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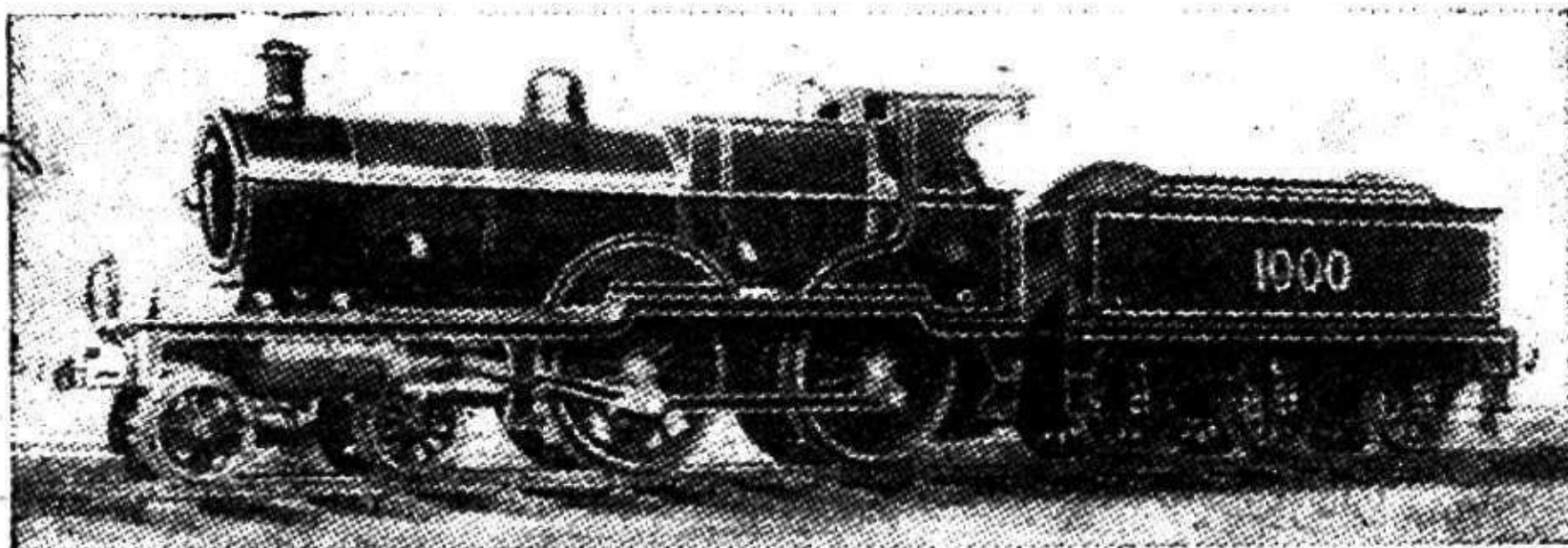


A Thrilling Moment from the story:—

**The Ghost of Somerton
Abbey!**

This Week's Splendid
Christmas Story.

THIS MAGNIFICENT
"TWELVE GUINEA" MODEL STEAM ENGINE



MUST BE WON
 IN A SIMPLE AND ATTRACTIVE
STORY VOTING COMPETITION

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THE COMPETITION

began last week, and ends with issue dated January 27, when a list of the seven St. Frank's stories to be voted for will appear on a coupon.

All you have to do is to place the figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7 in the blanks provided on the coupon against the titles of the stories according to how you consider they rank in order of merit, putting the figure 1 against the story you like best, the figure 2 against the story you like second best, and so on. Where you like two or more stories equally, place the same numbers against them according to their position with the other stories.

All the lists will be totalled, and from this a comparative list will be drawn up, representing the general voting of all competitors. The competitor whose individual voting most nearly corresponds to the general voting will be declared the winner.

IMPORTANT!—A small coupon, bearing title of story and date of issue, will appear every week during the competition, usually on the back of the "Answers" tag. This week it will be found at the foot of page 21 of the book. These small coupons must be cut out and enclosed with the final voting coupon.

Competitors may send in as many attempts as they like, provided each attempt is accompanied by the required number of coupons.

THE PRIZE.—A scale working model of M.R. Express Locomotive, complete with Railway Track.

IT IS NOT A TOY! It is a mechanical reproduction on a reduced scale of one of England's finest locomotives, made by the leading mechanical model makers in this country—Messrs. Bassett-Lowke, Ltd. It will be on exhibition this week at E. G. Butler's, 134, Kentish Town Road, N.W.

The Ghost of Somerton Abbey!

A Capital Christmas
Story of the Boys of
:: St. Frank's ::

CHAPTER I. 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 particularly 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 and 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 and 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. And, of course, a bit of an argument was in progress.

"I never knew such chaps in all my life!" said Handforth tartly. "Didn't I tell you to pack my pocket camera? I want to take a few snapshots at Tregellis Castle—and now the camera can't be found!"

"I've looked for it everywhere," growled Church. "You told me it was in the cupboard, but there's no sign of it there. I expect you've put it somewhere, and forgotten all about it."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Do you think I should forget a thing like that? It's no good you trying to get out of it. You've lost the camera, and you'll have to find it. Are you sure you haven't packed it?"

"Certain," replied McClure. "What's it matter, anyhow? You can't take many photographs at Christmas-time—it's not the right weather. Anyhow, it's your camera, and I don't see why we should worry!"

Handforth glared.

"You rotters!" he said bitterly. "And that's all you care! I leave a thing to you—I trust you to carry out my instructions—and all you can do is to talk like that!"

"What's that in your own case?" asked Church abruptly.

"Eh? Where?"

Handforth was on the point of closing the lid of his suit-case. But he gazed into it in rather a startled way as Church pointed. There, up in one corner, lay the missing camera, half hidden by some notepaper.

"Well, I call that rather rich!" said Church sarcastically. "You slang us like the dickens, and the giddy camera's in your own bag all the time! A fine memory you've got, I don't think!"

"Of course, I didn't put it there!" said Handforth decidedly. "One of you chaps must have made a mistake, and thought my case was yours! But there's no sense in arguing about it."

Church and McClure grinned. They had no intention of arguing. Handforth would never have admitted that he was in the wrong, and his chums were only too glad that the point was settled.

Then 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 suit-case, 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 home. 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 Willy.

"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."

Willy 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! You jolly well beat a gramophone when it comes to talking!"

"Why, you cheeky young sweep!" roared Handforth. "If you think you're going to cheek me in my own study——"

"Oh, there he goes again!" sighed Willy. "Didn't I say he was like a gramophone? He's always playing the same record! It's a pity you can't change the tune sometimes, Ted!"

Handforth pushed up his sleeves.

"You'll change your tune in about five seconds!" he snapped. "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 all 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 babble!"

"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 had 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, you know, 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.

"Blessed if I can see what all the fuss is about," grinned McClure. "What about what you said after breakfast, Handy?"

"What did I say after breakfast?"

"Didn't you tell us that you were worried about Willy?" asked McClure. "Didn't you say that it was a pity he wasn't invited?"

Didn't you express regret, and swear that your holiday would be spoilt?"

"I—I don't seem to remember!" growled Handforth. "Oh, rats! We haven't got time to waste like this! Let's finish the packing."

Whenever Edward Oswald found himself in a bit of a corner, he changed the subject. As a matter of fact, he was secretly delighted to know that his young brother was to form a member of the party.

He had, in truth, told his own chums that something would have to be done about Willy. But it was just like him to kick up a fuss when the very thing he desired had been accomplished. And he took it as a matter of duty to oppose Willy at all times, and on every subject.

Even if he had wanted to argue further, he couldn't have done so. For Reginald Pitt and De Valerie and I came hustling round to give Handforth and 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 goodbyes 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 ex-

pect Lady Heien has made some new arrangement about meeting us at the other end, or something like that."

"But, dear fellow, my aunt positively said that everythin' was fixed up—"

"But plans go wrong sometimes," I put in. "Anyhow, don't waste time. If you want to know what the message is about, you'd better read it. It's the general way, I believe."

"Begad! So it is!"

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 noble face changed colour.

He went red, and then absolutely 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.

"Yes, what's in the wire, Montie?"

"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 is 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 II.

SOMERTON TO THE RESCUE.



HANDFORTH was the first to find his voice.

"What rot!" he exclaimed, with his usual abruptness.

"What absolute piffle! 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 old cart!"

"Up to our necks!" I said. "But it's no good grumbling. Here we are, left in a bunch——"

"All dressed up, as it were, and no dashed place to go to!" put in Archie. "I mean to say, rather apt what? Bally queer how sudden these things biff a chappie in the central region. I don't mind admitting, old tins of fruit, that I'm feeling somewhat doubled up!"

"Doubled up!" snorted Handforth. "Huh! I'm fed-up with the whole thing! This is what comes of keeping servants! They haven't got any more sense than to go and get lumbago at a time like this!"

"If it was only lumbago, it wouldn't matter!" said Pitt. "Lumbago isn't catching. But scarlet fever fairly puts the lid on the whole idea. It would be madness for us to go to the castle with scarlet fever running loose there. We've got to accept the decision of Fate."

"A fat lot of consolation that!" grunted Handforth. "I don't want to say anything nasty—I wouldn't offend Montie like that—but I certainly think his aunt is a dotty chump!"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "Not nasty what? In my opinion, laddie, it is a somewhat foul thing to call a chap's aunt a dotty chump! I mean to say, it's not done! Absolutely not! To be quite exact, absolutely not with assorted knobs!"

"Hear, hear!" said Pitt. "Don't be so insulting, Handy!"

"It's too bad!" growled Handforth. "Why couldn't Lady Helen have sent this wire last week? That's what I want to know! We should have had time to make fresh arrangements if she'd done that."

I sighed.

"Oh, why are people born without brains?" I asked patiently. "You—you ass! It's quite obvious that they knew nothing about this scarlet fever in the castle until this morning. Of course, as soon as they found there was a case of fever on the premises, the only course was to stop our coming."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "I must be allowed to warble that the whole scheme is most frightfully frightful, but at the same time, there it is. I mean to say, it's there! That is, absolutely! It seems to me, dear old lads of the village, that we're all somewhat messed about!"

"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 strolled 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 there has been dirty labour at the cross turnpikes. Some unknown blighter 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—I hardly know how to sympathise."

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.

