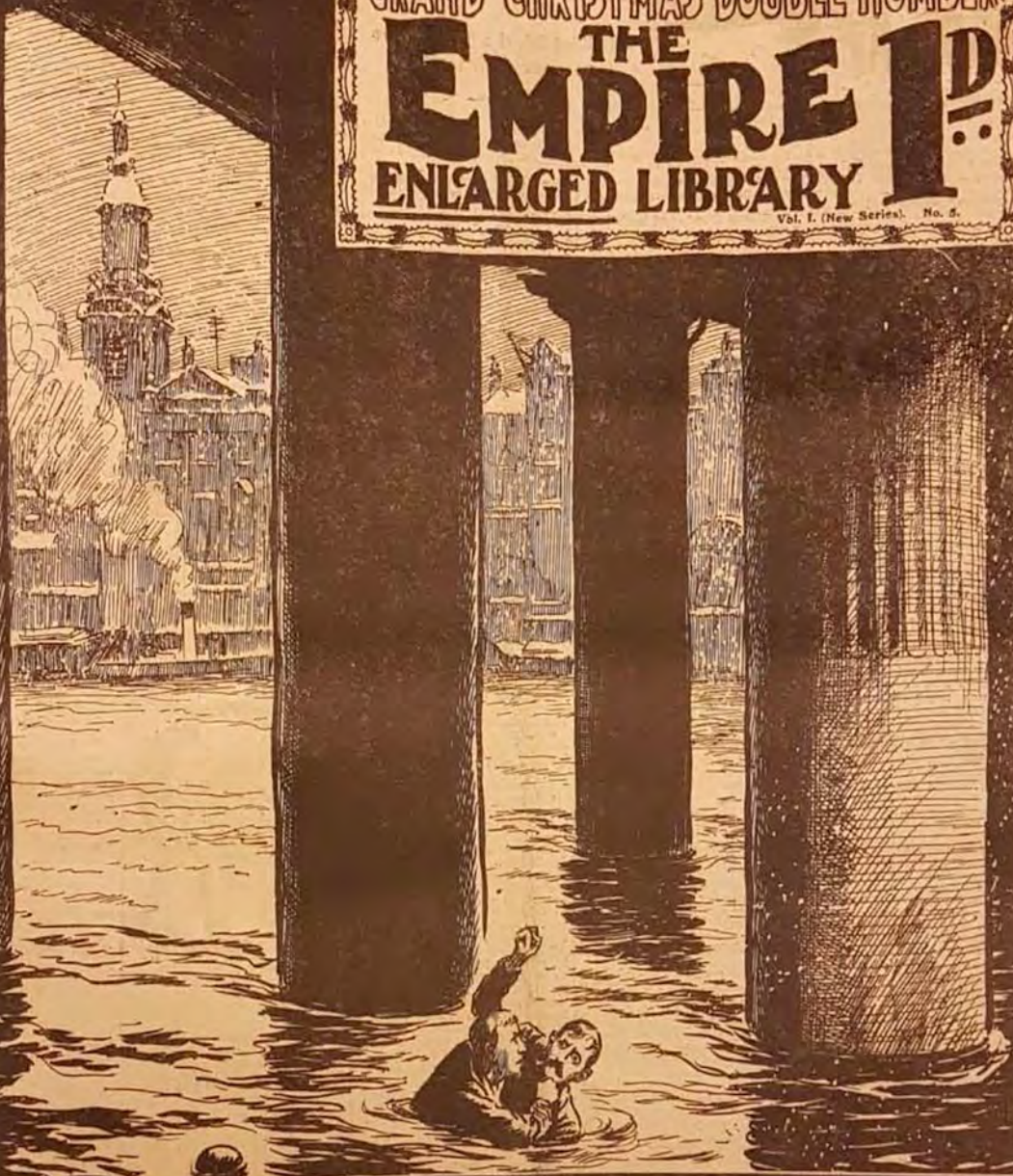


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PANTHER GRAYLE'S CHRISTMAS EVE

A Thrilling Tale of a NEW Detective.
By JACK LANCASTER.



