece of scenery in order to save herself from falling completely. Her effort was useless, for she did fall.

And then disaster happened.

The whole piece of scenery, looking so solid, with its mass of gilt, toppled, and then fell with a crash upon the stage. And a shriek arose from hundreds of throats in the audience as it was seen that the little dancer was buried amid the debris.

Confusion and panic took place on the stage. Then, as Archie was leaping up the curtain swirled down, and hid the scene from view. The audience was in an uproar.

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Pitt, looking pale. "Poor little kid! She must have been half killed by that fall! She was buried!"

Archie tried to speak, but no words would come.

I looked at him closely.

"All right, old man!" I exclaimed. "Perhaps it isn't so bad as it looked. You needn't get scared——"

"But—but I mean to say!" panted Archie, finding his voice. "That is, I mean—— What a perfectly ghastly accident! What an absolutely foul shame! That poor little girl, don't you know! She——"

"Hush!"

Many members of the audience uttered that admonition. For a man in evening dress had suddenly appeared before the curtain, and he was holding up his hand for silence.

"I regret that there has been a slight accident, ladies and gentlemen," he exclaimed, when he could make himself heard. "Happily, I am able to announce that the little lady was only slightly hurt. Fortunately, the scenery was light, and caused no serious injury."

A perfect storm of clapping arose and Archie looked particularly relieved

"Well, thank goodness for that!" I said. "If the girl had been injured it would have spoilt the whole evening."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "But, dear old lads, it's queer. I might even say it's fearfully queer. Didn't you

notice that the little girl swayed before she grabbed at the old scenery stuff?"

"Yes, it seemed as though she felt faint," said Pitt.

"That, so to speak, is the absolute word," agreed Archie. "The kiddie did faint, old lads. She positively wilted away, as it were. Why, dash it all, the poor little bounder wasn't fit to do all that stuff! I mean to say, I don't suppose she was in condish. The old tissues must have been somewhat deprived of the rightful amount of vim!"

I nodded.

"You put it a bit strangely, but I know what you mean," I said. "And I think you're right, too. Plenty of these people on the stage smile and look cheerful, and yet they may be nearly on the verge of poverty. It looks easy enough, but it's a hard kind of existence. I don't envy an actor or an actress!"

Archie passed a hand over his forehead.

"The fact is, you know, I'm feeling most dashed hot!" he observed. "It seems to me that the old frame is calling somewhat urgently for fresh air. Excuse me, laddies—I go in search of a few gulps!"

He left his seat, and disappeared. It was the interval, anyhow, and the whole audience was discussing the recent mishap. Archie got outside, took his few gulps, and then strolled round the theatre.

"What-ho!" he muttered. "So there it absolutely is!"

He was gazing at a side entrance. Just over the top there was an illuminated sign which read "Stage Door."

Archie walked towards it with a firm tread.

CHAPTER 22.

A Surprise for Archie!

THE stage door, upon close inspection, was not very attractive.

There was a certain dingy look about the entrance, and just inside there was a kind of glass-fronted box. Archie could see a man sitting in there, reading a newspaper, and smoking a pipe.

The man was big and burly, and even his best friend could not have called him handsome. Apparently this fellow was the stage doorkeeper. After all the glitter and brilliance in the auditorium, Archie was rather staggered to find such dullness here.

He had half expected to see a brilliantly illuminated, gaily decorated entrance, with all sorts of people in evening dress walking about. This was his first acquaintance with a stage door, and he was rather shocked.

But he had made up his mind, and he did not hesitate.

He walked boldly inside, and tapped upon the glass of the doorkeeper's box.

"What-ho within!" said Archie. "Kindly emerge, old lad!"

The stage doorkeeper put down his paper, gazed at Archie, and then rose to his feet. It was not customary for schoolboys to make their appearance here.

"Well, my lad, what is it?" asked the man.

"What is it, what?" replied Archie. "Absolutely! Possibly you want to gather a few facts, as it were. I've just trickled round to make the old inquiry. How about Dainty Dolly?"

The name sounded rather good to Archie. He had found it out by looking at the programme. Dainty Dolly was the name of the little fairy. And Archie considered it was a priceless kind of a name.

"I don't know what you want, young man, but you ain't allowed to come round here," said the doorkeeper. "It's against regulations. I can't answer no questions."

"But, dash it all, be civil!" said Archie. "I saw the accident, don't you know! Dainty Dolly fainted, or something, and the fairy palace fell over, or something. Is she all right?"

"Lot o' fuss over nothin'!" grumbled

the doorkeeper. "Of course she's all right. The young 'un was hardly hurt. There, young man, you'd best be off."

Archie stood there, hesitating.

"I was just wonderin', don't you know," he said tentatively. "Would it be possible for me to have a few words with the young lady? I mean to say, is there any chance, old tulip? Or don't you think so? What?"

The man frowned heavily.

"Well, perhaps not!" said Archie. "Just a suggestion, you know! But it seems that you don't approve. The old brow was rather wrinkled. No hope, what?"

"That's a fact!" said the doorkeeper. "I don't think you're a harmful young gent, but you shouldn't have strayed away from your keeper! Some folks is too careless! They'll be looking for you if you don't get back!"

Archie drew himself up, and adjusted his monocle

"Well, of course, there you are!" he said firmly. "That's a bally insinuation! I don't want to argue, laddie, but I should just like to inform you that there's nobody searching for me!"

"Well, there ought to be!" said the man. "Now, we've had enough of this. Be off before the stage manager comes and finds yer! It would take him about two seconds to kick you out on your neck!"

"Gadzooks!" said Archie. "The stage manager appears to be a somewhat swift blighter! I mean to say, it couldn't be done! Two seconds, don't you know! Quite imposs, dear old onion!"

"And I ain't no honion, either!" said the doorkeeper darkly. "Any more lip, my lad, and hout you goes!"

"As a matter of fact, I've already decided to go hout!" said Archie. "That is to say, out. Dash it, I'm catching the good old accent! Most embarrassing, don't you know! Well, so-long, old friend! I had an idea that the quest would be somewhat barren!"

Archie was very disappointed, and as he turned away to make his exit he paused. The sounds of an altercation came to his ears. He could hear two people talking just up the passage, and he looked round. There was a young lady there, with her side view towards him. And a burly, aggressive-looking man was talking to her. The girl was about fifteen, Archie judged, and rather shabby. His heart sank. He had half hoped that she might be Dainty Dolly.

"I'm very sorry, my girl, but the show's got to go on!" the man was saying roughly. "We've got a matinee every day, and if you don't turn up an hour before the show to-morrow, I shall have to engage an understudy."

"I'll try, sir!" said the girl, in a tired voice. "I do hope I shall be feeling better. Really, sir, I will try to be here!"

The stage manager nodded.

"All right, we'll leave it at that," he said. "But I can't give you any hope if you turn up late. You'll find the job gone, and somebody else in your place. That's absolutely final. We can't hold up the show because you don't happen to feel very well."

"Yes, sir," said the girl meekly.

Archie's gore arose within him. His natural chivalry absolutely rebelled against this kind of thing. He was gaining an insight into theatrical affairs which he had never dreamed of.

So this was the way they talked to the actresses behind the stage! The man was a bully—a low-down scoundrel! Just because the poor girl felt a bit ill she was going to lose her job! It was more than frightful.

"The best thing you can do is to get off home now," went on the stage manager. "You can thank your lucky stars you didn't cause more damage. And don't forget to be here on time for to-morrow's matinee. One minute late, mind you, and it'll mean the chuck!"

"Great absolutely gad!" murmured Archie. "The foul brute!"

The stage manager, fortunately, did not hear the words. He turned on his heel and walked away. And the girl gave a little sigh, and came towards the exit. And now Archie could see her face. It had previously been hidden by a hat.

And Archie came all over faint.

The passage appeared to be whirling round, somehow. For the face which looked at him was the face of Dainty Dolly! She wasn't a child, as he had thought—she was fifteen or sixteen, if a day!

CHAPTER 23.
The Knight Errant!

EVERY one of Archie's cherished notions came tumbling about his ears, as it were. All the preconceived pictures of Dainty Dolly faded away. He had imagined her to be a pretty little child.

And here she was, within a couple of yards of him, as old as himself! Archie was so confused that he could only stare at her in a blank, dazed kind of way.

Through a sort of mist he dimly saw that the girl had wet eyes. She was crying—actually sobbing. And she looked even prettier than ever!

Yes, Archie was quite sure of that. She looked much bigger now that she was dressed in a plain tweed walking costume. It was fearfully shabby, Archie saw.

It was a shame that she should be obliged to wear such a costume. But even the drawback of such clothing could not possibly hide the girl's daintiness.

She was small, and neat, and there were the curls, just the same, but neatly tucked away into her hat. And the face, although wet with tears, was even prettier than it had been on the stage. And Archie boiled with rage to think that the stage manager had spoken to this girl in such an overbearing, bullying manner. It was an outrage that could be only wiped out in mortal combat!