"By absolutely gad!" ejaculated Archie. "Possibly the old bean is somewhat overworked, and it may be gathering the trend in a slightly warped condish. Do I take it laddie, that you are, as it were, inviting the whole gang to stagger home with you?"

"Of course," said the duke, smiling. "Only you needn't have used the whole dictionary!"

"What!" yelled Pitt. "You're joking, Sommy! You can't really mean it. It's—it's—"

"It's quite simple!" said Somerton. "I'm just off to Somerton Abbey, and you chaps have been left in the cart. Only, this scarlet fever breaking out at Tregellis Castle, you can't go there. So why not make a slight alteration, and come with me to Somerton Abbey?"

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

"Of course!"

"Honour bright?"

"Yes!"

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."

"Of course there isn't," I put in. "Calm down!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Kindly allow the bubbling exuberance to simmer somewhat. I mean to say, it's dashed probable that the poor chappie will be put in a flutter by all this jazzy stuff. Personally, I should be absolutely hot and bothered by such an exhibish!"

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 might lead to."

"How do you mean?" 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 sha'n't be even 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."

"That is to say, in massive slices!" observed Archie. "I mean, the lad's absolutely a what-do-you-call-it—a chappie who skates along at the critical moment, and does the good Samaritan act. You grasp my meaning? He's blown into the landscape—sailed out of the offing, as it were—and come across with the absolute stuff!"

"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 had received a very big disappointment, for they had believed that the Christmas party was to be ruined, and it really made little difference to them whether the party went to Tregellis Castle or to Somerton Abbey.

In fact, it must be admitted that we were all very pleased at the change. We preferred it. Lady Helen Tregellis-West was a charming hostess, and Sir Montie's country seat was a fine old place. But it was a distinct advance on the social scale, so to speak, to spend Christmas in a ducal palace. It would be something to talk about afterwards.

It can be imagined, therefore, that all the members of the party 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 all arrive hours sooner. Another important point was that the fares were only about half.

And as all the fellows had all 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 over the snow covered lanes. It didn't carry 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 at once.

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.



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.

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.

The Somerton family was one of the most aged and honoured in the whole of England, and the noble junior was justly proud of his line.

And, 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.

And it need not be imagined that because Somerton Abbey was one of England's oldest piles it was out of date. The place literally blazed with electric light, and there was an air of gaiety and festivity about the warmly lighted windows which made us feel supremely happy.

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 gov'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. Indeed, if I had not known her to be Somerton's mother, I should never have believed it possible. She looked scarcely more than thirty.

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 bedrooms 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. "It was all fixed up on the spur of the moment, and so you can't expect too much. But 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 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 III.

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 gov'nor sternly. "But what of her Grace? 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 express! 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."

"In plain English, Glenthorne, what are you getting at?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Absolutely!" said Archie.

"But that's no answer, my boy."

"I should say, absolutely not!" ejaculated Archie. "That is—to be quite frank

—the whole thing's fearfully fearful! Don't you grasp the fact, laddie? I—I should say, a thousand pardons, Mr. Lee! Laddie is hardly the word, what?"

"Why don't you get down to the facts, Archie?" I chuckled.

"Absolutely!" said Archie hastily.

"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 whatnots!"

"He must have been fairly loaded!" I chuckled.

"Loaded!" repeated Archie, groping for his monocle. "I've got to admit it, dear one—I've come over frightfully goosey! The old tissues are visibly wilting under the strain! You see, Phipps has got the whole bally bag of tricks with him."

"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 in the plan. Tregellis-West wired to his aunt before leaving Bell-ton, 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.

There was a pretty heavy kind of silence.

"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—or De Valerie was having a chat with a chambermaid. 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 boys, 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?"

"My dear lad, the legend of the Somertons is known practically throughout the civilised world," replied Nelson Lee. "In many respects it closely resembles the mystery of Glamis Castle—which is equally famous."

"Something about a locked room, isn't it, sir?" I asked.

"Precisely," 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. In a way, this is almost identical with the Glamis Castle story. 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 gov'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 gov'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 gov'nor impatiently. "You boys know everything! I was attempting to hoodwink myself 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 gov'nor. "It is because of this private family performance that the boy was instructed to come home alone. But, under 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 bedrooms, all adjoining, in the east wing. There were four of us in each room, and the beds proved to be absolute havens of comfort in comparison to the dormitory cots 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 drily.

"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, you know—those ripping Russian cakes, all colours, and tasting winey! 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 springs 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 become aroused over nothing, although a very slight sound is sufficient to get 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 IV.

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!"

I stared at him wrathfully.

"You—you fat burglar!" I said, with indignation. "The hospitality of a duke's palace isn't enough for you! You've got to get up in the middle of the night, and pilfer some grub! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Get back to bed before I do something drastic!"

"Oh, don't be dotty!" said Fatty, in alarm. "Don't you understand? I must go—I'm absolutely faint from want of food! I tell you it won't take me long, and there's nobody about now. It's after midnight, and everybody's in bed."

"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 bed-clothes aside. I'll admit he took me by surprise. I had expected him to carry on with the conversation, hoping that I should be able to persuade him to show a little common sense.

He probably realised that I might do something drastic, as I had hinted, and so he seized his chance while the chance was good, so to speak. For a moment I thought of following him, but decided otherwise.

"Why should I bother about the over-fed 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 dark corridors. The whole abbey was in bed by now, and the great mansion was filled with that peculiar kind of silence which can always be noted in ancient piles.

It wasn't really a silence at all.

There were no definite sounds, but all kinds of rustlings and creakings. The very

stairs seemed to crack, as though invisible feet were mounting them. Fatty heard them, as he paused on the great landing.

And the corridors and staircases were not in 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 bedroom, 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 bedroom 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 ain'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. As he walked along, he pictured that sideboard. And the ghosts were beaten.

Once or twice he was in danger of backsliding, and the only thought that kept him going was that he was nearer and nearer to the grub. 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



"Great frying chestnuts!" muttered a shaky voice. "Is—is that you, Nipper? Oh, thank goodness! I—I thought that——"

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 bedroom—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 so that the things should be balanced. 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 bedroom door—and that was a silly thing, now he came to think of it. How the baked potato 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 wretched part about the whole affair 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.

And by now his arms were aching considerably—not because his load was weighty, but because it was very awkward. He bitterly grumbled at the ducal staff for not having a basket or a large bag knocking about in a handy position. What was the good of servants if they couldn't provide such a simple thing as a bag?

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 further away than it had seemed before. This was quite understandable—but not to

Fatty. For he was now situated in the furthest 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. Yes, he would go back, and start 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. His heart suspended action.

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. And the extent of his flight may be gathered from the fact that he absolutely forgot

(Continued on page 15.)

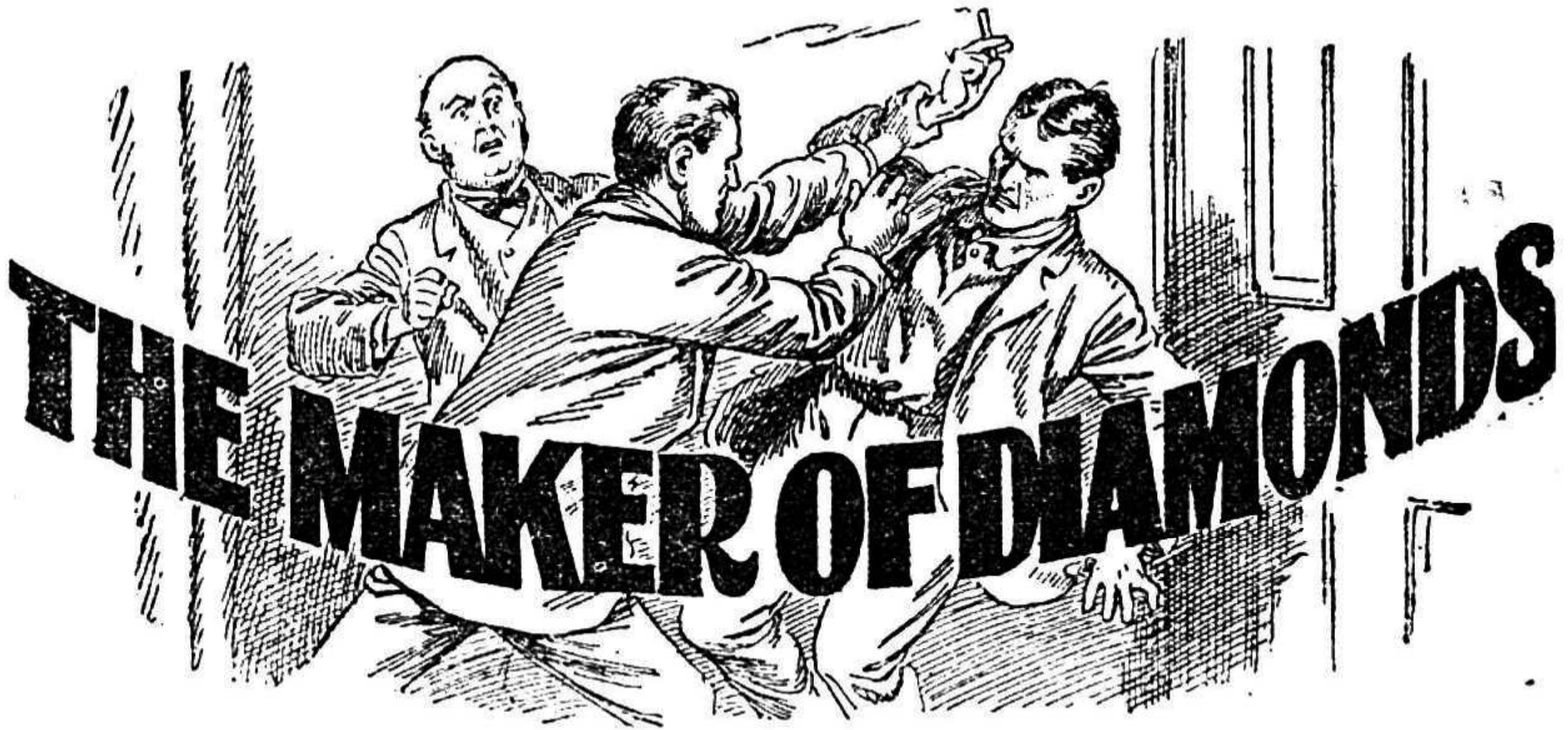
EVERY WEEK—TWO GRAND COMPLETE DETECTIVE STORIES !