CHAPTER I.

PANTHER GRAYLE frowned as he pressed the receiver of the telephone close against his ear. It was a trunk call, and at first he could hear little beyond a dull,

grinding, whirring noise, as of machinery in motion.
"Speak a little more distinctly," he begged.
A voice that sounded thin and metallic reached his ears above the din.
"You are Gordon Grayle, are you not?"

"Yes."
"Can you come down at once? Bring Mr. Martin, if you like. Hedley Towers, Little Wickham, Kent, is the address."
"Who is speaking, please?"
"Sir Leslie Chaleris. I want your help immediately, if you are willing to give it."

"What has happened?"
"I cannot explain now, but we are in sore trouble. You will be well paid. Can you catch the twelve thirty-five from Victoria?"
"Will you hold the line a minute, please?" the Panther replied.
He laid down the receiver and turned his face towards me. I had only heard half the conversation that had been carried on, and was, of course, quite unable to fill in the gaps.
The Panther briefly explained everything.

"I am wanted down in Kent about a couple of hours from town," he said. "Care to catch the twelve thirty-five and come with me?"
"You may chalk my name up," I said, with alacrity, for I was always glad to accompany the Panther when he was engaged in any of his cases.
"Good!" he said. "You'd better run up and pack. We haven't much time."
I turned on my heel at once and made for the door, for it takes me a long time to hustle my belongings together. At I went, the Panther (Continued on next page.)

A Now and Interesting Story for All.

COUSIN ETHEL'S SCHOOL DAYS

A TALE OF TOM MERRY'S CHUM

BY MARTIN CLIFFORD



Dolores is Missing!
MISS PENFOLD came into the school-room in her hat and walking-dress, showing that she had been out that morning, which accounted for no one having caught a glimpse of her. But it was her face that the pupils noticed.

Miss Penfold was usually so grave and calm and self-possessed that any emotion in her face was certain to attract attention.

And now she was excitedly labouring under a deep emotion. A thrill ran through the school. They felt that there was to be an explanation of the strange mystery at last. They were to learn what had happened in the night.

Miss Penfold stood at her high desk, and made a sign for silence. Every eye was fixed upon her. "I have a very strange and painful announcement to make, my dear girls," she said. "You are aware that your fellow-pupil, Dolores Pelham, has been in disgrace lately. Last night she left St. Freda's."

"There was a general gasp. "Left St. Freda's?" murmured Dolly Carew, aghast. "Run away!" "Oh!" "Run away!" "My gracious!" "My hat!" said the slangy Dolly. "She's bolted!"

Ethel did not speak. She was watching Miss Penfold's white, worn face. "I have been making inquiries all the morning," said Miss Penfold. "There is no doubt that the foolish girl took the earliest train for London, and I have wired there. She will be stopped, and brought back here, and will arrive this afternoon. That is all."

And Miss Penfold left the school-room. The girls poured out into the Close and a babel of tongues. Dolores's action had taken all by surprise. "Bolled!" said Dolly. "I never expected that."

"Oh, you never know what to expect of Dolores!" said Belle Hilton. "Fancy her running away at night. I should be afraid to!"

"Oh, you're afraid of anything!" said Belle scornfully. "I shouldn't be afraid to run away if I wanted to. But I shouldn't want to."

"She must have waited a long time for the train," Milly Pratt remarked. "How hungry she must have been!" "Ha, ha, ha!"

Dolly Carew drew Cousin Ethel aside. "Did you know?" she asked. "I suspected."

"It was curious—we didn't! Dolores is a queer girl!" said Dolly. "But I am sorry for her. It was not my way to think that she could not do anything. Of course, Miss Penfold would do everything to get her caught and brought back at once, to save a scandal. The silly girl! She had no chance of getting away."

"Thank goodness!" said Ethel fervently. "What would have happened to her if she had escaped?" "I suppose she didn't think of that. Dolores is so hot-headed. I say, Ethel, where are you going?"