At least, that's how Archie felt at the moment. He also felt tremendously sorry for Miss Dolly. He had seen her on the stage, and he knew how astonishingly clever she was. And she was the girl that that blighter, Radmore, was attempting to get into his coils, through the medium of her father.

It was bad enough to think of a child being tricked in that way. But it was all different now. The girl was nearly a young lady. And how on earth could she manage on five pounds a week after she had become a star? The thing was an outrageous robbery! She would have to fulfil a contract for ten years which would not expire until her best earning period was over.

Archie was quite shrewd enough to see that. The contract meant that the rascally Radmore would gain all the fortune that this girl was capable of earning. The junior, young as he was, determined that such a thing should not be. He'd do the best he could, anyhow.

And the most important thing at that moment was to tell Dainty Dolly of Radmore's scheme. By hook or crook, Archie had to speak to her.

And then, before he could really collect his wits, the girl came past him. She seemed quite oblivious of his presence.

Archie had completely forgotten the theatre and his companions who were still in the auditorium. He had no room in his brain for anything but this girl and her affairs.

It must not be imagined that Archie had any silly ideas. He wasn't that kind of a fellow. He hadn't fallen in love—but he was undoubtedly filled with admiration for Miss Dolly.

And he had a heart of gold. He was so soft, that anybody's misfortune touched him. He felt that he had to do something.

And his only reason for wanting to talk to Dainty Dolly was for the pur-

pose of warning her against Radmore. The man was her agent—and he was a rascal. Archie felt that he had to put things straight.

And then he found that the girl had gone by, and he started violently. Unless he was quick, his opportunity would be lost.

Then Fate came to his aid. In brushing past Archie, her handkerchief—which was just protruding from a side-pocket—caught against one of Archie's coat-buttons. There was a hole in the handkerchief, and a second later the little scrap of white linen was caught on Archie's jacket.

But the girl did not know—she walked on.

Archie took the handkerchief in his hand, and was aware of a rather ripping perfume. Then he came to himself. Why, by Jove, here was the chance he wanted! He hurried outside after the girl.

"Er—that is—pardon me!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

Dainty Dolly turned.

"I—I think this is yours, don't you know," said Archie, raising his hat. "Your jolly little handkerchief, what? Awfully pleased to be of some little old service! I mean to say, charmed to meet you, and all that kind of thing!"

"Oh, thank you so much!" said the girl, taking the handkerchief. "I didn't know that I'd dropped it."

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "You see, my coat-button, as it were, positively got in the way. Dashed ridiculous, and so forth. But there you are—these things will happen."

"I am so sorry," said the girl, turning. "Thank you!"

"Oh, but, really!" said Archie, hastening forward. "I—I haven't finished! The fact is, I just wanted to say one or two words, as it were. I think you're Miss Dainty, what? I—I should say, Miss Dolly! Or, to be absolutely exact, Miss Dolly Wickham?"

The girl looked at him very curiously. He was not at all the type she had learned to steer clear of. There was something very charming about Archie—something so ingenuous and frank that it was quite impossible to suspect him of anything wrong. He was so openly a good fellow.

"Yes, I am Miss Wickham," said the girl softly. "But, really, I can't stop now. I hope you'll forgive me for——"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "But, I mean to say, there's nothing to forgive! I thought perhaps a few words in private—what? I mean, there's something most frightfully important I've got to say. Or don't you think so? It's really dashed urgent——"

The girl pulled him up with a cold look.

"Thank you, I must be going!" she said stiffly. "I am sure there is nothing you can want to say to me in private."

"But, honestly, there is!" persisted Archie, in alarm. "By gad, you've absolutely frozen me up, don't you know! The glassy eye, and all that! But, really, honour bright! Honest Injun, and that stuff! It's bally important that you should know it, Miss Wickham."

"Please let me go——"

"It's about a frightful cove named Radmore——"

"Mr. Radmore?" she said quickly.

"Absolutely!"

"What have you got to tell me about him?" the girl asked.

"A most frightful lot—all sorts of jolly old things, you know!" said Archie, seizing his chance. "The blighter is planning to work fearful swindles, and make you a victim of his frightful wiles! I mean to say, rather neatly put, what? Well-chosen words, and all that!"

Dainty Dolly looked thoughtful.

"How do you know anything about Mr. Radmore?" she asked.

Archie looked round.

"Well, hardly the place!" he remarked. "I mean, cold breezes, and all that sort of thing. Don't you think it would be rather a priceless idea if I

saw you home? Then we could have the jolly old confab on the way. Honour bright, Miss Wickham, it's serious. I found this out by accident, you know, and the old bean is dashed upset about it. In other words, I'm worried."

The girl looked at him closely again, and she was satisfied that Archie was in earnest.

"If it's so important, perhaps it would be as well," she said quietly. "I generally catch a bus——"

"Oh, absolutely impossible!" said Archie. "I mean to say, scores of taxis doing nothing! Just gaze upon them! Buzzing up and down, as empty as anything, asking to be filled! What about it?"

And two minutes later they were in a taxi.

CHAPTER 24.
Down Brixton Way!

"THIS," said Archie, "is priceless!" He was lounging back in the seat of the taxi, and Dainty Dolly was sitting beside him. He couldn't think of anything more absolutely ripping. For the life of him he couldn't understand how it happened.

An hour earlier, if anybody had told him that anything of this nature would take place he would have scoffed. And yet here he was—Archie Glenthorne—sitting in a taxi side by side with the girl of the photograph.

He had heard her mention Brixton. The taxi was going to Brixton. Archie had some vague idea that he had heard the name before, and he hazily believed that Brixton was a kind of suburb, miles away. But he couldn't be sure.

The girl was waiting for him to begin, and he seemed to have no intention of beginning. He was quite content to sit there by her side.

The girl herself was in a bit of a puzzled state. She knew well enough that Archie was as simple as a child. And she couldn't possibly understand why he had insisted upon taking a taxi. She had always gone home by bus from Piccadilly Circus. This, indeed, was the first time she had ever been in a taxi, and it rather thrilled her.

The hour was not very late—only just a little after ten. She did not appear in the second half of the pantomime. Her only appearance was in the Fairyland Scene, just before the interval.

At the theatre she had been feeling faint and rather weak, but this curious adventure was making her forget her faintness. Indeed, she really felt a lot better.

"I think you were going to tell me something?" she said at length. "You know, it won't take the taxi very long to get to Brixton. Not more than a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes, at the most."

Archie came to himself with a start.

"What?" he exclaimed. "What? But, dash it, the driver is going a fearful lot too fast, old fruit! I—I beg your pardon! Force of habit, don't you know! That's the way I talk to the dear chappies!"

"I don't quite understand."

"Of course not—absolutely not!" said Archie. "The St. Frank's fellows, I mean. You see, I'm up from school for the holidays."

"Oh, you're a schoolboy?"

"That, of course, is precisely the truth," said Archie. "Oh, what about it? I've just remembered! Your fall on the stage! Dashed careless of me not to ask before!"

"It wasn't really serious," said the girl. "I suddenly came over faint, and I don't know how I came to touch the scenery. Thank goodness, it was only light! I'm afraid I shall be in trouble to-morrow."

"How frightfully unfair!" said Archie indignantly. "The chappies who shoved the scenery up ought to be blamed! I mean to say, what's the good of scenery if you can't grab at it?"

"You were telling me something about Mr. Radmore——"

"Absolutely!" said Archie, accepting the hint. "Well, here it is! The whole yarn, don't you know!"

He told her everything—even explaining how Handforth & Co. had pushed him under the railway-carriage seat. It was rather a difficult job, and he afterwards wondered how on earth he had had the nerve to go through with it.

Because the girl was looking at him all the time. And he frequently found himself stumbling—the reason being that he was occasionally lost in admiration at her prettiness. It was disconcerting to have such a really priceless girl sitting so near to him, and paying keen attention to every word he uttered.

But, somehow or other, Archie told the story. And by the time it was over he was feeling more at his ease. She was so pally—so comforting to a chap. She listened just as attentively and unaffectedly as one of the fellows would have done.

He could see that Dainty Dolly was looking very thoughtful and anxious, and a sad expression, too, had come into her face. This, of course, was too foul for words. There was no room on that pretty face for sadness. Absolutely not!

Archie started speaking again, but she stopped him.

"I really don't know how to thank you for taking all this trouble," she said gently. "Oh, but I do think you're a brick!"

"Oh, I say!" protested Archie, hopelessly confused. "I've done absolutely nothing! In fact, I'm dashed lucky to have met you so soon. I thought I should have to search and search and search—and then, as it were, go on searching! And here you absolutely are, right next to me!"

"Yes, it is funny, isn't it?" said the girl. "But I believe you are too late. Mr. Radmore came to see father this evening. I know that, because I heard father say that he was expecting him. The contract must be signed by this time."

"But can't you do anything?" asked Archie blankly. "I mean, it's a bit of a horrid sort of a posish when somebody signs a contract for you, and you've got to bally well keep to it! Dashed unfair, if you know what I mean! You're the one to do the signing, what?"