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OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

No. 3. PRESENTED WITH "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY." Dec. 23, 1922



This story is written by an authority on the methods employed by Scotland Yard's sleuths in tracking down the subtle jewel crook.

FLEETING twisted his watch-chain absently round his fingers till it cut the flesh.

"They're diamonds all right, all right," he said. "That's the blazes of it."

Heldway smiled genially at the jeweller.

"Where do I come in? I don't see what you've to complain about. You admit, yourself, that there's a fortune in it."

He spoke quietly, yet there was a subtle inflection of irony in his tone that caused the jeweller to scrutinise his face with suspicion. Somehow, Heldway made him feel a fool, and Fleeting knew he was not a fool. He recognised himself—more than other men recognised him—as one of the keenest jewellers in Hatton Garden.

Being a jeweller, he was one of the most credulous of men. It spoke for itself that he had called in Heldway. There were those at Scotland Yard who held Heldway in high esteem.

"There's a screw loose somewhere," he protested, releasing his chain and pushing out a pair of delicate hands. "I feel it. The thing's too good to be true. Why, if

I hadn't seen it myself, I'd have sworn those diamonds came from Kimberley."

The detective-inspector shrugged his shoulders listlessly.

"Ah, of course, an expert can always tell which mine a stone has come from."

Fleeting seethed inwardly. He was in a burning excitement, and the placidity of the other annoyed him. He did not consider that while his own agitation was to be attributed to the possibility of making a fortune beyond his wildest dreams, or losing a sum that would long cripple him, the detective had nothing to gain or lose.

"What do you make of it?" Fleeting demanded bluntly.

Heldway slowly changed his position till his elbow rested on the mantelpiece. He seemed to be weighing the question. At last he spoke.

"What it comes to is this: This man Vernet says he can make diamonds, and offers to sell a half-interest in his secret to you for a hundred thousand pounds. He gives a demonstration under the most stringent tests, and you fail to find out any fake. The diamonds are genuine. Now it

seems to me one of two things—either Vernet can do what he says, or your precautions against trickery have not been effective.”

“Hang it all!” retorted Fleeting impatiently. “What more could I do? The room in which he works is here in my office. It was fitted up by firms whom I specified, according to his ideas, with a little charcoal furnace and certain chemical preparations. I did all the buying. Everything passed through my hands. It is impossible that he should have had any confederates among the workmen. When he has gone in to supervise the construction of the furnace, I have been with him, watching every movement. That he could have hid anything in the room is quite impossible.”

“Have you seen him actually make these gems?”

“No,” admitted Fleeting. “I can’t very well expect him to lay his hand down till I have paid cash. It’s too big a thing to take chances on. Mind you, Vernet’s perfectly reasonable. He invited me to take precautions against trickery, and I have. Each time he goes into the laboratory he changes every stitch of clothing for a suit I have provided. I have engaged an expert searcher, who used to be at the diamond fields, to examine his hair, his mouth, his ears, and so on. I have stood guard over the door while he’s been inside. And always he has come out with perhaps one, perhaps two, perhaps three, rough stones, well up to the average size and quality.”

Heldway had been softly whistling a bar of ragtime. He broke off to press home the logical fact.

“Well, if they’re not already in the room, and he doesn’t take ’em in, he must manufacture them.”

“I wish I could be sure,” said Fleeting. “It seems all right, and yet—one does not like to sink a hatful of money. I want to be dead sure. That’s why I’d like you to look into the business.”

The detective-inspector settled himself in a chair.

“The long and short of it is, that you’re in for a gamble and want to be sure you’ll win before you risk your money. I guess you know if I take it up and it is a swindle, you’ll have to take it into court. Let’s be clear about that.”

The jeweller reddened.

“Look here, Mr. Heldway, I don’t mind so much myself; but there’s another thing—my daughter—”

“Oh, there’s a lady in the case?” The corner’s of Heldway’s eyes wrinkled. “Suppose you tell me all you know about Vernet.”

“We ran across him while we were in Chamonix last summer,” replied Fleeting.

“You know how one falls into these holiday acquaintanceships. Don’t run away with the idea that I’ve got any fixed suspicions of him, Mr. Heldway. I believe in him—but I want to be sure. He’s certainly a gentleman, and he was in touch with some very nice people. He made himself agreeable to Elsie

—that’s my daughter—and he and I fell rather together. I’m not impressionable, but I must say I like him. Apart from the money, I should be sorry if there were any fake in this. I should put him about thirty. His mother was English and his father French. He’s got a little estate in France, and for these last ten years has been knocking about the world. He speaks English as well as you or I.

“Of course, my business leaked out. I’m a pretty well-known man. I don’t remember precisely how the matter arose, but one day Vernet asked me for a private interview. I thought he wished to see me about something else—”

“Miss Fleeting?” interjected Heldway.

“Yes,” Fleeting hesitated. “I didn’t intend to tell you this, Mr. Heldway, but you may as well know it. It makes the situation rather more delicate. He did see me about Elsie, but he introduced the other affair, and that matter remains in abeyance for the time being. He told me he had stumbled on the discovery while making certain chemical experiments, and offered to submit to any test I might propose short of showing me the actual process. I, of course, accepted, and invited him over to my little country place till inquiries were completed.”

The detective’s whistling stopped.

“Made any inquiries about the chap?” he demanded.

“Naturally. His estate is near Danville, in the Department of Eure. I pleaded business in London, and put a couple of days in there myself as a tourist. I corroborated all that he told me about his affairs. His income, translated into English would be about seven hundred a year. Nothing tremendous, but quite enough.”

A superficial insight might hold that a lifetime of detective work would make a man a cynic. Heldway had his share of cynicism, but, like all successful men of his profession, he had sympathy. He could appreciate something of the diverse feelings by which the jeweller was torn—his care for his daughter, his pocket, his vanity. He rose and dropped his hand lightly on the other’s shoulder.

“When does the next demonstration take place?”

“On Monday.”

“Good. Now, can you invite me down to your place for the week-end as a friend? I’d like to see Vernet. Meanwhile, if you’ve got a photograph of him, any writing, any scrap of material concerning him, you let me have it. And by the way, I’d like a description of Vernet—hair, eyes, height, and so on. Good-bye for the present. I’ll be down some time Saturday afternoon.”

Ten minutes later Heldway sauntered out of the office, whistling softly. He did not wonder that Fleeting, canny man, felt uneasy. The making of diamonds—profitably—was a big thing, and a man who could prove his good faith would easily obtain more than one hundred thousand pounds for a

half-share. True, there was Elsie Fleeting—but, not having seen her, Heldway did not know exactly how far she might weigh in the transaction.

The spade work of detection is a laborious business, but very necessary to every detective outside the story-books. Juries do not convict on theories, however brilliant and plausible. They want facts—facts that can be sworn to. And so far Heldway had no facts—only a statement by Fleeting.

For an hour or more Heldway laboured diligently. The Criminal Record Office put him in possession of facts relating to every one of the adventurers of this type known to be in England. Big Grant, the head of the department, knew the science and practice of identification backwards, assisted in a close comparison of the portraits available with the amateur photograph of Vernet in the midst of a group which Fleeting had supplied. But they drew blank.

The finger-prints of Vernet might have simplified the search to a matter of minutes. As they were not available, the Record Office staff was set to work to trace through the old system of indexes, a tedious, lengthy job, by the light of the description Vernet had offered. They looked not under the letter "V," but in that section of the records devoted to men five feet nine in height with brown hair and hazel eyes.

This phase of the search Heldway left to the department, though at times he brought in a colleague to examine the photograph on the chance that Vernet might be recognised. At intervals he dispatched cryptic cables to Paris and New York. Possibly Roger Vernet would have been flattered had he known how many people were being stirred to an interest in his career.

A neat little motor-car was waiting at the station when, on Saturday, Heldway took his trip to Haslemere, and a run of a couple of miles brought him to a pine-shaded villa in which Fleeting had his country retreat. The detective nodded approval at the trim gables, the rose-bordered lawn, and the well-rolled gravel paths.

Fleeting, a little nervous and ill at ease, welcomed him with effusion, and with a wave of his hand introduced the couple who were standing in the shade of the veranda.

"Mr. Heldway—my daughter. Vernet, a friend of mine—Mr. Heldway."

The detective found himself gripping a slender, almost effeminate hand, and Vernet's eyes did not drop under his scrutiny. Indeed, they were scrutinising him with a languorous ease that was almost insolent. The maker of diamonds had no appearance of the scientific student. He had been dressed by an artist in tailoring. His boots, his meticulously creased trousers, the sloping waist of his jacket, were all beyond criticism. He had a little tooth-brush moustache which he stroked from time to time with a delicate forefinger. His handkerchief was tinged with scent. Heldway, who was not self-conscious, felt uncouth in his presence.

"Delighted to know you," said the young man, but his face had the abstract look of one wrestling with an abstruse mental problem. Heldway wondered if he had any suspicion of his identity. He murmured some commonplace, and his gaze wandered momentarily to the girl—a picture in grey and white. Erect and slender, with sparkling blue eyes and cheeks tanned to a wholesome clearness by fresh air and exercise, she did not conform at all to his mental impression of her. This was not the sort of woman to become infatuated with an adventurer. And yet—

They went in to lunch. Heldway was a good talker when he was in the vein, and conversation moved swiftly. He set himself to draw Vernet out, and the other was nothing loath. He had apparently been everywhere and seen everything.

"If this man's playing with a cold deck, he's got nerve," meditated the detective.

Once, during a lull in the conversation, he again surprised the bland, hazel eyes surveying him with abstract calculation. Vernet pulled himself together.

"Come, Mr. Heldway, a man of your profession is always running against experiences. I appeal to Miss Fleeting. Here's a real live detective, and he hasn't told us one of his adventures."

The shot was sudden, and for the moment Heldway was thrown off his balance. A flicker of astonishment passed across his features. Then he smiled. Vernet was evidently determined to drag him boldly into the open.

"Are you a detective?" inquired the girl. "How exciting! Dad only told us you were a friend of his."

Heldway went imperturbably on with his sweet.

"Yes, I am a detective, Miss Fleeting. I'm afraid it is not so exciting as the novelists would have you believe. How did you know?" He addressed Vernet.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't recall your face till this moment," he answered indifferently. "I saw you give evidence at the Old Bailey in a murder case last year. Are you down here on business?"

