

GRAND XMAS HOLIDAY SERIES BEGINS TO-DAY!



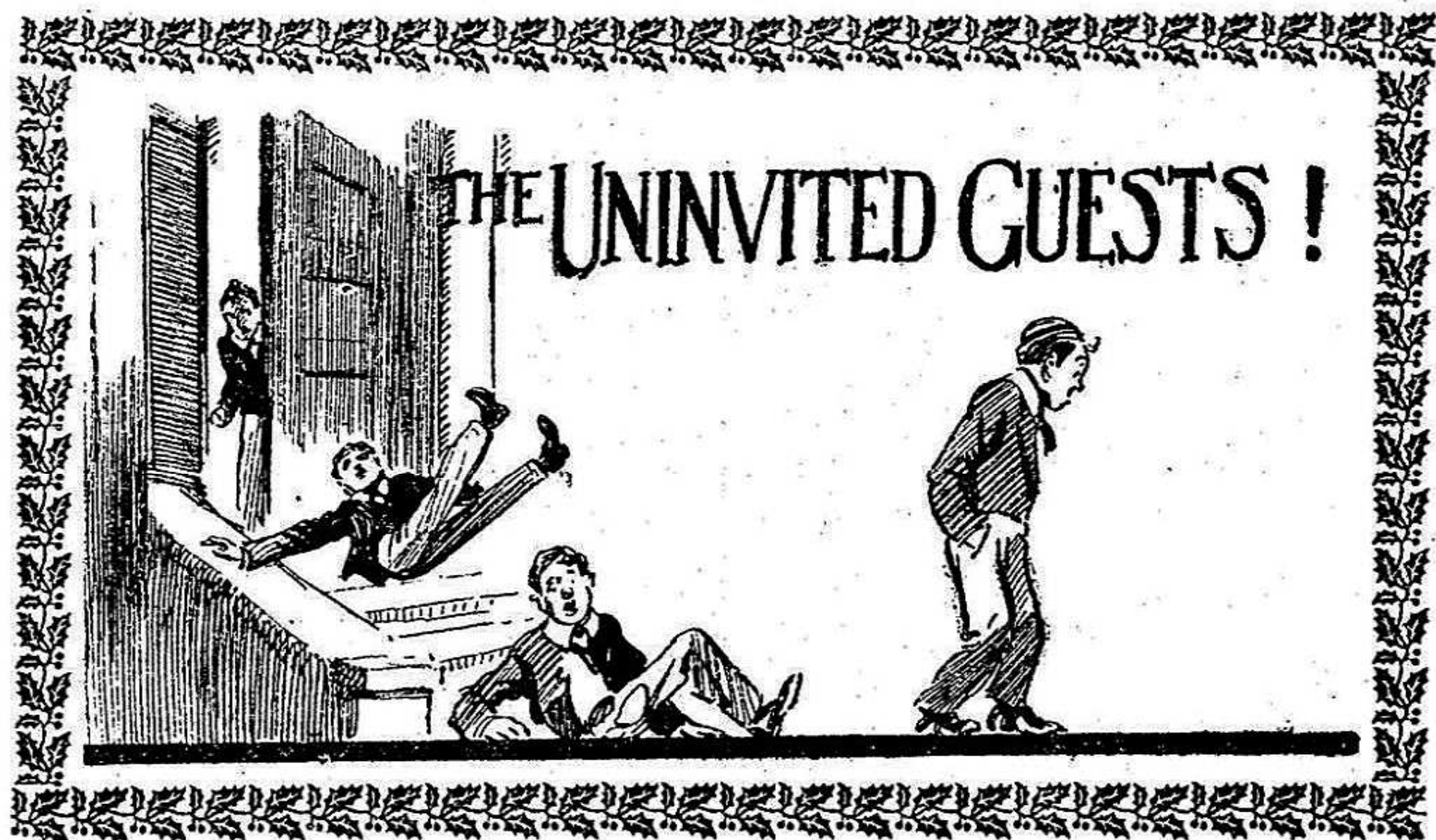
The three lags, looking unusually disreputable, joined the party, unbidden and unwanted.

The Uninvited Guests

or, Willy Handforth's Christmas Jape.
A YULETIDE STORY OF THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S WITH SURPRISING DEVELOPMENTS.



"This is very strange, Mr. Browne," said Phipps softly.
"It is not merely strange, Brother Phipps, but disconcerting," he replied gravely. "Much as I hate the thought, I am compelled to fear that we are facing an outlook of the murkiest description."



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

This week we publish the first of a series of three special Christmas Holiday stories dealing with the Yuletide adventures of the Boys of St. Frank's and the Girls of the Moor View School. The curious predicament in which our young friends find themselves on Christmas Eve, due to a prank of Willy Handforth's, is but the beginning of some unexpected developments that will be disclosed in our next story, which you will be able to obtain before Christmas Day.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

A VERY SPECIAL OCCASION.

WILLY HANDFORTH swayed dizzily, and shaded his eyes.

"Where are my smoked glasses?" he asked faintly. "Help! I can't stand a sight like this all in one go! Juicy, can you see it, too, or is it only a vision?"

Juicy Lemon wisely made no comment, but he grinned broadly. The two Third Formers were standing in the lobby of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. Willy was clutching desperately at one of the banisters of the staircase. And Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove, who had suddenly appeared at the head of the stairs, paused in his stride.

"Clear off, you cheeky fags!" he said severely.

"Is that the way to talk to your own beloved brother?" asked Willy, with a reproachful air. "Let's have another look! My eyes are getting used to the strain now— By jingo! What a gorgeous sight!"

"Gorgeous isn't the word!" agreed Juicy firmly.

Handforth continued his descent of the stairs. Without any shadow of doubt, he was splendid. His appearance, from his glittering shoes to his shiny topper, was immaculate in every degree. Never before had his Etons been so well brushed—never had his trousers possessed that perfect crease—never had his linen been so dazzling.

As a general rule, Handforth was exceedingly careless in his attire. Baggy trousers were commonplace with him, and a small detail like a crumpled collar was a mere matter of course. But this evening he

looked like a second edition of Archie Glen-thorne. And Archie was famed far and wide as being the dressiest fellow in the Lower School. Even Lord Pippinton, the new chap, was unable to compete with Archie.

"Well, what are you staring at?" demanded Handforth.

"Ted, old man, you're absolutely killing!" said Willy, in an awed voice. "You're marvellous! That crease! That spotless collar! That wonderful tie! I've never seen anything so ripping in a my life!"

Edward Oswald thawed considerably.

"Think I'm O.K. then?" he asked genially.

"My dear chap, if you go out like that you'll knock 'em all dead!" declared Willy. "And you'd better not meet any girls, either. It'll be positively fatal. The poor things won't stand an earthly chance. Could any ordinarily human girl resist such a specimen of manly brilliance?"

"Yes, I shall have to be pretty careful," admitted Handforth thoughtfully.

"Careful!" echoed Willy. "What on earth's the good of being careful? Ted, old son, you've got to be on your guard every second! Once the girls catch sight of you, they'll make one leap, and it'll be the finish of a promising young career! They'll simply eat you up!"

Handforth frowned.

"I'm willing to take the risk," he said, with a suspicious glance. "Look here, Willy, if you're trying to pull my leg——"

"What a thought!" interrupted Willy, horrified. "Have you ever known me to indulge in that sort of wickedness? But, I say! You might let a chap into the secret! What's all this dazzling scintillation for?"

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" said Handforth tartly. "Well, you can go and eat coke! You, too, Lemon, my lad! I don't tell fags my business! Not likely!"

Church and McClure appeared at this point, and Chubby Heath had joined Willy and Juicy. It was nearly tea-time, and the majority of the fellows were in their studies, juggling with tea-pots and tins of sardines and jars of jam, and such-like trifles.

But it seemed fairly obvious that the chums of Study D were booked out somewhere. They would never have dressed themselves up so immaculately under ordinary circumstances. For Church and McClure, although below the standard of their redoubtable leader, were nevertheless smart. Not that they satisfied Handforth.

"What did I tell you about that collar, Church?" he demanded sternly. "You can't go to a party in that thing! There's a spot of ink on one side, and a crumple on the other! Go and change it!"

"Oh, rats!" said Church. "It's clean enough!"

"A party, eh?" said Willy reflectively. "I don't claim to be a second Ezra Quirke when

it comes to gazing into the future, but at a random guess I should imagine that you're booked for the Moor View School?"

"Didn't I tell you to bunk?" demanded Handforth. "You needn't hang about here—we shan't tell you anything! It's likely we're going to satisfy your inquisitive curiosity! It's likely we'll tell you we've been invited to a party by Irene & Co!"

"Awful!" said Willy, shocked. "Why should we know these things? An invitation from Irene, eh? No wonder you look like a model in one of the latest tailoring lists!"

"You—you——" Handforth paused, breathing hard. "By George!" he went on. "I might have expected it! You're taking advantage of me because you know I can't slosh you! I daren't do a thing in these togs! And how did you know we were going to Irene's party?"

"Oh, buck up, Handy," put in McClure. "We don't want to stop here, arguing with these kids. We shall be late. Nipper and Pitt and most of the others are there by this time. Get a move on!"

Handforth started.

"Yes, by George, we shall have to move!" he said briskly. "We can't let those fat-heads steal a march on us! This is a special party, and we're the guests of honour."

Willy frowned.

"There's been some rank carelessness somewhere," he declared. "I don't know whose fault it is, but somebody's made a bloomer. A ghastly bloomer!"

"Yes, it looks pretty awful," said Chubby Heath, nodding.

"What looks pretty awful?"

"That thing!" said Chubby, indicating Handforth with a nod. "Weren't you talking about your major? My hat, I've seen a few mistakes in my time, but he looks like a catastrophe. The first time he sits down he'll split something!"

"Why, you young sweep!" roared Handforth. "I'll——"

"Easy, old man," interrupted Willy. "I wasn't referring to you at all! Not that Chubby can be blamed for holding such a view. No, there's been a blunder of another sort. Where are our invitations?"

"Your what?"

"Who forgot to send 'em?"

"What on earth——"

"Clearly an oversight on somebody's part," went on Willy indignantly. "Three strapping chaps like us, with healthy appetites, and we haven't even been invited to the party! Why, it's more than a blunder—it's a calamity! As far as I can see, there's only one solution."

Handforth laughed with scorn.

"You hopeless young duffer!" he said tartly. "Do you think the girls would invite a crowd of grubby fags? My only hat! You've got a nerve!"

"There's only one solution," repeated Willy. "We shall have to go along without

the invites, and march in. How's that, Chubby? What do you think of it, Juicy?"

"Fine!" grinned the other fags.

"That's settled, then!" said Willy. "No need to change—we're quite smart enough as we are. We might as well go along with my major——"

"You silly young idiot!" howled Handforth. "The girls only invited a few Removites and one or two Fourth Formers. I'm blessed if I know why they wanted the Fourth Formers, but there's never any telling with these girls! They do the queerest things under the sun!"

"Very likely—but they bar fags," said Church, with satisfaction. "Just out of sheer curiosity, though, I'd like to know how much longer we're going to stand here? Of course, it doesn't matter. We shall only be about ten minutes late. Might as well make it a quarter of an hour while we're about it."

Handforth failed to appreciate the sarcasm, but he leapt into activity. Pushing Willy aside, he strode into the cloak-room, and donned his overcoat. Church and McClure lost no time in following his example. The fags watched proceedings with a kind of wistful interest.

"I say, Ted," said Willy persuasively. "What about five bob?"

"Eh?"

"Just as a little consolation, you know," explained Willy. "These are hard times. Chubby's got a bad penny, Juicy possesses a threepenny-bit with a hole in it, and I've only got ninepence in the wide. Now, we can't get much of a feed for ninepence, can we? What about that five bob?"

"What five bob?"

"The five bob I just asked you for."

"Look here——"

"Don't!" pleaded Willy. "I'm trying hard to keep my eyes away. A chap's got to think of his eyesight, you know. You can't tell me that five bob's going to make any difference——"

"Come on!" said Handforth brusquely.

He pulled open the big door, and Church and McClure followed him out into the Triangle. Willy looked out in dismay.

"I say, Ted!" he called. "What about that five bob?"

"Go and eat coke!" snorted Handforth, without turning. "If my appearance hurts your eyesight, I wonder that you look at me! You can jolly well go and have tea in Hall!"

And with that heartless remark, Handforth continued his way onwards towards the gates. Church and McClure were grinning. For about the first time that term their leader had resisted his minor's financial appeal. Times without number Willy had wormed cash out of Edward Oswald—and in nearly every instance it had been the exact sum of five shillings.

But on this fateful night Willy had failed. It was fateful because that trivial incident was destined to lead to very surprising consequences.

CHAPTER II.

WILLY MEANS BUSINESS!



CHUBBY HEATH gave a hollow groan. "You ass!" he said, glaringly. "Why did you chip your major just then? He'd have whacked out that five bob in two ticks!"

"And now we're dished!" growled Juicy Lemon. "What's the good of ninepence? You promised us you'd get that five bob, Willy! Why, we even went to Mrs. Hake, and ordered all the stuff!"

"And she wouldn't let us take it away without the cash!" added Chubby, with a snort. "That's what I call a bit thick! People can't trust us for five mouldy bob now!"

Willy shook his head.

"Well, as it happens, Mrs. Hake was pretty wise," he admitted. "She wouldn't have seen the cash, would she? Fancy old Ted jibbing like that! Just because he's going to a girl's party! That's what's given him so much courage! Just because he was dressed up like an exhibit for the Lord Mayor's Show! You don't think I'm finished, I suppose?"

His two chums looked hopeful for a moment.

"But we can't do anything, can we?" asked Juicy. "Your major's gone, and it's too late to——"

"We're going after him," interrupted Willy firmly.

"But he won't shell out——"

"We're going to that party," explained Willy. "They don't know it yet, but we're going! My dear chaps, it'll be easy! Just watch me!"

"But we haven't been invited!" protested Chubby Heath.

"What's a little trifle like that?" asked Handforth minor contemptuously. "It's not as though it were a big, formal affair. It's only a spree at the Moor View School. Besides, the girls are as soft as the dickens. We've only got to smile sweetly, and they'll fold us in their giddy arms!"

Juicy Lemon shuddered.

"Chuck it!" he protested. "I'd rather go without the feed!"

"I don't mean literally, you ass," said Willy. "Thank goodness we're not dotty about girls, like some of those Remove-fat-heads! When it comes down to brass tacks, what are these girls good for?"

"Inviting chaps to feeds, for one thing," said Chubby.

"Oh, well, I'll admit there's something in that," said Handforth minor, nodding.

"And they're easy to deal with, too. That's another point in their favour. Come on—we'll buzz along straight away."

"Hadh't we better change first?" asked Chubby doubtfully.

"Change?" said Willy. "What on earth for?"

"Oh, well—I mean, look at old Juicy!" said Chubby, scratching his head. "He's got mud on his collar, and there's a tear in his bags, and his boots look like a tramp's, and his jacket's ripped—"

"What about you?" demanded Juicy indignantly. "There's a sauce—talking about me when you've got two buttons missing off your waistcoat! And I'm blowed if there isn't a whacking great hole in your left sock! And that collar looks more like a piece of crepe than anything else! You ain't too smart, either, Willy," he added critically.

Willy Handforth waved his hand.

"If we were going to the pictures, or a football match, or something important like that, I'd smarten myself up," he said firmly. "But you needn't think I'm going to change just for those girls! Not likely! Besides, we haven't got time! Unless we're quick, the feed'll all be over!"

The thought was so awful that Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon made no further objections. They piled into their overcoats, and sallied out. They were full of confidence, too. When Willy made up his mind to do a thing, nothing could stop him. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon looked upon that feed as an absolute certainty.

It was a keen, brisk December evening, and the darkness had already settled over the wintry countryside. It was very near to Christmas—St. Frank's, indeed, was breaking up for the holidays on the following day. Such an unimportant thing as work was totally forgotten. The Christmas vacation was the one topic throughout the entire school.

It had been rather nice of Irene & Co. to ask a crowd of St. Frank's fellows over to a kind of breaking-up party. A week previously the girls had descended upon St. Frank's, and had been feasted royally. So this little affair was by way of returning the compliment.

"Rain coming," remarked Chubby Heath, as he glanced at the sky. "It's a bit thick, isn't it? We never get any snow nowadays. Christmas isn't what it used to be."

"No need to worry about that, my lad," said Willy. "When we get to your people's place for Christmas, we shall have tons of snow. It always snows in Derbyshire—especially in the Peak district."

Chubby brightened.

"Yes, that's one advantage of living up in the hills," he admitted. "We ought to get some good sport these holidays. There's a ripping lake at my pater's place, too. If there's a decent frost, we shall have plenty of skating. Christmas isn't Christmas without snow."

Willy nodded thoughtfully. Both he and Juicy Lemon had accepted invitations from Chubby to spend Christmas at Heath's home, in Derbyshire. It appeared that Chubby's pater was a country squire of the old-fashioned type—one who believed in homely parties, with an enormous amount of Christmas fare. It struck Willy and Juicy as an excellent proposition. They had accepted the invitations gratefully.

Willy was particularly pleased, for otherwise he would have been compelled to spend the Yuletide at home. And such an event was always an ordeal for Willy. It was quite bad enough to have his major constantly about the place—but there was Ena, too. Handforth minor always did his best to steer clear of his sister. She was the one person in the world he feared. Therefore, an invitation to spend Christmas away from home was welcome.

The thought of Ena gave Willy a jar.

"My hat," he remarked dubiously, "I'd forgotten my sister for the minute! Take my advice, you chaps, and steer clear of her! For two pins she'll push the three of us into the cold, cold night. It's just what she'd delight in. She's got a heart like a stone."

"I think we ought to have changed," said Chubby firmly. "Those boots of Juicy's will ruin everything."

"What about your collar?" snorted Lemon. "Isn't there some way we can dodge your sister, Willy? The other girls are bad enough, but she's a terror! Somehow, I don't think we'll get that feed, after all!"

"Won't we?" said Willy grimly. "You leave it to me!"

They had arrived at the gates of Moor View School. Lights were gleaming brightly from the windows, and there was an air of warmth and comfort about the scene. The icy wind came whistling round the angle of the building as Willy & Co. marched to the front door.

"Hold on!" said Juicy. "We ought to go to the other entrance, you ass! We want the school door—not this private one! We shall probably run into Miss Bond—and then we shall be properly diddled!"

Willy shook his head.

"I'm attending to this," he said calmly. "If we go to the school entrance, it's a ten-to-one chance we shan't even get our feet across the threshold! But once we're inside—it doesn't exactly matter how we get in—they wouldn't have the nerve to turn us out. This is where a little cool assurance is needed!"

"You mean cheek?" asked Juicy Lemon.

"Same thing!" said Willy, as he pressed the bell-push.

There was certainly something in his plan. Once within the stronghold, the girls would probably good-naturedly let them remain. After all, it was a time of festivity and good cheer.

The door opened, and a neat maidservant was revealed. The glance she bestowed upon

Willy & Co. was hardly promising, however. "Run away, little boys!" she said severely. "It's too early for the waits——"

"Waits!" howled Willy. "We're St. Frank's chaps!"

The maid's confusion was downright, pitiful.

"Oh! I—I beg your pardon, young gentlemen!" she said, flustered. "For the moment I thought you were some of the village boys. We've been pestered with them quite a lot this week——"

"Oh, have you?" snorted Willy. "Well, it's like your giddy nerve to mistake us for a set of urchins! But we'll forgive you if you lead us straight to the girls' party. We're full of generosity."

The maidservant was relieved. Actually, she could scarcely be blamed for having made the mistake. Willy & Co. were—to be painfully frank—decidedly disreputable in appearance. They hadn't even washed before coming, and such pastimes as wrestling in the Triangle, to say nothing of punting a football about, were hardly calculated to improve their appearance.

But good cometh out of evil. The maidservant made no attempt to inquire into their credentials. She unhesitatingly admitted them, and took them through Miss Bond's private corridors to the school-rooms. The fags couldn't have gained such entry under purely normal circumstances.

The maid opened a big baize door, ushered the fags through, and pointed.

"The party's in there, young gentlemen," she said confidentially. "I'm ever so sorry——"

"That's all right," said Willy kindly. "Anybody's liable to make a mistake. You needn't announce us. We'll just stroll in without anybody noticing. As a matter of fact, we're a bit late."

"Very good, sir," said the maid, relieved.

She closed the baize door, and Willy & Co. glanced at one another with gleaming eyes. Just in front of them lay the big school-room where the party was being held. The clatter of cups and saucers came out invitingly. The odour of tea was hovering in the air. The merry sounds of laughter rose above all else.

"By jingo!" breathed Chubby Heath.

"We're in!" murmured Juicy Lemon.

"Of course we're in!" grinned Willy.

"Didn't I tell you to count on me? Always trust your uncle, and he'll never let you down!"

CHAPTER III.

NOT QUITE A SUCCESS!



"GOOD gad!"

Archie Glenthorne was so utterly startled that he nearly spilt some tea on his trousers. It was only the acute presence of mind of

Dick Hamilton that averted this catastrophe.