"Oh, but that wouldn't be binding," said Dainty Dolly. "You see, I'm only just fifteen, and I thought I was very lucky to get a contract at all And five pounds a week seemed such a lot of money."

"This blighter says that you'll be worth fifty pounds a week in a year or two," said Archie indignantly. "Don't you see the dashed scheme? You'll be earning fifty pounds, and Radmore will collar forty-five of it! Your part will be to do all the work, and he'll grab the old takings! And you can't do anything, because you'll be bound under contract. He can book you for the highest sum he can get, and still pay you the same fiver."

"Oh, but I shall never be worth all that!" said the girl breathlessly. "But Mr. Radmore told me that the contract was only for a year. He promised that if I got on well he would get my father to sign another—for a much bigger salary. He told me that I should have to do my best to get on. He means to fix me up with a big circuit of halls as a separate turn!"

"That, of course, is ripping, but it is a fearful shame that you should be treated in such a rotten way. The scoundrel means to make you work like anything, and grab the money. By the way, did he fix your engagement at the pantomime?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to be frightfully inquis., but is it true that you're only getting two pounds a week—with two shows daily?"

"Yes," said the girl in a low voice.

"How bally awful!" said Archie

hotly. "Why, a salary like that isn't allowed nowadays! I mean, it's as clear as the good old sunlight that Radmore is taking a lot for himself! But, of course, your pater earns a fair amount of doubloons? That is, he probably rolls home with the pieces of eight?"

She was silent.

"No?" said Archie. "Of course, I don't want to—— Gadzooks!"

Archie felt rather dizzy. Without warning, she had seized his arm—quite unconsciously, for she felt so warm towards this generous-hearted junior that she already looked upon him as a friend. If he had only known it, he was about the only friend she had ever had.

"Please—please don't ask me much about my father," she said softly. "He's not really my father——"

"What?" gasped Archie.

"He's only my stepfather," went on the girl, with a catch in her voice. "You see, my mother died when I was quite a tiny girl. I—I can only just remember, and I've had—— Oh, I can't tell you! I've had such a struggle to keep things going."

Archie was terribly shocked.

"To—to keep things going?" he repeated dazedly. "But, I mean to say—you! Doesn't your stepfather rally round with the good old tin? I mean, don't you have enough money to pay the servants?"

She gave a bitter little laugh.

"Oh, how can you be so silly!" she exclaimed. "Father doesn't work. He never has done. I've always tried to keep things going, but it's been very, very hard. It would be better if father didn't take most of the money and spend it in the public—— Oh, but why am I telling you this? I shouldn't—I shouldn't! It's not fair!"

The girl had really been carried away, and she had said a great deal more than she had ever intended. It was only Archie's comforting friendliness which had caused her to speak at all. He was so different from everybody else she had ever met. As for Archie, he could hardly think clearly

But, in a confused sort of way he knew this girl had kept the house going. Probably she had been a typist, or something, before going on the stage. And her father took the money and spent it on drink! Now he came to think of it, Archie suddenly realised that the girl looked very wan and ill-nurtured. But nothing could cancel her dainty beauty.

And then, suddenly, she looked out of the window and gave a little gasp.

"Oh, we're just against the town hall!" she exclaimed. "I must get out here—I must!"

"But you don't live here, do you?"

"No; I live in a little turning off Coldharbour Lane," she replied. "But I'll walk the rest—it would be terrible if father saw me getting out of a taxi! And we really must part now——"

"Absolutely imposs.!" declared Archie firmly. "I mean to say, we'll get out of the old taxi if you like, but I've got to see you home—right to the bally door! But I didn't know that we were near the harbour!"

"Harbour?" she repeated. "Oh, no, no! That's only the name of the road. Please stop the taxi at once."

Archie did so, and they got out. Archie paid the cabman off, and then adjusted his monocle.

"And now we'll trickle off home!" he said calmly. "I mean, it's absolutely no use protesting—the old mind is made up! Miss Dolly, we're going right to the jolly old doorstep!"

"Oh, you shouldn't come!" she exclaimed nervously. "It's too good of you, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Dash it all—not mister!" protested Archie. "My name's Glenthorne, don't you know. But that sounds frightful. I'm Archie—just Archie, Miss Dolly. And now which way do we wend our footsteps?"

She could see that he was determined, and so she made no attempt to

dissuade him, although, even as she led the way in the direction of Coldharbour Lane, she had an uneasy feeling that Archie was too rash.

However, she was very grateful to him for his cheering words and his big-hearted sympathy. They were silent as they walked along, and Archie's mind was in a bit of a whirl.

He was rather concerned by the fact that he must soon bid her good-night, and he felt that the whole thing was unsatisfactory. He hadn't done anything as yet to help the girl.

And then, almost before he knew it, they had turned down a narrow side-street, and Dainty Dolly halted in front of a little gate. Archie vaguely saw that the houses in this road were very small and dingy, and all in a continuous row. There were practically no gardens—only tiny enclosures, a few feet deep, separating the gate from the front door.

The girl was just about to speak, and Archie was wondering what to say, when the door suddenly opened. At the rear of a short passage there was a light, and this light revealed the outline of a big, burly man.

"Oh," panted Dolly nervously.

Archie gazed at the stranger dumbly. He instinctively knew that he was facing the girl's stepfather.

CHAPTER 25.
Looking for Archie!

"BLESSED if I know where the ass has got to!"

Reginald Pitt was looking round rather anxiously. "He went out in the interval, you know, and we haven't seen a sign of him since."

Pitt was rather concerned about Archie Glenthorne. The pantomime was over, and the vast bulk of the audience had already streamed out of the big theatre. Our little party had collected together in the foyer. And everybody was talking about the strange disappearance of Archie.

"I know he went out during the interval," I said. "But as soon as the show restarted I naturally thought he came back."

"That's what we all thought," said Handforth. "Just like that fathead! You never know what he's up to! I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we found him fast asleep in one of the saloons, or somewhere."

"Archie wouldn't do that," I put in thoughtfully. "He seemed a bit excited during the interval. Anyhow, the best thing we can do is to ask one of these attendants. They may have spotted him."

Reggie's father and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, and two or three of the others went straight off home at once. Handforth and Co. and Pitt and I remained behind to see if we could find any trace of Archie. We arranged with Mr. Pitt that if we couldn't find him within twenty minutes we'd come home.

We questioned two or three attendants without any result, and were just beginning to get a bit worried when we met with more success. One of the theatre firemen came along, and I at once got hold of him.

"A rather smart young gent?" inquired the fireman, in reply to my query. "Aristocratic-looking, with a monocle?"

"That's him!" I said. "Have you seen him?"

"Well, I did see him, young gent, but not during the last hour or two," said the fireman. "He was round by the stage door."

"What!" gasped Handforth.

"That's where he was, sir."

"The—the awful bounder!" exclaimed Handforth indignantly. "Fancy Archie buzzing round the stage door! What the dickens did he want there? And when was this, anyhow?"

"Just after the interval, young gent," said the fireman.

We tipped him, and went outside, and stood in a group on the pavement.

"Round the stage door, eh?" exclaimed Pitt. "It's jolly queer——"

"I'm not so sure about that," I interrupted. "Don't you remember how concerned Archie was when that girl who played the fairy fainted? She's only a little kid, and Archie has got a soft heart!"

"That's about the size of it," agreed Pitt. "He must have been worried, and went round to see what he could do. And once Archie fairly starts on a thing like that, there's absolutely no stopping him."

Handforth sniffed.

"Archie's not the kind of chap to go bothering after infants!" he said. "Why, that fairy was only a kid—about eight or nine, I should think. You can bet her mother was waiting at the side of the stage——"

"In the wings, you mean?" asked Church.

"Who's talking about wings?" snapped Handforth. "The fairy was wearing wings, I know. That little kid ——"

"Was about fifteen or sixteen, my son," I put in. "She certainly didn't look more than ten or eleven, I'll admit, but things are deceptive on the stage. Let's see, what's her name?"

"Dainty Dolly," said Pitt.

"Yes, that's right," I agreed. "We'll go round the back and ask what Archie was doing round there during the interval. I'll guarantee that he made an inquiry about Dainty Dolly."

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't mind betting anything you like that Dainty Dolly is only about ten years old!" he said. "We'll soon find out, anyway."

We went round to the stage door, chuckling over Handforth, who was grimly determined to prove that he was right. When we got there we found many more signs of activity. The front of the theatre was now quiet and still, being all closed up. But there was plenty of life at the rear.

The stage doorkeeper looked at us very curiously as we crowded through the doorway.

"Sorry to bother you, but we'd like to make an inquiry about a friend of ours," I said. "Do you know if a young fellow came round here about half-way through the show? He was probably wearing an eyeglass——"

"That's right," said the doorkeeper. "He was here right enough."

"What did he come for?"

"I reckon he was mighty interested in Miss Wickham."

"Who?" said Pitt.

"Her they call Dainty Dolly," said the man.