It was difficult for Heldway to repress a laugh. Whether Vernet was a rogue or not, he was not so simple as not to put a construction on the circumstances.

"An official of police is always more or less on business," he parried. "But I'm here, through Mr. Fleeting's kindness, only for fresh air."

"So you haven't brought your handcuffs?" Vernet was smiling inwardly. The official wondered if he meant a challenge.

"I don't anticipate any occasion to use them down here," he laughed.

Fleeting, who had been fidgeting uneasily in his chair, broke in:

"Here's coffee. Have a cigar, Heldway. My daughter doesn't mind. I never ask Vernet. He's got his own particular brand

of poisonous cigarettes. I believe he smokes them in his sleep."

"It's a bad habit," said Vernet. "If I had any strength of will I should give them up. But I'm lost without a cigarette." He extracted a fat one from a gold case, and, lighting it, blew a circle of smoke into the air. "If I were a criminal, now there would be a clue for you, Mr. Heldway. You'd only have to look for an insatiable consumer of cigarettes, like Raffles—eh?"

He held the white tube up to the light. "I have them specially made, with my initials on the paper."

"The perfect criminal—and thank Heaven there is none—would have no fixed habits," commented Heldway.

It was late in the afternoon before he got the chance of a word alone with his host. Miss Fleeting had accepted the diamond-maker's challenge to billiards, and the two elder men were contemplating the moonlight from the veranda. Fleeting was anxious to make it clear that he had given no hint of the detective's identity. Heldway brushed away his explanation.

"Never mind about that. You haven't shown me over the house yet. Suppose we take the opportunity now."

"I didn't suppose you'd be interested. It's entirely modern. However, come along."

So it was that, when he retired, the detective had in his mind a very complete plan of the sleeping apartments of the house, especially the relation of his own bedroom to that occupied by Vernet. Beyond taking off his boots and collar, he had made no attempt to undress. He stretched himself out in an armchair with a novel, and composed himself to read until such a time as the household should be asleep. At two o'clock he laid aside his book and rummaged in his kit bag. A small electric torch about the size of an ordinary match-box, a dozen master-keys, and a red silk handkerchief he adjusted on his face, the holes serving as eyeslits. The keys and the torch he carried in his hands.

There are moments when a police officer steps out of the limits of strict legality. He knows how great a risk he runs, for if he fails of his purpose he can expect no countenance from his superiors. There was no possible excuse for Heldway in what was, in effect, an act of burglary. He had deliberately refrained from saying anything to Fleeting of his intention, partly, it must be admitted, because he was afraid that the jeweller might exercise a veto.

Softly he stepped into the corridor, his stockinged feet making no sound on the soft carpet. A thin thread of light cut through the darkness, affording just enough light to prevent his blundering into any furniture. More than once he switched off the light and stood stock still as his ear caught those indefinite sounds that are always audible in a sleeping household.

He reached Vernet's door and softly turned the handle. As he expected, it was locked.

Very stealthily he tried his keys one after the other.

His muscles contracted involuntarily as a light click told that the bolt had shot back. He stood stiffly, listening intently.

Five minutes elapsed before he ventured to thrust open the door and cautiously edge his way inside. He waited for a matter of seconds till the deep, regular breathing from the bed reassured him. Then he flashed a bead of light on the wardrobe, and all his movements quickened. Whatever he sought he had guessed the diamond-maker would carry on him during the day—otherwise Heldway would not have waited till now to ransack the room.

Presently he gave an almost unconscious ejaculation of triumph, as he dragged out of a pocket a little wash-leather bag. With hasty fingers he opened it and directed the rays of his lamp on twenty or thirty uncut diamonds. And then, even while he chuckled to himself, the room was suddenly flooded with light. He wheeled abruptly. Vernet was sitting up in his bed, one hand on the electric light switch, the other holding a revolver, its muzzle steadily directed towards Heldway.

"Stand still, my friend." Vernet's voice was cold and menacing. "Perhaps it would be as well if you put your hands above your head." His own hand had deserted the switch and began groping for the bell. "I see you have masked your face—a wise precaution."

Heldway lowered his head, swerved sideways, and plunged forward so swiftly that it seemed as if all his movements were simultaneous. A quick report rang out, and a bullet shattered the glass of the wardrobe. Before Vernet's finger could compress on the trigger again, Heldway was upon him. His full weight was behind his left as he swung it to Vernet's jaw, and the man dropped limply back on his pillow.

The detective fled. It was a matter of seconds from the time Vernet had fired till he reached his own room and closed and locked the door. He could hear people rushing about and sleepy voices raised in inquiry. Hastily he tore off his clothes and tumbled into his pyjamas. A thunderous knock interrupted him before he had finished. He continued an audible yawn the while he ruffled his bed noiselessly to give it the appearance of having been slept in, and in his voice as he put a question was the querulous tone of a man just aroused.

"It's me—Fleeting. Wake up. There's been burglars. They've murdered Vernet."

"Good heavens!" There was a fervour that was unfeigned in the detective's voice. He had had no time to calculate his blow with nicety, and trusted that he had not struck harder than he meant. A moment later he flung open the door, and while Fleeting waited, put on his slippers and dressing-gown. His alibi was convincing.

They went together to the diamond-maker's room. He was relieved to find that

OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

Vernet was very far from dead, though still unconscious.

"Somebody has knocked him out, that's all," he diagnosed. "He'll be all right in a little while." He turned on the group of servants who had gathered in the room. "Some of you men get out into the grounds. The burglar can't have got far."

"Hadn't some one better go for the police?" said the jeweller.

"Not worth while. They can do nothing to-night that we can't do without them. If we don't catch the man ourselves, I'll

grounds. One man at least had scarcely expected there would. He was undecided whether to take Fleeting into his confidence. If all had gone well he would have done so—indeed, it would have been necessary to his plan.

"I reckoned that if Vernet was on the ramp he would have a stock of diamonds to draw on," he explained to a colleague later. "I wanted to lay my hands on them, and to get Fielding to weigh and measure them and examine them, so that he could tell them again. Then I was going to replace them.



And then, even while he chuckled to himself, the room was suddenly flooded with light. He wheeled abruptly. Vernet was sitting up in bed, one hand on the electric light switch, the other holding a revolver, its muzzle steadily directed towards Heldway.

run out to put the case in their hands myself."

No one disputed his authority. He calculated that the flustered menservants would make enough confusion in the garden to keep up the illusion of a burglar, and he did not want to have to cause the local police useless trouble. Nevertheless, after seeing Vernet comfortably disposed, he went to direct the search. He it was, curiously enough, who discovered a broken pane of glass in an unfastened scullery window—proof of the means by which the burglar had effected an entrance.

Nothing resulted from a search of the

If Vernet played any of them during his manufacturing stunt, then we would have had him."

Heldway was a man who rarely did a thing without an object, and there was now no object in telling Fleeting. He might safely be allowed to nurse the delusion of a burglar if he would. The diamonds he resolved to keep, for the time being. Unless Vernet had a reserve store, which was unlikely, he would be forced to procure more or postpone Monday's demonstration. There was, of course, the possibility that he really could make diamonds. But the detective had little fear of that.

"Nothing gone," repeated Fleeting, who had been stocktaking with the butler. "That is, unless Vernet's lost anything."

"Let's hope he hasn't," said Heldway cheerfully. "The chap's got away, whoever he was. Perhaps Vernet will give us something to work on when he comes round."

As a fact, Vernet a quarter of an hour later was able to throw little light on the situation. He was still a little dazed and unable to think or express himself clearly.

"Woke up . . . masked man . . . going through my clothes . . . came for me . . . fired . . . missed him. Then he hit me." He lay back wearily, and, at Heldway's suggestion, was permitted to sleep.

But it was a different man who appeared at breakfast. Spruce and debonair, he seemed little affected by his adventure, as in well-chosen phrases he told of his encounter with the burglar.

"He was confoundedly quick," he admitted. "I didn't think I could have missed at that distance. As it was, all he got was a bag of twenty-five rough diamonds—the result of some of my experiments." He smiled brightly at Heldway.

"Experiments?" repeated the detective blankly.

"Ah! I forgot. It's a little secret between Fleeting and myself. By the way, Fleeting, can the chauffeur run me into Haslemere after breakfast? I want to send a wire."

"I'll go with you if you don't mind," interposed Heldway. "We may as well see the local police. This burglary is really their affair." He had his own ideas as to what Vernet's wire might contain.

No one who beheld the two side by side in the car would have considered them as the hunter and the hunted, the attacker and the defender. Heldway had risen to Vernet's flow of spirits, and accepted the light chaff of the other without resentment.

"Now, if I didn't know you were above suspicion," remarked the diamond-maker once, "I should be inclined to think you were the burglar all the fuss was about last night. He was just about your build."

It was a deftly conveyed intimation that Vernet had guessed something of the object of the midnight raid. Heldway laughed.

"Oh, there's no need for me to turn burglar yet."

"One never knows," retorted Vernet.

Vernet went on to the post office, but Heldway got out of the car at the police-station. As a matter of detail he reported the burglary, and the facts were solemnly written down on an official form by the officer in charge. Looking up for a fresh dip of ink, the officer saw a wink flicker on Heldway's grim face.

"I shouldn't waste too much trouble over the case if I were you," said Heldway. "Of course, it's none of my business, but if I might suggest a policy of masterly inactivity—you understand?"

The other was a man of quick perception. He grinned.

"Not altogether. I'm not going to cross-examine you. If you like, I'll go back with you. You just want me to look wise?"

"Exactly," assented Heldway. "Now, can I use your 'phone for a moment? I want to talk to the Yard."

When he put down the receiver he was whistling softly to himself.

The three men—Vernet, Heldway, and Fleeting—had travelled to Waterloo together, and there separated, the last named to Hatton Garden, Heldway to Scotland Yard, and Vernet to keep an appointment. The demonstration was fixed to take place at noon.

Heldway's business with the department did not keep him long, and when he left it was in a taxi-cab straight for Fleeting's place of business. A couple of men were loitering in conversation outside the door, but as Heldway brushed by them they might have been perfect strangers to him instead of two of his most astute subordinates.

Fleeting was in a pessimistic mood.

"I've got to make a decision to-day, one way or the other, Heldway. Unless you can prove something definite after Vernet's experiment, I shall close the deal. He threatens to go to Burnett's. You've not found out anything?"