"What's the matter, Archie?" asked Dick. "What on earth—— Archie, you ass, are you seeing ghosts, or what?"

"Odds ragamuffins and urchins!" breathed Archie. "Nipper, old lad, this is absolutely frightful! I mean to say, the old bean positively refuses to grasp it! What is that thing?" he added tensely. "Dash it all, what is it? I mean, when did it appear?"

He pointed dramatically with his teaspoon. Nipper, glancing round, gave a start of surprise and then grinned. They were over in a quiet corner, near the door, while the rest of the party filled the bulk of the room. By all appearances, it was a merry gathering.

Handforth was making himself very prominent. At the present moment he was apparently giving a juggling performance with a large plate of bread-and-butter, a dish of cakes, and a tray of pastries. It was his intention to pass the eatables round. But Handforth believed in doing things thoroughly. He tripped, and deposited the entire contents of the cake-dish into Fullwood's lap.

"Thanks!" said Fullwood promptly. "Awfully decent of you, Handy, but I prefer them one at a time, if you don't mind."

"You clumsy ass!" hissed Handforth, turning. "Whose hulking big foot——"

"I believe it was mine!" smiled Winnie Pitt sweetly.

"Oh, I say!" gasped Edward Oswald. "Really? I—I thought—— Awfully sorry, Win! I—I thought one of the chaps—— That is——"

"It's all right, Ted—don't trouble to explain!" chuckled Winnie. "You'll only get yourself into a tangle. Reggie, I'm surprised at you! Why can't you help with these cakes?"

In several other parts of the room the party was progressing on similar lines. There was no lack of good humour, and no lack of good food. All the girls were looking their best, too. And why not? With the Christmas holidays so near at hand, there was every reason for cheeriness.

The only disturbing element appeared to be in the corner by the door. Archie Glenthorne was still sitting rigid, his gaze fixed. On the other hand, Dick Hamilton seemed to be rather amused.

"Dash it!" ejaculated Archie at length. "I mean to say, dash it! I believe it's Willy! Absolutely! And those two frightful pals of his! Odds tears and rents! Isn't this somewhat too juicy, old boy?"

"Dry up, Archie!" murmured Willy Handforth. "We've just dropped in, you know. Don't make a fuss. Any tea flying about?"

Willy & Co. were very cunning. They insidiously projected themselves into the midst of the party. In fact, their entry was so unobtrusive that they were hardly noticed during the first few moments. And in next to no time they were busy on the eatables. There were plates of stuff lying

about everywhere. It was rather more difficult to get hold of some tea. One was obliged to ask for tea. There weren't cups of it lying about loose, as it were. And Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley, who presided over the teapots, were busy enough as it was.

"Something," said Archie, "ought to be done. I mean, absolutely! Good gad! Have you seen the frightful footgear of these young blighters? The good old appetite is absolutely wilting. Ever the choice brew fails to revive the tissues! This sort of thing is positively mouldy!"

"Leave 'em alone!" chuckled Nipper. "They deserve kicking out, but it's nearly Christmas-time. Besides, they've earned a feed by their cheek!"

Unfortunately, Nipper's opinion was not general.

The climax was really caused by Juicy Lemon. Giving up all hope of obtaining a cup of tea for himself, he annexed one from a neighbouring desk. By sheer ill-fortune, it happened to belong to Ena Handforth. And Ena, reaching out for her tea-cup, was astonished to see the contents of it disappearing rapidly into Juicy Lemon's interior.

"My hat!" ejaculated Ena blankly.

Juicy Lemon nearly choked. Just as he was swallowing the last drop he caught Ena's eye. As he afterwards declared, it was just like an electric shock. It seemed to go right through him and come out at the back.

"Oh, corks!" gurgled Juicy shakily.

Crash! The teacup dropped out of his hands and shattered. It was the one thing needed to attract general attention. Ena was on her feet by this time, deadly calm, and with that celebrated look of imperious severity on her face. Ena was really a very nice girl, but when she was dealing with her brothers her manner became icy. In fact, Willy had often declared that you only had to touch Ena and you'd go all frosty.

"Willy!" she exclaimed grimly.

"Oh, hallo, sis!" said Willy, with a careless air of geniality. "Glad to see you looking so chirpy. Hallo, girls! We just dropped in, you know!"

"Just came round to look on," said Chubby Heath feebly.

"By George!" roared Handforth, dropping the pastry all over the floor. "My minor! And those two sweeps with him. Look at 'em! Dirty, grubby, and generally disgraceful. Clear out of here, you young rotters!"

"Go!" commanded Ena.

"Oh, I say——" began Willy.

"At once!"

"But look here, Ena, old girl," said Willy persuasively. "Keep your hair on, you know. And don't look so jolly frozen. The fact is, girls," he added, addressing the company generally, "we came along

to say good-bye. And we're quite ready to forgive you."

"Forgive us?" repeated Irene in surprise.

"My only hat! What nerve!" murmured Doris.

"Of course we'll forgive you," declared Willy generously. "We know it was a pure oversight on your part to forget the invitations——"

"That's enough!" roared Handforth. "You can't use that bluff. You sneaked in without permission, and you're going out on your necks!"

"I've only got one neck," said Willy grinning.

"I'm talking about the three of you!" snorted his major. "Not that we can see your necks," he added tartly. "It's a wonder to me you don't grow mustard and cress on 'em. There's plenty of soil there."

"They're disgraceful!" agreed Ena. "Ted, take them out and deal with them firmly!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean, absolutely with knobs on. To be emphatic, absolutely with bronze fittings. Dash it all, it's a bit murky when these blots buzz along and mar the view! I'm not the kind of chappie to make a fuss, but there's a dashed limit!"

"Hear, hear!" grinned Fullwood. "Sorry, Willy old son, but I've got to agree. If you'd all smartened yourselves up I shouldn't have said a word. But you've got to remember you're in the presence of ladies."

"You're quite right, Ralph," said Winnie, nodding. "They ought to be taught a lesson."

Doris Berkeley waved her hand.

"Out with 'em!" she said sternly. "We can't have all the proceedings stopped by these fags. Ted, be a sport, and cast them out into the cold, bitter night. In other words, Willy, you've got the order of the boot!"

"It's all right, Irene?" asked Handforth. "I can chuck 'em out?"

Irene tried hard not to smile.

"It seems to be a general edict," she replied. "And I must admit they look perfectly awful. Proceed with the dirty work."

"Hear that?" said Handforth triumphantly. "Now then, my lads, are you going quietly, or shall I chuck you out on your necks? Choose!"

Willy backed away cautiously.

"Now, look here!" he protested. "It's nearly Christmas time. You're not going to be hard and flinty at such a time as this? I haven't had a drop of tea yet, not even a spoonful. Come on, girls. Don't spoil everything by——"

"Outside!" bellowed Handforth fiercely.

Willy was putting on his best smile. And when Willy became persuasive it was very

difficult to resist him. Two or three of the girls had already begun to exchange inquiring glances. Willy's sister was about the only one who remained grim.

"This way!" she said coldly.

She grabbed Willy by the shoulders and marched him firmly across the room. It was too late for any persuasive methods now. With Edward Oswald to lend assistance, Willy was hurled forth into the night.

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon, in the grasp of the other Removites, joined him a second later. The door slammed, a bolt was shot, and the heroes of the Third found themselves in the midst of the bitter wind.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS HALLIDAY.



WILLY HAND-FORTH took a deep breath.

"Chucked out!"

he said tensely. "Booted off the giddy premises. My sons, are we going to stand

it?"

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon snorted. "Leave everything to your uncle, and it'll be all right!" sneered Chubby bitterly. "You're a fine chap—I don't think. I only grabbed one piece of bread-and-butter. Not even a cake!"

"I had even less than that——" began Juicy.

"There's something more important than grub in this life," said Willy, with a grim note in his voice. "My hat! Think of it! Kicked out by all and sundry. There wasn't one who stood up for us. Not one. Even old Archie urged my major to chuck us out!"

"The heartless beggars!" growled Juicy. "And those girls are just as bad. Worse! Where's the idiot who said that girls were soft-hearted? Irene and Doris and that lot are worse than flint stones. And as for your giddy sister, Willy, she's——"

"Don't talk about Ena," interrupted Willy sourly. "I can think of better words to describe her. But I won't trouble; the English language isn't descriptive enough. I can't quite believe it, you know—all those girls throwing us out."

"The Remove chaps naturally turned against us—they always do!" growled Chubby. "We couldn't expect any sympathy from those beasts. But, hang it, I hardly thought the girls would be so callous. It was just like turning a starving man away from the door."

"Let's get in again?" suggested Juicy eagerly.

But Willy shook his head.

"That's crude, and it wouldn't work,



Opening the door, Nipper could see that the snow was drifting against the train. Already it was knee-deep—and reaching to the footboards.

anyhow," he replied. "We should only get hoofed out again. I suppose they think it's rather funny to play that sort of game. And all because of our appearance, too. What's wrong with it? Anybody might think we were contaminated. You chaps are a bit awful, I'll confess, but——"

"What about you?" growled Chubby. "Your boots——"

"Oh, well, it's no good arguing!" interrupted Willy curtly. "We're dished, and we'd better get back home. And we haven't even got that five bob for tea!"

"It's too late for tea in Hall now, too," moaned Juicy. "We're dished on every side. This is what comes of relying on you, Willy. I'm starving, and we can't get anything from Mrs. Hake on tick——"

"Don't worry about tea," interrupted Willy. "There's bound to be some food knocking about somewhere, and we'll get hold of it. We'll have revenge, too. We'll get even with that crowd. You leave it to me!"

They started trudging back towards St. Frank's, hungry, irritable, and thoroughly disgusted with life in general. Things had come to a pretty pass when they couldn't

even join a party—especially at this season of the year—without being kicked out.

As far as Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were concerned the incident was over. And even Willy Handforth, after pondering awhile, realised that there wouldn't be much time for revenge in the immediate future. With the school breaking-up on the morrow there would be no opportunity for any elaborate plotting.

But while Chubby and Juicy allowed the thing to slide, Willy stored it up. He was by no means a revengeful junior, but he considered that the Third Form had received a deadly insult. And before normal relations could be resumed that insult had to be wiped out.

However, it could wait. Willy possessed an endless supply of patience. When the right opportunity cropped up he would be ready.

As for the perpetrators of the insult, they seemed to take a purely heartless view of the matter. They were laughing and joking considerably over the discomfiture of Willy & Co. They seemed to think it quite a good joke.

"It's the only way," Handforth was saying. "You've got to be firm with my minor. Give him half an inch and he'll take a mile. Like his nerve to push in without an invitation, and expect us to stand it."

"All the same, it was a bit rough, wasn't it?" asked Winnie. "They've had their lesson. Wouldn't it be a good idea to ask them in now?"

"And spoil all the good work we've done?" asked Ena. "No fear!"

"It wouldn't be any good, anyhow," said Irene. "They've gone by this time. Willy isn't the sort of boy to hang about. And they DID look dreadfully untidy, didn't they?"

"What-ho! I mean to say, absolutely!" observed Archie. "Why, dash it, the old appetite was wilting away— Good gad! Who's the fair stranger, what?"

Archie rose gracefully to his feet, and the other fellows stood up, too. The door had opened, and a lady was standing there. She was rather small and graceful, and although her dress was very prim, and her hair severe in appearance, nothing could disguise the fact that she was very good-looking. Her age seemed to be well over thirty, but Nipper, who was quite near, judged that she was considerably younger. She was smiling, but there was an indefinable air of sadness in her brown eyes.

"Haven't you finished tea yet?" she asked in a soft, well-modulated voice. "What a dreadful time you're taking. Aren't we to have some dancing?"

"So sorry, Miss Halliday," said Miss Irene. "We've been taking it easy, you know, and the time slips away so quickly.

This is Miss Halliday, you fellows, I don't think you've met her before."

"Absolutely not!" beamed Archie. "Charmed, old thing! I—I mean to say, pleased to meet you, dear lady. One of the heads, I gather?"

"Not exactly one of the heads," smiled Miss Halliday. "I am merely an under-mistress. The lecture-room is all ready when you need it," she added, turning to the girls. "You won't be long, will you?"

"Two minutes, Miss Halliday," said Doris briskly. "Buck up, Reggie. You're taking an awful time over that cup of tea. It's your fifth, too."

"No fear!" denied Reggie Pitt. "Only the fourth!"

Miss Halliday departed, and the juniors cast inquiring looks at their hostesses. Irene smiled.

"She's a dear," she explained. "Miss Halliday's only been with us a week or two, and there isn't a girl here who wouldn't go miles for her. She's simply a brick!"

"Rather!" agreed Marjorie Temple. "The other day I sneaked in twenty minutes late, and she didn't even report me. And yet she's down on us girls like a ton of bricks if we do something really bad."

"Oh, so you are bad sometimes?" asked Buster Boots, grinning.

"You'd go grey if you heard all!" said Doris grimly. "But we won't harrow you with any details of that sort. We were talking about Miss Halliday, and she's a real tip-topper. There's a bit of a mystery about her, too."

"No! I say, what?" asked Archie. "Not really?"

"Well, not exactly a mystery," put in Irene.

"But it is!" insisted Doris.

"And I say it isn't!" declared Irene stoutly.

"Why not go outside and fight it out?" suggested Reggie Pitt.

"Don't be silly," said Irene. "Doris is wrong. There's no mystery at all—at least, not a real mystery. It's simply that Miss Halliday isn't Miss Halliday at all. And yet she is!"

"That's what I call really lucid!" grinned Nipper.

"Don't be horrid!" frowned Irene. "She isn't Miss Halliday because she's really a widow. Miss Halliday is only her maiden name. Can't you understand? I believe she's had a lot of trouble in her life, and she won't tell us anything about her husband, or why she is compelled to take a job as a school mistress. We've often tried to draw her out, but she won't budge."

"She seems rather a nice sort," remarked Tommy Watson. "I believe she's younger

than she looks, too. She's not a year more than thirty."

"You howling fathead!" snorted Handforth. "She's over forty——"

He caught Irene's eye upon him, and words failed him.

"As a matter of fact, she's just twenty-seven," said Irene calmly.

"Twenty-seven!"

"She told me so herself."

"Then it MUST be true!" chuckled Fullwood. "It's proverbial that ladies always state their correct age!"

"Ralph, you're awfully sarcastic," protested Winnie Pitt. "Reggie, is he as bad as this always?"

"Nearly!" chuckled Pitt. "And I must say I agree——"

"Well, you can say what you like," interrupted Irene, tossing her head. "I believe Miss Halliday! If she did her hair another way, and dressed more fashionably, she wouldn't look more than twenty. She's made herself prim deliberately. And, anyhow, she's awfully sweet."

"We've caught her sighing once or twice," said Doris thoughtfully. "I believe she's got a big secret——"

"I'm sorry for Miss Halliday, and she has my full sympathy," interrupted Handforth. "But what about this dance? Are we going to make a move, or stop here all the evening talking about your new under-mistress?"

"Blunt, but to the point," smiled Doris. "And Ted's right, too. There's none too much time, so we'd better make the most of it. Now then, you fellows, choose your partners!"

CHAPTER V.

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE BROKEN PENDANT.



UNDOUBTEDLY, the party was a success.

Following the tea, there was a jolly sort of informal dance, and Miss Halliday presided at the piano. Miss Bond herself

even looked in, and beamed upon the company in general. All the same, there was a general air of relief when the headmistress gave a kindly, motherly nod and withdrew.

"Having shoved the seal of approval on the old gathering, she's staggered away," observed Archie. "I mean to say, dashed good taste, laddies. Somehow, these mistresses always cast a cloud over the festive scene."

"Not all of them," said Marjorie, who was dancing with Archie at the moment. "Miss Halliday is quite different. We never feel awkward when she's with us. Miss Halliday's a sportsman."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "I mean, dash it, this fox-trot, what? Positively ripping! It helps a chappie to dance so much

better, you know. Marjorie, old girl, you've improved frightfully since we danced last. Absolutely! The old steps merge, as it were."

Marjorie smiled.

"That's Miss Halliday again," she smiled. "Although she takes us in general subjects now and again, she's really our dancing mistress. And she's given us some ripping points, too."

There was no doubt that Miss Halliday was as great an expert at the piano. Her dance playing was perfection. The time was so good that the dancers were genuinely sorry when each dance ended.

"What a pity we shan't be spending Christmas together," said Handforth during one of the intervals. "There's been nothing arranged this year—no Christmas party, or anything. Sometimes we go to Tregellis-West's place, or Archie Glenthorne's home. But this year the invitations don't seem to have happened."

"Well, I dare say we shall meet once or twice during the holidays," replied Irene. "My people live in London, too, Ted. You'll spend Christmas in London, won't you?"

"Rather!" declared Handforth. "We shall have to fix things up. I dare say we can arrange one or two parties of our own."

"And perhaps you'll take some dancing lessons, in the meantime?" asked Irene carelessly.

"Eh? My hat! You don't mean——"

"I've got to be frank, Ted," said Irene. "Do you know you've trodden on my feet at least three times this evening?"

"Oh, I say!" protested Edward Oswald in distress. "Awfully sorry, Irene! The fact is, you've improved so much since we last danced that I'm all at sea! What's happened?"

"Miss Halliday's been coaching us."

"I'll take some dancing lessons as soon as ever I get home," said Handforth firmly. "I won't be long in—— Hallo, what's this, a waltz?"

The music had started up again.

"Yes, but I've promised this dance to Dick," replied Irene, rising. "Sorry, Ted—we'll have the next fox-trot."

"Good!" said Handforth.

But he frowned with ill-concealed jealousy as Nipper claimed Irene and waltzed off with her. Everybody seemed to be dancing, too. Handforth looked round for a partner, and, as far as he could see, there was nobody but his sister left. In desperation he approached.

"How about it, sis?" he asked gruffly.

"Thanks all the same—nothing doing," replied Ena coldly. "Some of these other girls may like you to clump on their feet, but I don't! You're bad enough when you're fox-trotting, but when you're waltzing you resemble a limp elephant!"

"I've never seen a limp elephant!" snorted Handforth.

"Well, a flabby one, then," said Ena. "Oh, are you ready, Jack? Come on, the waltz is nearly half over."

Jack Grey took Ena into the swirl of dancers, and Handforth received a pleasant surprise when he observed that Tessa Love was sitting out. He ran up so boisterously that two of three pairs of dancers were sent careering and swaying.

"Will you risk it, Tessa?" asked Handforth. "I'm a bit off colour—"

"There's nothing like pluck!" smiled Tessa. "I'll chance it!"

Handforth was certainly hopeless when it came to waltzing. Tessa was an excellent dancer, and she guided Handforth's steps to a considerable extent. But he was too much for her. He had a habit of getting into a spin, and failing to recover. And when he did finally straighten up, he was so dizzy that he lurched into everybody else.

After about two of these spins, Tessa was nearly exhausted. But she continued bravely, hoping that the waltz would soon be over. And then it ended quite unexpectedly—owing to the capsizing of the orchestra.

Handforth developed one of his treacherous spins near the piano, and when he came out of it lost his balance so completely that he lurched dizzily into Miss Halliday.

The result was disastrous.

Dragging Tessa with him, Handforth literally swept the unfortunate mistress off the stool, the music suddenly ceased, and Miss Halliday, Tessa, and Handforth collapsed to the floor in a heap.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

In spite of themselves, the others couldn't help laughing. Handforth was sitting up, looking dazed and stunned. Before Tessa could rise, half a dozen hands were helping her up. And Miss Halliday was assisted to her feet, too.

"I say, awfully sorry!" muttered Handforth, as red as a beetroot. "I—I don't seem to know exactly what—"

"You hopeless ass!" panted Church. "Things have come to a nice pass when you biff into people like that!"

"You might have hurt Miss Halliday badly!" said McClure breathlessly.

"It's all right—don't trouble!" laughed Miss Halliday. "I'm not hurt a bit, really. But it was so unexpected—"

"Hallo! Is this yours?" asked Fullwood, picking something from the floor and showing it to the under-mistress. "I seem to remember you wearing—"

"Oh!" murmured Miss Halliday.

There was something in her tone which made all the others stare at her. Fullwood had picked up a pendant with a thin gold chain. As a matter of fact, Handforth had snapped it with one clean sweep as he

clutched at Miss Halliday in falling. The pendant was rather heavy, with a folding device. It was open, and the glass was shattered.

Fullwood and Reggie Pitt—indeed, two or three of the juniors—caught sight of a tiny photograph within the pendant. It was the picture of a striking-looking young man—an excellently preserved likeness. He had strong features, and a kindly, frank expression.

"Please!" said Miss Halliday faintly.

She took the pendant, and her distress was obvious. To the astonishment of the juniors—and to the surprise of the girls, too—she had gone very pale. She slipped the broken pendant into her pocket.

"We will get on with the dancing," she said quietly.

Somehow, there was an indefinable change in her manner, and even the dancing was different from that moment. It could all be attributed to Miss Halliday's playing. She had lost every vestige of her former lilt and accurate time. She played mechanically, and, as a result, no dance was a real success.