"My hat!" grinned Church. "So Archie was smitten, eh? Well, I'm jiggered! Fancy him going dotty over a mere kid."

"Not so much of a kid neither, young gents," said the stage doorkeeper. "Miss Wickham's fifteen, if she's a day. Anyhow, the young gent went off with her. Sorry I can't tell you no more."

Handforth looked at me blankly.

"Fifteen! Then—then you were right, Nipper! I can't believe it, you know! And think of Archie! Buzzing round here, running after fairies!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't think Archie was buzzing after more than one fairy," I said. "He was very concerned when that girl fainted, and I expect he came round to see if she was all right. By the way," I added, turning to the doorkeeper, "was she hurt much?"

"Nothing to speak of," he replied.

"And you say our friend went off with her?"

"Yes."

"About what time?"

"That must have been somewhere near ten o'clock—just before, or just after," said the doorkeeper. "I'm sorry, young gents, but I can't spend any more time talking to you——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "We shall only keep you half a minute. Do you think that our friend went home with Miss Wickham?"

"Mebbe," said the old man.

"Perhaps you can give us the girl's address?"

"Well, I could, I dessay."

"Then don't waste time, let's have it!" put in Handforth.

I slipped a shilling across, and the doorkeeper winked.

"Wunnerful how a little thing like that makes the tongue go easier!" he grinned. "Right you are, young gents. Just a minute, an' I'll let you know."

He went into a little kind of office, and returned after a moment or two, and gave us the address of Dainty Dolly in Brixton. And we bade him good-night and walked off.

"Well, that's that!" said Pitt. "What's the next move?"

"Well, in the circs., I think we'd better just run out to Brixton," I said. "It won't take us long in a taxi, and it doesn't matter about being late. Your pater won't worry, Reggie."

"Of course not," said Pitt. "He knows we can take care of ourselves. But what do you think of Archie? Seeing young actresses home! He's going the pace a bit!"

"Archie in love!" grinned Handforth. "Great pip! I shouldn't have believed it! We'll chip him to death ——"

"Wait until we know all the facts," I put in. "I don't think Archie is the kind of ass to fall in love. He probably went home with this girl because he was sorry for her. Anyhow, there's something behind it—something that we don't know of yet. Don't forget that photograph that Archie had in his pocket on the platform——"

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "The photograph! I'd nearly forgotten it—I—I mean I was just going to mention it! Of course! This Dainty Dolly is the same as that girl in the photo!"

"The plot thickens!" said Pitt.

"Not very much," I remarked. "Archie knew something about Dainty Dolly before he came to the theatre at all. He was pretty mysterious about that photograph, if you recollect. And the best thing we can do is to go to Brixton."

And so, a few minutes later, we bundled into a taxi and started off.

CHAPTER 26.
Archie in the Wars!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE was aware of the fact that his heart was beating rather more rapidly than usual as he stood facing the burly figure in the somewhat gloomy doorway.

He couldn't see the man distinctly, and this made matters all the worse. But he could easily judge that Mr. Wickham—for the girl used her step-father's name—was a rather unpleasant customer.

"You see, the fact is—I mean to say, absolutely!" said Archie, in some confusion. "What? I mean——"

"Who's this young fool?" demanded the man gruffly.

"What-ho!" exclaimed Archie. "Pardon me, old carrot, but I judge that you fail to grasp the old situation. In the circs., I will overlook the fearful insult——"

"It's all right, father! He's only a schoolboy, and he saw me home from the theatre," put in Dolly quickly. "I came over a bit faint during my dance, and some of the scenery fell on me."

"Oh, it did—eh?" growled the man. "Then you ought to be darned well ashamed of yourself! What right have you got to go fainting on the stage? If you aren't careful you'll lose your job!"

"Yes, father!" said the girl quietly. "And it won't be any good whining

round me!" went on Wickham roughly. "If you can't earn money, you ain't any good in this house—understand? Now get inside, and I'll deal with this interfering young whipper-snapper!"

Archie pulled himself up a further inch or so.

"Dash it all!" he said. "I mean to say, a chappie doesn't like to start quarrels, and all that kind of rot, but there you are! I mean, when some foul blighter staggers along and calls me a bally whipper-snapper—— Well, the good old blood of the Glenthornes becomes dashed hot and fiery!"

The girl made no attempt to move, but stood there, listening with great anxiety. Archie himself was rather overwhelmed with indignation. To hear her spoken to in such a way made him boil. This man was nothing more nor less than a poisonous blot. And something had to be done.

"I don't want any sauce from you, my lad!" said Wickham coarsely. "I'm going to give you a good hiding. I'll teach you to come running after my daughter! I don't allow that kind of thing——"

"One moment!" interrupted Archie. "That is to say, two moments! In fact, I shall probably be five or six moments! It's up to you, laddie, to listen to me! Absolutely! I'd just like to explain that you're a dashed frightful kind of a brute!"

"What!" shouted Wickham furiously.

"Absolutely!" declared Archie. "That is to say, absolutely not! It seems to me, old fruit, that you're the impudent rotter! A chappie of your stamp oughtn't to be allowed to keep daughters and things! I mean to say, it's a somewhat fearful thing altogether! Here you are, doing absolutely nothing, and this girl has to go to the jolly old theatre dancing like anything when she doesn't feel like it! The whole thing's wrong—absolutely near the edge! What I mean is, a great cove like you ought to be dashing about doing whole piles of work, and buzzing home with bulging pockets, and so forth!""

"By thunder!" snarled Wickham. "Do you think I'm going to stand this? You young whelp, I'll——"

"As a matter of fact, I'm expecting quite a fearful amount of bother!" said Archie calmly. "But there you are—these things come! But it had to be done! It was on the old chest, and it had to be shifted. I've had the greatest pleasure in ticking you off, old lad!"

"Please, father!" pleaded Dolly, grasping the man's arm. "He doesn't mean it—really he doesn't! It's only his way——"

"Don't you interfere, you little hussy!" snapped Wickham harshly.

He pushed her aside with great violence, and the girl gave a little cry as she thudded against the doorpost, and then fell. She collapsed just inside the doorway, sobbing.

Archie's blood rose to fever heat.

"That, as it were, is absolutely too much!" he shouted. "You fearful blighter! Take that, don't you know! Absolutely!"

Crash!

His fist came round before Wickham could even be aware of his intention. And Archie was not entirely unversed in the art of self-defence. His punch landed on Wickham's jaw. And the man staggered back with a howl of rage and pain.

"Absolutely!" gasped Archie. "That is, what-ho! It seems to me, laddie, that we're off! Tally-ho, and what-not! As it were, yoicks!"

Biff!

He landed another heavy punch, and was just settling down to a keen enjoyment of the whole business. But at this point, unfortunately for Archie, Mr. Wickham awoke to a state of full activity.

He went for Archie like an enraged elephant.

And before Archie could even realise

what had happened, he found himself at the gate, and he was dimly aware that something had struck him in the mouth with the force of a battering-ram.

He was just wondering how many teeth he had left when he was grasped by the back of his neck and the seat of his trousers.

"Dash it all!" he shouted. "I mean ——"

"Out you go, you young hound!" snarled Wickham.

The next moment Archie had an idea that London was the seat of a most terrible earthquake disaster. The houses rocked, the street heaved, and it seemed that the very earth came up to meet him.

As a matter of fact, the whole thing was quite simple.

Wickham shook Archie violently. He kicked him, he cuffed him, and the unfortunate junior was finally flung into the gutter.

He was really hurt—even more than he knew of.

Mr. Wickham had hurt him quite badly enough, but as he fell he caught the back of his head on the edge of the kerb, and after that Archie only took a vague kind of interest in things.

He lay there in the gutter, muddy, dishevelled, and utterly spent. As though at a tremendous distance, he heard a door slam. Then a long time seemed to pass—about an hour, at least.

In actual truth, Archie was only lying in the gutter for a minute or so. But he dimly became aware that a shabby old lady was helping him to his feet.

Then she led him gently through a doorway. Archie went, still in a kind of dream. And when, at last, he awoke to a full realisation of his surroundings, he saw that he was in an ill-furnished kind of kitchen.

But the couch on which he lay, although faded and torn and old-fashioned, was certainly comfortable. There was a fire, too—a cheerful blaze in an ancient fireplace.

"There, there, just you keep quiet for a bit, child!" said the old woman kindly. "My, but I'd like to have the law on that brute! I've allus said that Wickham deserved gaol—an' I'm right!"

"Absolutely," murmured Archie feebly.

After that he must have gone to sleep, because he knew nothing more until he was awakened by Handforth and Pitt and several other St. Frank's fellows. Archie sat up on the couch, and looked round blankly.

CHAPTER 27.

Going into Action!

"WHAT-HO!" said Archie faintly. "What-ho! So here we all are, what? And here, absolutely, am I. At least, I believe so, laddies. It is me, I suppose? I must say that I feel dashed fearful!"

"You look dashed fearful, too!" said Handforth.