Ethel Cleveland is a new girl at St. Freda's, and on her first day at school is attracted by the personality of Dolores Pelham, a high-spirited girl of Spanish descent. Dolores confides to Ethel that she hates the school, and intends to run away that night. In spite of all Ethel's attempts to stop her, she goes on with the story.

"Yes," and she agreed to wait for the rest.
"Yes!" said Ethel impatiently. "You told you so! Don't you believe me?"

"Yes," said Dolly, in surprise. "Why shouldn't I believe you? How strange you are this morning. Ethel, didn't you sleep well last night?" "I never woke up once."

"You look awfully sleepy." "Nonsense!" said Ethel brusquely. And she hurried out of the gate. Dolly glanced after her curiously, and shook her head.

"She looks cut up about something," doesn't she?" Dolly remarked. "She may be worried about Dolores," Ethel suggested. Dolly Carew laughed.

"Not likely! She didn't like Dolores; she was always down on her." "That may make her all the sorer now that poor Dolores is in trouble. It would some people," said Ethel.

"If it, yes! But I don't think Ethel is one of those people. Poor old Dolores! I suppose she will be expelled now!" Ethel started. "Expelled!"

"Yes; nothing else, after trying to run away from school. Why, it might have got the school into the papers! I really don't believe Miss Penfold would ever have got over it if it had."

Ethel's brow was clouded. She thought it very probable that Dolores would be expelled from St. Freda's, when she came to think of it, and her heart ached for the wayward girl.

Dolores's Return.
THE St. Freda's girls looked forward anxiously for the return of Dolores Pelham. Miss Penfold had spoken so assuredly that they had not the least doubt that her statement was correct, and that the runaway would arrive that afternoon.

Doubtless the police had been communicated with, and probably they had been ready for poor Dolores to alight when the train stopped in London. At all events, the girls had not the slightest doubt that Dolores would be brought back in the afternoon, as Miss Penfold had declared. And they were right.

It was near the end of the afternoon lesson, in which the girls took so little interest, as was natural under the circumstances, that the teachers were less even-tempered than usual.

Dolores carries out her rash determination, and in the morning is missing from the school. The girls think nothing of her absence, supposing that she is detained in the punishment-room; but the fact that the principal, Miss Penfold, does not appear until the eleven o'clock recess causes much speculation.

door was opened every neck was turned, every eye was upon that part of the hall that could be seen from the school room, and teachers and lessons were for the moment totally forgotten.

Two figures had entered—one that of a lily-pollite-officer, the other that of a slim, pale girl in a cloak, and at the sight of her there was a murmur.

"Dolores!" it was Dolores!
Miss Trellet closed the door upon the hall, but it was in vain to attempt to reduce the girls to attention again.

"Dolores's eyes flashed. "I hate St. Freda's!" she said, in a low, firm voice. "I detest the place—and the people. I will not stay here. You have had me brought back, but I will not stay. If my people will not take me away, I will run away again!"

"There will be no necessity for that," said Miss Penfold quietly. "You will not be allowed to remain at St. Freda's now, whether you wish or not. There is no place for you in this school."

Dolores's lip curled. "I am glad of it." "You are glad to be expelled!" Dolores winced.

"No, no—not that! But I want to go. I do not like the place. Nobody likes me here, nobody understands me, or wants to!"

"I have tried to understand you, Dolores. But I confess that I have headstrong and willful, but never as what you are?"

"What I am! What do you mean, Miss Penfold? I know you think it is wrong of me to do as I have done, but I don't think it wicked," exclaimed Dolores passionately. "Girls and boys have run away from school before!"

"I was not now speaking of your leaving St. Freda's, though that was very, very wrong!"

"Then what?" "Do not attempt to deceive me, Dolores; you cannot think I am

"Why should Dolores be arrested?" she asked. Ethel turned away without replying.

Cousin Ethel would gladly have seen Dolores. But the girl was about up in Miss Penfold's room with the principal of St. Freda's.