Indeed, after twenty minutes had elapsed, Miss Halliday pleaded a bad headache, and retired altogether. And the party degenerated into a kind of sing-song affair. Some of the girls obliged with a solo, and there was plenty of merriment. But the departure of Miss Halliday made a great difference.

Later on, after the good-byes, the St. Frank's fellows forgot the incident. They returned home, thoroughly satisfied with the evening's entertainment, and after that there were so many things to think of that Miss Halliday never entered their thoughts again.

Irene & Co., however, discussed the incident at bed-time. They were more romantic than the boys, and it seemed to them that that tiny photograph was somehow connected with the mystery of Miss Halliday.

"There's something funny about it," declared Irene firmly. "Why should Miss Halliday carry that little miniature about with her? She's always worn that pendant, you know."

"Nothing funny in that," objected Doris. "I expect it's a photograph of her late departed."

"Oh, Doris, don't be so crude!" said Marjorie, shocked. "You mean her late husband, I suppose? Well, it's fairly obvious that the photograph is of him—"

"The obvious isn't always the truth," interrupted Irene with a wise nod. "And that photograph we saw isn't a likeness of Miss Halliday's husband at all. He was a Mr. Thornton—and, really, she's Mrs. Thornton—and one day last week she showed me his photograph."

"You mean thing!" exclaimed Doris. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"There didn't seem to be anything to tell," said Irene. "I happened to be in Miss Halliday's room, and she showed me. I felt bound to take a polite interest, but I wasn't actually enthralled. But, here's the point—he wasn't a bit like that photograph in the pendant."

"Oh-ho!" murmured Doris slowly. "This looks serious. Two romances, eh? Still, it's a bit thick to discuss Miss Halliday like this. That miniature may be a likeness of her brother, or something," she added with a yawn. "Let's forget all about it."

CHAPTER VI.

THE SAD AFFAIR OF A TOP-HAT.



TUBBS made a laboured note in his pocket-book.

"Got that down?" asked Willy Handforth.

"Nearly, sir," said Tubbs breathlessly. "Just a

minute, Master Handforth. I ain't such a scholar as you are! An' this 'ere pencil ain't wot it might be, neither!"

"Any excuse is better than none," said Willy tartly. "My only hat! Do you call that handwriting? What's the good of making notes? You'll never be able to decipher 'em!"

The Ancient House page-boy grinned.

"I don't know about de-syphoning 'em, sir," he said, "but I can make out wot I've writ all right. That last one was about Septimus, wasn't it? I've got to feed him every mornin'—"

"My dear chap, it's nearly time for me to go," interrupted Willy impatiently. "Trains won't wait. You're sure you've got everything down? Have another look!"

"Everyfink's here, sir," said Tubbs, scanning his notes.

"Good!" nodded Willy. "Mind you don't spoil Marmaduke—he's a perfect beggar for nuts. And be very careful about Sebastian. Snakes need careful handling—"

"I'll go easy with the snake, sir," said Tubbs cautiously. "As long as 'e don't sting, I don't mind."

"Sting?" repeated Willy. "Snakes don't sting, you chump!"

"I've heard as 'ow they kill people—"

"They bite!" explained Willy. "You needn't be afraid of his tongue—he only shoves that out to feel things."

"I thought 'e stung with 'is tongue!"

"Then you thought wrong," growled Willy. "My only aunt! It beats me, the way people get the wrong ideas about these animals and reptiles! You needn't worry about Sebastian at all—he hasn't got any poison glands, and he doesn't bite, anyhow. He's as harmless as I am."

"Then I'll go easy with 'im, sir," said Tubbs promptly.

He made one or two notes—until, indeed, his pocket-book was thoroughly mutilated. How anybody could read those notes was a complete puzzle to Willy.

It was the following day, and the bulk of the school had already gone. St. Frank's was looking deserted and forlorn. One or two fellows were trickling out of the various Houses, but the greater proportion of the school had left by the earlier trains.

Willy Handforth had lingered with his pets. He was very fond of Marmaduke the monkey, and he had a great affection for Priscilla the parrot. As for Rupert the rat, and Ferdinand the ferret, he had spent ten minutes with each, fondling and coaxing.

It was one of Willy's big grievances that his pater had strictly forbidden him to bring any of his pets home. He had taken them home once or twice, and the consequences had been disastrous. Sir Edward Handforth was particularly down on Marmaduke, the monkey.

Under no circumstances was Marmaduke to be brought home. And in order to make thoroughly sure of complete immunity, Willy's pater had placed a ban on the whole collection. The only solution, therefore, was for Willy to leave the pets behind, and to get somebody to look after them.

Tubbs was staying at the school for Christmas, and for two or three days Willy had been coaching him. For a lump sum down, and a promise of another lump sum at the beginning of the new term, Tubbs had consented to act as temporary keeper.

Willy revealed traces of astute business. The lump sum at the beginning of the new term was to be far the larger—but it would only be paid on condition that every pet was well-groomed and in perfect condition. Tubbs, accordingly, would be prompted to perform his duties religiously.

Willy glanced at his watch.

"Twenty minutes before the train goes," he said briskly. "It's not so bad as I thought. Heaps of time. Thank goodness my major went in the morning. I'll buzz round now, and fetch Chubby and Juicy. I'll bet they're gorging themselves in the tuck-shop."

He gave Marmaduke a final pat through the bars of the monkey's cage. Marmaduke chattered volubly, and his bright little eyes revealed such an expression of anxiety that Willy's heart was softened. The monkey obviously knew that something very unusual was in the wind. He was greatly attached to Willy, and would obey every command of his young master.

"All right, old son," said Willy gently. "It won't be for long—only two or three weeks."

"I'm blowed if 'e don't look regular sad, sir," said Tubbs.

Willy unfastened the cage, and took Marmaduke into his arms. The little monkey clung round his neck, gleeful and happy.

There was a scuffling of feet outside, and Chubby Heath fairly hurled himself within the Pets House.

"Quick" he yelled. "We shall miss the train!"

Marmaduke gave one leap. He wasn't accustomed to these startling interruptions. Before Willy could recover him, he streaked through the doorway, hopped over the wall opposite, and skidded sideways across the West Square like a crab in top gear. Just as he was vanishing through the West Arch he performed a couple of somersaults, and other gymnastic evolutions.

"You blithering idiot!" howled Willy. "Look what you've done! Marmy's escaped now—"

"I can't help that!" panted Chubby. "There's only seven minutes before the train goes!"

"Seven minutes!" echoed Willy. "Who told you so?"

"It's twenty past two!" gasped Chubby, pulling out his watch. "The train goes at two twenty-seven, and there's not another until nearly tea-time! Come on—we shall miss it!"

Willy snorted.

"You hopeless chump!" he declared. "Do you call that thing a watch? How the dickens can you expect it to tell the time? I saw you sticking a penholder into it this morning!"

"I only did that to make it go—"

"Well, it goes too well!" snapped Willy. "It's fast! What's the good of a school clock if you don't look at it? It's only ten past two, and the train's bound to be late, anyhow. Come and help me to find Marmy!"

Willy wasn't really disturbed. He knew that it was only necessary to give his famous whistle, and Marmaduke would come scooting back. He hurried through the gate into the West Square, and raced towards the Triangle. Chubby Heath and Tubbs followed. They emerged from the West Arch just in time to witness a somewhat diverting incident.

William Napoleon Browne, the elegant, lanky captain of the Fifth, was striding towards the outer gates, bag in hand, and even more immaculate than usual.

Browne was making for the two-twenty-seven, too. Stevens, his bosom chum, had gone on in advance, having occasion to settle one or two bills in the village. Browne was resplendent in gleaming shoes, a well-cut overcoat, and a glossy top-hat. The cold December sunshine revealed him to the very best advantage.

And then Marmaduke appeared upon the scene.

Exactly why he took a fancy to Browne was a puzzle that only Marmaduke himself could solve. At all events, he caught sight of the Fifth-Former, made one bound, and landed squarely upon Browne's shoulder.

William Napoleon gasped. He was one of the coolest fellows in the school. His self-

possession was a by-word. But he had heard no sound—he had seen nothing of this startling approach. It was hardly surprising that he gave a gurgle, and staggered back.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated blankly.

He turned his head, and beheld a tiny face close to his own—a whiskery face, with gleaming eyes and white little teeth. And Browne recognised the celebrated features of Marmaduke.

"Ah, Brother Marmaduke!" he observed. "As an example of pure nerve, this would undoubtedly require some beating. When you have quite finished mauling my overcoat, be good enough to remove your undesirable presence!"

Marmaduke chattered with sheer delight.

"I positively decline to agree with you," said Browne firmly. "Without wishing to be too personal, I feel bound to remark that you are no gentleman. This habit of leaping upon one's shoulder must be discouraged. Whatever you do, be careful with my hat, Brother Marmy. Be very careful—"

Marmaduke probably understood the meaning of the word "hat." He was uncannily intelligent. He might have thought that Browne was inviting him to remove his hat. At all events, this is exactly what he did do.

He not only removed it, but he leapt to the ground, and careered off in triumph. And Browne stood there, hatless, watching him. Willy Handforth and Chubby Heath and Tubbs paused in the West Arch to watch the proceedings.

Marmaduke made a bee-line for the fountain, made a victorious conquest of it, and perched himself at the very summit. Then he calmly donned the hat, and practically obliterated himself.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Willy and Chubby yelled, and Browne looked excessively pained.

"Alas!" he sighed. "Alas and alack! That this grievous exhibition should be received with boisterous merriment! Brother Willy, be good enough to recover my head-gear. After which, take your infernal monkey, wring his neck, and cast him into the deepest dungeon 'neath the castle moat."

"None of that, Marmy!" shouted Willy sternly. "Bring that hat back!"

Marmaduke emerged from the hat, and in his exuberance he swung the silken topper about so violently that it repeatedly collided with the ornamental spikes at the top of the fountain.

Browne's expression was pitiful. A great sadness came over him. Unquestionably, his hat was being slightly soiled. Already there were two enormous gashes in it, and the crown was bashed in.

Marmaduke completed his riot of destruction by holding the hat at arm's length, chattering at it contemptuously, and then dropping it into the fountain-pool. It struck with a sickly splash, gurgled once or twice, and drifted forlornly off in a half-derelict condition.

William Napoleon Browne approached with a purposeful stride.

"As a piece of dirty work, this surely beats every known record," he said. "Brother Willy, there is no time to deal with this matter as it justly deserves. Unhappily, I cannot take Brother Marmaduke myself, and place him upon the rack. I have no time to apply the branding-irons. Neither are the thumb-screws available. I will therefore leave you to pass sentence, and perform the ceremony of execution."

"Chuck it, Browne," grinned Willy. "I'm sorry about your hat, but old Marmy didn't do it deliberately——"

"No?" asked Browne mildly. "Opinions, of course, are liable to differ. Personally, I have never seen a more premeditated piece of foulness in the whole of my chequered career. So proceed with the slaughter. In the meantime, solely in the interests of health, I am compelled to commandeer your own chapeau as a substitute!"

Willy made one grab, but he was too late. Browne seized the Third-Former's shiny topper, removed it, and placed it upon his own head. It was about three sizes too small, and it looked ludicrous in the extreme. Even Willy, in spite of his indignation, couldn't help joining in the the howl of laughter. Browne regarded them coldly.

"I am aware that my appearance is bizarre, but there is surely no need for this Cheshire cat effect?" he asked. "Fortunately, there is no mirror near at hand. I am therefore spared the painful ordeal of regarding my own reflection. But health is the watchword. The wintry blast is bitter, and my doctor has ordered me never to venture forth unprotected. You are, of course, at liberty to wear my own hat in exchange!"

Browne glanced at the school clock, and strode off. There was something in his point of view, after all. Any hat was better than none, and he surely had a perfect right to Willy's. Once at the station, he could remove the offence, and once in London he could take a taxi to the nearest hatter's and buy a new topper.

Willy Handforth breathed hard as Browne vanished.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he asked tensely. "The absolute bounder! He's pinched my new tile!"

"Well, you can hardly blame him——" began Chubby.

"It wasn't my fault that Marmy pinched his hat!" howled Willy. "Besides, it's not hurt—there's only a dent or two in it! As for being wet, what's that?"

"You'd better wear it, then," said Juicy Lemon, coming up.

But Willy didn't. After a brief inspection, he concluded that it would be better to go off hatless. And it was necessary to put some speed on, too. Willy's chums considered that Browne had been fully justified in his action.

But Willy, who held that Marmaduke could do no wrong—and that if he did do wrong, he couldn't be blamed—registered a large, broad, black mark against the name of William Napoleon Browne.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DESERTED CASTLE.



"NOW!" yelled Chubby Heath joyously.

He was standing at the window of a comfortable, roomy bed-room, filled with old-world furniture. There was only one bed in it, but it was of gigantic dimensions—one of those ancient four-posters which were built for comfort, and not with the idea of wedging them into a maisonette.

Within the bed were two forms, and the bedclothes were partially pushed back, showing exactly where Chubby Heath himself had reclined. Chubby was in his pyjamas, and he was gazing out across a spacious garden, with steeply rising hills in the distance.

"Snow!" he repeated. "Come and look at this, you chaps! What did I tell you? We always get snow in Derbyshire! Good egg!"

The two forms sat up in the bed, revealing themselves as Willy Handforth and Christopher Lemon. They were Chubby's honoured guests for the Christmas holidays, and the actual scene was the home of Mr. Martin Heath, J.P., M.P., in the Peak district of Derbyshire. Chubby's pater was the most important man in the neighbourhood, and quite a big man in Parliament, too.

Willy yawned, went to the window, and grunted.

"Fathead!" he said tartly. "Dragging me out of bed for nothing! Is this what you call snow?"

"What do you call it; ginger-beer?" asked Chubby sarcastically.

"It's not worth talking about!" growled Willy. "About ten flakes to the acre! It'll take weeks and weeks to cover enough ground to make a decent snowball!"

"But look at the clouds," said Chubby, casting his eye upwards. "The pater was telling everybody last night that snow was coming—and it's started already! Look at those snow clouds!"

Willy was somewhat mollified. Unquestionably, the heavy, lowering clouds were of the right brand to produce a heavy snowfall. A few isolated flakes were descending, and blowing against the window. There was no sign of snow on the ground yet—and the whole vista was bleak and wintry, for a hard frost had set in. But the promise of snow was evident.

It was quite near to Christmas now. Chubby had been home for days, but Willy and Juicy had only arrived the previous

afternoon. And even in this short space of time, the redoubtable Willy had created a big impression on the household.

At dinner the whole table had been startled by the extraordinary behaviour of a wine decanter, which had insisted on tipping without any visible aid. When it finally went a bit too far, and deposited its red contents over the snowy tablecloth, an investigation revealed a rubber bulb, and a tube leading to Willy's place. And in the drawing-room, later, a sudden green glare in the fire, accompanied by a devastating report, was hardly attributable to the coal.

Chubby stoutly denied all knowledge of the phenomenon, and Willy was under deep suspicion. Indeed, Mr. Heath had gravely remarked to Mrs. Heath, upon retiring, that he wasn't at all sure whether he had been wise in inviting those two mischievous young monkeys. Joe was bad enough—but they seemed to be far worse.

Willy had come to Chubby's home to enjoy himself, and he had his own peculiar methods of extracting amusement. After all, Christmas was Christmas. So why not stretch a point or two?

Willy had left his own home with little regret. Only two days ago he and Ena had quarrelled violently, and hadn't spoken a word to one another since. And Edward Oswald, out of sheer perversity, had taken Ena's side. Strained relations were the order of the hour—particularly as Sir Edward and Lady Handforth had separately lectured Willy, and warned him about the wickedness of placing beetles in his sister's bed. In vain, Willy had protested that the beetles were dead—mere specimens. According to Sir Edward, this made no difference whatever.

At Heath's home, these little troubles were not likely to crop up, so Willy was feeling serene and happy. As he dressed, he touched one or two tender spots which reminded him of home and his father. But he cast these recollections aside, and sadly told himself that home wasn't half the place it was made out to be. Why, a fellow couldn't do a single thing without being dropped on, and chastised. It was little short of sickening. Christmas away from home was heaps better.

"I think you'll have your wish, Joe, young man," remarked Mr. Heath, when Chubby and his guests presented themselves at the breakfast-table. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, there is a lot of snow coming."

"Fine!" said Chubby. "What's under that dish-cover?"

"The Air Ministry tells us that we are liable to have the most severe spell of wintry weather for many years," continued Mr. Heath, unfolding his serviette. "I'm afraid it'll cause a great deal of inconvenience, but, after all, one feels the need of snow at Christmas time."

"What's under that dish-cover, mum?" asked Chubby, dreamily.

"Anybody might think you were half-starved, Joe!" said his mother, with a severe look. "And you shouldn't be so inquisitive. Why don't you listen to what your father is saying?"

Mr. Heath was making some learned remarks on the atmospheric condition, and deploring the fact that the snow couldn't wait until Christmas day itself. Trains would be delayed, and all manner of other inconveniences would result if a big fall came immediately.

Mr. Heath was a big, robust, genial gentleman, with a red face, and a hearty manner. He was a typical country squire, and one would never have imagined that he was an exceedingly capable speaker, and a shrewd politician. For the moment, he was throwing aside all politics, and acting his part as host with a true Yule-tide abandon.

"What about some skating after breakfast?" asked Willy.

"Certainly not!" said Mr. Heath. "Good heavens! What next? Joseph, don't you dare take your young friends to the lake! The ice is treacherous—very treacherous. There will have to be a great deal more frost—"

"Topping!" ejaculated Chubby. "Kidneys and bacon!"

"What did you say, Joe?"

"Eh? Sorry, dad!" said Chubby, who had been concentrating his attention on the dishes. "You were talking about the weather, weren't you?"

"I was talking about the lake!" said Mr. Heath severely. "I am grieved to observe, Joe, that you retain that grievous habit of concentrating your attention upon food. Will you never outgrow that gluttonous trait?"

Willy glanced at Juicy, and they both sighed. It was a rummy thing, but all parents seemed to be the same. How many times had Sir Edward spoken to Willy on the same subject? How many times had Juicy's pater scolded him in similar strain? It was enough to make a chap fed up.

In fact, the three fags were heartily relieved when breakfast was over—although they took good care to lay in a solid stock—and when they sallied out for a walk in the frosty air they breathed freely.

"The pater makes me tired!" said Chubby rebelliously. "Always gassing about grub—always grumbling at something or other! He even told me to give you a friendly warning, Willy!"

ANSWERS

Every Saturday. Price 2d

"Oh, did he?" said Handforth minor. "What about?"

"Oh, nothing—a lot of fuss over a trifle," growled Chubby, as they came into the road. "That bomb-thing you put in the fire last night. The pater didn't seem to appreciate it."

"I thought it was rather good," remarked Juicy.

"Distinctly good!" declared Willy firmly.

"Well, the pater says that that sort of thing has got to stop," growled Chubby. "Might as well be prisoners! Even the mater started on me! Said that there was

hadn't been at Heath's place twenty-four hours yet!

However, the brisk nature of the morning, and the assurance of snow, worked wonders on the fags' feelings. After they had been walking for half an hour, and had covered about two miles, they found themselves upon a high bluff. From this vantage point they could gaze down into the neighbouring valley, and it was possible to see for miles.

"Look at the old feudal castle!" remarked Juicy, pointing.

Willy Handforth turned. Upon the sum-



Phipps led the way with the lantern, and the St. Frank's fellows followed in pairs—each pair with a girl between them.

a whacking great hole in the carpet, where a chunk of hot coal flew out!"

Willy sniffed.

"Fancy kicking up a dust about a little hole," he said disgustedly. "Well, thank goodness we're alone now. They won't drop on us, I suppose, if we push through a hedge, and break a few twigs?"

As a matter of fact, Willy was beginning to feel rather indignant. He had left home with a feeling of joy, thoroughly relieved to be away from all the bother. And now things were getting just as bad! And he

mit of an adjoining bluff stood a grim-looking building—an aged castle of grey granite, or stone, with rising turrets and towers. They peeped out from beyond the masses of surrounding trees—for all the lower sides of the bluff were thickly wooded.

"Looks deserted," continued Juicy. "Not a sign of life there—not even a coil of smoke. My hat! Reminds me of some of the stories you read about sinister castles in the Balkans. Fancy that place being here, in Derbyshire."

Chubby Heath chuckled.

"Don't you know who it belongs to?" he asked amusedly.

"No!" replied Willy. "Who?"

"For once I know more than you know!" grinned Chubby. "I know all about that castle—and I'm going to give you a surprise."

CHAPTER VIII.

REVENGE IS SWEET!



WILLY HANDFORTH sniffed.

"Jolly clever, aren't you?" he asked tartly. "Boasting because you know something about your own neighbour-

hood! My hat! You'd be an ignorant ass if you didn't know all the local landmarks!"

"Well, there's something special about that place," said Chubby, looking hurt. "It belongs to somebody we all know. Rummy thing. I meant to tell you about it ages ago, but I've always forgotten. Something crops up, you know, and it gets left—"

"Don't gas so much!" interrupted Willy. "Who does it belong to?"

"You'll know as soon as I tell you the name."

"Then tell us, you exasperating dummy!"