"Really?" said Glenthorne. "Am I awfully disfigured?"

"My dear ass, you look as though you'd had a fight with Joe Louis!" said Handforth. "You're in a shocking mess! Your nose is all sideways, you've got a fearful bruise on your left cheek, and there's not much left of your ears! Have you been fighting a mob?"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "As a matter of fact, I don't quite remember what happened, dear old chappies. You see, I was ticking off old Wickham. I might say that I gave him the good old length of the Glenthorne tongue! And then, don't you know, trouble buzzed up in platoons! I mean to say, bombardments and barrages, and all that kind of thing!"

"I can quite understand it, if you had the nerve to tell Wickham what you thought of him," I put in

"But the chap's absolutely foul!" said Archie.

"I can quite believe it, but you weren't very diplomatic to tell him so to his face," I went on. "That's where you made a mistake, my son. We only arrived five minutes ago, and we heard that you'd been carried in here by Mrs. Huggins. Some of the people in the street thought that you were in hospital!"

"Somebody said the mortuary!" remarked Handforth.

Archie shuddered.

"Pray don't be so frightfully frightful!" he protested. "I mean to say—the mortuary! It absolutely makes a chappie go all funny! The fact is, I'm feeling fearfully braced. The old tissues are repaired! And it's up to me to warble large doses of gratitude to the kindly soul who came along with the helping hand! Dashed priceless, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, there's no doubt that Mrs. Huggins is a brick!" I said. "But what does it all mean, Archie? What on earth have you been doing? I think you ought to explain."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "You see, I was bally worried over Dainty Dolly. It seems that a pretty scoundrelly sort of a scoundrel named Radmore has been plotting, and all that kind of stuff! Well, there you are. I mean, wasn't it absolutely the right thing to rally round?"

"You're talking double Dutch!" said Pitt. "I don't know anything about Radmore—never heard the name before."

Archie managed to tell us the whole story. He was feeling a lot better now, although his face was very sore, and there was a lump on the back of his head as big as a pigeon's egg.

But as he told us what he knew, he grew stronger, and his indignation increased as he talked on. And at last, when he had finished, we stood round him, thoughtful and puzzled.

"So you see, dear old sportsmen, something pretty fearful has got to be done," concluded Archie. "We can't let this drunken bounder knock his stepdaughter about just as he likes."

"The position is a bit difficult——"

"Absolutely not!" interrupted Archie. "All we've got to do is to buzz into Wickham's place, knock the ruffian flat, and there you are! I mean to say, there's nothing in it! It's simply a question of rescuing the fairy from the dashed ogre, if you gather the old trend!"

I shook my head.

"This is real life, Archie—not pantomime!" I said. "It's easy enough to rescue fairies from ogres in a pantomime. But this chap is the girl's stepfather, and her legal guardian. If we interfere, we should only lay ourselves open for a lot of trouble."

"But—but I mean to say——"

"You don't seem to understand, Archie, that we should be absolutely in the wrong by taking matters into our own hands," I went on. "We can certainly do something to-morrow. But it's no good wasting any more time to-night. My dear chap, we can't go next door and take that girl away from her stepfather!"

Archie looked rather blank.

"But that's pretty awful, don't you know!" he protested. "I thought you chappies would rally round with a few yards of enthusiasm. And yet you say you can't do anything!"

"We don't want to stir up further trouble," I said. "I'm quite certain that Wickham is a rotter. But he's got the law on his side."

"Then the law's deucedly unfair!" declared Archie firmly.

"But you needn't worry," smiled Pitt. "By what Mrs. Huggins says, this girl is one of the best, and old Wickham treats her like dirt. I'll tell my pater all about it, and he'll soon have a look into matters. Wait till to-morrow, Archie, and we'll set things going."

"Rot!" exclaimed Handforth.

"Look here, Handy——"

"Rot!" repeated Handforth. "I haven't been saying much—I've been listening to you chaps. Now I'm going to speak!"

"We shall be here for hours, then!" sighed Pitt.

"I'm going to give my opinion!" declared Handforth. "You chaps ought to be bumped! Here's one of our chaps, battered and smashed about, and yet you talk about doing nothing until to-morrow! Wickham's a brute—a drunken beast! I vote we take the law into our own hands, go next door, and give the cad a jolly good hiding!"

"Hear, hear!" said Archie. "That, I mean to say, is the stuff!"

"Oh, you can't come, Archie," said Handforth. "I'll deal with this matter. You're no good—you're a wreck!"

"Really! I—I mean——"

"A bundle of shattered humanity!" went on Handforth. "Your face is smashed about, you look on the point of pegging out, and your own father wouldn't recognise you."

"Dash it all!" murmured Archie faintly. "I mean to say, this is where I need Phipps. The chappie would come in frightfully handy now. Phipps has a most soothing effect upon a fellow. He just glides about, murmuring words of wisdom and sympathy."

"Never mind Phipps now," said Handforth. "You're more in need of a doctor."

"Gadzooks!" breathed Archie. "That's shocking, don't you know! I had a slight idea that I was feeling somewhat bucked——"

"And so you are feeling bucked," I interrupted. "Don't take any notice of Handy; he's only trying to be funny. There's not much the matter with you now, Archie. The best thing we can do is to go off home."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "I've heard quite enough about this Wickham chap! He's a brute—a ruffian! And don't forget that he's sloshed one of our chaps about. For the honour of St. Frank's, it's up to me to dot him one."

Archie nodded.

"Of course, that's a rather priceless scheme, but don't you think there might be a few drawbacks?" he asked. "I mean to say this dotting business. A fruity notion, old dear, but there might be a back-fire. That is to say, two can play at the old dotting game, if you follow."

"That's pretty obvious," said Pitt. "One look at your handsome features, Archie, convinces me that Mr. Wickham is a past-master in the art of dotting. Better not take any chances, Handy——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "I'm going to slosh him!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "A somewhat different game, what? I mean, sloshing sounds more business-like, laddie. What about it? Shall we stagger forth, and attend to the blighter?"

"We shall!" said Handforth firmly.

I knew very well that if we attempted to hold Handforth back there would be a scene. Edward Oswald was quite prepared to slosh his own chums, if necessary. He didn't particularly care whom he smashed about, just so long as he did the smashing. And, after all, we were in Mrs. Huggins' dwelling, and we couldn't have any upsets.

Handforth was not likely to get much satisfaction, anyhow.

He and Archie went out, and the rest of us stayed behind to thank Mrs. Huggins, and to leave her a ten-shilling note for her kindness to Archie. The latter had already decided that he would bestow a fiver on the good lady. He considered that she was one of the ones—a priceless sort of lady who came along with the helping hand when it was most needed.

Archie and Handy went out into the street, and found it very quiet and

dark. For by now, of course, the time was in the neighbourhood of midnight, and although the main streets in Brixton were fairly lively, these little side-turnings were very still.

Handforth paused just before coming to Wickham's gate.

"Now, we've got to plan this carefully," he murmured. "I don't know why the dickens you've come—you'll only be in the giddy way!"

"The fact is, old bean——"

"Don't argue!" interrupted Handforth. "Now that you're here, the only thing that you can do is to wait until I've finished. I'm going to——"

"What ho! What ho!" breathed Archie. "Observe! The bally door has just opened, and—— Why, my only sainted aunt! It's Radmore! Absolutely! The very cove himself!"

Handforth crouched against the railings.

"Radmore!" he breathed. "You mean the chap who's planned to get that contract signed?"

"Absolutely!" whispered Archie. "Don't you know, he's probably got the dashed thing on him now! By gad! Think of it! He's buzzing off with the goods, as it were."

"Is he?" muttered Handforth. "We'll see about that."

They paused, listening, quite hidden in the gloom.

CHAPTER 28.
Arrested!

THE two men in the doorway were just in the act of shaking hands.

"Well, you'd better get off, Radmore," came Wickham's voice. "Yes, I understand; don't worry. That contract business is settled, anyway. That's the main thing."

"Yes, I'm glad we've fixed that up," said Radmore. "It's a fine thing for the girl, Wickham. She'll be certain of five quid a week now, whether she earns it or not. That's the best of making these long agreements. You'll be able to live in comfort for years."

"Well, the girl's worth it—every penny!" said Wickham. "A saucy little cat, but she's clever enough on the stage. And if she can earn money easy like that I don't see why I shouldn't have the benefit."

"Right you are! I'll see you tomorrow," said Radmore. "Same place, I suppose?"

"Yes—in the little back saloon."

The pair shook hands again, and Radmore turned out of the gate and swung off down the street. The door closed, and Radmore's footsteps were the only sounds which broke the stillness—except for the distant murmur of electric tramcars.

"I knew it!" breathed Handforth. "That scoundrel has got the contract on him now. Didn't I say so?"

"Absolutely not!" replied Archie. "I had an idea that I was the chappie who mentioned the fact. But it doesn't matter, old lad. Not a bit. But it really seems to me that we ought to be dashing about."