"Only that he's a smart man," parried the detective evasively. "I'll make a report to you after the demonstration. Meanwhile, I'd like to get up to the laboratory. Is there any place there where I can hide?"

"Not room for a mouse," declared Fleeting. "I had it cleared specially."

"Then the outer room will have to do. Is there a cupboard or a curtain in that outer room anywhere, where I can be out of sight?"

"There are heavy, long, plush curtains to the windows. But why out of sight? I am sure Vernet would not object—in fact, I am certain he has guessed you are watching him in my interests."

"So am I," answered Heldway grimly. "But even if he guesses I am concealed, he will say nothing."

"I like that, you know. It shows he isn't afraid of investigation."

"H'm!" grunted Heldway.

Twelve o'clock was striking when Vernet entered, accompanied by Fleeting and a third man, whom the detective, watching from behind the curtain, guessed to be the expert searcher. Little time was wasted in preliminaries. The diamond-maker at once began to strip. The inevitable cigarette was still between his lips. The searcher made a slow, painstaking examination, and Vernet put on the suit which had been arranged for him.

He puffed out a cloud of blue smoke and stepped to the laboratory door.

Heldway flung back the curtain.

"One moment, Mr. Vernet," he said.

Vernet stood with one hand on the door, the other holding his cigarette. His eyebrows went up in well-bred surprise, and he made a little gesture of annoyance.

"This isn't quite fair, Fleeting, I asked you to take every precaution you wished, but I did think you'd be open and above-board and not set this man to spy— Oh!"

The detective had gripped his wrist. There was a second's struggle, and then he staggered back from a quick push by the detective. Heldway had in his hand the broken fragments of the cigarette Vernet had been smoking. The diamond-maker had gone white. His fists clenched and his lips moved without speaking.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Heldway.

He had crumbled the cigarette into shreds. In the tobacco in the palm of his hand lay three rough diamonds.

It was then Vernet saw his opportunity. With a rapid movement he was at the door and, flinging it open, vanished before anyone could lift a finger to intercept him.

"Never mind," said Heldway quietly; and, lifting the window, he gave a long, low whistle.

He could see his two men arrange themselves one on each side of the door. One calmly stuck out a foot as Vernet emerged. The other caught him as he tripped. He was as helpless as a child in their hands. Not a word was spoken as he was marched with business-like haste back into the office.

"Vernet," said Heldway, as he again confronted the trickster, "you will be charged with attempting to obtain money by means of a trick. You may volunteer any statement, but remember anything you say may be used against you. One of you two fetch a cab."

Returning from the police-station, Heldway accepted one of Fleeting's choice cigars, and explained.

"There are a lot of people," he said, "who believe that when you know a man's guilty, all you've got to do is to arrest him. Those same people would raise Cain, of course, if one really did so. I believed Vernet was a wrong 'un from the start, but when you told me of your inquiries, I was not quite certain. He wasn't in our records, nor could I find any of our men who recognised him. Of course I cabled to France and had a little investigation made there. The French police got hold of Vernet's bankers, who assured them that he had last been in touch with their agents at Cairo. That was only five weeks ago."

"But," remonstrated Fleeting, "Vernet was—"

"Wait a minute, please. It was clear there were two Vernets. I asked the French people to procure me a photograph or a description of their Vernet, and at the same time posted them a copy of the portrait of ours. You see, it didn't matter very much whether the man was an impostor or not until I could prove that our man was trying to defraud you. I came down to Haslemere pretty positive in my own mind. Ver-

net—our Vernet—showed pretty clearly that he knew I was gunning for him, and that worried me a little, for it was obvious he was confident of getting away with his game in spite of me. Bear in mind that I had nothing against him that was definite. I wanted to get hold of the reserve diamonds that he was planting on you. I put up the burglary hoping to get them, take a record of them, and put them back. However, that fell through.

"This morning, when we came up, I had arranged for a couple of men to pick up Vernet at Waterloo. They shadowed him to the bar of a public-house in Shaftesbury Avenue. There he met a crook well known to us—a man called Wiggins. They had a drink together, and then Vernet took out his cigarette-case. It was empty. Wiggins at once produced his. 'Take two or three,' he said; 'you'll like them. They're a special brand.'

"I had waited at the Yard, and one of my men reported this over the 'phone. Things began to take shape, and I took a chance. I ordered them to detain Wiggins on suspicion the moment the two separated. Meanwhile, there was a batch of correspondence from France for me. They had identified the photograph I sent over as that of a young Englishman named Meldrum who had once been a sort of companion to Vernet. They had broken off association over some card-cheating business. You see, you had made the mistake of confining your attention to Vernet's standing, and as the man you were dealing with was not Vernet, you were deceived by Vernet's good reputation.

"When I came on here I knew what I had to look for. It was now merely a question of catching Meldrum in the act. I waited until the last moment, took the cigarette from him, and—there we were. Of course, Wiggins and he had concocted the idea together, and Meldrum was laying for you at Chamonix."

Fleeting looked rueful.

"I must seem rather a fool," he said.

"Not at all," said Heldway politely.

THE END.

Next Week's Story of Scotland Yard

in this Splendid Detective
Series is entitled :: ::

**"CREEPING
JIMMY!"**



The Case of the RAJAH GASCOIGNE

THE STRANGE
& REMARKABLE
EXPLOITS
of CARFAX BAINES

THE scene was an awning-covered verandah of Rajah Gascoigne's palace, where sat four Englishmen in kummerbunds and cool, white linen. They were quite alone—the Malay servants had been dismissed—and were languidly enjoying the after-dinner hour, with its accompaniments of fragrant Manilas and brandy-peg.

"Yes, it is a very mysterious case," Carfax Baines was saying, "and after a week's work I am as far from finding a clue as I was when I started. Look at the facts. Their simplicity is baffling in itself. Mr. Douglas Fraser, a young gentleman of means, stops at Kowhing six weeks ago for a few days of sightseeing. On the third evening he saunters out of his hotel, and never comes back. He was seen strolling beyond the town, but there all trace of him ends; no one saw him afterwards. His body is not found; he vanishes as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him."

"Poor chap, he dined with me the night before," said Sir Richard Gascoigne, who was a tall, handsome man with a brown complexion, crisp black hair, and a heavy moustache with carefully waxed points; he looked every inch a born ruler. "He was full of life and spirits—a most genial fellow," he added. "It is a thousand pities. As in duty bound, I did all in my power to clear up his fate, but without success."

"I took quite a fancy to him," replied Captain Shaw, the British Resident. "He surely had no enemies here."

"He probably carried a good bit of money with him," suggestively remarked Anthony Raffles.

He was private secretary to the rajah—a clean-shaven man, with patrician features and bearing, with an indolent manner that was merely a mask for a strong and deep character. A penetrating glance from the detective seemed to disconcert him for an

instant; he shifted his face from the light of the Japanese lanterns that swung overhead, and blew a thick cloud of smoke.

"As you intimate, Mr. Raffles," said Baines, "the circumstances point to the fact that young Fraser was robbed and murdered."

"That's my theory," assented the resident. "I dare say the body was thrown into the river, and is lying in some hole under the bank. There are plenty of native ruffians in Kowhing who attach no value to human life."

"Very true," said the rajah. "I am thinking of strengthening my police force. I am glad you have taken this case up, Mr. Baines, and I am anxious to render you every assistance possible."

The detective acknowledged the offer with a few words of thanks.

"I am determined not to leave Kowhing," he added, "until I find the assassins of Douglas Fraser."

"I hope you may succeed," replied Sir Richard Gascoigne.

He spoke with a barely perceptible sneer, with a glimmer of a mocking smile. He poured out a stiff brandy and soda, and drank half of it.

"Is it usual," asked Anthony Raffles, "for the Government to employ detectives in such cases?"

"I can't tell you if it is usual or not," Baines answered curtly. "I know that I was sent here from Singapore—where I happened to be stopping on business—by the High Commissioner for the British North Borneo Company. I believe he was stirred up by young Fraser's people at home, who have influence in high places."

"Shaw, I am going to let the London people have the Perang gold-mining concession," the rajah said abruptly.

The resident's face expressed amazement and concern.

"At their own figure?" he asked.

"Yes; it's a fair price."

"I think you ought to do much better, Sir Richard."

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you."

After those brief remarks a sort of restraint fell on the company, and as the hour was late, Baines and the resident presently took their departure in the latter's dogcart. As they drove along the lonely and deep-shadowed road leading down to Kowhing, which skirted the palace grounds for some distance, Captain Shaw said seriously to his companion:

"I would give a good deal to know what has come over the rajah these last few weeks. The change worries me."

"The change?"

"Yes; Sir Richard is not the man he used to be; he is altered in many ways. He drinks more brandy than is good for him, whereas he was formerly rather temperate."

"As I have known him but a short time," replied Baines, "of course I can't endorse your observations."

"Naturally, my dear fellow," said the resident. "But I am right, I assure you. Sir Richard is the same, yet not the same. Either he has been disappointed in love—he may have been engaged to some young lady in England or the Colonies—or his private secretary is exerting a bad influence over him. I incline to the latter theory. Candidly, I don't like Anthony Raffles."

The detective was more deeply interested in the subject than he chose to let appear. He asked various questions about the Rajah Gascoigne, and after reaching the residency he continued the conversation in Captain Shaw's smoking-room. It was past midnight when he strolled half a mile across the town to his own quarters—a little, furnished bungalow kindly procured for him by the resident.

Baines was not a bit sleepy. The events of the evening had given him much food for thought, and he wanted a quiet hour to himself. Lighting his pipe, he dropped into a cane chair by an open window that looked on to the compound, with its plants and shrubbery glittering in the tropical moonlight. He sat there for a long time, puffing clouds of smoke. One thing in particular puzzled and baffled him, kept reverting at intervals to his mind when he was thinking of other matters. At length the solution, over which he had vainly harassed his brain, flashed suddenly upon him.

"By Jove, I have it!" he muttered aloud.

"I remember now where I last saw Anthony Raffles. No wonder his face was familiar to-night!" He pondered for a while, then went out and walked in the compound; he felt that he might be on the eve of thrilling discoveries, of a startling revelation. "It is incredible!" he said to himself. "Ten to one I am wrong, and, if I am right, how can I prove it? Shall I abandon the theory? It would be the wiser course, perhaps."