"That place is called Dorrimore Castle," said Chubby calmly.

Willy Handforth and Juicy Lemon started.

"Dorrimore Castle!" echoed Willy.

"Yes."

"Not the property of old Dorrie?"

"Of course it is," grinned Chubby. "It's his country seat. At least, one of 'em. Being a millionaire, he's probably got three or four. But this old place is his ancestral home. Funny thing I haven't told you before."

"You've always had a memory like a sieve," retorted Willy. "I know that Lord Dorrimore has got two or three places in other parts of the country— My hat! Fancy that castle belonging to Dorrie! Well I'm blessed!"

They regarded the neighbouring castle with much greater interest. It had become personal. There wasn't a fellow at St. Frank's who didn't know the genial, good-natured Lord Dorrimore. To the juniors he was particularly beloved. They had had heaps of good times with old Dorrie.

But his lordship was an explorer—a big game hunter—a globe-trotter who never seemed able to settle down. Consequently his English mansions were more or less populated by their staffs alone. Not that Dorrimore Castle seemed to be populated at the moment.

"Isn't there anybody there?" asked Juicy, after a while.

"Not a soul."

"How do you know that?" demanded Willy.

"My dear chap, everybody knows it about here," replied Chubby. "There's something rummy about Dorrimore Castle—one of old Dorrie's secrets, I expect. A kind of family skeleton."

"I never thought he was that sort," remarked Willy thoughtfully. "Fancy old Dorrie having family skeletons! Do you mean to say this castle is always empty and deserted?"

"No, only at Christmas time."

"Only at Christmas time!"

"That's all," replied Chubby, enjoying the sensation he was creating. "The ordinary staff lives there during the year. But they always go off about two weeks before Christmas, and don't come back until the New Year. And the castle is left locked, bolted and barred during the interval."

"Well, it's a rummy business," declared Willy. "Some old tradition, perhaps. These ancestral castles have all sorts of queer customs."

"It hasn't always been like it," said Chubby. "I was talking to the pater about it this week, and he says that the castle's only been locked up like that for the last ten years. Before then there were always high old times there during Christmas week—whether Dorrie was present or not."

"Well, it's no business of ours," put in Juicy Lemon. "Supposing we walk round in that direction, and have a closer look? Might as well do that as anything else."

"And there's nobody there at all?" asked Willy, slowly.

"Not a soul."

"You're sure of that?"

"Positive."

"And it's locked, bolted and barred?"

"Like a giddy prison!"

"H'm!" said Willy reflectively. "That's interesting. Very interesting. In fact, it's thundering interesting."

"What the dickens are you getting at?" asked Chubby, staring.

Willy looked dreamily across the hills.

"And old Dorrie himself is touring in South America somewhere," he went on. "That's what Nipper told me, anyhow—and he heard it from his guv'nor. Touring in South America—and not likely to be home for months. Yet there's no telling," added Willy calmly. "Dorrie's full of surprises. It would be quite like him to turn up a day or two before Christmas, and hold a huge party."

"You're dotty!" said Chubby.

"Even Mr. Lee wouldn't be surprised if he suddenly heard that Dorrie was back in England for Christmas," continued Willy absently. "By jingo! I believe it would work! I jolly well believe it would work!"

"What would?"

"I'm jolly well sure it would work," declared Willy.

"You—you—"

"My sons, I've got an idea!" exclaimed Willy, his eyes gleaming. "It's more than an idea. It's a brain-wave! It's a stupendous wheeze! It's the jape of the century!"

"What is?" roared his chums, in one voice.

"Listen to me!" said Willy tensely. "The day before Christmas Eve we'll send telegrams to Nipper and my major and Pitt and Grey and Fullwood, and all those other chaps! Yes, by Jove, we'll send telegrams to Irene and Doris, and the other girls, too!"

"Send 'em telegrams?" repeated Chubby, amazed.

"It'll cost you quids!" gasped Juicy.

"No, it won't—not more than twenty-five or thirty bob," said Willy. "I've got over two pounds, anyhow. And it'll be worth every penny! This, my sons, is where we get our revenge!"

"Revenge!"

"Revenge!" said Willy firmly. "We'll send those wires to everybody, extending a cordial invitation to spend Christmas at Dorrimore Castle! Everybody will think that Dorrie has got home, and has got up a surprise party! That's as certain as the sunrise!"

"But—but why?" gasped Chubby. "You mean them to get here on Christmas Eve?"

"Exactly!"

"You howling chump, they'll find the place all locked up and barred!" snorted Juicy Lemon. "They'll find no party at all!"

"Precisely," nodded Willy. "That's the jape!"

"Jape!"

"That's the way we'll get our revenge!"

"Revenge!"

"You giddy parrots!" roared Willy. "You haven't got as much sense as Priscilla! All you can do is to repeat my last words! Can't you think? Haven't you got any machinery?"

"It beats me," confessed Chubby, scratching his head.

"Then cast your mind back to that night at St. Frank's—the evening before we broke up," said Willy grimly. "Think of the way those Remove chaps kicked us out of the Moor View School! Think of the way Irene & Co. approved of the dirty piece of work! In fact, they absolutely egged the chaps to do it! They were all in the same boat—and they'll all suffer!"

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon stared.

"But—but it's too thick!" gurgled Chubby, aghast.

"Too thick be blowed!" snorted Willy. "It wasn't too thick for them to kick us out, was it? If anybody insults the Third I believe in getting revenge! And I believe in doing it thoroughly, too! Come to think of it, there's old Browne, too!"

"Browne!" said Juicy feebly.

"Didn't he pinch my hat?" demanded Willy, with indignation.

"Yes, but your monkey ruined his!"

"That's nothing!" interrupted Willy hastily. "Browne had no excuse for burgling my topper like that. And he's going to get one of those telegrams, too! On Christmas Eve, at about tea-time, they'll roll up, expecting to find a gorgeous party—and they'll find barred gates!"

CHAPTER IX.

WILLY MEANS BUSINESS!



HERE was something so daring about Willy's proposed practical joke that Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were breathless. They were normally intelligent juniors, but their brains failed to grasp the completeness of the project.

"They won't come!" said Chubby, at length. "They won't be fooled by a telegram like that! You're mad! They know Dorrie's abroad——"

"That's nothing," interrupted Willy. "I'm simply counting on Dorrie's characteristics. Everybody knows he's a bounder for giving surprises. It would be just like him to get up a party at the last minute."

"Yes, but everybody will have made their own arrangements," objected Juicy Lemon. "They'll have Christmas all fixed up. Instead of getting that crowd down here, there'll be a sheaf of telegrams, saying that nobody can come!"

Willy shook his head.

"Don't you believe it," he replied. "There may be one or two non-starters, but the majority will roll up. I happen to know for a fact that nearly all the chaps are planning to spend Christmas at home. They'll simply leap at the chance to come to one of Dorrie's parties."

"Well, that's true," admitted Chubby.

"Dorrie's famous for his parties," went on Willy. "Being a millionaire, he spends money like water. Everybody will rush at the thing and not a soul will suspect that it's a trick. We'll even get Nipper down here. He'll probably discuss the matter with Mr. Lee, but even Mr. Lee won't know that Dorrie isn't home. Dorrie's such an erratic beggar. I tell you, we're on safe ground."

Chubby's face broke into a slow grin.

"There's something in it," he admitted. "Crumbs! What a lark! And we shall get our own back, shan't we?"

"It's good enough for the First of April!" chuckled Willy. "They'll all be properly fooled, my sons. We'll chip them all next term over this affair. The whole school will yell!"

"But will they come?" asked Chubby dubiously. "Your major knows you're in

this district, and he might smell a rat. If he got talking with the other fellows——"

"We shall have to risk that," replied Willy, frowning. "That's the worst of having a big reputation! Not that there's much risk," he added thoughtfully. "Dorrimore Castle is nearer Buxton than your place, Chubby. We can send those telegrams from Buxton—it's the station for the castle, anyhow. Nobody will catch on."

"Yes, that'll be safe enough," agreed Chubby. "But I say, isn't it a bit too mouldy?"

"Mouldy?"

"I mean, we don't want to be vindictive," said Chubby. "It's Christmas-time, and we're supposed to be bunged full of good-fellowship. Let bygones be bygones, you know. That sort of spirit. Doesn't it seem a bit steep to spoil their Christmas like that?"

"Who's going to spoil their Christmas?"

"You will, if you carry out that dodge," replied Chubby. "After all, they only biffed us out of that party because we weren't invited. It was more or less of a joke——"

"And so is this a joke," interrupted Willy coldly. "My hat! You're as soft as putty! I've got the honour of the Third more at heart! If the Third's insulted, the Third's got to wipe it out!"

"Yes, but——"

"Yes, but nothing!" snorted Willy. "You're talking out of the back of your neck, my son! There's no question of spoiling anybody's Christmas. Hang it all, I wouldn't play a dirty trick like that! It's only a rag!"

"A pretty steep kind of rag," said Chubby. "They'll get here on Christmas Eve, and find themselves miles from anywhere, with the castle all locked. I don't suppose there'll be any trains running on Christmas Day, so they'll simply be stranded! I don't call that much of a joke!"

"Neither do I," agreed Juicy Lemon. "It's too thick!"

Willy regarded them with pitiful contempt.

"And you thought me capable of that?" he asked tartly. "You thought I'd suggest a filthy trick of that kind? My only hat! I hope I'm not a vindictive——"

"But you have suggested it!" interrupted Chubby.

"Rats!" roared Willy. "Rot! Rubbish! Piffle!"

"Steady!" protested Juicy indignantly.

"My poor, hopeless cuckoos!" sighed Willy. "When I send those wires, I'll name a certain train—one that'll get 'em here in the afternoon. It's not much of a journey from London, after all—three or four hours, at the most."

"Well?"

"Well, I'll fix it so that they'll have heaps of time to get here, and then catch a train back for London the same evening,"

explained Willy. "Their Christmas won't be spoilt—they'll be back home on Christmas Eve. But they'll have had the journey all for nothing. And we shall be outside the castle gates to explain, in sweet tones, that we've had our own back."

Willy's chums grinned with relief.

"Of course, that makes it different," said Chubby heartily. "As long as they can get back in time for Christmas, it's a ripping wheeze. They deserve something pretty stiff, too, to pay 'em back for the way they treated us!"

"Rather!" said Juicy, nodding.

"I'm glad you can see it!" growled Willy. "It's like your nerve to suspect me of letting the chaps in for a ruined Christmas. What about the girls, too? We couldn't leave them stranded!"

"Of course, everything's all right, the way you've planned it," said Chubby. "What a joke! What a wheeze! Even if they don't all come, plenty of 'em will roll up! We'll crack our giddy sides!"

And Willy & Co., as they turned their steps towards the castle, entered into closer details of the sinister plot.

CHAPTER X.

A COMPLETE SUCCESS.



ARCHIE GLENTHORNE adjusted his tie with great care.

"Everything all in order, Phipps?" he inquired anxiously.

"Yes, sir," replied Phipps.

"I shouldn't advise you to touch your neck-wear. There are many blacks in the air this morning, and they have a habit of clinging to gloves. Better let well alone, sir."

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie. "A dashed wise observation, laddie! I mean to say, when one looks out of the old window, one realises the general murkiness!"

"Just so, sir."

Archie was gliding through the West-end in a taxi, en route for a big London terminus. On the seat opposite sat Phipps, his valet, cool, calm, and unemotional, as usual.

"I trust we have bags of time, Phipps?" asked Archie, as the taxi halted. "These blocks are a frightful bother, you know. I mean, dash it, we could have walked to the bally place in half this time!"

"I was prepared for delays, sir, and allowed ample time," explained Phipps. "I imagine we shall arrive fully half-an-hour before the train leaves. Quite necessary, too, sir, for there is bound to be a big rush on Christmas Eve."

"Oh, absolutely," agreed Archie. "It's a rummy thing, Phipps, but all the dashed citizens appear to dash off at the last dashed minute! It doesn't give a chappie breathing space, I mean!"

"Undoubtedly, the trains will be run in duplicate this morning, sir," said Phipps. "It is rather a pity his lordship did not give us longer notice. I have done my best under the circumstances, but I am afraid our wardrobe is far from satisfactory."

Archie looked worried.

"Yes, that's a frightful piece of bad news," he remarked. "Dash it, Phipps, you've given the young master an absolute spasm! Just when I was feeling considerably bucked, too. I hope we've got all the essentials?"

"You can safely rely upon that, sir," replied Phipps. "At the same time, I share your own antipathy to these precipitate excursions, sir."

Archie seemed to go pale.

"Excursions, Phipps?" he gurgled feebly. "Odds crowds and sardines! Not really? I mean to say, not absolutely? You're not telling me, old article, that we're dashing off by one of those blighting excursion trains?"

"Oh, no, sir," replied Phipps.

"But, dash it, you just said——"

"I merely used the word in its correct sense, sir."

"Then I wish you wouldn't give the young master these heart shocks!" complained Archie. "If there's one thing I absolutely bar, Phipps, it's an excursion train. And I mean to say, on Christmas Eve—— I distinctly abhor the idea of the populace squashing me into a corner, or edging me up on to one of the bally luggage racks! That sort of thing, Phipps, depletes the old tissues to a frightful extent."

Phipps looked perfectly unemotional.

"There is no necessity for you to be alarmed to-day, sir," he said. "There are exactly eighteen in the party, and three first-class compartments have been reserved in advance."

"What-ho!" said Archie genially. "I mean, that's a fruity wheeze, Phipps! Who's the lad with the excessive brain who thought of that?"

"It was my suggestion, sir."

"Phipps, you're absolutely overflowing with the good old grey matter!" said Archie approvingly. "I'm dashed if I know how you think of these juicy schemes? So everything's all right, what?"

"As far as I know, sir."

"Good!" beamed Archie. "The old morning looks less foul."

He gazed out at the streets. London was positively packed. It was a bright morning, with a touch of frost, but the sun had some difficulty in penetrating the misty haze.

In a word, Willy's scheme was proving thoroughly successful.

He had sent twenty-four telegrams, and eighteen of the recipients were answering the call. A magnificent proportion. Even Willy had hardly expected such a number.

The telegrams had arrived on the previous

day—late. And now, this morning, the party was setting off. There had been no time during the brief interval for any searching inquiries to be made. One or two of the invited guests had wired to the mythical Lord Dorrimore at the Castle, regretting their inability to accept the invitation. One or two others had wired, accepting. In all probability, those telegrams would trickle back to their senders, sooner or later—or, at least, something would be heard to the effect that they had not been delivered.

But Willy Handforth had been cunning.

He had despatched the wires so that they would arrive late. Messages of acceptance and regretful refusal would not be sent off until the following morning. Thus, the party would be well on its way before any hitch could take place. And then, of course, it wouldn't matter. For, according to Willy's calculations, everybody would be back in town the same night.

Things had gone very nicely.

Most of the prominent Remove fellows were in town, and so were the Moor View girls. Such young ladies as Ena Handforth, Winnie Pitt, and Violet Watson were naturally with their respective brothers and families. Willy had saved money on these particular wires, for he had included brother and sister in the same invitation. At Pitt's home, for example, Reggie and Winnie had received a telegram addressed to them jointly. It was the same with the others.

Naturally, the telephone had been busy the previous evening.

Tommy Watson had lost no time in ringing up Nipper. And Nipper had got into communication with Reggie Pitt and Handforth and Archie Glenthorne. Archie was staying at his brother's flat, engaged in Christmas shopping.

A few of the fellows found it impossible to accept "Lord Dorrimore's" invitation, much as they desired to do so. The Duke of Somerton, for instance, was compelled to go to his own country seat. Cecil de Valerie, Jack Grey, and one or two more were already away.

But Willy's scheme was successful, nevertheless.

Those who were free eagerly decided to go. They knew what to expect! At least, they thought they did. Dorrie was always a marvellous host. To miss one of his parties was little short of tragic. So, although the notice was short, there was a rush to go.

Exactly as Willy had predicted, nobody questioned the authentic nature of the invitations. They had been despatched from Buxton, and Dorrimore Castle was near by. Why, it was as clear as daylight that good old Dorrie had returned to England, and was bent upon giving the chaps a good time.

It was so characteristic of him, too. That was where Willy was safe. It was just like

Dorrie to spring it suddenly. It was just like the genial peer to arrive home, prepare a party, and say nothing until the final minute.

Nipper had been considerably surprised. Although one of the shrewdest fellows in The Remove—probably the shrewdest of all—undoubtedly THE shrewdest of all—he had suspected nothing. Why should he? He knew Lord Dorrimore better than the other juniors.

As it happened, Nelson Lee was away, having accepted an invitation from Mr. and Mrs. Beverley Stokes. Nipper was going to Reggie Pitt's home on Christmas Eve.

And then the wires, purporting to come from Dorrie, arrived.

Arrangements were swiftly made, and the party was formed. It was far better to go down by the same train, in one group. There was naturally no hint of a trick, for all the invited guests had received the same telegrams—clearly proving that Dorrie had sent out his invitations wholesale, as usual.

Archie had decided to take Phipps along, and both Lady Handforth and Mrs. Pitt had provided their daughters with lady's-maids. And Ena and Winnie had promptly arranged that the maids should serve for all six girls in the party. The maids didn't mind, for they knew they would get liberal tips.

It was a contingency which Willy hadn't bargained for. He hadn't dreamed that some of the guests would bring personal servants with them. Not that it made any real difference.

Arriving at the big terminus, Archie alighted from his taxi, and soon found himself in the midst of a jolly party. Phipps had bustled off to attend to the general baggage.

"What-ho! All here?" beamed Archie. "I say! Good gad! Congrats., Marjorie, old thing! I mean, what a perfectly priceless picture! Dash it, the old eyes are dazzled like anything!"

"Don't be absurd, Archie," smiled Marjorie Temple.

But Archie wasn't absurd in the least. Marjorie was looking unusually attractive and neat in her winter furs. Indeed, all the girls were attractive, for their parents had sent them away beautifully equipped. An invitation to Dorrimore Castle was not one to be treated lightly! The girls, moreover, were in the highest of spirits. And the St. Frank's fellows were fairly bubbling with Christmas cheer.

They little thought of what awaited them!

Handforth & Co. were present in force, and the other juniors in the party consisted of Nipper, Tommy Watson, Reggie Pitt, Ralph Leslie Fullwood, Fatty Little, John Busterfield Boots and Bob Christine. Last, but by no means least, was the elegant Fifth Former, William Napoleon Browne. Being a senior, he treated the party with a fatherly, benevolent air.

There were six girls—Irene Manners, Doris Berkeley, Marjorie Temple, Ena Handforth, Winnie Pitt, and Violet Watson. It would have been impossible to select a more representative gathering.

And at last they started off—occupying three adjoining compartments in one of the corridor coaches of the train. They were able to dodge in and out just as they liked, and there was any amount of fun and laughter.

It was a case where ignorance was bliss.

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT.



STRICTLY speaking, Willy was a terrible young rascal.

There's no help for it—it's got to be admitted. If Dorrimore Castle had been a mere fifty miles from London, the joke would have been quite comic. But Dorrimore Castle was in Derbyshire—and the fastest trains took between four and five hours. The expense, alone, was considerable.

But in all fairness to Willy, it is necessary to explain that he regarded distances with the eyes of extreme youth. A hundred miles or so to him was a trifle as light as air. As long as the party could reach Dorrimore Castle in time to be fooled, and then get a train back, nothing else mattered.

And Willy had certainly seen to that.

According to all the train schedules—and Willy had made a complete study of them—he found that the guests would roll up somewhere between half-past three and four, allowing them sufficient time to get from the station. They would still have bags of time to catch a train back.

Having planned this out satisfactorily, Willy gave no thought to the distance, or to any possible hitch. It didn't occur to him that Christmas Eve is about the last day in the year when one may expect trains to run to schedule time. And as for the weather, this detail didn't enter his calculations at all.

And yet the weather—at Christmas-time—and in such a county as Derbyshire, was a very important factor.

The invited guests made this discovery at about two o'clock.

They had all partaken of an excellent luncheon in the dining car, and were feeling happier than ever. It was snowing. That was a splendid development. At least, they thought so at the moment.

"Snow!" said Handforth, as he looked out across the country. "By George! What could be better? It's going to be a real old-fashioned Christmas."

Irene clapped her hands.

"I've been longing for snow!" she confessed. "Oh, this is wonderful! And I expect there'll be lots of it at Dorrimore Castle, too!"

"Rather!" said Fullwood. "The Peak district's famous for snow."

"Then we'll have tobogganning?" asked Winnie Pitt, with sparkling eyes. "How absolutely gorgeous! Oh, but there may be no toboggans there!" she added, in dismay.

"Don't you believe it!" smiled Fullwood. "If I know anything about old Dorrie, he'll have every facility for winter sports at the castle. Don't you remember how he provided everything for us on that South Sea trip? Dorrie's a marvel. He thinks of every detail. Hang it all, he's only a boy himself!"

"Dorrie's a brick!" said Doris heartily. "I'm particularly fond of him, because he's got my name. The girls call me Dorrie sometimes. But, somehow, it doesn't sound a bit feminine when we're talking about Lord Dorrimore."