Little did the girls dream of what was passing. In that room Dolores was sitting bolt upright upon a chair, her hands clasped in her lap, when Miss Penfold entered. The headmistress's face was hard as granite, but Dolores did not look at her. Her own face was hard with defiance. She had been recaptured, but not conquered.

Dolores did not rise. Miss Penfold stopped, and looked fixedly at the Spanish girl.

"Dolores!" she said quietly. "Half unwillingly Dolores rose to her feet. She meant to be defiant, but there was something in Miss Penfold's manner that impelled respect.

Her eyes met Miss Penfold's steadily enough, however. "I am sorry for this, Dolores," said Miss Penfold quietly. "I should never have believed it of you. I could hardly credit it when I found it was the case. In spite of all your faults, I should never have deemed you capable of this."

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"Then what?" "Do not attempt to deceive me, Dolores; you cannot think I am

ignorant of what happened last night!" said Miss Penfold impatiently. "For your parents' sake, and the sake of the good name of the school, I shall do the best I can. I have sent the lily-pollite officer, and in time to come you will regard it, I am sure, with as much disgust and horror as I feel now!"

Dolores panted. "What—what do you mean?" she cried. "I do not understand! What is it you have not told the officer—is it he knows everything. I was met at the London station by an inspector, and he stepped out of the train, and this man was sent down here with me. He knows that I had run away from school!"

Miss Penfold made an impatient gesture. "Why will you affect ignorance, Dolores? Brink called my attention to the broken ivory on the school desk this morning, and asked me to see if there were any other things missing in the house, as he feared that burglars had been here."

"And I was missing." "Yes, you were missing, Dolores—and something else!" "Something else?"

Dolores's dark eyes were wide open now. "Miss Penfold made a weary gesture. "Dolores, why will you prevaricate? You know what was missing." "I do not."

"Nonsense! As soon as Brink made his statement, I remembered the money I had left in my desk, and I went there to see whether it was safe."

A strange paleness crept into Dolores's olive cheeks. She looked fixedly at the principal of St. Freda's. "The—the money!" she faltered.

"Yes." "But—but what has that to do with me?" "It was gone."

"The money was gone?" "Yes." Dolores's eyes were wide open in horror.

"But—but—but—" She faltered and stammered. "But—you do not think that I have taken the money?" "Dolores!"

"Do you think I have taken it?" demanded Dolores fiercely. "No, no, you are saying this to frighten me—to punish me—you do not think I am a thief?" "Dolores!"

"Why do you not speak?" said Dolores, her voice breaking. "Miss Penfold! You do not—you cannot think I took money from your desk!" Miss Penfold was silent. This passionate denial quite confounded her. She had not dreamed of thinking otherwise for a moment; the fact that Dolores and the money were missing at the same time had seemed conclusive enough, without much thinking about the matter.

She was startled now, and strangely disturbed. "Do you mean to say that you did not take it?" she exclaimed. "I did not—I did not!"

"It was taken—it was gone during the night," said Miss Penfold. "St. Freda's certainly was not entered from outside. Dolores, why do you not confess the truth?" Dolores burst into a dry sob. "I am telling the truth. I did not take it—I did not know it was missing. Oh, believe me!" Miss Penfold shook her head. "I cannot believe you," she said.



"Oh, Miss Penfold, I am innocent—I am innocent!" panted Dolores, her voice broken and husky. "I am not a thief—oh, believe me!"

Buzzes of talk would break out again and again, and at last the school was dismissed, a few minutes early, to the equal relief of mistresses and pupils.

Meanwhile, Dolores had gone to Miss Penfold's room. The police-officer who had brought her to St. Freda's was provided with refreshment, and devoted just as the girls poured out of the big school-room.

They watched him with aed and interested eyes as he strode majestically across the Close and disappeared.

"Brought back by a policeman!" said Milly Pratt. "How awful! It was like being arrested! Terrible!" "Perhaps Dolores was arrested," said Ethel Carew. Dolly stared at her.

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