Whatever decision the detective arrived at, he certainly spent the next few days like any gentleman of leisure in Kowhing. He took afternoon siestas, and lounged in shady places; he smoked cigars and ate dinners with the resident, and missed no chance of accepting Sir Richard Gascoigne's hospitality. He strolled about the native quarters of the town, and seemed fond of looking at the rajah's fine steam yacht, which was moored at the river's mouth in convenient proximity to the palace. One might have thought that he had forgotten all about the disappearance of Douglas Fraser.

At the end of the week there was to be a reception at the palace, and Baines was invited. He spoke of the affair when lunching with the resident.

"It will be very informal," said Captain Shaw. "By the by, I hope my old friend Danvers and his daughter will be here in time for it. They are coming from Singapore, and their steamer is due about to-morrow."

"Has the rajah met Miss Danvers?" the detective asked.

"I don't know, I'm sure. It's quite likely though, for Sir Richard visited Singapore eighteen months ago. Danvers is a wealthy merchant there."

"I recall the name," Baines said carelessly.

It was the night of the rajah's reception, and everybody who was anybody in Kowhing was present. Squads of native soldiery guarded the entrances to the grounds, and a Malay band discoursed music at intervals. Dusky-faced servants hurried to and fro bearing refreshments. Inside and outside the palace the scene was like fairyland. Hundreds of soft lights shed a mellow radiance on ladies in airy costumes and gentlemen in unconventional white. At this hot season of the year evening dress and uniforms were always sacrificed to comfort.

The resident was very late. He arrived a good hour after any of the other guests, accompanied by Mr. Danvers and his daughter Helen. Miss Danvers was appropriated and carried off by a young officer of her acquaintance, and Captain Shaw and his friend went in search of a drink.

Twenty minutes afterwards his Highness the Rajah Gascoigne was walking rapidly through a lonely part of the garden, as if searching for someone. He was followed in the rear by his private secretary, from whom he had been rarely separated during the evening. Voices and laughter were close ahead, and a turn of the path suddenly revealed a little group of people chatting in a shady nook by a splashing fountain. From these, leaving her escort, there tripped forward a very beautiful young woman. Her eyes sparkled with delight, and there was a heightened colour on her cheeks, as she confronted the ruler of Sarampang.

"Sir Richard!" she exclaimed.

The rajah stared blankly, with an uneasy,

bewildered look, like a man whose memory has suddenly deserted him. He nervously twisted the end of his moustache.

"Ah, how do you do?" he said, finding his voice. "Pleased to see you here. I hope you are enjoying yourself."

"Exceedingly, Sir Richard."

The girl spoke with bitter sarcasm; she waited, barring the way.

"I trust you will forgive me—overlook my seeming rudeness," replied the rajah, with a propitiating bow. "I'm awfully sorry, you know, but really I can't for the moment recall—"

"Does the name of Miss Danvers suggest nothing to your memory?"

"Of course! How could I have forgotten? I sincerely beg your pardon, Miss Danvers."

"No excuse is necessary, your Highness," the girl answered cuttingly, her cheeks crimson with shame and resentment.

She bowed and left him, holding her head very high, and taking the arm of her escort she vanished amid the shrubbery.

Sir Richard stifled an oath, and with a black countenance he whispered something in Anthony Raffles ear. Then he started involuntarily as he saw Carfax Baines standing a couple of yards away by the fountain, his hands in his pockets and a cigar between his lips. The detective had been there all the time, a careful observer of the little scene that had just transpired. The eyes of the two men met, and in that brief, steady glance each read the other's secret. The rajah made a polite remark, and passed on with his secretary. Baines looked after them with a grim smile.

"The next step must be taken without delay," he reflected, "for I am already under suspicion. I had better arrange with Captain Shaw and Miss Danvers for an interview at the residency after this affair breaks up. Many things may happen before morning."

The surmise was strangely fulfilled. Many things did happen, though they did not come about exactly as Baines meant, for which he himself was partly to blame. But the likelihood of danger threatening him at the present time never entered his head, and so he was less prudent than he would have been otherwise. He strolled about the gardens for an hour or more, but was unable to get a word alone with the resident. Finally he entered the palace, refreshed himself with a drink, and then wandered through the building to a verandah on the north side which he had not seen before. It was a lonely and secluded spot, far removed from the chatter of the rajah's guests, and the quiet and the dim light appealed to his mood. He was leaning over the carved balustrade, deep in thought, when he fancied he heard a stealthy, rustling noise behind him. He swung round instantly, and beheld two gigantic Malays, who flung themselves savagely upon him.

Taken quite by surprise, with a grip on his throat and a brawny hand on his mouth, Baines had not time to utter a single cry.

A cloth that had been wet with some stupefying drug was pressed to his nostrils, and the odour made him feel dizzy and faint. He fell an easy victim; he was quickly overpowered, gagged, and his arms bound behind him. Then his captors hurried him along a dark and deserted passage. Then a door swung open noiselessly and the detective saw a luxuriously furnished apartment lined with books, which he judged to be the rajah's private audience room. The next instant a curtain parted at the farther end, and two men appeared—Anthony Raffles and Sir Richard Gascoigne. The latter glared at the prisoner with undisguised wrath and scorn.

"You meddlesome dog!" he said, in low, venomous tones. "You will find in the end that you have paid a dear price for playing the spy. You have brought this on yourself; there is only yourself to blame."

Baines struggled desperately, but vainly; he would have given anything for a moment of freedom. The rajah leered at him mockingly.

"I must return to my guests, so farewell, my friend, in case we never meet again," he said significantly. "Away with him!" he added to the Malays.

Anthony Raffles touched a secret spring in the panelling at one side of the room, and a small door slid back, revealing a narrow opening. The Malays dived into this, one of them guiding the prisoner, while the other went in front with a lamp that the rajah had handed to him. Down they climbed for a score or more of steps cut in solid rock, and at the bottom they reached a dismal corridor, with here and there a massive timbered door on either side. These led to small dungeons, and into one of them Baines was thrust. The door clanged shut, the footsteps of the Malays died away, and he was left in darkness and solitude.

There was no window or other opening to the outer world, but by some ingenious contrivance a grating over the door admitted a supply of fresh air to the cell. The silence was so profound that Baines knew he must be far below the level of the ground. For a long time he tramped up and down the narrow space, fettered and gagged. He bitterly repented his imprudence, by which he had played into the hands of his enemy. The theories he had formed were now proved beyond doubt, and he could easily guess the course events would take.

"The scoundrel fears others besides myself," he reflected. "Will he dare to attempt to silence the girl? No, I think not; he will probably take refuge in immediate flight. And ten to one, before I am found, I shall die of starvation."

It was a ghastly thought, and the fear of such a terrible thing almost unnerved the detective. It was a relief when he felt exhaustion and drowsiness stealing upon him, and groping about in the darkness he discovered a rude pallet, on which he threw himself heavily and was soon sound asleep.

A couple of hours later a dull trampling

overhead, and a faint clamour of voices, roused Baines from his slumber. He was uncertain at first if this were favourable to him or otherwise, but when the commotion suddenly swelled to a louder pitch he was thrilled with hope. He staggered to the door, and beat against it with his shoulders. The outcry drew nearer and nearer, and a flickering yellow glare shone into the cell. Then the door was unbarred, and Baines almost fell into the arms of Captain Shaw, who was attended by half a dozen Malay soldiers—several of whom carried lanterns—and by a few Englishmen. The prisoner's

"Did the fellow give away the whole plot?" exclaimed Baines.

"Yes, everything."

"Then where are the other prisoners?"

"They must be close by. Ah, what is that?"

A muffled pounding and a couple of faint shouts came distinctly from the far end of the corridor. The whole party hastened in that direction, making noisy answer to the appeals for rescue, and the two cells from which the sounds proceeded were easily located. The doors were unbarred and thrown open almost simultaneously. From



Into one of these small dungeons Baines was thrust.

wrists were quickly untied, and the gag taken from his mouth.

"How did you get here?" were his first coherent words.

"One of the Malays who were in the plot repented," replied the resident. "He came and knocked me up, and told me the whole story. I got some chaps together, and we hurried to the palace, to find that the birds had already flown, taking as much treasure as they could carry. I have no doubt that they are miles out to sea in the yacht by this time. The Malay guided us down to this underground hole, the existence of which was unknown to me before."

one a young man, haggard and unshaven, staggered out with a husky cry, blinking at the light. He was scarcely recognisable as the missing Donald Fraser. The occupant of the other cell was an older man, and though his cheeks were shrunk and he had grown a heavy beard, it was impossible to mistake his identity.

"Sir Richard Gascoigne!" cried the detective.

"Sir, I congratulate you," added Captain Shaw. "The truth has come to light—your sufferings are over."

"Thank God!" the unfortunate rajah replied hoarsely. "I had lost hope long ago,

"Where is the heartless traitor—my brother?"

"He and his confederate have fled with the yacht," answered the resident, "but they are certain to be caught."

The rajah tried to speak, but no words came. The reaction—the joy of his unexpected deliverance—were too much for him, and he suddenly reeled and fell.

"Only a swoon," said Baines, as he partly lifted the stricken man. "He'll come round in a moment or two."

However, the seizure was more than a swoon—at least, in its results. A serious illness, from which Sir George happily recovered in two weeks, was brought on by his confinement and suffering. In the meantime, to tell the story briefly, the yacht was pursued and overtaken by one of his Majesty's gunboats that happened to come along opportunely. Larry Gascoigne, the false rajah, shot himself through the heart in the saloon when he saw that capture was certain, and his body was buried at sea. Anthony Raffles was brought back to Kowhing, where he made a full confession.

"There is very little in the story that I had not suspected before," Baines said to the resident, when discussing the matter. "Of course, you were aware that Sir George Gascoigne had twin sons, Larry and Richard, who were alike as two peas; but in character they were opposites. Richard was steady and reliable, Larry was reckless and unscrupulous—bad in every way. They were sent to England to be educated, and they left the 'Varsity in 18—— Richard, who was the elder by a few minutes, came home to prepare himself for the rulership of Sarampang. Larry was foolishly permitted to remain in London, and his father gave him a decent income. He gambled, lost on horses, fell into the worst of company, and finally forged a friend's name to a bill. For this crime he served three years' imprisonment, and was utterly disowned and cast off by his father. On his release he went to British Guiana——"

"And was killed there," interrupted Captain Shaw, "according to common belief."

"I knew otherwise," said Baines, "for I was in Guiana at the time. Larry Gascoigne was the only survivor of the party that was supposed to have been massacred by Indians in the interior, and when he reached the coast a false name and a heavy beard preserved his identity. He sailed for England, and in London he ran across one of his old comrades, Anthony Raffles. The latter was doing well, but he was not proof against the fascinating temptation that Larry held out to him. It was a brilliant, masterful, and daring scheme. It appears that the Rajah of Sarampang—old Sir George had died—was then seeking, through his London agent, for a private secretary. His credentials obtained Raffles the post, and the first stage of the game was won. Raffles went out to Kowhing and familiarised himself with every detail of Sir Richard's life, though he did not discover that the rajah had

met Miss Danvers at Singapore a year before. When the plotters deemed the opportunity ripe, Larry turned up. In the meanwhile, he it remembered, Raffles had won over the two Malays and several other of the servants. Well, Larry was admitted secretly to the palace, and the coup was successfully carried out. Sir Richard was overpowered and thrown into one of the underground dungeons, which had been constructed in the time of one of the native rulers, and so cleverly, that no sound could penetrate to or from them. Larry shaved off his beard, trimmed his hair, and donned his brother's clothes. He was the very image of Rajah Gascoigne."

"He certainly was," assented Captain Shaw.

"It was the intention of the conspirators," Baines resumed, "to raise all the money they could from the revenues and by selling concessions, then slip away in the rajah's yacht, ostensibly on a pleasure cruise, and take with them the two prisoners, whom they proposed to land at some lonely spot where they might not be found for weeks. But their hand was forced before they were ready. As for Fraser, you know his story. He turned up here a fortnight after the substitution of rajahs, and recognised both Larry and Raffles, with whom he had been intimate in London. So he was nabbed by the Malays, and went to share Sir Richard's captivity."

"What puzzles me," replied the resident, "is how you got on to the game so quickly."

"Well, I knew about the two brothers," said Baines, "and after racking my brains to recall where I had seen Anthony Raffles before, I remembered that he was a witness at Larry Gascoigne's trial, and had been one of his intimate friends. The change which had lately come over the rajah—as you told me—suggested my first suspicion. And it was confirmed when I witnessed that little scene between his Highness and Miss Danvers in the palace gardens."

It may be said in conclusion that Anthony Raffles was tried before the High Commissioner, and is serving a stiff sentence. Baines and Douglas Fraser sailed for home on the same steamer, and a year later they read in the London papers an announcement of the forthcoming marriage of Sir Richard Gascoigne and Miss Helen Danvers.

THE END.

**The Exploits of Carfax Baines
will continue NEXT WEEK
with :—**

**"THE CASE OF THE
RED BROTHERHOOD"**

(Continued from page 14.)

about his precious grub. He shed pastry and cakes as he ran.

He didn't drop the lot all at once, because he didn't even know—in that fearful extremity—that he had anything in his arms at all. He ran just as he was and shook off the good things as he rushed along.

He left a trail behind him.

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 V.

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 I was firm. I practically dragged him out, and we donned our dressing-gowns. Fatty hadn't unpacked his, and that was why he had used a blanket instead.

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 bedroom. 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!”

“But—but the ghost!” protested Watson. “I mean, we might—”

“We might meet it?” I grinned. “Why, I'm blessed if you're not scared! This ghost is simply an imaginary thing. You know what these servants are. One gets talking, and they gossip, and in the end they all believe that the thing actually exists. Come on—we can't waste time.”

“Yes, but—”

“Are you afraid?” I asked bluntly.

“Afraid!” snapped Tommy. “Of course not! For two pins I'd go over the north wing by myself!”

I chuckled to myself in the darkness, and 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!" gasped Watson, clutching at my arm.

"I don't mean a skeleton or a corpse!" I replied impatiently. "It looks suspiciously like a ham sandwich."

I walked forward as I spoke, and my guess was correct. 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, anyhow," 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 indigestible 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. Besides, it's an absolute disgrace for St. Frank's. We've got to find Fatty, and smuggle him back—and deal with him privately."

"He deserves to be starved for a fortnight!" 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 further.

"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 ghastly. But, by a supreme effort, I kept myself under control.

I knew that the apparition was coming towards us. I could even see the indistinct shape moving. 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.

With a gasp, 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, and Tommy's heavy breathing.

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 sha'n'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. Indeed, although I sounded confident, I did not feel very confident. How in the world had this amazing thing happened?

I recalled all the strange stories I had heard regarding ducal palaces and ancient castles. There are many famous English mansions where ghosts are said to walk with almost monotonous regularity. There are hundreds of people who declare that they have seen these spooks. And it is not for me to set down that these people were merely suffering from imagination.

I do know, however, that I had never seen any genuine ghost until this night. And I wasn't convinced as to its genuine nature, either. That may sound a bit Irish, but you know what I mean.

"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 up 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. "You can't deny it, because we found food all over the passages. And 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—so you needn't boast about it."

"Boast!" moaned Fatty. "I wish I'd never come out of the bedroom."

"It's the evil results of burglary," I said. "You don't seem to realise that you've committed a fearful 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. And 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 bedroom. The household knew nothing of the midnight adventure.

It is worth setting down that 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 VI.

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 bedroom 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, for the barometer was as steady as a rock.

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.

The breakfast gong would not sound just yet, and most of the St. Frank's fellows were either running about the park, or throwing snowballs at one another. Nelson Lee and I were allowed to pace up and down in peace.

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 chat with our host, and then conduct 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.

Breakfast was a great success, for everybody was in the highest of spirits, and, as I have explained previously, there were no formalities as yet. The real house-party would not be complete until Christmas Eve. So we had a kind of free and easy time to ourselves.

When the last guest had turned up, we should be well settled down, and able to enjoy ourselves to the very full. If anything, the juniors were rather glad that we had come here instead of going to Tregellis Castle. There was no lack of comfort, and an abundant supply of Christmas cheer and good spirits and hearty companionship.

On the morrow, too, quite a number of young ladies would be arriving. As Reggie Pitt had said, we couldn't very well enjoy ourselves thoroughly unless there were plenty of young ladies in the party. Girls were quite essential to the success of the Christmas festivities.

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."

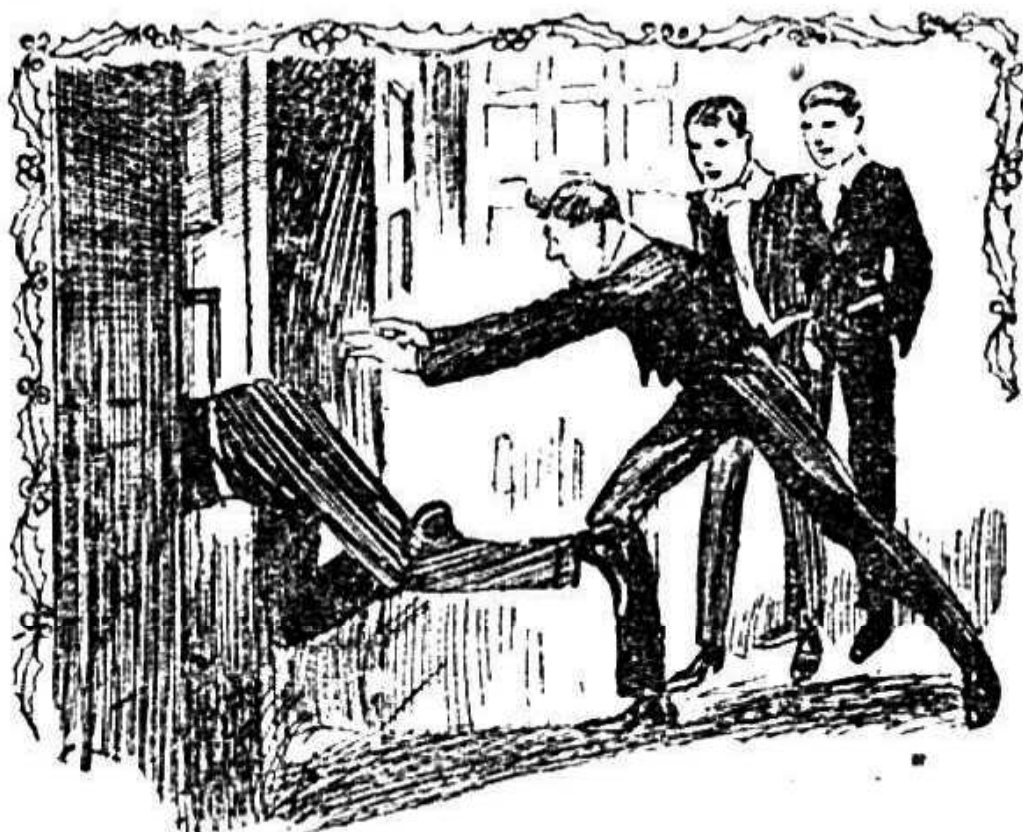
"Rot!" said Handforth. "This ghost

"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



Handforth minor gave a chuckle, and as his brother turned round, filled with sudden suspicion, he received a terrific push in the back which sent him lurching forward in the darkness.

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. "Don't you realise that I'm your elder brother? You've got to look up to me—and respect me! Any more nerve of that kind, and I'll—"

"Oh, there he goes again!" sighed Willy. "Always the same—always talking about his own importance! And yet anybody can see that he's—"

"Hi! Steady!" gasped Church, grabbing his leader. "You can't go for the young ass here! This isn't St. Frank's! Fighting would look terribly bad form."

"If—if that young demon goads me on, I'll have to slaughter him!" said Handforth thickly. "But I won't do it now—I'll wait till afterwards! As soon as he's shown me the way to this locked door, I'll knock the stuffing out of him."

"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 in doors, 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. It was a narrow 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. He had about as much chance of finding Willy as Mr. Marconi has of communicating with Mars.

And, 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 can't believe it!" he declared. "The servants may talk about this ghost, but I've never seen any sign of it. It's an absolute mystery. Are you quite sure, Nipper, that you were not overwrought?"

"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 gov'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. The thing was allowed to drop.

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, but had their dressing-gowns on over their clothing.

"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, except for all sorts of creaks and other minor sounds which came to our ears. But we paid no real attention to these.

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 was 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 VII. 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

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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! It's—it's infernal—it's positively ghastly! 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 gov'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!" mut-

tered 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 little 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 key-hole.

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! That's something to boast of, anyhow! Not very many get away from Dartmoor!"