They looked out of the window with eager joy.

It was certainly snowing. As Archie observed, it wasn't merely falling in flakes, but in absolute chunks. The train was driving through a snowstorm which seemed likely to develop into a positive blizzard.

Visibility was so imperfect that one could only see for a few yards on either side of the track. And everything was white. It was freezing, and the snow was powdery and feathery. It fell, and remained like driven sand, the high wind already banking it up into minor drifts.

"Good egg!" said Watson, with gleaming eyes. "It's coming down thicker and thicker! Good old snow!"

Nipper grinned.

"I shouldn't crow too much, if I were you," he remarked calmly.

"Whatever do you mean, Dick?" asked Winnie.

"Well, I'm just as fond of snow as you are," replied Nipper drily. "But it's not the best kind of weather for travelling. I suppose you know that our train's already three-quarters of an hour late?"

"By George!" said Handforth, startled.

"She's losing time all the way, too," went on Nipper. "You can't expect anything else with this snow—and with the enormously increased Christmas Eve train service. Don't forget they're running double and treble the amount of trains to-day, and we should have been late in any case."

"And this snow's making it worse," agreed Reggie, nodding. "What time are we due in at Buxton?"

"Well, this is a special train," said Nipper. "We ought to get there at about three o'clock. But we shall be lucky if we arrive by five."

"Oh, it'll be dark by then?" laughed Doris. "Who cares a hang about darkness?"



Church simply vanished. With scarcely any warning, he sank completely out of sight.

I can picture the castle already! Thousands of lights—great roaring log fires—fairy lamps by the million—and dear old Dorrie waiting to welcome us! Naturally, there'll be heaps and heaps of grub——"

"Grub!" echoed Fatty Little, from the doorway. "I say, do you think Dorrie will have enough for everybody?"

"Get back to your own compartment, greedy sides!" snorted Handforth. "My hat! It's only half an hour since you cleared out the dining-car pantry! Lots of people are going hungry on the train! How can you expect anything else with a food-destroyer like you on board?"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Fatty indignantly. "I didn't have much——"

"I can picture everything," went on Doris dreamily. "We shall be able to see the castle in the distance as we're driving towards it. All the gleaming windows, and the radiating warmth——"

"My hat!" interrupted Irene. "You're getting poetical!"

"Better come to earth, and look at this snow!" suggested Fullwood. "By gad, it's driving down with fearful force now! Just look out there! Hallo, we're slowing down! Where have we got to?"

The train came to a halt, and it was impossible to see why. There was no station, and on both sides of the train the view was

obscured by the whirling snowflakes—which were descending in such myriads that they resembled fog. The train stood there, held up.

The wait seemed an endless one.

"We must expect a lot of this," remarked Dick Hamilton ruefully. "With so many trains on the line, they daren't take any risks. By Jove, it's a real blizzard now, in earnest!"

"What's it going to be like in Derbyshire?" asked Watson.

The expressions of delight had vanished by this time. The party was discovering that snow had very decided drawbacks. It was perfectly splendid when one arrived at one's destination—when one was snugly sheltered beneath a hospitable roof. Under those circumstances snow was just wonderful.

But in the train—with a long distance still ahead—the whirling flakes took on a different aspect. They became a confounded nuisance. And once the train service was partially disorganised, there was no telling what hopeless confusion would ensue. On such a day as Christmas Eve the service absolutely depended upon smooth running.

And this Yule-tide snowfall was the one curse the railway company had feared. Up and down the entire line, officials were worried, harassed, and making use of language that could be employed in no drawing-room.

At three o'clock the train was a very long way indeed from Buxton. The hope of getting there by five was gradually fading away. It was one long succession of delays—one long series of stoppages. And each stoppage became more and more prolonged as the time passed.

Darkness descended prematurely, and the gleaming lights of the coaches glinted out upon the driving snowflakes.

Up and down the whole train, people could be seen with worried expressions. Nobody could rest. There was a general feeling of uneasiness. Nobody could say when one's respective station would be reached.

Five o'clock came, and five o'clock went. Six o'clock arrived—and Buxton was still somewhere in the indefinite distance ahead. Nevertheless, the train had been crawling along in a gradual series of slow pulls. It was getting somewhere, at all events.

"We must be somewhere near Buxton now, surely?" asked Irene at last. "Isn't this dreadful? Nobody seems to know anything! And it was ages since we stopped at the last station."

"Twenty past six, too," said Handforth, looking at his watch. "By George, we're stopping again! Hallo, what the——"

This time the train pulled up with such a tremendous jerk that everybody was nearly flung out of their seats. Alarmed voices could be heard all up and down the corridor.

"Something seems to have happened!" exclaimed McClure.

Browne lowered the window and leaned out. A perfect smother of snowflakes whirled

in. The snow was piled high, and seemed to tower up to the very heavens.

The train was in a deep cutting, and the drifting snow had banked itself up in enormous quantities. The other side of the track, although Browne couldn't see it, was even worse. The wind was roaring with a terrific fury, and it whistled and shrieked down the train. The snow was falling as Browne had never seen it fall before—choking, dense masses of flakes hurtling themselves from the sky with ever increasing ferocity.

The spectacle was not exactly cheering.

Browne had an idea that their destination was near at hand. He had kept his eye on the stations, and had studied the railway map. But even the lanky Fifth-Former's famous optimism received a jolt.

Somehow, he had an idea that all wasn't well.

CHAPTER XII.

SNOW-BOUND!



"CHUCK it, Browne!"

"Shut that window, for goodness' sake!"

"We're getting smothered!"

Browne withdrew his head and shoulders and closed the window. He turned to the others in the compartment, and sadly shook his head.

"Without wishing to be unduly pessimistic, brothers and sisters, I fear we are in the midst of it," he observed.

"In the midst of what?" asked Bob Christine.

"The soup, Brother Christine—undoubtedly the soup!" replied Browne. "Those who wanted snow have had their wishes granted with considerable interest. The heavens are discharging themselves with a zeal which I greatly deprecate. However, I fear we are powerless to stem the tide."

"We shall get there, shan't we?" asked Fatty Little anxiously.

"It all depends what you mean by 'there,' Brother Little," said Browne. "At the moment we are here. I greatly fear that we shall stay here, too. Gradually, but relentlessly, the snow will now proceed to enfold us in its chilly embrace."

"My hat! We're not snow-bound, are we?" asked Church.

"Alas, I fear so!" sighed Browne.

"Oh, I say!" protested Winnie Pitt. "That's impossible!"

"He's only trying to be funny!" said Ena stiffly. "Personally, I don't think it's much of a joke to——"

"I deplore this unjust suspicion, Sister Ena!" interrupted Browne, in distress. "Am I the one to spread gloom and sorrow? It is my purpose in life to radiate sunshine and happiness. Alack, at the moment, I am unable to discover a single, tiny ray. I fear

we are lost. Lost, not only figuratively, but literally."

"Let's have a look!" said Boots, going to the window.

But the door of their compartment opened, and Nipper strode in from the corridor.

"Here's a nice state of things!" he exclaimed. "We're snowed up!"

They all jumped to their feet.

"Snowed up!"

"Deep in a drift!" said Nipper. "What's more, the snow's coming on thicker than ever, and it's impossible to make any progress. By the look of things, we shan't be able to back out, either!"

"Snowed up!" murmured Winnie. "But that's terrible!"

"Did I not express my own opinion in the same terms a minute ago?" asked Browne gently. "But tell us, Brother Hamilton, is this information official? Is it copyright by Reuter? Is it straight from the horse's mouth?"

"I've just seen one of the inspectors," replied Nipper. "There are two or three on the train, I believe. He's been up to the front, and says the snow's twelve and fifteen feet deep."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"That's why we pulled up with such a jerk five minutes ago," went on Nipper. "We ran slap into it—a huge drift right at the foot of the cutting. We're in the deepest part."

"Oh, corks!" groaned Fatty. "That means another delay! And I don't suppose they've got enough food on the train for a decent meal—"

"Never mind about food!" growled Buster Boots. "What about all these people? The train's packed—and we shall probably stick here for hours—perhaps all night."

"All night!" exclaimed Winnie breathlessly.

"That's cheerful, if you like!" commented Violet Watson.

There were all sorts of conjectures and suppositions. The St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls, while being anxious, were nevertheless thrilled and excited. This was an experience, at all events! Snowed up in a cutting! And snowed up so effectively that the train was completely helpless!

It wasn't long before the awful truth was made known to everybody on the train. Any hope of reaching a station was out of the question. Breakdown gangs were being despatched, and efforts would be made to clear the tracks. But many hours must necessarily pass before the train was free. The whole main line was in a state of utter disorganisation.

They were in the heart of the Peak district, and the blizzard was one of the worst that Derbyshire had known for many years. Later, the juniors were to read of the unprecedented drifts which had smothered all parts of the county. Animal life had suffered with terrible severity.

It was a snowstorm of snowstorms—a Christmas hurricane that was destined to be remembered for years to come. And while the snow flooded down with ever-increasing force, London and the southern counties of England were merely visited by a long period of heavy rain.

But the victims of Willy Handforth's jape had an idea that they were in the Alps. Within half an hour a complete change had come about the scene. Opening the door, Nipper could see that the snow was drifting against the train. Already it was knee-deep, and reaching to the footboards. There was snow, snow—nothing but snow. And there was no indication that the downfall would lessen.

"Well, it's no good growling," said Nipper, as he closed the door. "We're probably booked here for the whole evening. It's seven o'clock already—and we shall be lucky to get to our station by midnight. Lots of the people are saying that we shall be here until the morning."

At this moment Reggie Pitt came dashing in from the corridor. Behind him crowded some of the other fellows, all looking hot with excitement.

"I've got some news!" panted Reggie tensely.

"Oh, we're not going, are we?" asked one of the girls, jumping up.

"Great Scott—no!" said Pitt. "We're stuck faster than ever—shan't get clear of this drift for ages."

"But you said—"

"News, yes!" interrupted Pitt. "I just collared one of the guards—he's a local man, it seems. He knows every inch of this district. Were only a mile from Dorrimore Castle!"

"What!"

"A mile!"

"But—but—"

Everybody talked at once—everybody was full of excitement.

"Fact!" said Pitt calmly. "This guard knows what he's talking about—and he wouldn't try to fool me, anyhow. You see, the nearest station to the castle is two miles farther on—"

"We're only two miles from Buxton?" asked his sister.

"No, Buxton's a long way ahead," explained Reggie. "We were going to Buxton because this is a fast train, and doesn't stop at the local station. Direct across country, Dorrimore Castle is only a mile away. Straight up this left embankment, and over the fields."

The same thought occurred to everybody.

"My only hat!" gasped Boots. "You—you mean—"

"We'll walk it, eh?" cried Violet excitedly.

"Why not?" asked Reggie. "You girls won't be able to come, of course—but the rest of us can push through the snow, get to the castle, and bring back some kind of conveyance."

"Hurrah!"

"We'll try it!"

"Better than sticking here all night, anyhow!"

"It's absolutely amazing!" declared Fullwood. "A kind of fate that we should only be a mile from Dorrimore Castle. And yet I don't know," he added. "The train might have been snowed up anywhere—and it was bound to be near somebody's home. We happen to be all going to the same place."

"We'll chance it!" said Boots. "We'll walk there!"

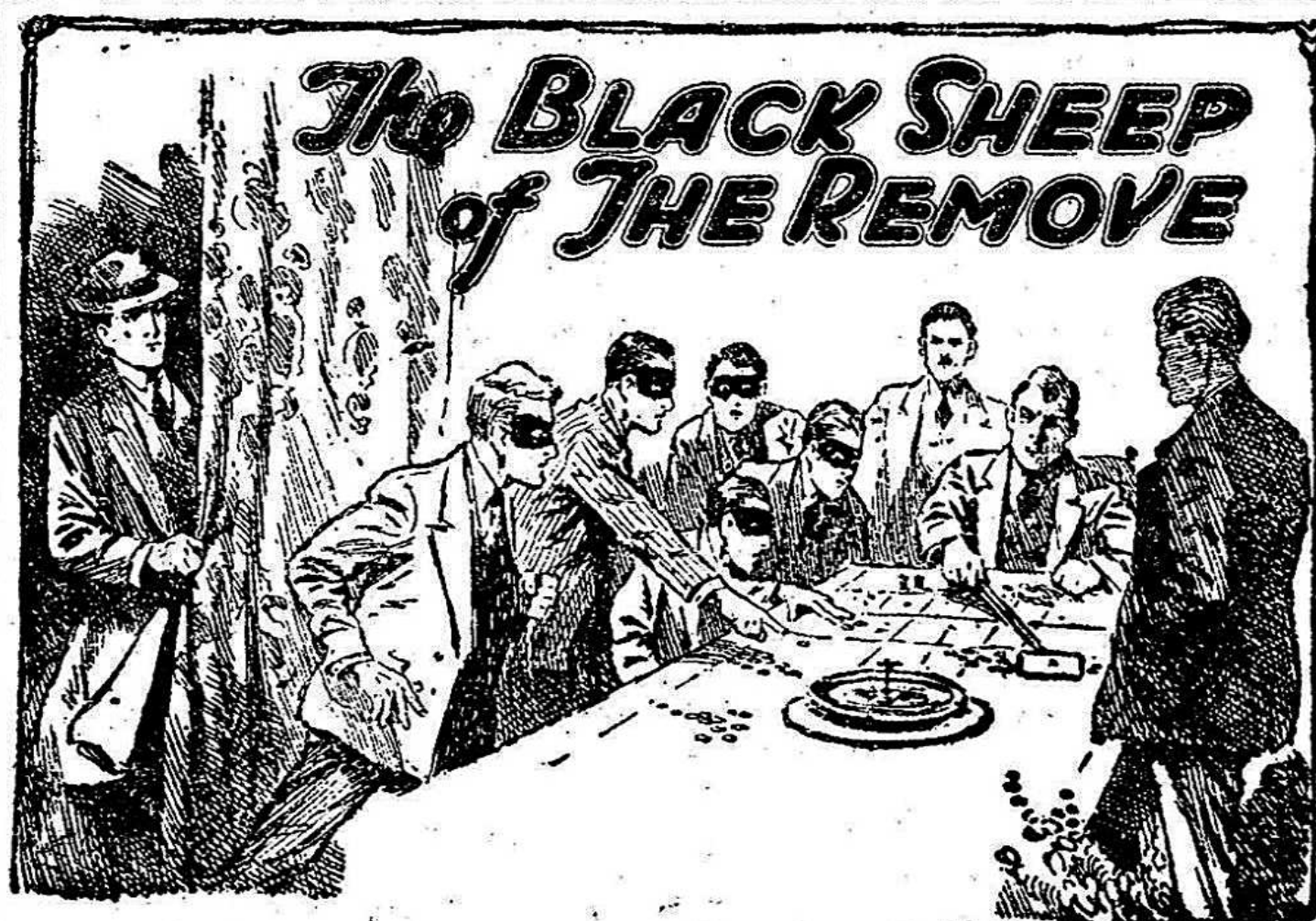
"Rather!"

"Hear, hear!"

of the Empire's most promising life would

"You gassing ass!" snorted Handforth. "What's the idea of talking like that? There's no danger."

"Greatly as I hate contradicting you, Brother Handforth, I must, nevertheless, do so," said Browne. "The danger is great. If a train can get buried, what of us? We must prepare ourselves. At least one lantern will be required. We must seize that guard firmly, and bribe him. We must inquire the exact direction from this local encyclopædia. With any ordinary luck, we may even annex one of the lamps from the engine."



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"Let's start straight away!"

"Steady, brothers—steady!" said Browne gently. "Is this burst of exuberance absolutely essential? Let us be cautious. I am not the one to discourage youthful energy, but it seems to me that care is required. Think of the sensation if we all got buried in the snow!"

"Look here, Browne——"

"Think of the black edges which would be the feature of every newspaper if my premature death became published," went on Browne calmly. "A wave of stark horror would undoubtedly sweep throughout the length and breadth of the land. The loss

Dick Hamilton nodded.

"Browne's dead right," he said grimly. "It would be nothing short of madness to start off without a few precautions like that. We must have a lantern, and we must have a general idea of the right direction. Even a mile will be a big ordeal in this snow. It's an awful depth in some places."

"We're all ready to chance it, anyhow," said Irene firmly.

"But you girls aren't coming——"

"That's just where you're wrong!" said Irene. "We girls are coming! If you try to stop us, we'll go off alone!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THROUGH THE BLINDING STORM.



IRENE & CO. were determined.

There wasn't a girl who wavered. All six were inflexible in their resolve to accompany the St. Frank's fellows on their trudge to Dorrimore Hall. Even the two maids entered into the spirit of the thing, and were willing to go, too. It was far better than waiting indefinitely in the train.

Phipps, of course, with his usual calmness, took possession of the party. He didn't appear to do so, and nobody knew that he had constituted himself the actual leader. But it was really Phipps who gained the information from the guard, and it was Phipps who secured a lantern. It was quite a good lantern—a spare one from the guard's van.

"I have been warned, young gentlemen, that this attempt to proceed across country will be risky in the extreme," declared Phipps. "All will be well if we keep to the route, but there is a danger of straying. And in that event the danger will be considerable. It is a wild district, with moorlands in many directions. To be lost here would be quite fatal."

"Isn't there any particular landmark?" asked Boots.

"It wouldn't help us much, sir, if there was," replied Phipps. "In this darkness, and in such driving snow, nothing will be visible beyond the rays of our lantern."

"Oh, we'll chance it!"

"Anything's better than sticking here!"

"Rather!"

"My main aim, young gentleman, is to impress upon you the importance of keeping together," went on Phipps. "If a member of our party strays, it may be very difficult to locate him. Otherwise, we shall be fairly safe."

"Of course we shall be safe," said Nipper. "Once we get to the top of this embankment we've got to follow the fence for a hundred yards, and we'll find a stone bridge over the cutting. There's a lane there, and by turning to the left—that is, across the bridge—we can follow the lane until we get to some cross-roads. We take the right-hand road, and the gates of Dorrimore Castle will soon appear direct in front, at a sharp bend."

"It must be admitted, Brother Hamilton, that our directions are simple in the extreme," observed Browne. "While complimenting Brother Phipps on his well-meant words of caution, I must, nevertheless, remark that we have no necessity to simulate the weather and get the wind up. By following the childish directions we shall unquestionably solve the puzzle."

Nipper and Phipps and Reggie Pitt and one or two others had all listened attentively to the details of local geography from the

friendly guard. And the party prepared itself for the start.

All sorts of other passengers knew of the venture, and crowded the corridors, and craned out of the windows. They were probably envious. They wished their own destinations were as near. There was hardly a soul in the train who wouldn't have risked a mile trudge through the snow.

For there was little hope on the train. The storm was getting worse, the snow-banks were increasing with alarming rapidity, and until the break-down gangs arrived to clear the tracks, the prospect was dismal. Even then there was always the chance that an avalanche of snow would shoot down the cutting, and block the line again. Indeed, this had happened in several places up and down the cutting, and the train was hopelessly trapped.

It was a piece of wonderful luck that the party for Dorrimore Castle should be able to walk the remainder of their journey. And their spirits were so high that they set off full of determination and cheery good humour.

Phipps led the way with his lantern, and the St. Frank's fellows followed in pairs—each pair with a girl between them. Thus, Irene & Co. had plenty of strong arms to assist them through the masses of snow.

The two maids helped one another. Practically every junior carried a bag or a suitcase of some kind. Only two or three of the guests had brought heavier luggage—and this, naturally, would have to wait until after Christmas. It was fortunate that the party was able to carry nearly everything with them.

"A lot of fuss over nothing!" panted Handforth, as he forced his way up the steep bank. "There's nothing in this. The snow's only eighteen inches deep, and it's as powdery as—Whoa! Look out!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Church.

They had Irene Manners between them, and all three gave a fearful lurch to the left. Church simply vanished. With scarcely any warning, he sank completely out of sight, and the snow rolled smoothly over the spot where he had been.

"Oh, quick!" panted Irene. "He's buried!"

"Rescue, you chaps!" sang out McClure.

The snow heaved violently, and Church partially came to the surface. He had stepped into a kind of deep ditch, and the drifting snow had levelled it with the rest of the surface. These were the kind of pitfalls that were to be expected.

"All right down there?" shouted Nipper, from above.

"Hold on a minute!" roared Handforth.

"Good! We've got him!"

Church was yanked out, and Handforth wasn't quite so emphatic about the simplicity of the going. Those in advance, looking down, could just make out the moving figures. Further down, the dim outline of

the train could be seen in the cutting—just a blurred kind of glow in the haze of snow-flakes. From the train, the venturesome party had been swallowed up. Even the light of their lantern had disappeared.

There were many other minor disasters. Delays were constant, but at last the bridge was located, and the most difficult part of the journey was over. Everybody was in a glow of warmth, in spite of the biting gale and the fiercely driving snow. The exercise of forcing their way through the drift was strenuous in the extreme.

The girls, indeed, hampered by their coats and skirts, would have been in a bad fix but for the assistance of their escorts. It was necessary to fight almost every inch of the way. The juniors were actually perspiring by the time the bridge was reached.