"You bet!" said Handforth. "Now's the chance! If we can grab this contract at once, the thing's done! Before Radmore has a chance to start things off again we'll have spoilt his game. We'd better look sharp!"

"Exactly, old thing!" said Archie. "A ripe scheme!"

There was no time to be lost, and the two juniors went down the street at a run. Handforth was eager because there was a good chance here of a scrap. And Handforth had sadly missed his usual daily fights. At St. Frank's he was always in some trouble or other. And here was an opportunity of engaging in a fight that would be really worth while.

Archie's chief anxiety was to get hold of the contract and tear it up.

The juniors overtook Radmore just as he was about to turn the corner.

Handforth was never a fellow to do things in a delicate way. He didn't believe in wasting time.

He just grabbed Radmore by the shoulder, swung him round, and then pushed his fist right under the man's nose.

"See that?" he roared. "I'll give you just three seconds to yank out that contract for Miss Wickham! Three seconds, or your nose will be made as flat as a giddy pancake!"

Radmore was utterly surprised and startled.

"What in the name of——" he began.

"One—two—three!" said Handforth grimly. "Good enough!"

Biff!

He really didn't give anybody much of a chance. After all, it was rather unreasonable to expect Radmore to take in the situation within the short space of three seconds. Handforth's fist came round with the force of a steam-hammer, and Mr. Radmore went flying backwards with a roar of rage and agony.

"That," said Archie, "is the absolute goods!"

Radmore just recovered his balance, and saved himself from falling.

"You—you young hounds!" he stuttered. "By glory! I'll have the police on you for this——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We know your game, and we want that contract! What's more, we're going to have it."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Hear, hear, and all that!"

Radmore breathed hard.

"You infernal young rogues!" he snarled. "It'll only take me a minute to have the police on the scene! Get back! Confound you, what the blazes ——"

He was interrupted in the middle of his outcry, for Handforth and Archie were determined. They piled on the man before he could make any attempt to save himself.

And, in any case, Radmore was not much of a fighter. He howled for help as he went down. Handforth's fists thudded upon the man's chest, and he went over, sprawling in the mud.

"Now we'll soon have it!" panted Handforth triumphantly. "Huh! Even Nelson Lee himself couldn't have done it better! You can't teach me much about detective work!"

Handforth was sitting across Radmore's chest, and now he was tearing open the man's overcoat. It was the work of a moment to locate the inside breast pocket. And there, sure enough, was the contract.

Handforth pulled it out, with a yell of victory.

"Help!" roared Radmore wildly. "Help! Police!"

"By George! You'd better stop that!" snapped Handforth.

He pushed his cap into Radmore's face. And at the same moment, Archie seized the contract, and gazed upon it with intense interest. It was just possible to read the writing, for at this corner the street was not so dim.

"Absolutely!" burst out Archie excitedly. "This is it, old tulip! This, as it were, is the jolly old thing itself! Here we are! Legal words, and what-not!"

"Tear it up!" panted Handforth.

"I was thinking, old bean, that it might be advisable to show it to somebody or other," suggested Archie. "One never knows——"

"Tear it up!" insisted Handforth.

It was good advice, for, once the contract was destroyed, there could be no possibility of Radmore recovering it. So Archie, having satisfied himself that this paper was the actual document, ripped it across and across. Then he scattered the fragments into the air.

"Good work! Good work!" he declared. "In fact, dashed good work!"

Mr. Radmore didn't think so.

He was yelling at the top of his voice, for in his struggles he had managed to free his mouth. And Handforth and

Archie were just about to let him go when they received a bit of a shock.

For, without warning, two burly figures loomed up round the corner. They were gentlemen in long, blue overcoats and helmets—in point of fact, a couple of constables.

"Looks like a case, Jim!" said one, as they hurried up.

Archie turned, and his jaw dropped.

"Cave!" he breathed. "I mean to say, this is where we ought to trickle away, dear old lad! I don't like the look of things—absolutely not! Trouble, like the jolly old ale, is brewing!"

Handforth jumped up.

"And about time, too!" he said tartly. "You police chaps are never where you're wanted! You'd better arrest this rotter——"

"They've robbed me!" screamed Radmore wildly. "These young ruffians knocked me down and robbed me!"

"We robbed you of that contract, right enough!" grinned Handforth. "Yes, and it's torn up now!"

"What's it all about?" demanded one of the policemen.

"These infernal brats knocked me down, and took a valuable contract out of my pocket!" shouted Radmore excitedly. "You heard them admit it! You've got to arrest them! They attacked me!"

"Yes, we could see that all right," said the policeman. "You'll have to come to the station—all of you. If you wish to charge these two young men, you'll have to do it in the station, sir!"

"I will charge them!" snarled Radmore fiercely.

He was beside himself with rage and mortification. The contract he had been at such trouble to get signed had been torn up before his eyes. And he was determined to take his revenge. In excited, breathless tones, he told the two policemen how Handforth and Archie had knocked him down and robbed him.

And Handforth didn't improve matters.

"It's all rot!" he declared warmly. "The man's a scoundrel! We took the contract all right—of course we did! And the best thing you can do is to arrest the rotter——"

"None of that—none of that!" interrupted the policeman. "You youngsters will have to come along with me. And you'd best come quiet, too!"

"What!" shouted Handforth. "Do—do you mean that you're going to arrest us?"

"Yes!"

"This is somewhat diabolical!" breathed Archie. "I mean to say, arrested, what? But, my dear old lads in blue, you're absolutely off the track! I might even say you're somewhat

snookered! The fact is, we have been doing a large chunk of good work——"

"You won't do yourselves no good by talking!" growled one of the policemen. "Come on, now! No more of this!"

And, to the alarm of Archie and Handforth, they were firmly seized and marched away. There could be no question as to the view the constables took, for Radmore was allowed to walk freely.

There was one fortunate aspect of the whole matter.

Church and McClure had come out to see what their famous leader was doing. And they arrived just in time to see Handforth and Archie being marched away. They were staggered.

"Arrested!" gasped Church. "Oh, my goodness!"

"What shall we do?" panted McClure, in alarm.

"Tell Nipper; he'll do something!"

They went rushing back, and a few moments later I was in possession of the facts. And I was by no means pleased to hear them.

"Oh, my hat!" I exclaimed impatiently. "That ass is always getting into trouble of some kind. Just fancy him getting into a scrape like this! I was half afraid that would happen if he started any of his nonsense! We shall have to go and get the fatheads set free if we can!"

We hurriedly thanked Mrs. Huggins once more for all that she had done, and then rushed away at full speed towards the police-station. For Handforth and Archie to be arrested was a dreadful calamity. There was really no telling how the matter would end if Radmore pressed the charge. For, after all was said and done, Handforth and Archie had acted with more impetuosity than discretion. What they had done was morally justified, but in the eyes of the law it was a different matter.

Happily, Mr. Radmore had cooled down by the time the police-station was reached. And he was just beginning to realise that it would be bad for him if he was obliged to go into a lot of details. And it would do him no good to have these schoolboys brought up before the local bench on a charge of assault.

Handforth and Archie were marched into the charge-room, and the two constables commenced relating their version of the whole affair. But Radmore interrupted.

"It's all right—I won't press the charge," he declared. "It was only a trifle, and I don't want a big fuss made about it. I'd rather let the boys go free."

The inspector looked up, frowning.

"Do you charge these young men with anything, or not?" he demanded.

"No, I do not."

"Then what's the idea of fooling these constables about?" asked the inspector sharply. "It's a pity people can't know their own minds! First of all you say you want these boys brought to the station and charged, and now you change your mind! I think I'd better detain them—and you, too!"

"Don't be absurd!" interrupted Radmore. "These youngsters were excited, and acted rather foolishly—that's all. I don't want a lot of fuss!"

Accordingly, greatly to the relief of Handforth and Archie, they were allowed to walk out of the police station a few minutes later. They couldn't understand why Radmore had changed so quickly. And they emerged just in time to run into the rest of us.

"Oh, thank goodness!" gasped Church. "We thought we should find you in a cell!"

"I'd like to see 'em put me in a cell!" growled Handforth. "By George! I've stood enough rot already! But we dished Radmore! We got that contract away, and tore it to bits!"

This, at all events, was a very satisfactory state of affairs. Upon the whole, I willingly forgave Handforth and Archie for being so drastic in their methods. They had certainly justified themselves.

And soon afterwards, by a piece of luck, we got hold of a taxicab. The driver was homeward bound, but consented to take us through London to Pitt's home. All things considered, the evening had been an eventful one.

CHAPTER 29.
All's Well that Ends Well!

NEXT morning I was up early in spite of a somewhat short night. And my first task was to go out and make straight for Gray's Inn Road. The guv'nor was there, in our own place. And I put the whole affair before him just as it had happened. And Nelson Lee promised to look into it.

In the meantime, Archie was very greatly worried.

He had felt intense satisfaction at the thought that Dainty Dolly was now quite safe from Radmore's wiles. But, at the same time, he still had the uneasy feeling that something more ought to be done for the girl.