"I remember reading of the affair," said

ANSWERS
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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 brain, sir. I dashed out, and I didn't care what happened to me! I'd rather go to the scaffold than be locked in that room again, sir!"

The gov'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. Under 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 storeroom, and the window was barred. And there, locked in, he was left for the night.

As the gov'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.

So I felt pretty rotten as I went to bed.

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 bally 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. And when Archie really started something, he was by no means the ass he was supposed to be.

At all events, 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.

Archie politely raised his hat, and stood by the bars, waiting. And 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 predicament! 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 ain'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 chokey, and your Christmas dinner will consist of skilly!"

"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."

"Diamonds, what!" said Archie. "Of course, between you and me and the jolly old prison bars, I don't know much about the ins-and-outs and the to's and froms! Absolutely not! But I believe you, laddie! And, 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. Frank'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.

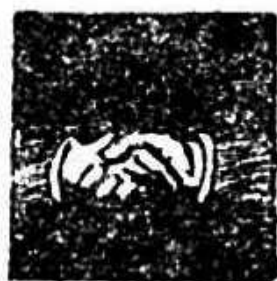
There was one thing he could tell, however. He provided an explanation for Norton's flood of panic while in the outer room. He explained that there was a large rat-hole against the skirting in the sealed apartment. So it was fairly obvious that the sound which Norton had heard had been caused by a rat. 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 VIII.

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! You couldn't think of an idea if you took double doses of brain tonic for a year."

"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 obtain extra large stocks of 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 gang 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 fearful 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! Tears, don't you know! Large drops of wetness oozing from the optical department. I mean, that kind of thing is inclined to make a bloke somewhat miz!"

"Well, of course, I understand what you mean, Archie," I said thoughtfully. "I feel the same way myself, to tell the truth. I couldn't sleep properly because of it. It's terrible 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 it 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! You're thinking about that poor fellow all the time. But I really don't see how we can help him. 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 crow-bars. 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, shak-



One glance at the man was enough to melt Archie's soft heart. He looked absolutely forlorn and hopeless.

ing 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 dashed 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 chestfallen.

"You really don't think so?" he asked sadly.

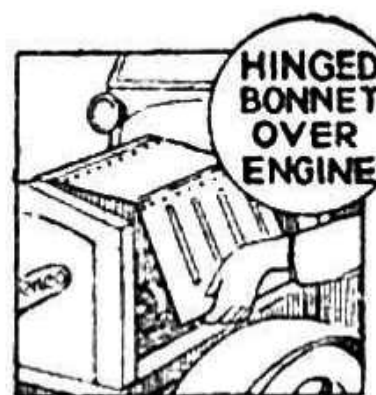
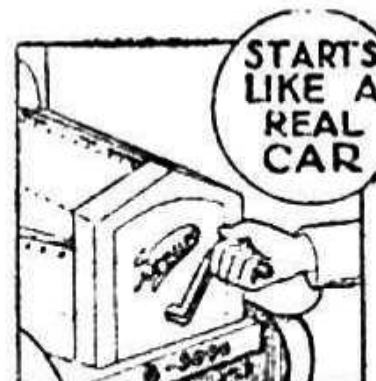
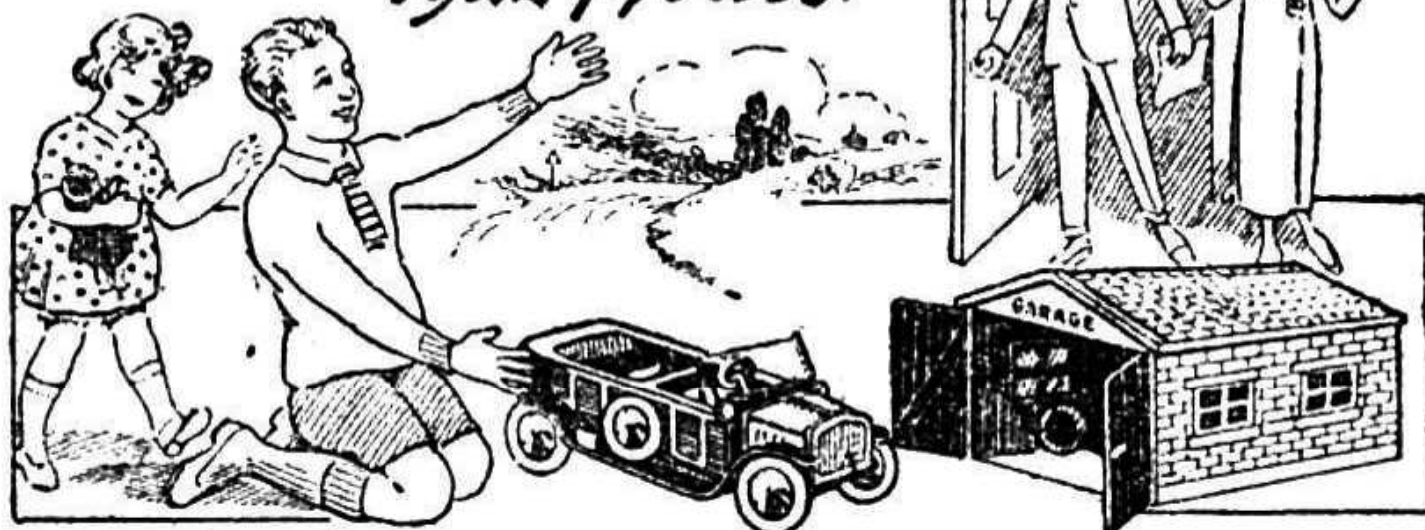
"I'm sure of it."

"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! But I'm fearfully cut up. In fact, the old tissues are feeling positively weak!"

And Archie Glenthorne walked away,

(Continued on page 27.)

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ADVENTURE

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(Continued from page 25.)

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 suffer 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 intense satisfaction, he was quite 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 appreciate 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 note-case, and extracted two or three currency notes.

Then, very carelessly, he dropped them. They blew about the little yard without any danger of being wafted further.

"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. Frank'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 about 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 further 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. "Good for you, Archie!"

"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 fatally injured in a motor-cycle accident last week—fell off the carrier. Too many of those accidents nowadays! Anyhow, 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. I think I'd better mention that 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 mystery and excitement 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 very merry and glorious Christmas under the Duke of Somerton's hospitable roof.

Well, that's that!

A Merry Christmas to Everybody—and Good Luck!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

My Dear Readers,

A BRIGHT AND MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YOU ALL!

The season of good cheer, of feasting and family re-union has come round once again, and we all like to feel that everyone else is having as good a time as ourselves, that no one is being left out in the cold, friendless and hungry. We can afford to be a little more generous just now, and whenever possible emulate Archie's example by "offering the glad hand" to those who are less fortunate than ourselves. That is the real spirit of Christmas, and never was it so needful as during the hard times of unemployment through which we are now passing. There are brighter days coming in the near future, when, I hope, you will all benefit by a big boom in trade. In the meantime, bury all your troubles for the time being, and make up your minds to have a jolly good time this Christmas.

OUR NEXT PHOTO CARD.

With regard to the Photo Cards, owing to the Christmas rush they have been suspended for a week or so. They will be

resumed very shortly, and No. 3 of the Locomotive series, which you are now awaiting, will be an exceptionally fine photograph of a L. B. and S. C. Rly. Express Engine.

ORDER YOUR NELSON LEE IN ADVANCE!

Owing to the Story Voting Competition, there is certain to be a great demand for "The Nelson Lee Library," and, although arrangements are being made to ensure no one being disappointed, it is advisable to order your copies well in advance.

COMING ATTRACTIONS.

Next week's long complete St. Frank's story deals with the Holiday Adventures of the famous Juniors, and as its title suggests, "ARCHIE'S PANTOMIME FAIRY," it is thoroughly in keeping with the festive season. Following on this story, which I shall announce next week, will be a grand, new, **Barring Out** St. Frank's series. Other coming attractions for next week are mentioned in "Our Detective Story Section."

Your sincere Friend,

THE EDITOR.

PROBLEM STORY COMPETITION No. 2.

LIST OF PRIZE-WINNERS.

The following readers have been awarded prizes for the best solutions to the problem contained in the story, "THE FLAMING GOD":

FIRST PRIZE—£1.

Francis J. Melotte, 58a, Manor Park, Lee, London, S.E.13.

SECOND PRIZE—10/-.

E. A. Taylor, 16, Lupos Street, Victoria, London, S.W.1.

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Claude Leverton, 17, Heathfield Road, Mount Gold, Plymouth.
 M. Brookfield, 38, Spring Road, Normacot, Stoke-on-Trent.
 Arthur Smith, 64, Highfield Road, Rock Ferry, Cheshire.
 E. F. Robertson, 1, North Place, Old Headington, Oxford.
 Arthur Wood, 82, Nightingale Lane, Wanstead, London, E.11.
 C. E. Davy, Feremina, St. Martin's, Guernsey, C.I.
 E. Stead, 10, Milner Street, Barnsbury, London, N.1.
 W. A. Shanly, 12, Hydethorpe Road, Balham, London, S.W.12.
 P. de Sions, 25, Chatsworth Road, London, N.W.2.
 Charles Lind, 74, Elm Row, Edinburgh, Scotland.
 Louis J. Ellis, 88, Gilman Street, Hanley, Staffs.
 R. Leatherdale, 12, Old Heath, Colchester.
 Norman Beckett, 1, Villiers Road, Rathgar, Dublin, Ireland.
 Jack Armitage, Station House, Snaith, Yorks.
 Roland Nelson, 160, Sutton Court Road, Plaistow, London, E.13.
 James Buckley, 116, Mottram Road, Stalybridge, Cheshire.
 G. J. Lawford, Alva House, Leeds Road, Heckmondwike, Yorks.
 Douglas Vickers, 24, Princess Street, Attercliffe, Sheffield.
 Miss May Wilson, 18, Prydes Place, Penicuik, Midlothian, Scotland.
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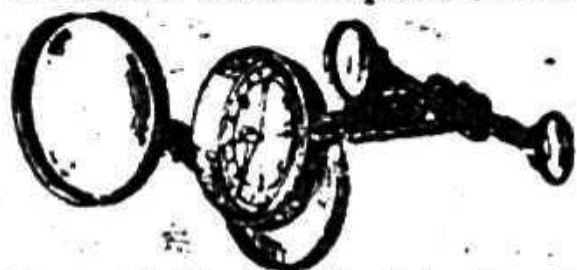
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