"All is well, brothers, beamed Browne. "All is well, sisters. A civilised road now stretches out before us, and the going will be easier. I can already see the gleaming windows of Dorrimore Castle—"

"By George!" shouted Handforth. "Where?"

"In my mind's eye, Brother Handforth."

"You silly ass—"

"I can already waft the delicious odour of hot coffee," went on Browne thoughtfully. "Cold viands enchant my vision—"

A hollow groan sounded further in the rear, and Fatty Little held his hands tightly over his middle.

"Great pancakes!" he said, in a dismal voice. "Stop that Fifth-Form ass, somebody! I'm nearly dead, you know! The very thought of hot coffee and grub makes me go all faint! I don't think I shall be able to last out much longer! I'm getting more feeble every minute!"

"A sad, sad case," sighed Browne. "Alas, I fear we shall be compelled to leave Brother Little in the cold snow. We need all our strength to drag ourselves along. He is a lost soul!"

But Fatty Little proved that he was even more energetic than the others. He and Fullwood were assisting Winnie Pitt between them, and Winnie found herself hustled along to the forefront of the party. Fatty was anxious to be one of the very first over the threshold of Dorrimore Castle.

The party made a curious picture as it trudged along the lane. The high wind was driving from straight ahead, and all heads were bent to meet it. Phipps, in advance, carried a lantern in one hand and Archie's Gladstone bag in the other. And every weary traveller was smothered with snow from head to foot. They were like so many white ghosts of the night.

Hardly any word was spoken, for it was difficult to converse in the teeth of that bitter wind. The snow was whirling down in great flurries. The hedges on either side were packed and overloaded, and the whiteness of the picture was intensified by the lurid light of Phipps's lantern.

It seemed ages before the cross-roads were reached. The actual distance was short, but every inch of the lane was knee-deep in snow. It was one long, continuous fight against the elements.

It was, indeed, a night to be remembered!

As they drew nearer to their objective, a sense of relief affected them all. They pictured the glowing hearths, the roaring logs, and the cheery, joyous atmosphere of a great household. There would be old Dorrie, too—other guests—glowing lights, and wonderful things to eat. And there would be beds—glorious, comfortable beds. This final thought was the best of all. None of them had realised how tired they were until now.

Another trudge into the endless waste for another age. And then, when even Phipps was beginning to think they had mistaken the road, the great wrought-iron gates of a private park loomed up out of the darkness. The road took a sharp turn here, and the gates were just down a wide entrance, immediately ahead.

The snow covered them, making them look fairy-like and unreal. There was a general whoop of joy, and a final rush. They had arrived! Their troubles were over!

Phipps frowned. It surprised him to find the gates closed. It surprised him still more to observe that snow was heavily banked up, proving that the drive had not been used for hours. He shook the gates, and then started.

They were not only locked, but a great chain was fastened round them, with a padlock to make doubly sure of their security.

"This is very strange, Mr. Browne," said Phipps softly.

William Napoleon Browne nodded.

"It is not merely strange, Brother Phipps, but disconcerting," he replied gravely. "Much as I hate the thought, I am compelled to fear that we are facing an outlook of the murkiest description."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STUNNING TRUTH.



HANDFORTH pushed forward.

"What's all the delay about?" he asked impatiently. "If you want those gates open, I'll—Hullo! They're padlocked!"

He stared at the gates in amazement. The others collected round in a big group. Phipps, holding his lamp high, allowed the light to shine on the chain and padlock. The snow came down in greater volume than ever.

"Why is the gate locked?" asked Irene, open-eyed. "Surely they haven't given us up? Lord Dorrimore must know that the train was delayed!"

"It's extraordinary!" declared Nipper, puzzled. "Look at these great lamps on the pillars! You'd think they'd be blazing—to show us the way. And there's no sign of car-wheels, or anything. This drive hasn't been disturbed for hours," he added, peering between the bars.

"Any sign of the castle?" asked Tommy Watson.

"There's nothing at all," replied Nipper. "Just blackness. I can't even see a gleam. But the snow's thick, and there are probably some trees in the way. What on earth—"

He paused, unable to think clearly. The whole affair was so disconcerting—so utterly unexpected. They had all anticipated wide-open gates—servants on the look-out—welcoming lights.

And there was nothing but darkness—nothing but locked barriers!

With the wind howling round them, and snowflakes beating into their faces, they felt strangely isolated and forlorn. The blizzard hadn't seemed so bad in the train—for the train, with its electric lights, and its cargo of humanity, had been a kind of oasis of civilisation. But here they seemed to be lost in the wilds. And the hour was getting late.

"Perhaps it isn't the right gateway?" suggested Pitt. "There may be another drive further along, you know."

"By George! That's an idea!" ejaculated Handforth.

"I must urge you not to build your hopes, young gentleman," interposed Phipps quietly. "The guard was quite emphatic in his statement that there was only one drive. I asked him particularly, in order to avoid any possible confusion."

"Well, it's dashed rummy!" said Archie. "I mean to say, it's absolutely mottled in the extreme! Here we all are, don't you know, and we're bally well locked out! We're too late, what? They've given us up, laddies!"

"I can't believe it!" growled Nipper. "Dorrie isn't a fool. He knows what a snowstorm like this will cause. He must have expected us to be hours late. And yet—Look here!" he added grimly. "Give me a leg-up, somebody. I'm going to take a run up to the castle itself."

"By George! I'll go with you!" declared Handforth.

There were plenty of willing helpers. Dick Hamilton and Handforth were hoisted up, and they climbed the gates, and dropped to the other side. Then, in the darkness, they forced their way through the snow up the drive.

Sooner than they expected, the gaunt shape of the castle loomed up. They could just distinguish it ahead. They went closer, a curious sensation gripping their hearts.

This affair was becoming eerie and mysterious. It was alarming, too. They had

burned their boats completely. It was impossible to go back to the train, for the girls could never repeat that strenuous journey. Even so, the train would probably have moved on.

The castle towered above Nipper and Handforth. The great steps were just one solid mound of snow. The door itself was half-covered. And every window was black—every window was cold and cheerless. There wasn't the slightest indication of life. In fact, the two juniors realised the dreadful truth in all its stunning significance.

Dorrimore Castle was empty—deserted!

"What does it mean, Nipper?" asked Handforth huskily.

"Goodness knows," muttered Nipper. "But one thing's certain—there's no Christmas party here! No Dorrie either! Handy, there's only one possible solution. We've been hoaxed!"

"Hoaxed!" gasped Handforth.

"What else is there to think?"

"But Dorrie wouldn't be cad enough—"

"Don't be an ass!" snorted Nipper. "Good old Dorrie would cut off his right hand before playing a filthy trick of this sort! We can't possibly explain, but there's no getting away from the truth. We've been hoaxed. And it's deadly serious," he added huskily.

"We can find a hotel, can't we?" asked Handforth, looking blank.

"A hotel?" muttered Nipper. "Where? You seem to forget the nature of this district! There's no village for three or four miles—and that distance in this snow is equal to a dozen miles of ordinary walking. I don't suppose there's a house of any kind for miles, either. And we've got those six girls with us—to say nothing of the two maids! It's terrible, Handy!"

"Let's go back and tell the others," said Handforth hoarsely.

They stumbled back through the snow, and the waiting party saw them coming like two white ghosts out of the waste.

"Well?" shouted a dozen voices.

Neither said anything until they had climbed the gates, and were on the other side. There was something about their silence which struck a coldness into the hearts of the others.

"What's wrong, Nipper boy?" asked Tregellis-West anxiously.

"We found the castle—but it's as black as night!" replied Nipper. "There's nobody there—it's empty—deserted! It's an awful thing to admit, but we've been tricked. We've come all this way for nothing!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"It's—it's too awful!"

And while they stood there, momentarily stunned by the nature of their predicament, three well-wrapped figures trudged grimly along the road in the snow. They were the figures of Willy Handforth, Chubby Heath

and Juicy Lemon—three exceedingly scared fags.

"It's no good, I tell you!" Chubby was saying. "They can't have got there, Willy! All the trains are held up! Didn't we hear it from my pater? We shall only lose ourselves like this!"

Willy grunted.

"We've got to march up and down until they arrive!" he said desperately. "If necessary, we shall have to march up and down all night! We've let 'em in for this catastrophe, and we've got to explain!"

"I told you what would happen!" murmured Juicy Lemon. "Chubby said the thing was too thick, too—"

"How was I to know we'd get a blizzard like this?" demanded Willy indignantly. "If the weather had kept fine, they'd have been here in the afternoon. The snow-storm's the worst for years!"

Willy was acutely tormented. His conscience was stabbing him continuously. He was responsible for the hoax—but he had never intended it to be ill-natured or vindictive. As he had originally planned it, it would merely have been a first-class jape. But the weather conditions had changed everything.

And Willy could find no rest. He and his chums had received their first alarm soon after mid-day, when the great storm had commenced. By three o'clock—when they had stationed themselves outside the gates of Dorrimore Castle in order to laugh at their victims—the ground had already been covered by several inches of snow.

They had waited until five, growing more and more concerned. Then a passing motorist had informed them that all the trains were hours late. They had gone back to Chubby's home to tea—and had sneaked out again afterwards, for Mr. Heath had refused to permit them to go for a walk.

During the early evening they had waited in a growing fever. Leaving Chubby and Juicy on guard, Willy had trudged two miles to the local station. And there he had learned that the train was expected within the hour. But hours had elapsed, and there had been no sign of the party.

At last the three fags had turned homewards again, full of doubts and uncertainties. They were all dead tired and weary. But in spite of this, Willy had suddenly changed his mind, and was going back.

"It's no good—we can't let the thing rest like this!" he had said. "We've got to see it through!"

And so it happened that three forms loomed up out of the surrounding smother near the castle gates. There were general shouts as they appeared. At first it was impossible to distinguish the newcomers, for they were covered in snow. But it was a welcome sight to see humanity of any kind.

"Look!" shouted Ena Handforth, pointing.

Her brother gave a violent start.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "My minor!"

CHAPTER XV.

ANY PORT IN A STORM.



WILLY HANDFORTH gave a whoop of relief.

"You've got here, then?" he gasped, as he rushed up. "Thank goodness! I've been worrying

like the dickens—"

"How did you know we were coming?" demanded his major. "And what are you doing here, anyhow? Your giddy chums, too! I say, this is a bit startling, isn't it?"

The party crowded round, eager and excited.

"It's not startling at all!" panted Willy. "We're staying at Chubby's place, you know two or three miles away."

"My hat! Is young Heath's home only two or three miles away from here?" asked Edward Oswald. "Yes, by George! I remember now! You came up to Derbyshire, didn't you? I never thought—"

"Never mind about that, Handy," interrupted Nipper. "Look here, Willy, do you know anything about Dorrie?"

"He's not here," replied Willy breathlessly. "It was only a jape, you know—"

"A jape!" howled the juniors.

"Yes, I sent all those wires—"

"You!"

"I only did it for a lark!" said Willy hurriedly. "I thought it would be a good revenge for the way you chaps chucked us out of that party at the Moor View School! That's why I dragged the girls into the jape—"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted his major, his voice thick and grim. "Do you mean to say that you—I can't believe it! Why, you young sweep! You horrible young spoofer! I—I—I—"

Handforth fairly choked. The others became positively dangerous as the truth flooded upon them with shattering effect. Even the girls looked deadly. Willy & Co. were surrounded. Strong hands reached out to seize them. They were on the point of cold-blooded slaughter.

"Gently, brothers—gently," interposed Browne, seizing Willy. "While admitting that this base creature deserves annihilation, it is just possible that he has a form of explanation. Let us be fair. Let us grant him a hearing before proceeding with the execution."

"I didn't mean to be spiteful!" panted

Willy. "Dash it all, you know me better than that! It was only a joke!"

"Is this what you call a joke?" asked Nipper.

"Of course it isn't!" retorted Willy. "It's awful! I'm so jolly sorry that I could kick myself for a week! But I never dreamed of a development like this."

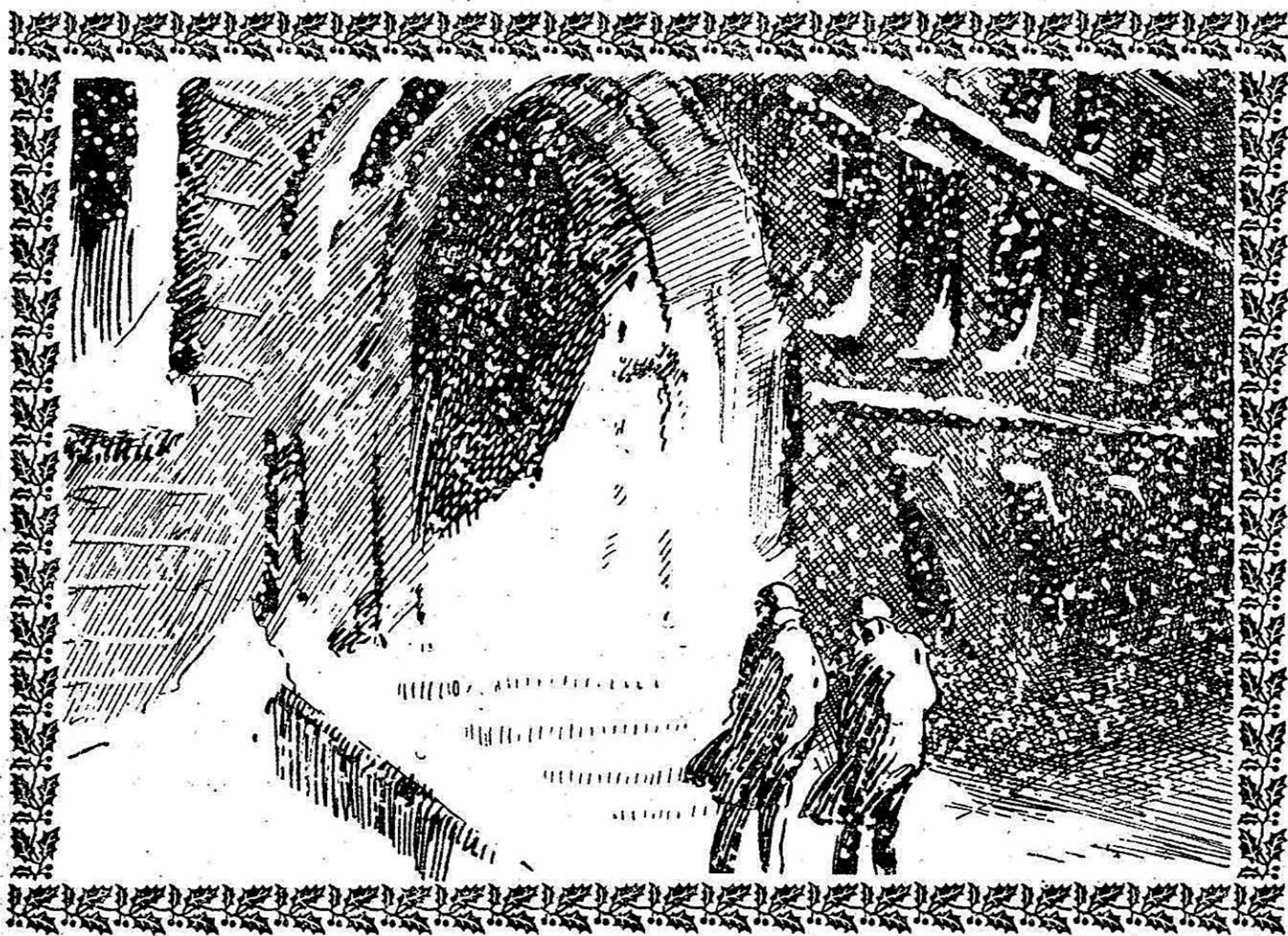
"But you sent those wires——"

"Yes, I know!" interrupted Willy. "But your train ought to have got here at three o'clock—Chubby and Juicy and I were waiting for you. We were going to have a good laugh at the hoax, and then see you off by

We didn't know where you were, or what had happened, or—or anything."

The lantern light, gleaming on Willy's face, revealed the concern in his eyes. His face was haggard, too—a very singular phenomenon for that usually cheery countenance. It was plain that Willy was nearly exhausted. A little reaction had set in now, and he was pale and wan.

"Under the circumstances, we must defer punishment until a more fitting occasion," said Browne gently. "Not that any known form of torture will do adequate justice to the situation. It is Christmas time. Let us forgive and forget——"



There wasn't the slightest indication of life. In fact, the two juniors realised the dreadful truth in all its stunning significance.

the evening train. We thought you'd be able to get back to London by to-night. How were we to expect this awful blizzard?"

"So the joke, then, was to fetch us here for nothing, but you meant us to have plenty of time to get home?" asked Pitt. "That's bad enough, but it's a bit better than we suspected."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Willy contritely. "You don't know how worried I am. We've been out in this snow for hours.

"That's all very well——" began somebody.

"Let us remember that this is a time of goodwill towards all humanity," continued Browne. "Greatly as these rascals deserve burning at the stake, we will be charitable. It is Christmas time, and peace reigns. Our thoughts will be better employed in thinking of a means to extricate ourselves from this frozen mass of ox-tail."

"Yes, we're in the soup all right!" growled Handforth. "We'll let Willy off now—but we'll remember it! Ye gods and

little fishes! Hoaxed by my minor! And all these girls dragged in, too!"

"Don't be concerned about us!" said Irene tartly. "We can stand as much as you boys! The thing is, what are we going to do?"

"We mustn't be too hard on Willy," said Doris, pulling her furs more tightly about her. "He didn't mean to get us into this pickle, I'm sure. Besides, we were a bit rough on him that night, weren't we?"

"He didn't mean any real harm," said Winnie, nodding.

"Just like girls!" snorted Handforth. "Ready to forgive anybody for anything! He's my own minor, but I'm ready to tan him——"

"But he didn't purposely put us into this fix, Ted!" protested Irene.

"Thanks, girls!" said Willy, recovering some of his usual spirit. "It's awfully decent of you to take it so nicely. Naturally, I don't expect the chaps to understand. You see, I found that Dorrimore Castle was here, and I thought it rather rich——"

"Let us not revive that painful subject," interrupted Browne, wincing. "We are faced by a problem, and that problem must be solved. There are, indeed, several problems. We need shelter. We need protection——"

"We need grub!" said Fatty Little mournfully.

"Undoubtedly, Brother Little, we need grub!" agreed Browne. "But you must allow me to remark that grub is the least important of all our requirements. Silence, everybody! A suggestion is about to proceed from my lips of wisdom. Let us delight the hearts of Mr. and Mrs. Heath by dropping in to supper."

"By jingo, that's a good idea!" said Reggie Pitt. "We can sleep anywhere for to-night—at least, we chaps can. There are bound to be some spare beds for the girls——"

"Oh, corks!" gasped Chubby. "You can't do that!"

"Look here, you young ass——"

"I tell you it's impossible!" shouted Chubby, in dismay. "We're absolutely full up—every room crowded! Besides, my pater's fed up with Willy and Juicy already! He'd have ten fits if all you chaps piled in!"

"Yes, it would certainly be a bit thick," said Nipper thoughtfully. "Isn't there a hotel near here? I've got an idea in my head, but I'll say nothing for the moment. If we can find accommodation——"

"There's nothing," interrupted Willy, shaking his head. "There's no hotel for miles. There's hardly a cottage. And the roads are practically snowed up in every direction."

"The prospect grows more and more murky!" observed Browne. "There are no hotels, there are no trains, there is not even a village. On Christmas Eve we are stranded in the wilderness. Under the circumstances, I fear that Mr. and Mrs. Heath must be in-

vaded—even at the risk of ten fits on the part of the former."

But Nipper shook his head.

"This was Willy's doing—not Chubby's," he said. "It wouldn't be fair to ruin Mr. and Mrs. Heath's party in that way. We're in the cart, but there's no need to drag anybody else in."

"But we must go somewhere, you ass!" snorted Handforth. "We can't stay out in the snow all night, I suppose?"

"No, but we can force a way into the castle," replied Nipper. "Where there's a will there's a way, you know! We all know that Dorrie wouldn't mind—he's a sportsman. And under these circumstances——"

"Break into the castle, eh?" whistled Pitt. "By Jove!"

"But—but could we?" asked Irene breathlessly.

"I say, that's a topping wheeze!" exclaimed Willy, his eyes gleaming. "The castle's only empty for Christmas, you know. It's not really deserted—it's only a temporary thing. It's all locked and barred now, but everything's bound to be in perfect condition. There'll be tons of grub in the pantries and store-rooms——"

"Let's break in now!" urged Fatty hungrily.

"There's another thing, too," chimed in Chubby excitedly. "The castle's got radiators everywhere—steam heat, you know! And it's all worked from the outside! I believe they keep the heat going all the time—one of the outdoor men attends to it——"

"Steam-heat, well-aired beds, store-rooms full of food!" exclaimed Browne firmly. "Brothers and sisters, forward!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SAFE FROM THE ELEMENTS.



THERE was a general feeling of relief.

Even the immobile Phipps had allowed a few worried wrinkles to mar his forehead—but they now disappeared. This idea of

forcing a way into the deserted castle provided a solution to the immediate problem.