When Archie remembered how her step-father had pushed her over, his blood boiled afresh. And then, on the top of this, the thought came to him that Radmore might be preparing another contract. After all, what was there to prevent him doing what he had done before?

Some of the fellows went out during the morning and didn't return until well on in the afternoon, having had lunch in a restaurant. But Archie remained indoors all the time. He was certainly not quite himself. And when tea-time arrived he was inclined to be absent-minded.

We were all there, comfortably seated in Mrs. Pitt's drawing-room. Archie sat in a big armchair, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling, and polishing his monocle at the same time.

"Buck up, Archie!" I smiled. "Everything will be all right!"

"Oh, rather!" said Archie absently. "I mean to say, dashed rosy cheeks, and all that! And what priceless eyes! One look, and a chappie positively goes all hot and confused!"

"Yes, rather!" I grinned. "Dainty Dolly is a peach!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "That is, one of the real sort! You know what I mean—as pretty as anything, and all that sort of stuff! She's got eyes like lakes af azure!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody roared, and Archie was startled into full alertness.

"Gadzooks!" he gasped, turning very red.

"I—I—I—— That is to say, you—you—you—— What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, dear old chappies——"

"You can't get away from it, Archie—you're in love!" grinned Pitt.

"Dash it all!" protested Archie weakly. "I mean to say, absolutely! She's stunning, and so forth, but you're positively wrong! The fact is, I was dashed worried!"

"Worried?" I repeated.

"Absolutely!" replied Archie. "That priceless girl, don't you know! Working like anything, doing the fairy stuff every bally evening, and her father taking all the tin! I mean to say, the whole thing's not only rotten, but inclined to be putrid. You grasp what I mean? And that contract business, too! The fact is, I don't know what to think, but it seems to me that something pretty serious ought to be done."

"It has been done," I said.

"What?" said Archie. "It's all very well to raise the old hopes, old tulip, but I'm afraid things are fearfully bad. Of course, I shall go to the jolly old

theatre again to-night. It's up to me to get absolutely busy——"

"I hardly think so, Archie!" smiled Mr. Pitt. "While you have been worrying here, other people have been at work—notably Mr. Nelson Lee."

Archie sat forward eagerly.

"I fail to grasp the scheme!" he exclaimed.

Before he could say anything else the door opened and the maidservant announced that Miss Wickham had arrived. Archie went red all over again, half-rose to his feet, and then sank back.

"What-ho!" he murmured. "Steady, laddie—steady! This is where a large supply of restraint is required. Absolutely!"

A moment later Dainty Dolly was ushered into the room. She was looking very neat and pretty in a warm winter coat and a small fur hat. Archie gazed at her in a kind of trance.

"Awfully jolly to see you, Miss Wickham!" he exclaimed confusedly, as he rose to his feet. "That is, what priceless weather! I should say, how do you do, old carrot? I—I mean——"

Archie paused, hopelessly involved.

"I came because Mr. Lee sent me here," said the girl. "He saw me after the matinee, and told me to come straight to this address. I'm sure I don't know what it all means, but Mr. Lee was awfully kind!"

"I think the guv'nor will be here himself in a few minutes," I said. "What you've got to do, Miss Wickham, is to make yourself at home and have a cup of tea. Now that Mr. Lee has been looking into things, you can be quite sure that your troubles are at an end."

Mrs. Pitt was very interested in the girl, and in a few minutes they were sitting together, talking as if they had known one another for weeks.

She soon supplied the information that Radmore had seen her stepfather again. In fact, she was almost certain that another contract had been drawn up—a document to take the place of the one that Archie had torn to atoms.

"But that, I mean, is simply frightful!" said Archie, with concern. "All our work for nothing, what? Labour in vain, and all that kind of stuff! I had a fearful suspish that something like this would happen."

"Well, you needn't worry yourself, old son," I said. "I was going to leave this until the guv'nor came, but it doesn't matter much. Miss Dolly knows, so there's no reason why you shouldn't know, too."

"Know what?" asked Handforth.

"Well, the guv'nor has been making a lot of inquiries to-day, and even if Radmore gets a second contract signed, it won't be any good," I explained. "This man Wickham isn't Miss Dolly's stepfather at all!"

"What!"

"Gadzooks!"

"Not her stepfather!"

"No; and he's got no legal authority to act for her!" I said.

"But, I mean to say, really!" said Archie eagerly. "This, don't you know, is absolutely too priceless for words! But it can't be true."

"It is true," I replied. "Mr. Lee has definitely established the fact that Wickham is absolutely no relation to Miss Dolly at all. She didn't know it herself until to-day. Of course, she'll never have anything more to do with the brute, and Radmore will get precious little profit out of his beautiful scheme."

Archie beamed with delight.

"So everything's absolutely all serene?" he asked.

"Of course it is," I replied. "You see, the guv'nor has interested himself in the matter, and it's a dead certainty that he'll see that Miss Dolly is fixed up fairly. So you needn't worry yourself about her any more, Archie."

Archie looked supremely happy.

"Dash it all, it's like the bally pantomime itself!" he murmured. "I mean to say, the fairy finishes up a winner, and all that sort of thing. And the demons frizzle up in a few tons of red fire! Rather gorgeous, if you know what I mean."

And everything was all right.

. . . . .

Nelson Lee arrived very shortly afterwards, and he gave a few details of the inquiries that he had made. Beyond any shadow of doubt, he had established the fact that Wickham was not the girl's stepfather, and he had received an official warrant to remove the girl completely from the man's control.

This, of course, meant that Dainty Dolly was without a home—but, strictly speaking, she had never had one. It was rather splendid of Mrs. Pitt to come to the rescue. She could see that the girl was made of the right stuff, and she invited her to stay until other arrangements could be made.

As for Dainty Dolly herself, her gratitude was very heartfelt. And Archie Glenthorne was as blithe as a young peacock on a fine day. He was further gratified by the news that Nelson Lee had fixed up a much better contract for Dolly for the run of the pantomime.

And on the top of this, the following day, came the welcome news that a big theatrical magnate had been immensely struck by Dolly's performance. And he engaged her for a long contract immediately the pantomime run was finished. And her salary was one that her cleverness and genius thoroughly deserved.

And so everything was all serene, and we felt that the episode had ended in the best possible way for all concerned. Archie's pantomime fairy had come out on top.

And there was not the slightest doubt that the wonderful change in her fortunes had come about solely because of Archie's astuteness. The genial ass of the Remove was not such an ass, after all!

THE END.

WHEN THE GHOST WALKS!

DO you believe in ghosts? Probably not. But suppose you were walking across lonely Dartmoor, in Devon, on a foggy Christmas evening, without a thought of ghosts in your head, when you suddenly came face to face with a phantom bloodhound?

The Ghost Dog of Dartmoor.

This was the experience of a young labourer only a few years back. He was accompanied by his dog on this walk across the moor, and the first warning of the approach of the ghost-hound was when his pet started a piteous howling.

Looking round, the man saw a great dog with a bloodhound's head and a bulky body looming out of the mist. As he watched, the phantom started running towards him, its jaws slavering and its fangs bared.

He was unarmed, so he turned and ran. And every time he looked over his shoulder the ghost-dog was just behind. He was nearly dropping from exhaustion and fright when he reached a cottage. As he knocked at the door, he looked back—and the phantom had vanished!

Now comes a curious point of the story. When he described the ghost-dog to the cottagers, they knew all about it. It was the famous phantom hound of Dartmoor, they said, and described the ghost to him exactly.

The labourer had never heard of this ghost-dog, which was first seen over a hundred years ago, so he could not have invented his story. Gives you the creeps, doesn't it?

The superstitious explanation is that the hound is the ghost of a particularly unpleasant old noblewoman, who, in her lifetime, several hundred years ago, killed off her four husbands one after the other. She is made to roam the earth in the form of a hound as punishment—or so the story goes.

Ghost Ships.

Another strange Christmas ghost story comes from the Solway Firth, where a doctor, looking out over the misty waters one Boxing Day night, saw what he thought were two eerily-outlined Viking long-ships moving slowly through the water, propelled by oarsmen.

Naturally, he couldn't believe his eyes. Viking ships in the twentieth century! He watched the ships disappear into the mists, then walked home puzzling the matter in his mind.

Some time later he was talking to some friends about the ghost-ships, and one of them at once told him the story of the phantom vessels. They had been seen from time to time before, and were said to be ships manned by Danish sea-rovers, who, after plundering the coast along the Solway Firth, had put to sea with their long-ships heavily laden with loot. Both vessels had been overwhelmed by a sudden storm.