There was rather a thrill in it, too.

It was something adventurous. The very thought was sufficient to excite the party's imagination, and set their hearts throbbing. Stranded in the midst of the great blizzard, in one of the loneliest parts of the country, they were about to force an entry into the great, empty mansion.

It smacked of real romance—something quite out of the ordinary. And as most of the party were young, they entered into the spirit of the thing with tremendous enthusiasm.

"It would be a different thing if the castle belonged to a stranger," declared Nipper. "But it's Dorrie's place—and he'd be the

first one to sanction the action. We're perfectly safe in doing it. Besides, there's nothing else," he added finally.

"Undoubtedly, this suggestion solves our problem, sir," said Phipps quietly. "No doubt I shall be able to prepare sufficient beds for you young gentlemen. And the maids, I am sure, will see after the young ladies."

Reggie Pitt nodded.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "It's a lucky thing those two maids came along with us! They'll prove jolly handy now. And Phipps, too! He'll be worth his weight in gold at a time like this!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "What-ho! Rely on Phipps, laddies!"

"I shall try to give satisfaction, sir," said Phipps modestly.

"Well, come on—let's do something," said Handforth, with a brisk air. "No good standing here and freezing! Willy, you'd better buzz off! And take your precious young pals with you!"

"Let's see you safely in first," said Willy.

"We can only hope that the blizzard will be over by the morning," remarked Phipps. "In that event, it is almost safe to assume that there will be a train for town. The line will be cleared by then, and there is no reason to anticipate any further complications."

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie Glenthorne. "The old lad's thinking about the morning already! What did I tell you? Trust in Phipps, and everything will be absolutely priceless."

"Thank you, sir," said Phipps. "I will make a point of being up early, and will institute inquiries regarding the railway facilities. But we must confine our present attentions to obtaining shelter."

"How are we going to open these gates?" asked Tommy Watson. "Of course, we chaps can climb over—but the girls aren't up to it."

"Aren't we?" said Doris indignantly. "If you can climb over, so can we!"

"Peace!" said Browne. "There is no necessity for this petty bickering. My eagle eye, with its celebrated penetration, has already perceived a gap in the adjoining hedge. One would naturally wonder why the gate should be locked, and the hedges gappy. But the ways of these landed gentry are strange and wondrous. Let me urge you to beware of barbed wire."

Some yards down the road there was indeed a narrow gap, but it was only a recent opening. The blizzard had caused the limb of a dead tree to crash down, and this had driven through the thick hedge, leaving a clean opening. Nothing could have been handier.

Once through into the grounds, the party floundered helplessly in thick masses of snow. It was a long struggle to get out of it, and more than one junior frequently vanished amid the smother. Until this strenuous struggle was upon them, not a

single member of the party realised how tired they were, or how much their limbs ached. Their previous battle had well-nigh exhausted them.

But they reached the drive at last, and ploughed on until they found themselves in front of the gaunt old castle. If there had only been one or two in the party, they might have hesitated. There was something grim, mysterious, even sinister, about the appearance of this stark, deserted pile of grey, standing there in the snowy waste.

But there were many, and they gave one another courage. They were ready to face any kind of darkness or gloom. What they needed more than anything else was a rest—a long sleep. They were all tired out.

Fatty Little, indeed, was the only one who had any thoughts of food. The rest wanted to get to bed. And now that there was every prospect of an immediate couch, the yawns were numerous and frequent.

"All right, sis—we're nearly in," said Reggie Pitt, as he pressed Winnie's arm. "Tired, old girl?"

"Oh, Reg, I'm fagged out," confessed Winnie wearily.

"I admire you for admitting it," said Reggie, with a yawn. "By Jove, I'm about done, too! Look at the others! They won't say 'No!' to a good sleep, I'll bet!"

"I don't care what happens now," murmured Irene. "Anyhow, we shall be able to get back home to-morrow, shan't we?"

"Rather!" said Handforth stoutly. "That's certain!"

A voice came out of the gloom. "All right, everybody!" it sang out. "We're in!"

"Good egg!" "What-ho!" breathed Archie. "Odds aches and pains! The good old limbs are absolutely tottering! The tissues are wilting in chunks, dash it! What-ho for the good old sheets! Yoicks, and all that stuff!"

Considering that Archie was the slackest fellow in the Remove, he had borne up very well. Until now he hadn't uttered a word about being tired, but had consistently helped Marjorie Temple along that trying route.

Phipps and Browne and Nipper had succeeded in forcing a small corridor window just round one of the gables. It was Dick Hamilton who had called.

"All clear!" he announced. "We had to smash the glass, but I don't suppose Dorrie will send in a bill for damages. We're in, and that's all that matters to-night. By Jove, when's this snow going to stop?"

"It's thicker than ever!" muttered Watson.

It certainly was. Far from showing any signs of abating, the blizzard was working itself up into a greater fury than ever before. The wind came buffeting down, howling and shrieking round the castle. And the flurries of snow were so powerful that one was almost blinded.

Willy & Co., however, were determined to trudge back to Heath's home. They were dog-tired and weary, but such a step was necessary. Chubby's people would be worried out of their lives if the trio didn't return. On such a night as this they would fear the very worst.

So they started off manfully—vanishing, indeed, before the others realised that they had gone. Willy was afraid that his sister would try to keep him there. And Willy had a heavy sense of responsibility. He was determined to see Chubby and Juicy safely home. It may be mentioned that the fags successfully accomplished the trudge, and arrived tired, but safe.

In the castle, there was one unanimous thought.

Bed!

Phipps was standing in the great hall when all the weary ones entered! The lantern was standing at his feet. The hall was aglow with warmth, and there seemed an air of wonderful peace in the great place—after the whirl and shriek of the storm outside.

"If the young gentlemen would care for food and drink, I will see what can be done," said Phipps. "No doubt the maids will assist me—"

"Oh, Phipps, don't!" pleaded Irene. "Let them go upstairs and see if there are any beds! Not that I care where I sleep!" she added. "There's a lovely rug on the floor over there—that'll do!"

"I say, I'm starving!" moaned Fatty Little. "I can't sleep a wink unless—"

"You spoofing ass!" grunted Handforth. "You're nearly asleep already! Blow grub! Let's wait until the morning! Sleep's all we want!"

And there was unanimous agreement on this point. Phipps and Nipper and Browne went upstairs with the maids to investigate. They didn't explore much of the castle—only one wing. It was enough. There were bedrooms galore—bed-rooms to spare by the dozen. And all were aired and heated. The place was like a glorious hotel—only there were no lights. There were electric fittings everywhere, but the current was evidently switched off at the main.

And as everybody dragged themselves upstairs, the great clock boomed out the hour of midnight. Christmas Eve! No, it was Christmas Day! What a strange adventure it had been!

But how extraordinarily it was destined to develop!

THE END.

HOW WILLY'S JAPE IS DESTINED TO LEAD TO UNEXPECTED RESULTS WILL BE REVEALED NEXT WEEK IN:—

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(NOTE.—If any reader writes to me I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor. THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter acknowledged below has been personally read by me, and I thank each reader most heartily. But although all letters afford me an equal amount of pleasure, I am reluctantly compelled to confine my individual replies to those of general interest.—E.S.B.)

Just to begin with, I would like to express my keen pleasure at the general response to my earlier remarks concerning THE MONSTER LIBRARY. I have received an enormous number of letters since then, and in every case their writers have expressed their determination to make sure of No. 1. If all you who don't write have bought No. 1, too, then there won't be much doubt as to the permanency of the new venture, which, as I have already told you, is in the nature of an experiment.

Owing to an extra rush of work, in connection with the New Year Series, I was rather late with my Chat recently, and you may have noticed that it was entirely missed out the week before last. That was my fault, not the Editor's. So please put all the blame on to me. In consequence of that lapse I'm afraid you have had to wait an awfully long time for your acknowledgments and replies. And now we find Christmas practically upon us, and that reminds me that No. 2 of THE MONSTER LIBRARY is on sale this week. If you were pleased with the first issue, I hope you all ordered No. 2 well in advance. If you didn't do so, you may be left out in the cold, for at Christmas time there is bound to be an extra demand. So all you who have overlooked the matter dash round to the newsagent and grab a copy. Of course, I'm only talking to those who are keen on the thing. Was I wrong in my former statements? Don't you agree with me that THE MONSTER LIBRARY is the elephant's elbow?

While I am on the subject of Christmas, I want to take the opportunity of wishing every reader of Our Paper a happy, joyous, and jolly Yuletide. Somehow, I feel that most of us are really close friends, and when I extend you my Christmas greetings I do so in the spirit of just one pal to another. Here's good luck and prosperity to all. By the time Christmas is over may your shadows be greater.

Now, I suppose, I'd better acknowledge some letters. If I don't I shall be finding a few bombs in my mail. Here's a batch now: Solomon Hirshbin (Bethnal Green), A Loyal Reader (Folkestone), Three Regular Readers (Nottingham), G. Watson (Basingstoke), William Houchin (Wymondham), Loyal Reader (London), Miss Isabella (London, W.1.), W. Butterworth (Rochdale), K. Wilkinson (Bradford-on-Avon), Albert Hughes (Bockleton), Robert A. Wheeler (Hastings), Leslie Lange (Bournemouth), J. Stewart (Aberfeldy, N.B.), Stanley R. Cubin (Ilkley), T. W. Gilpin (Penrith), Frederick Dorkins (Derby), Algy Hay (Southampton), Row Slater (Willenhall), John Leiper (Aberdeen), G. H. G. Bulmer (Durham), Leslie Wilkes (Bromsgrove).

That was a very interesting little story of yours, Solomon Hirshbin, about the fellow who thought these replies of mine were fraudulent. So he's a regular reader now, eh? Good man! You're the kind of fellow to carry on the good work. You're quite wrong about the trees at St. Frank's. When the old Modern House was wrecked the explosion took place a long way off, and the walls of the school simply crumbled and collapsed. The fine old trees were naturally left standing. It takes something like a direct hit to destroy a tree, Solly. And you're also wrong about that other point. There have been many stories of mine in which the Remove had been featured in the class-room under the eagle eye of Mr. Crowell, and I have no doubt there will be many more. By the way, give my kind regards to little Izzie, and tell him to be careful with the inkpot in future.

How about Nelson Lee now, Loyal Reader? He wasn't absolutely out in the cold in the Quirke series, was he? You see, Nelson Lee had to work in the background. If I had brought him into the yarns half-way through the series everybody would have known what to expect. As it was, I'll bet that you were a bit surprised. Am I right? As for a Barring-Out Series—well, something's got to be done about it. You wouldn't credit how many fellows have written to me with the same request. How do you like the idea of a Barring-Out Series for the new Year?

When you raise a question about the number of fellows in the Remove and Fourth, G. Watson, you seem to be taking it for granted that every dormitory contains three fellows. In the particular yarn you mention three was given as the average number. But lots of chaps have bed-rooms to themselves—Archie Glenthorne, for example. And many of the dormitories are unoccupied. You see, there's plenty of room in the old school for lots of new boys.

I'm going to quote a few words of a letter from an enthusiastic reader. I won't give his name, because he makes an admission concerning his backwardness in English. No doubt he'll recognise his own words, and I thank him for his fine spirit, and for what he says: "There are still some parents who think the Old Paper is a penny dreadful. Well, I think, as a member of the British Empire (and a proud one at that) that your stories help to tighten those sacred cords which bind the heart of the Empire to one of courage and love. They also help those (myself included) who do not know the correct way to pronounce every word of the English language." Quite a nice little tribute, and I only hope that my yarns DO help a little.

Somehow I think you'll be pleased with this week's yarn, Loyal Reader. You are rather keen on a good ghost story, you say? Well, I'm afraid there's no actual ghost this week, but you won't be too cross with me, will you? This year I'm making a short series of the Christmas yarns, and I am hoping that everybody will be pleased with my Yuletide effort. Hang it all, it's such a dickens of a job to know how to please you best!

Awfully sorry the Quirke stories have come to an end, Miss Isabelle. But they couldn't go on for ever, you know. I hope last week's yarn cleared up the mysteries

all right. As for Nelson Lee, he is both a schoolmaster and a detective. Although he occupies the position of a Housemaster at St. Frank's he is still keen on criminal investigation.

What you suggest, K. Wilkinson, is rather impossible, I am afraid. Now that Our Paper features school stories we cannot very well bring back stories of the "Green Triangle" type, but there is a distinct chance that the "Green Triangle" Series, to say nothing of the yarns of "Jim the Penman" and "Eileen Dare," will be published later on in THE MONSTER LIBRARY.

Thanks for your excellent little essay, Albert Hughes. It is quite entertaining, and I will hand it over to the Chief Officer for publication in the League Magazine. I don't think it'll be long before the Mag. gets going. And you can be sure that your contribution will find itself in print.

You'd better have a word with those friends of yours, Robert A. Wheeler. Nothing is more ridiculous than for them to assume that the St. Frank's League is a "kid's" league. When a Chief Officer gives the word for members to form clubs, there will naturally be senior and junior branches.

I quite appreciate your desire to see portraits of your favourite characters, Stanley R. Cubin, but the boys you mention have already appeared in the Portrait Gallery. We can't print them again and again, you know.

I don't know what to say to you about those 4d. books, Frederick Dorkins. If you cannot get the back numbers through your newsagent I am afraid you'll have to chance your luck.

Really, Row Slater, I don't see why you should want to bind the volumes of THE MONSTER LIBRARY into book-form. They are in book-form already, but of course it will be quite simple, if you wish it, to have six or a dozen bound together in stiff covers. Any bookbinder will do the job for you quite reasonably. With regard to your query about a Willenhall Organising Officer, I should advise you to write to the C.O. He'll tell you like a shot.

Well, here's wishing you all a Merry Christmas once again!

E.S.B.



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The story takes place in the wild and mountainous country of Carlovian, infested by bandits and outlaws. Here life is held very cheaply, and it is with grave personal risk that Sexton Blake and Tinker find themselves the guests of the youthful King Peter, the new ruler of Carlovian. The great detective, in the guise of Mr. Brown, English tutor to the King, has been employed by the Foreign Office on an important mission, and Tinker is on a visit to King Peter as an old school chum. Blake does not trust the King's ministers, who are plotting to overthrow the King. There is no doubt whatever that the detective and his assistant are being closely watched by Sarjo, Carlovian's unscrupulous Prime Minister. In order to obtain an incriminating document, Blake kidnaps the Secretary of State and Chief of Police. The document appears to be an innocent order for the King to sign, to tax wine, but in invisible ink it contains a death warrant against the loyalists and enemies of Sarjo.

(Now read on.)

"IT'S a wonder you got over the frontier, for they don't seem to care a rap about passports," said Tinker. "How did you work it?"

"Dollars, buddy, dollars. I reckoned that was where I might get shot, so I sprinkled the five-dollar bills about pretty freely."

"And you're walking about in daylight in Kamfak?"

"Sure!" answered Clodie, with a laugh. "I've seen the old police guy, and gave him to understand that Arthur P. Clodie had a right to walk around and inspect the gaols. And I guess I startled the guy some. I reckon, bo, I just about own this old city twice. I've been buying up their rotten stock wholesale."

"My hat!" exclaimed Tinker. "That's why Carlovian stock boomed, then! You were buying? My boss—er—Mr. Brown—thought it might be you; but I said I had a better opinion of you, and that you couldn't be such a complete ass."

"If that's a compliment, you've got me guessing, buddy," said Clodie. "Behold the

complete ass at the back of this cigar. What I've spent on Carlovian paper won't bust me, and if the goods come back I shall have more than doubled my outlay. The stock ain't due for repayment for some months yet, but, anyhow, I've arrived to collect the interest, so they can't very well tell me I've no business in the country. And when, later on, I ask for my script, and they can't weigh out the dough cash down, I reckon this guy who's sitting right here will have 'em in pawn. How does that get you, sonny?"

"If it's true, Arthur, my lad, you're just about the limit," said Tinker. "Have you really bottled them up like that?"

"Got 'em mortgaged, bo, got 'em beat unless in due course they can produce the shekels—and all for the sake of a pretty face in a photograph. I want to get introduced to that king guy and to—"

The gorgeous flunky opened the door of the reception-room.

"Her Royal Highness Princess Celia wishes to speak to Mr. Jones."

"It's all right. I only want to give you something, Billy."

Without noticing that there was a stranger in the room, Celia entered quickly, and gave Tinker a packet wrapped in tissue-paper. Putting the cigar behind him, Arthur P. Clodie sprang up. As she saw the stranger's blue eyes fixed on her, Celia's cheeks flushed.

"I thought you were alone," she said. "The servant did not tell me that anyone was here."

Tinker did not know what to do, for he could not get used to the etiquette of Royalties and courts.

"It's an American friend of mine," he said. "The Princess Celia, Mr. Arthur Clodie, of New York."

The princess dropped a curtsy, and Clodie bowed.

"I trust Mr. Clodie will enjoy his visit to our poor little country," she said. "Open the door for me, Billy," she added in a whisper, "and quickly!"

The next moment the princess was gone, and Arthur P. Clodie restored the cigar to his mouth.

"Gee! She knocks that old photo to a frazzle!" he said. "I'm sure glad I called. That's the girl for me, bo! She's fine, she's wonderful, she's amazing. If anybody can keep me from putting in the brokers, I tell you right now, bo, her name's Princess Celia. She's young, but I'm no old has-been myself. If there's any galoot making eyes at that young lady, lead me to him, and we'll arrange a shooting party."

"I'm beginning to think you are a complete ass, after all," said Tinker.

"Cut that out, bo, and invite me to lunch, anyhow," said the Yankee.

Though there was something like an arrangement to dine with his Majesty on pork-pie, Tinker took Clodie to their rooms. Blake's eyes twinkled as he recognised the young American, for Blake had learned from Sarjo, through the secretary, that Clodie was the man who had been speculating so heavily in Carlovian stock, or rather gambling, for it seemed a pure gamble of the riskiest kind.

"Mr. Clodie is lunching with us, Mr. Browne," said Tinker. "I've got something for you from somebody. Will you look at it?"

"After lunch," said the private detective.

They were at lunch when the King himself came strolling in. The pork-pie, it appeared, had to be specially made, so Sexton Blake rang for another cover, and introduced his Majesty to the visitor as Mr. Lyanoff. The Yankee knew well enough that Mr. Lyanoff was King Peter V. of Carlovian, for full-length portraits and picture-postcards of the fair-haired boy King crowded the shop windows.

"This is the gentleman who has bought up most of the Carlovian stock, Mr. Lyanoff," said Blake.

"I hope Mr. Clodie will get his money," said Peter. "What will you do if they can't cash up, Mr. Clodie?"

"I sure wouldn't like to do anything nasty," said the Yankee. "I can't very well ask the sheriff to take possession and put the—the——"

"Bailiffs in," prompted Tinker. "I don't think you can sell up the show. You see, sir——"

"Oh, you know who I am, then?" said Peter.

"I'm guessing you're the King, sir?"

"Not a bad guess," said Peter. "Do you mind telling me why you have barged in like this to collect our stock?"

"Wal, I was getting my own back, sir," said Clodie. "I came here first to look at the scenery, especially one bit of it which sure beats the band, and your police didn't treat me like a gentleman and a visitor should be treated. They told me I had no business here at all, and told me to quit. I didn't quit, so I was arrested and fired into a dirty cell. I quitted that quick,

only to be arrested again and deported, so I calculated that the next time I came along they couldn't say I had no business. You can take it from me, sir, that when those bonds are due there'll be nobody in Carlovian with more business on hand, except your Majesty's Treasurer, and I'll make that guy's hair stand on end."

Peter laughed, and so did Tinker at the way Clodie had described Princess Celia as the one bit of Carlovian scenery that beat the band.

"Well, you deserve your money, for you've certainly got your own back for being arrested and deported," said Peter. "Don't blame me for that, blame the police. You mustn't be too hard on us if you don't get the cash all at once. You mustn't be too hard on us, Mr. Clodie."

"Or bring the American Navy over the mountains to bombard Kamfak," said Tinker.

"I guess we'll do it good and friendly," said Clodie. "I dare say I could bring pressure to bear, but I'm easy-going if I see I'm getting a square deal. Anyhow, I shall get my interest, and I can talk over the other thing with the Treasury people. I'm no Shylock, sir, out for my pound of flesh."

King Peter stopped for some time, chatting with Clodie. At last the King went, and so did Clodie.

"What do you think of him, guv'nor?" Tinker asked.

"He's what his fellow-countrymen are fond of calling a very remarkable young man," said Sexton Blake. "With his money and grit he'll take some stopping. Not a word to Peter about his real business here, for it might make him furious. And why not? He's young and strong and rich, and not at all bad-looking. He'd be a better match for Celia than that sleek-headed hypocrite Prince Darro."

"But you don't think Celia would marry him, guv'nor?"

"She will if Clodie gets his way, and be happy, too, I think. He has both hands in the Treasury, and he'll take some stopping. He's the sort of fellow, too, Peter will get to like, for lazy people generally admire hustlers. Where's the packet Celia gave you. We had better examine it quickly and have it put back, for Brentschli may ask the King for it."

A glance told Sexton Blake that the document was an exact copy of the paper taken from Veilburg.

"Same old smell, too, guv'nor," said Tinker. "What's to be done?"

"Get those two bottles. You can do it. Do you remember the lieutenant's translation?"

"Every word, guv'nor, and most of the names, for I learned those before," said Tinker.

The sentry allowed Tinker to pass, but he had kept Mr. Secretary Brentschi back, and the secretary was biting his thin lips and fidgeting with annoyance. And while affairs of State waited, his Majesty was lying on a couch reading a racing novel.

"Get out of it, Peter, and come into your bed-room," said Tinker. "I've got something to show you that will make your hair curl."

"You've just come in time, then, Billy," yawned the King. "I was just thinking of

"For the sake of Mike, don't ask so many questions! Don't ask how I learned to read Carlovic, either. I'm going to read this to you, word for word. It's only about a silly tax on wine, and Celia would have told you to sign it."

Tinker's brilliant memory served him well, and he recited the working of the tax without omitting a word.

"What's wrong with that, you clever fathead?" said Peter. "We must tax something."



Tinker seemed to have lost either his nerve or his skill, or both, for horse and rider went down heavily.

sending for the barber, and having it cut." Tinker locked the door of the royal bed-room, drew the blinds, and switched on the electric light.

"Where did you get that?" cried his Majesty, when he saw the document.

"Somebody lent it to me, so keep your hair on for a bit, old scout," said Tinker. "You'd have signed this, I guess?"

"If Celia had said it was O.K.. You know I can't read that stuff. But where did—?"

"You watch," said Tinker grimly, "and I'll soon show you what's wrong with it, and what you were being cheated into signing, my poor old Peter!"

Presently King Peter V of Carlovica was crouching in a chair, his white face buried in his hands.

"But what can I do, Billy?" he asked forlornly. "What can I do with this gang of thieves and murderers? They're too strong for me. They have the police in their pay, and the army, such as it is,

and the control of the Treasury. They've got me, so what can I do?"

"I don't know yet, old man," said Tinker. "Put Brentschi off. Tell him you can't sign this thing till your sister has read it to you, and that she's busy. We've got to smash the gang. They tried to murder me just because they thought we were getting a bit too friendly. The gov'nor thinks it was Darro, jealous because I was a bit too chummy with Celia; but I've not got a swelled head, and I don't believe it. Anyhow, though he is your cousin, he's an arrant blackguard. Hold up your chin and set your teeth and I'll wager the gov'nor will pull you through."

Late that night Sexton Blake again met Rivastoff the ex-brigand, at the tinsmith's shop, when the King was sitting on the edge of his bed glowering moodily at Tinker.

"I wish I'd never seen the rotten job, Billy," he said bitterly. "If I could get anyone to take it I'd sell it for a bob!"

A shilling came spinning through the air.

"Catch!" said Tinker. "There's your bob, Peter, and the King job is mine."

"You get assier and assier!" growled Peter dismally. "Don't be so jolly humorous!"

Exactly two days before the next meeting of the Supreme Council, Mr. Secretary Brentschi was still without the document he was so eager to get hold of, because the king would not sign it until Princess Celia had read it to him, and the princess could not find time to do so. Peter rather startled the secretary by reminding him that as the document only concerned a paltry tax on wine there could be no hurry for it.

Tinker had gone for a ride down the Grand Promenade. The chestnut horse was a beautiful, high-spirited animal, but Tinker was a good rider, and checked its prancing and curvetting with a skilled hand. He was returning by the left side of the cathedral when the horse caught sight of a performing bear and took fright. Getting the bit between its teeth, the panic-stricken chestnut swerved and went across the square at full gallop, scattering people right and left.

On the tram-lines the horse slipped, and Tinker seemed to have lost either his nerve or his skill, or both, for he had often managed to keep a horse on its legs after a worse slip than that. Horse and rider went down heavily. The horse got up, and a man darted forward and grasped its bridle, but the lad lay as he had fallen, prone on his face.

"Say, get hold of his hoss," said Arthur P. Clodie, who had dashed to the rescue. "Pat him a bit and quiet him."

The man from Lil' Old New York turned the fallen rider over. He had already recognised Tinker on the runaway just before the spill, and had come to the conclusion

that Master Billy Jones, of the Royal Palace, Kamfak, though quite a good young chap otherwise, was such a shockingly bad rider that his proper place was on a rocking-horse, not on a live one.

Tinker was limp and scarcely seemed to breathe. His face did not look pale, for it was very sun-tanned, and his eyes were closed. There was no trace of blood, and no bones appeared to be broken. Some kindly person in the crowd brought a glass of brandy from a café. One sip of it revived Tinker. He sat up, spluttering and coughing, and blinked at the American.

"A bit jarred, eh, bo'? I guess you pulled the wrong string and yanked the hoss over instead of pulling him on his legs. Riding back?"

Tinker limped painfully as he was raised to his feet.

"I think not," he said with a wince. "Gee! I came a purler. I'll take a cab and pay somebody to lead the horse back."

"Taxi wanted," cried Clodie. "I'll ride the hoss back for you, Billy. You seem to sag a bit on that left leg, buddy. Does it pain much?"

"Not as much as feeling a complete ass and having this crowd gaping at me," said Tinker. "Where's that cab?"

Tinker was driven to the palace in a ramshackle taxicab, but though ancient, it soon drew away from Arthur P. Clodie on the chestnut. Tinker began to grin. Though the gentleman from Lil' Old New York had not been smitten by the beauty of Tinker's horsemanship, Tinker was perfectly satisfied.

"As neat as ninepence," he thought. "I might have smashed his knees and knocked ninety per cent of his value off him, or a leg, and then he'd have been cat's-meat, and I'll bet I floored the beggar so nicely that I didn't ruffle the hair on his ribs. If old Clodie knew it was a ramp, he wouldn't tell me I pulled the wrong string. It was a great fall, duly to be reported in the newspapers, and no damage done."

Tinker went to bed, and Sexton Blake telephoned for a doctor, who, curiously enough, happened to be waiting in a tobacconist's shop not a quarter of a mile from the palace when the call was received. The doctor was taking wine in a little room at the back of the shop with the tobacconist.

"The news is good," said the doctor, turning away from the instrument. "Ah, this king's tutor is a great man—a giant of a man—not, I mean in limb and body, but in brain. The colour, my friend, is to be green, so pass the word that it is to be green and prepare. It will not be to-night or for many nights, but be ready, for it will come. A giant of a man, and I am proud to work with him or for him."

"Dr." Rivastoff, ex-brigand, put on a flesh-coloured mask and picked up his bag.

At the gates of the palace he removed the mask, for they were forbidden, and was passed on from sentry to flunkey until he reached the door of the guard-room. Blimp, who knew him at once, did not let a single eyelash quiver. He yawned, and told an orderly to see that the doctor was taken at once to the apartments of the king's tutor.

Tinker had only gone to bed for about three seconds, and the "doctor" did not come near him. Tinker was grinning at the king.

"It's no use," said Peter grumpily. "The thing's too silly, and how am I going to stick it? I must have fresh air, or I shall choke."

"If you must have fresh air, open the windows, my lad," said Tinker. "You took my bob, didn't you? I seized your offer and

you grabbed my cash, so I'm king. I don't think you'll have to play possum for long, and pretend you're poor me with a sprained leg through being chucked off a horse."

Peter was in the depths of gloom.

"Why couldn't I play being you?" he asked eagerly, as a brilliant thought came to him. "I'll keep my mouth shut and head down and hobble about on crutches when anybody was about. I'm sure they'd never rumble me. Why can't I do that?"

"Because you'd be sure to miff it, my lad, and this stunt, though it may seem funny—"

"When is it funny? I call it perfectly rotten. Shut up in these beastly rooms—"

"If you think they're such beastly rooms, why didn't you give us better ones for a start, my lad? Now, look here, Peter, don't

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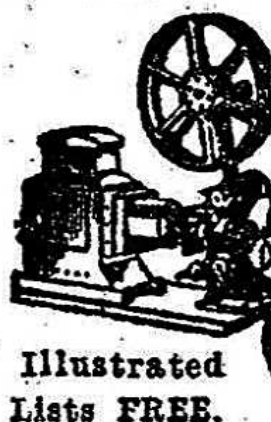
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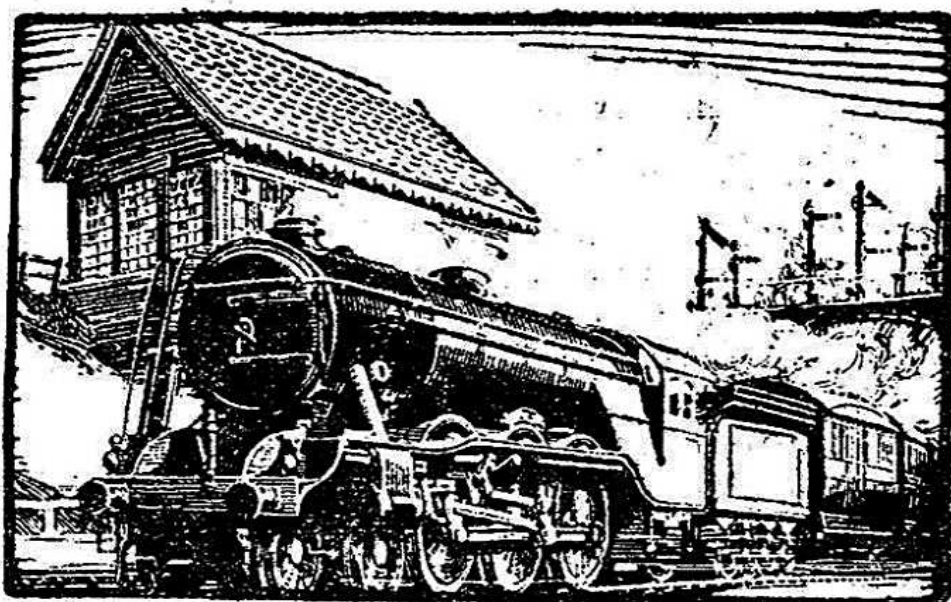
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play the goat. You can't act for toffee, except act the goat, and you'd fizzle the whole thing. I'm jolly well used to make-ups and disguises, though this is about the easiest one I ever had. When the gov'nor has got my hair the right tint, and I'm padded a bit, you won't know whether I'm you, or which of us both or neither. I can do your walk and your yawn and your voice just like life. And don't forget what I'm up against, a lot of rogues, sure, but not a lot of fools, except that colonel guy with the corsets who's near-sighted and deaf."

"Oh, you'll pull it off!" said Peter. "You'd make a good clown in a pantomime, Billy. But how long is it going to take? Why couldn't you wait till the day of the Council meeting before you made the horse skid, and given me a couple more days of freedom?"

"You'd better ask the gov'nor," said Tinker. "I'm taking my orders from him, and I suppose he wants time to fix things, and I must have time. I'm going to try the stunt on the servants before I face the Supreme Council. That beast Brentschi never seems to be looking at you, but the beggar has keen eyes and he's always watching. No, my dear Billy Jones, you fell off your gee-gee and hurt your poor little leg, and are confined to your apartments in the royal palace. Don't believe me, Billy, but you'll see all about it in print when the evening newspaper arrives. What information shall I give to the reporters, Billy, for they're waiting? A double fracture of the lobe of the left ear, isn't it?"

"It won't be the lobe; it will be a thick ear for you if I hear much more of it," said Peter. "If I must, I suppose I shall have to, that's all."

Peter heaved a sigh of resignation. He did not object to allowing Tinker to pose as the king and take over the royal duties for a time; but he did object to being a prisoner. Sexton Blake had talked to him very seriously, however, and at last he realised his true position. The abominable trick Sarjo and the junta had tried to play on him had opened his eyes. Sarjo, at one fell blow, wished to destroy his real friends and followers and to screen himself afterwards by declaring that the king had instigated the crime.

And Blake had not minced matters.

"This is actually what it means, Peter," he had told Peter, "for I have gone into it thoroughly. In his way, Sarjo is a strong man, so is Bizer, and so is Brentschi. Your cousin Darro has a big axe to grind, and Sarjo is quite willing to help him to grind it. The people they wish to get rid of are loyal to the crown, not so much because they have any affection for you as because they hate and fear the junta. Later on, you must make them like you for your own sake."

"If they win, the power of the junta will be supreme, and if you kick too much they will plot to get you out of the way. You will be so hated, for the blame will be put on you, that your assassination would not shock many people. That would bring your sister to the throne. She is a splendid, high-spirited, strong-willed girl, but she could not fight this junta, for she would be alone and friendless. They would force her into a marriage with that sleek rascal, your cousin, Prince Darro, and he is Sarjo's man. All this would be very pleasant and profitable for Sarjo, Darro, Brentschi, Bizer, and their jackals, but it would be a black day for your subjects and for Carlovina."

Of course, Celia had also been told. She was waiting anxiously and impatiently when the message came that his Majesty requested her presence at dinner. It was an informal affair, for only his Majesty and his Majesty's tutor were present, both wearing ordinary English evening-dress. The lieutenant, who was on guard, announced her, and the King crossed the apartment to meet her Royal Highness.

"It's—is it you, Billy—really you, Billy?" she asked in a low voice.

"Absolutely!" answered the supposed King. "We've got Peter chained up, and he's promised to be good. Am I like him?"

"Absolutely like him! It's just too wonderful—walk, voice, everything. What have you done to your hair?"

"Peroxide of hydrogen, or some bleaching stuff the gov'nor put on to get the proper tint," said Tinker. "He's padded me out a bit, too, and it made poor old Peter's eyes goggle when I went into the bed-room and showed myself. Do you think I shall pull it off?"

Celia looked at him steadily.

"I think so," she answered. "I can see a difference now, but if you had come like that at first, when I went with Sarjo to meet my brother on his return from England I'm almost sure I'd have taken you for Peter, and never doubted until we talked about things that happened as kiddies, and then I should have found you out. But you're just wonderful."

"We've taken the liberty of inviting a friend, Celia," said Sexton Blake. "He isn't exactly a friend as yet, but we hope to make him so. He has bought up so many Carlovian bonds that if our plans succeed, he will be a useful person to have on our side. Even a country, when in debt, like an individual, ought to try to keep on good terms with its biggest creditor."

The lieutenant admitted Mr. Arthur P. Clodie to the royal dining-room. The good-looking American bowed to the King, and even lower to her Royal Highness the Princess.

More about Tinker's impersonation of King Peter will be related in Next Week's instalment of this exciting series.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

My dear Leagueites,

For the last few weeks my little chat has been conspicuous by its absence, and this week, lo and behold, our League Application Form and instructions have shared the same fate. But don't be alarmed, my chums! This is not the League's obituary notice—far from it. Christmas is nearly upon us, and most of you will be so busy during the week sending off cards, buying presents, and visiting the many attractive toy emporiums that you will hardly have any time to devote to the League. That is why I am giving the League a rest this week. By the way, when you do visit the toy bazaars, don't forget to look out for the St. Frank's Table Football Game. It is being sold at 3/6 and 7/6, and if you can pay a visit to Gamage's or the Army and Navy Stores, you will see the game being demonstrated by experts.

We have not yet reached that five thousand membership, and as there are quite a number of Leagueites waiting for their silver medals, I am going to ask every

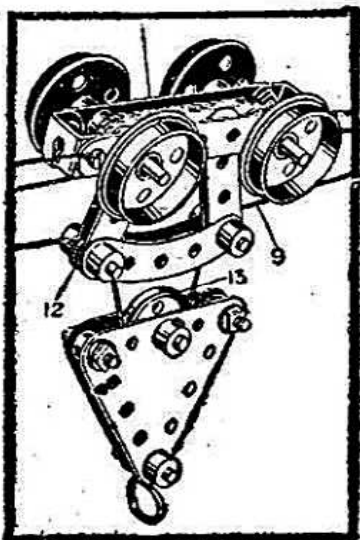
existing member to make a resolution that he will obtain one new member for the first week of the New Year. If some of you get two or more new members, all the better. But I want every member to set himself the simple task of enlisting at least one new member during the next fortnight.

Several members have been asking for the address of their local Organising Officer. As I am publishing a list of O.O.'s and their addresses early in the New Year, I hope these members will not mind waiting a little longer. Every member will then be expected to register his name with his nearest O.O. When this has been done, we shall be able to begin forming our social and sports clubs without further delay.

As this is our Christmas Eve Number, and I shall not be addressing a League letter next week, I will take the present opportunity of wishing you all a Right Jolly Christmas.

Your old friend,

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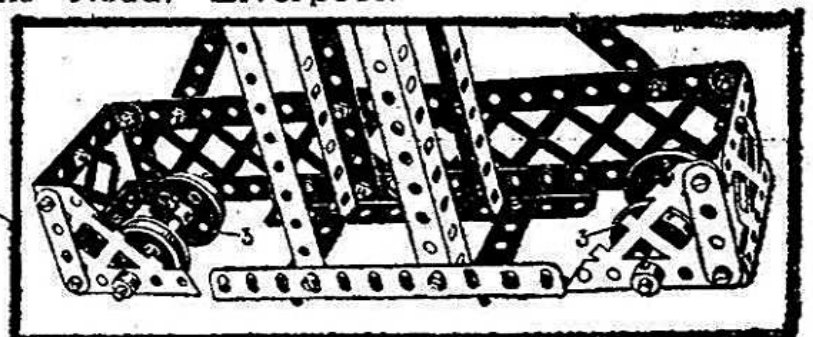
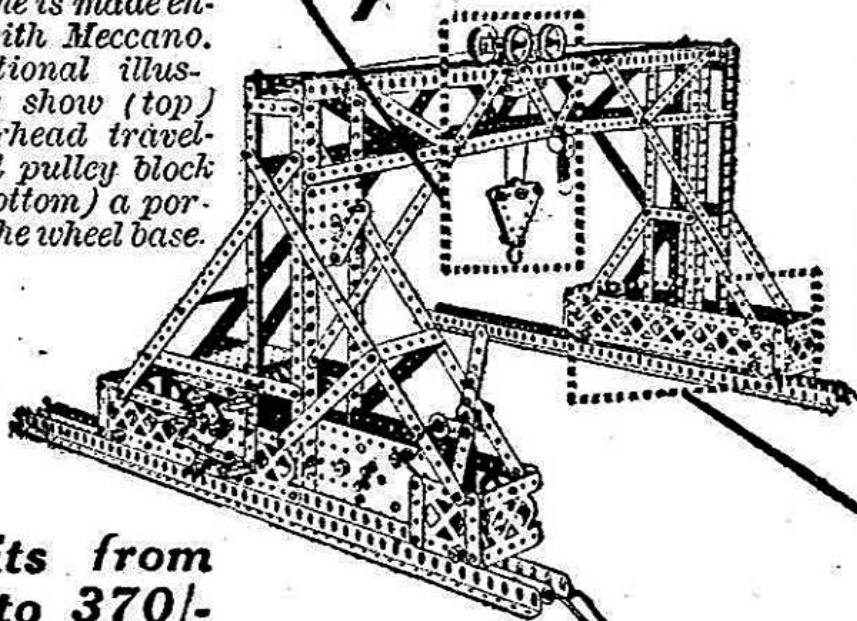
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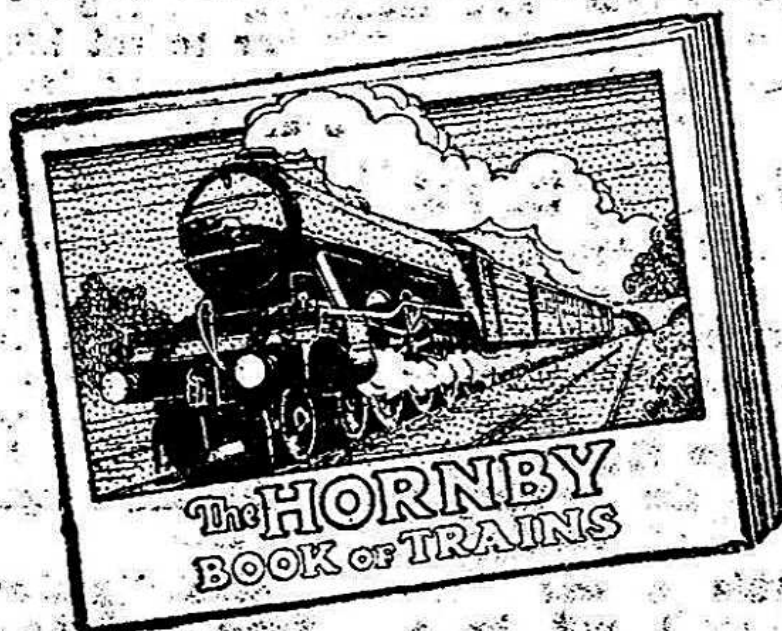
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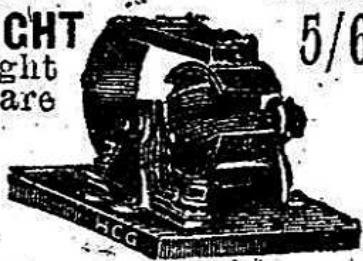
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