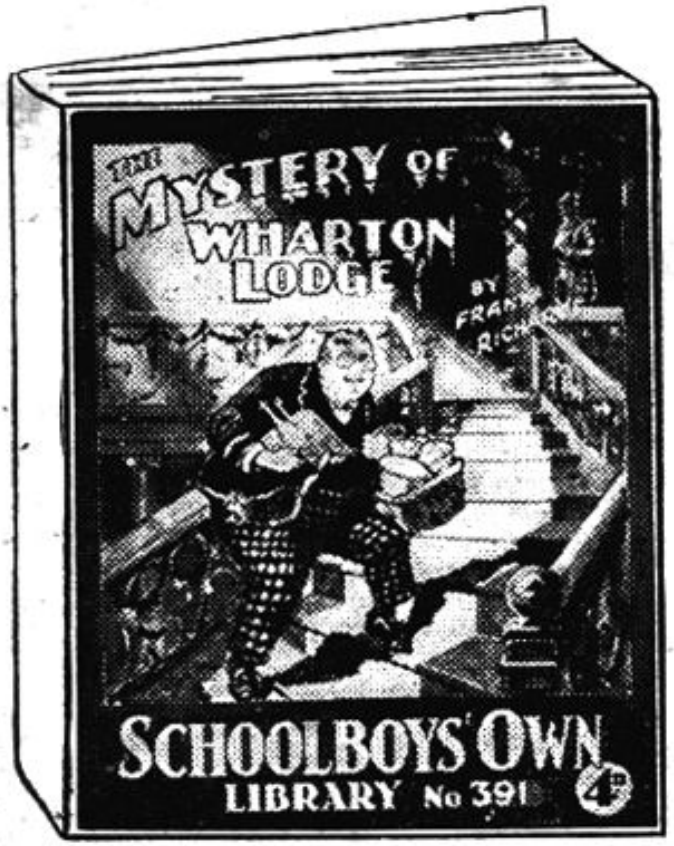
The ghosts of these ships still haunt the Firth, the fishermen say.

A weird ghost said to haunt the tiny island of Caldey, in the Severn Sea, only appears on Christmas and other holy days. The island is famous for its monastery, and is one of the quietest spots on earth.

Yet on certain days wild screams have been heard, and there are some who have seen a tall, black-robed monk wandering around the monastery at dead of night. A black face, and eyes that peer horribly from under a black cowl, make the monk a terrifying apparition, and none of those who say they have seen him have stayed to make his further acquaintance!

S.S.

ENJOY CHRISTMAS WITH THESE TWO GREAT SCHOOLBOY-ADVENTURE YARNS



TUCK galore has been mysteriously disappearing from the larder at Wharton Lodge, where Harry Wharton & Co. are staying for the Christmas Holidays. Who the mysterious midnight marauder is has got the chums of Greyfriars guessing. Read all about it in this sensational book-length story of Christmas adventure, starring Harry Wharton & Co. and Billy Bunter of Greyfriars fame. It's a real feast of thrills and exciting schoolboy adventure.

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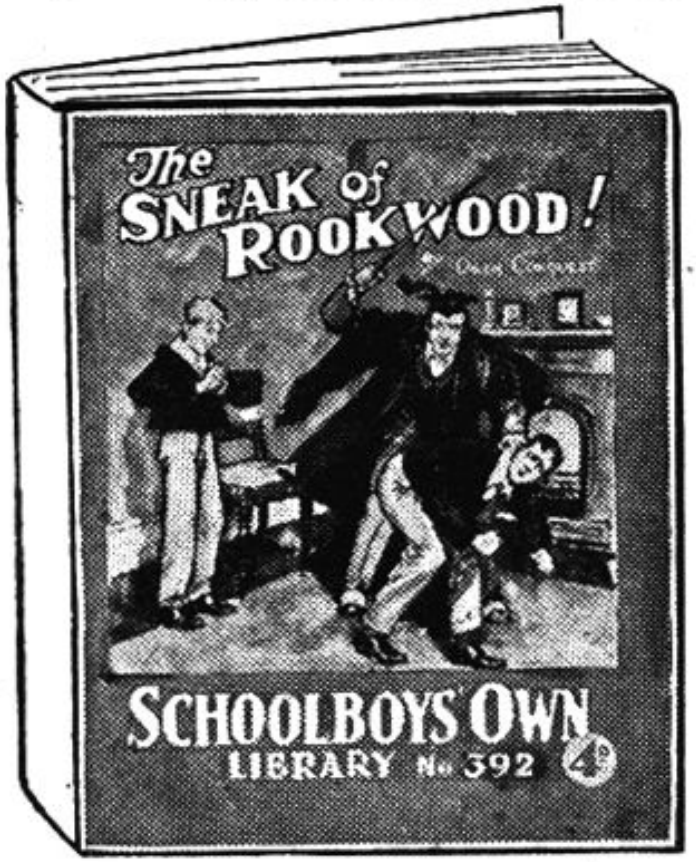

WHEN Marcus Manders, nephew of the unpopular master of the Modern House, comes to Rookwood, it proves the start of trouble for the chums of the Fourth. For Marcus is the biggest sneak who ever sneaked! But he doesn't have things all his own way. Read and enjoy how Jimmy Silver & Co. set out to make Rookwood too hot to hold the sneak. It's a great yarn!

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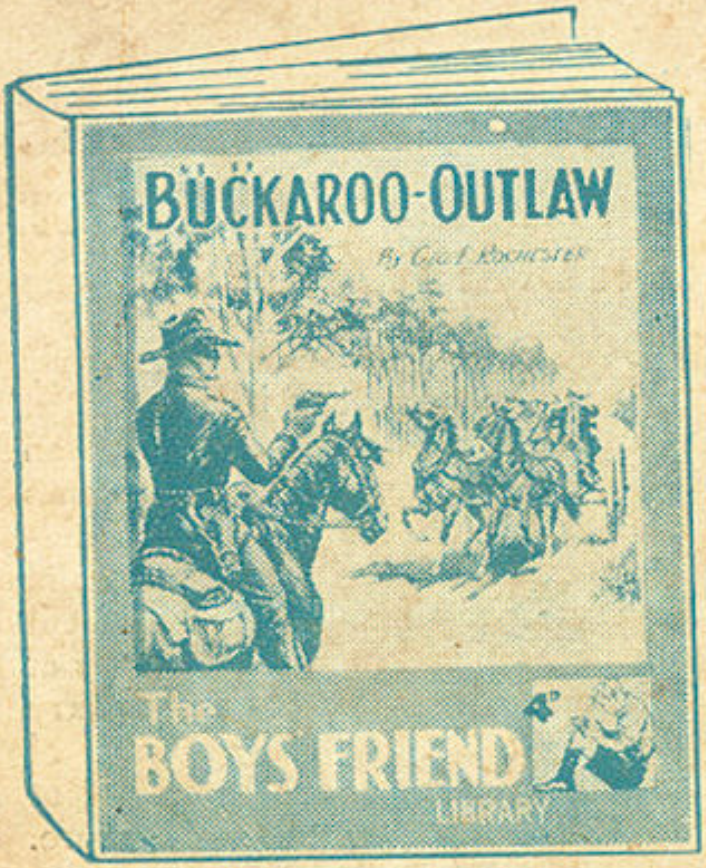

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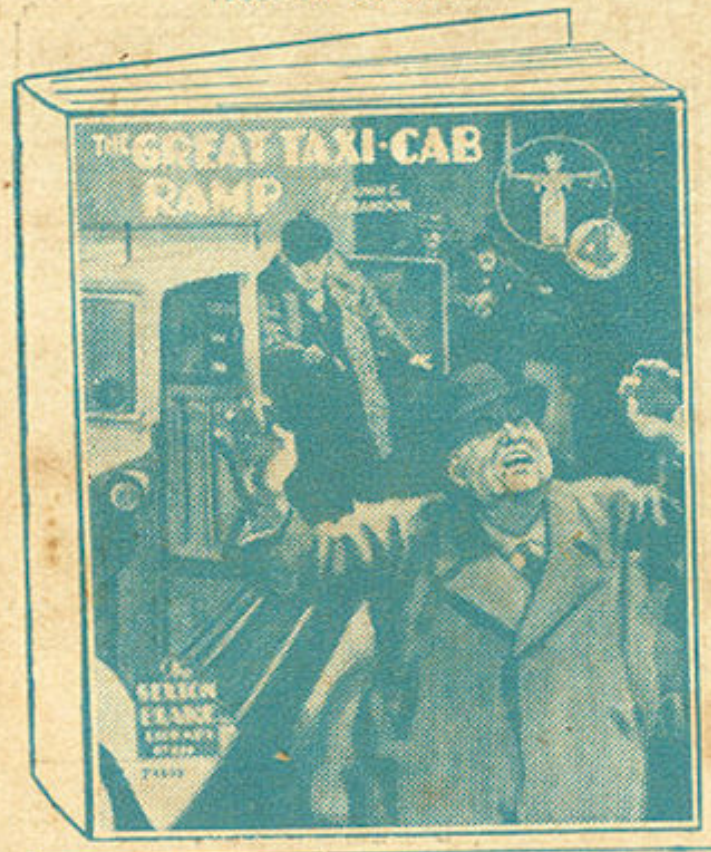

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Printed in England and published on the first Thursday in each month by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement Offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad, 5d. each. Registered for transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd.