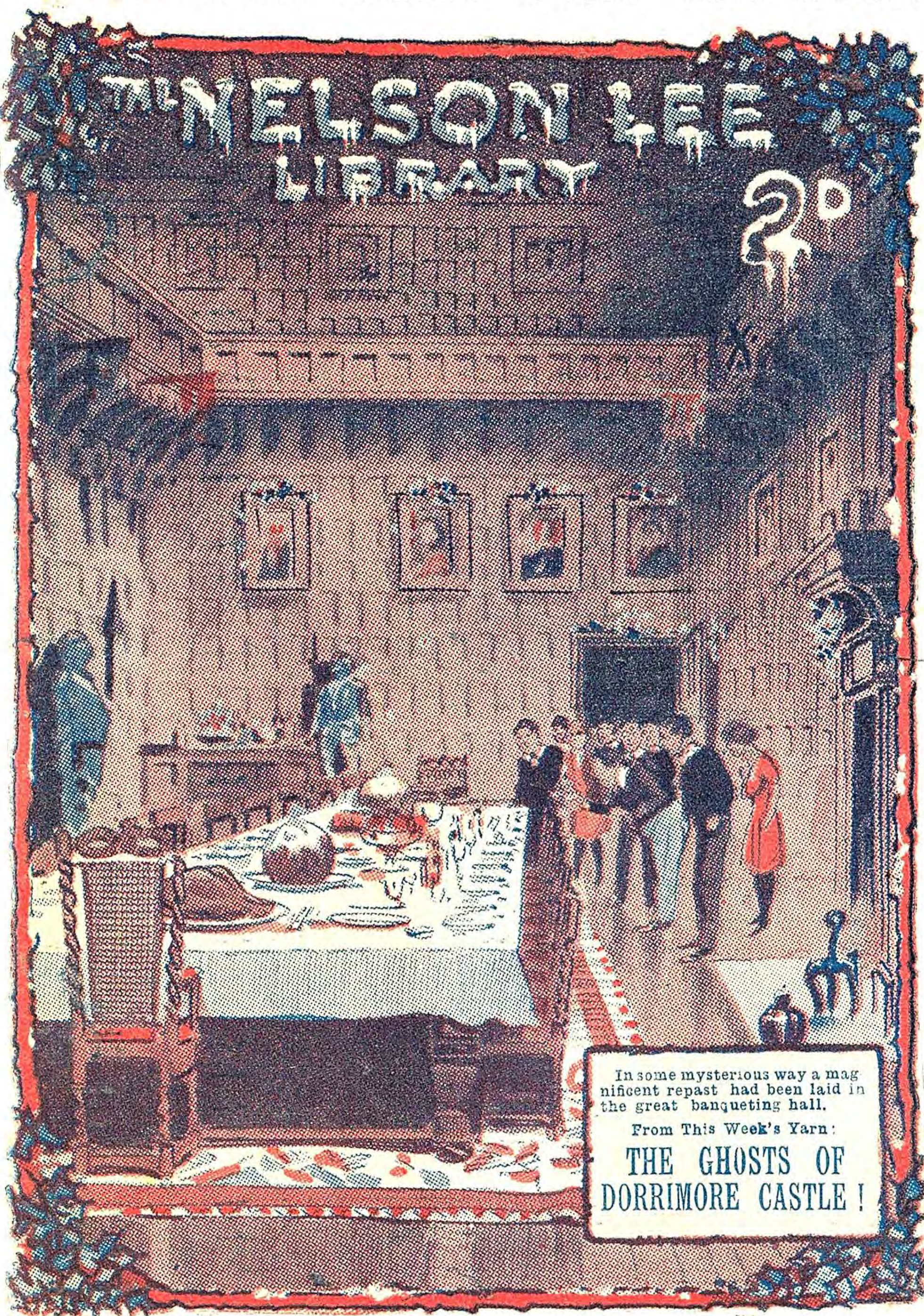


SPECIAL XMAS HOLIDAY STORY THIS WEEK!

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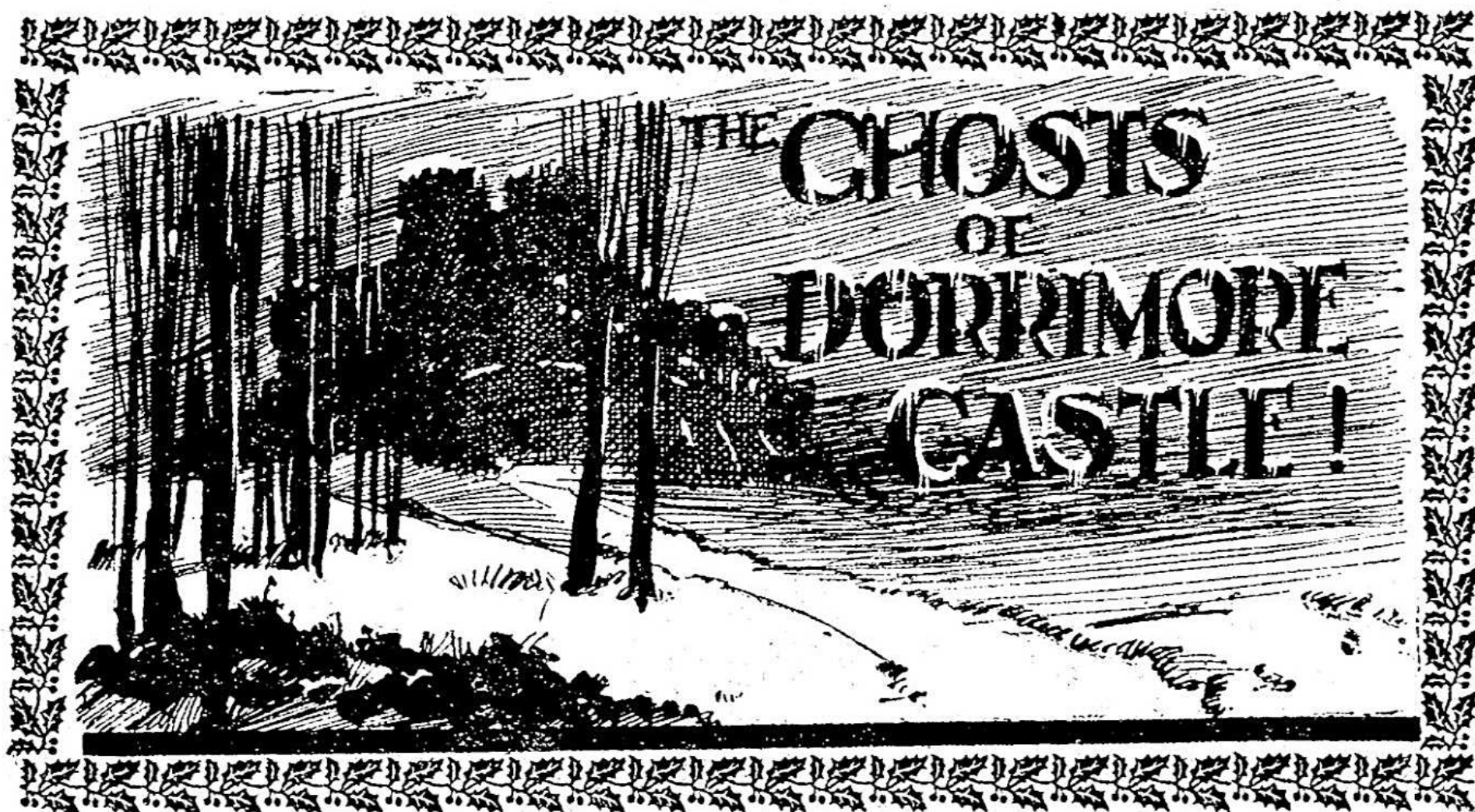
In some mysterious way a magnificent repast had been laid in the great banquet hall.

From This Week's Yarn:

**THE GHOSTS OF
DORRIMORE CASTLE!**



It swung off at a tangent, leapt the snow-bank, and soared clean upwards ten or twelve feet in the air—missing the startled Winnie by mere inches.



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

This being our real Christmas Number, the story deals with the adventures of your favourite St. Frank's heroes on Christmas Day. Owing to a hoax perpetrated by one, Willy Handforth, a number of St. Frank's juniors and Moor View girls have just arrived at Dorrimore Castle as the guests of Lord Dorrimore. The noble lord, however, is not at home, and the castle is deserted. Owing to the heavy fall of snow, the uninvited guests seek shelter within the castle, and prepare to make the best of their unhappy plight. What follows is best left to the Author to disclose in his narrative.

And now, let me wish you one and all a Most Enjoyable and Merry Christmas, hoping the story will contribute its share in the feast of good things that the season provides.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE UNBIDDEN GUESTS.

"PRISONERS!" said Reginald Pitt grimly.

"No question of that, old chap," agreed Dick Hamilton, nodding. "We're prisoners all right. And it's Christmas morning. By Jove! The queerest Christmas morning I can ever remember!"

The two juniors stood near the window, gazing out upon the snowy waste. The popular Captain of the St. Frank's Remove was looking concerned and troubled, and even the genial Reggie Pitt was worried.

"Christmas morning!" he echoed. "Well I'm jiggered!"

There was something very akin to dismay in his voice. Both juniors were in pyjamas,

but they were unaffected by this circumstance, for the stately bed-room was warmed throughout by means of steam radiation. There was an immense contrast between the interior of the room and the prospect outside the window.

Standing there, they gazed out across a hazy expanse of dead whiteness, for everything was literally smothered and choked with freshly fallen snow. The haze was caused by the ceaseless swirls of falling flakes.

Overhead the sky was leaden, and although the high wind of the previous night had dropped, the clouds were still sending down their never-ending bombardment of snow.

"It's absolutely terrific," remarked Pitt. "I've never seen it snow like this before. Anybody might think we were in Alaska,

instead of Derbyshire. It must be three or four feet deep, Nipper!"

Dick Hamilton nodded.

"All of that," he replied. "Of course, we're right in the Peak district, you know, and the Peak's famous for its snow. But I think this fall is extraordinary, even for Derbyshire. I'll bet they haven't had a storm of this sort for twenty-five years!"

"Everything's blocked—everything's buried!" muttered Reggie. "I don't suppose there's an open road for scores of miles. It would take hours to cover a mile through this terrific blanket. As for the railway, it's as good as washed out."

They stood there, busy with their thoughts. There were two beds in the room, and while one had the sheets and blankets flung back, the other was occupied by Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West. They were both sleeping the sleep of the just.

"I can't quite believe it, even now," went on Pitt absently. "It seems like a dream, you know. So jolly unreal—so fantastic. And it's Christmas morning, and we're bottled up in this medieval castle."

"As far as the outside world is concerned we might just as well be living in the Middle Ages," agreed Nipper. "Even if there's a telephone here, it'll be cut off. No wires could have stood last night's storm. They must be down in thousands. We can't communicate with anybody; we can't even go to the nearest village or town. We're just hemmed in."

They looked at one another queerly. It was indeed an alarming state of affairs on Christmas morning, the one morning of the year when they had hoped to be full of high spirits and genial humour.

"We'll let those chaps sleep a bit longer," remarked Nipper, as he glanced across the room. "They'll have a fit when they see that it's still snowing. I don't know what the others will say, either. Everybody was expecting to get back to London to-day."

"It won't be possible, will it?"

"Possible!" echoed Nipper. "My dear ass, if this snow continues there'll be no trains for two or three days. And it's obviously impossible to go anywhere by road. The whole district's snowed under. I'll bet there are ten and twelve foot drifts on some of these highways!"

"My only hat!"

Again they stared out, busy with their thoughts.

It really seemed ages since they had started on this adventure. It hadn't been an adventure at first, but merely a commonplace journey to spend Christmas with Lord Dorrimore.

There were twenty-one souls in the party, all told—twelve St. Frank's fellows, six Moor View girls, Phipps, Archie Glen-thorne's man, and a couple of lady's maids.

This little company, in fact, comprised the entire population of this great granite pile—Dorrimore Castle.

And they were unbidden guests, too.

That indeed was the crux of the whole matter. According to all calculations, they should not have been there. But the weather had stepped in, and had changed the aspect of things.

It had been Willy Handforth's idea originally. The audacious leader of the St. Frank's Third had merely perpetrated an elaborate hoax. And he had done it by way of revenge, quite a good-natured revenge, really, for a supposed slight which he and his chums had suffered at St. Frank's on the last day of term.

Willy Handforth and Juicy Lemon were spending Christmas with Chubby Heath, at the latter's home. This was only a mile or two distant. And some days earlier, while out for a walk over the frosty countryside, Willy had made his first acquaintance with Dorrimore Castle. A rather curious fact had come to light.

While the castle was normally occupied by its household staff throughout the year, it was always left deserted, bolted and barred at Christmas time. None of the servants were left in charge. Everybody was sent away, and the great mansion was left empty. Willy learned, however, that this state of affairs had only been in operation during the past ten years.

It was probably some secret of Lord Dorrimore's, one of the family skeletons which never appeared in public. His lordship was away in South America at the moment, satisfying his continuous craving for travel. The genial old Dorrie could seldom rest for more than a week at a time.

Willy had seen a good opening here.

In order to get his own back on the Remove—and incidentally on Irene & Co.—he had sent a whole sheaf of telegrams to London, purporting to be invitations from Lord Dorrimore to spend Christmas at the castle. Nobody had dreamed of questioning the genuine nature of the wires.

And the Christmas party had started out from London early on Christmas Eve, happy, light-hearted, and gay. It was Willy's little plan to bring them on this journey for the mere pleasure of laughing at them when they arrived. They would then be able to return by the evening train, after a wasted journey. It had struck Willy and his chums as being distinctly on the humorous side.

But they hadn't reckoned with that rascal, the Clerk of the Weather.

This misguided imp of mischief had seen fit to conjure up the heaviest Christmas Eve snowstorm of recent years. It had started not long after leaving London, had continued through the Midlands, and by

the time the train had reached the Peak district, the blizzard was at its height.

The train, instead of reaching Buxton at three o'clock in the afternoon, had finally snowed itself up in a cutting some miles distant, at a late hour in the evening. And all further progress had been impossible.

It had seemed that everybody was doomed to stay in the train until morning. But the party for Dorrimore Castle had learned from a friendly guard—a man whose home was in the neighbourhood—that the train was actually snowed up within a mile of the great mansion.

So the whole party had set off on foot. After weary battles against the snowdrifts, after fighting the blizzard, they had arrived shortly before midnight, only to find the castle black and empty.

But Willy & Co. had been there, and Willy had penitently explained the dreadful truth. To reach any hotel was out of the question. As a last resort they had broken into the empty castle, and had fallen straight into bed. And most members of the party were still sound asleep.

They had been so weary indeed that no thought had been given to food. They hadn't worried. Everybody took it for granted that the snowstorm would be over by the morning, and that there would be a train for London. Phipps had promised to be up early, in order to make all inquiries.

For, of course, to remain at Dorrimore Castle was too ridiculous for words. They couldn't very well hold a Christmas party on their own, and there were no facilities for Yuletide festivities, in any case. The only solution was to get back to their respective homes as quickly as they possibly could.

But the Clerk of the Weather was still in an impish mood.

Morning had come—Christmas morning—and the snow, instead of abating, was descending as thickly as ever. One glance outside proved that it had been coming down unceasingly. As a result, the party was snowed up—doomed to remain here until the railway service had got itself into shape again. And there was no prospect of this until Boxing Day, at the very earliest, and probably not until later.

It simply meant that the unbidden guests would have to remain.

Nipper looked at Reggie Pitt, and Reggie Pitt looked at Nipper. They had been thinking in the same strain. And the outlook was alarming. There wasn't a single ray of hope.

"Well, we shall have to make the best of it, that's all," remarked Nipper.

"Stay here, you mean?"

"There's nothing else for it."

"It'll be a pretty dud sort of Christmas!" said Pitt ruefully. "Of course, there

are enough of us to make a lively party, but that's not everything. How on earth can we have Christmas festivities without any cooks in the kitchen?"

"One of the maids might be a bit handy at cooking, and even Phipps would turn up trumps as a chef," remarked Nipper. "But what the dickens can they do without a turkey? How can they make a plum-pudding without any ingredients? This place was locked up, remember; there's nothing here at all."

"Don't, old man!" groaned Reggie. "Things are bad enough as it is, without you making 'em worse. Let's hope the staff left some grub in the larder before they cleared out. By Jove! Talking about grub reminds me. I'm famished!"

"Famished!" echoed Nipper. "I could eat boot-soles!"

"I'm so empty that I can feel my giddy inside touching!" declared Pitt. "We were too tired to eat last night, and we hadn't had a thing since lunch-time. No wonder we're empty!"

Dick Hamilton's eyes gleamed.

"I say, let's get dressed and go on a tour of exploration," he suggested. "I don't believe anybody else is awake yet. Let's buzz down and explore the larders and store cupboards."

Reggie Pitt looked dreamy.

"Sometimes," he breathed, "you have flashes of real genius!"

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE CHRISTMAS MORNING.



ARCHIE GLENTHORNE sat up in bed and blinked.

"What-ho!" he murmured feebly. "What-ho! Phipps, by gad! What-ho! I mean, what?"

"I thought I would awaken you, sir," said Phipps calmly.

The elegant Removite groped with the bedclothes as though feeling for something. Then he rubbed his eyes, stared across at the window, and transferred his gaze to his valet.

"Morning, and so forth, Phipps!" he observed, becoming more lucid. "That's the idea, laddie. But, dash it, the good old apartment seems a trifle larger than usual, old thing. Good gad! What's happened?"

"We are in Dorrimore Castle, sir."

"Eh? Which? I mean, what?"

"Dorrimore Castle, sir."

"I say, Phipps, dash it!" protested Archie. "What's the bally idea? Dorrimore Castle? The old memory is frightfully rusty. Odds blizzards and snowdrifts! The

machinery stirs, Phipps. Absolutely. The old cogs are churning like the dickens!"

"I thought you would soon recollect, sir," nodded Phipps.

"Last night, what?" ejaculated Archie, staring round. "The bally old train—the fight through that blighting snowstorm. Yes, by gad! We did the good old burgling act, didn't we? And here we are. I mean, here we absolutely are, Phipps!"

"Precisely, sir. It is Christmas morning."

"Bally good!" said Archie approvingly. "Yuletide! That priceless period when chappies pelt one another with goodwill, and so forth! Many happy returns, Phipps, old chestnut!"

"Thank you, sir!"

"That is to say, happy Christmas, laddie!" beamed Archie. "The best tidings of all the glad New Year, what! This is the one morning of the year when— Good gad!"

Archie paused blankly, and stared in a glassy fashion.

"I knew it, Phipps!" he moaned. "I absolutely knew it, and yet I couldn't quite lay the old finger on the bulls-eye! Something's missing—something's lacking. Tea, Phipps! The brew that cheers. The morning reviver!"

"I am very sorry, sir——"

"What! You don't mean——"

Again Archie paused, and this time he looked positively haggard. The full horror of the situation was dawning upon him. For the first time since Phipps had come to him as a valet he had failed to bring him his morning cup of tea. The thing was absolutely tragic.

"Phipps," said Archie frigidly. "This is a piece of foul business! I mean to say, Christmas morning, and I am sitting here, fairly gasping to curl myself round a cup of tea. Where, dash you, is it?"

"I am afraid there is no tea this morning, sir."

"No tea?" echoed Archie. "I mean, no tea? That is, no tea?"

He couldn't quite grasp the full truth.

"As you know, sir, we only broke into the castle as a temporary haven from the storm," said Phipps. "Unfortunately, I have been unable to make your usual tea. The position, I fear, is somewhat awkward."

Archie fell back and feebly beat the air.

"Awkward?" he moaned. "Phipps, it's worse than ghastly! You don't seem to realise that I'm still half-dead. I'm never absolutely alive, dash it, until the old brew has trickled its way into the vitals."

The door softly opened, and two faces looked in.

"Hallo, awake?" said Nipper. "We heard voices, so we thought we'd investigate. 'Morning, Archie! 'Morning, Phipps!"

They entered, fully dressed, and looked on with interest.

"What's wrong, Archie?" asked Reggie Pitt. "You look a bit dithery."

"Dithery?" breathed Archie. "Laddie, the tissues are withering away. Phipps has absolutely failed to rally round with the India and Ceylon."

"What, no tea?" asked Nipper, laughing.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Hamilton, there is none available," said Phipps.

"That's a bright beginning, anyhow," said Dick. "Perhaps there's some coffee?"

"As far as I can discover, sir—none."

"Cocoa?" suggested Pitt hopefully.

"No, sir."

"Oh, that's awful!" said Reggie. "There must be something, Phipps. In a big place like this—I mean, we're famished. Everybody's famished. We haven't eaten a bite since yesterday's luncheon!"

"It is extremely unfortunate, young gentlemen."

They exchanged glances.

"You don't mean to say there's no grub?" asked Nipper concernedly.

"I regret to disappoint you, sir, but my search for food has proved unsuccessful," said Phipps sadly. "I made a point of rising early, and I lost no time in visiting the domestic quarters. A most disappointing survey, sir."

"But the store cupboards?" asked Pitt in anguish.

"Quite barren, sir."

"Let's go down and have another search," said Nipper briskly. "I'm not doubting you, Phipps, but it seems impossible. There must be something. I'd eat raw potatoes this morning."

"Christmas morning, too!" said Pitt. "Just when we were expecting to get a list of luxuries a mile long! I can picture the pater and mater sitting at the breakfast-table; scoffing. But it's too tragic!"

They left the bed-room, and Archie rolled over, moaning slightly. Phipps went downstairs with Nipper and Pitt close at his heels. This was the first time they had seen the hall in full daylight. They hardly remembered what had happened the previous night, for they had been so utterly weary.

The castle was a wonderful old place—picturesque and stately. It was a treasure house of antiques, packed with wonderful tapestries, old masters, and period furniture worth tens of thousands.

Yet, at the same time, it was provided with every modern convenience—steam heat, electric light, and other up-to-date innovations. The steam heat was particularly welcome. It was still working—apparently being operated from a power-house at the rear of the garden. One of the outdoor men had presumably received orders to keep this going, so that no dampness could affect the castle's treasures.

Curiously enough, even Nipper had never been here before, although he had known Lord Dorrimore for years. Dorrie had many

country seats, and scarcely used any of them. The millionaire peer preferred to spend most of his time on his ocean-going yacht, or exploring some outlandish part of the globe where he took his life in his hands as a matter of course.

"I say, what a wonderful old place!" said Nipper, as they descended into the great hall. "Look at that oak—look at the panelling!"

"At any other time, old man, I'd appreciate such trifles," said Reggie. "But just at the moment I'd rather see a plate of good food than all the antiques of the whole world. In the end, it'll probably mean robbing the giddy mouse-trap!"

They went down the stately corridors, looking into the great reception-rooms with but scant interest. The banqueting-hall was sombre and seemed to be filled with the ghosts of countless generations. Dorrie's ancestors looked down from the great walls, and the enormous open fireplace was cold and black.

They passed the library, the drawing-room, and other splendid apartments. But they worked up no real enthusiasm until they reached the kitchens. Their steps echoed and re-echoed as they walked.

The effect was making itself felt. There was an overwhelming sense of being alone—of occupying this great castle unbidden. Everywhere they went, they felt that they were intruding.

And the search for food was devoid of success.

Just as Phipps had said, there was not even a crumb in the way of a meal. Store cupboards were searched and pantries were ransacked, but absolutely nothing was found. Several locked doors were encountered—great, solid doors which resisted every attempt to force them.

"Naturally, everything's locked up!" grunted Nipper. "I wouldn't hesitate to smash the locks, but we couldn't do it. These doors have stood the test of centuries. We'd wreck half the place before we smashed them down. It seems to me that we're dished."

Phipps nodded.

"I fear there is only one alternative, young gentlemen," he remarked.

"What's that?"

"I will get my overcoat on and venture out," said Phipps. "The snow is excessively thick, but I may be successful in locating a cottage. At all events, I will do my best to obtain food of some kind."

"Good old Phipps!" said Nipper heartily. "Don't you think we'd better come with you?"

"That will be quite unnecessary, sir," replied Phipps. "I trust I shall find more supplies than I can carry, but in that event I shall obtain assistance of the right sort. You may rely upon me to use my best endeavour."

And Phipps, having struggled into his overcoat, pulled his hat on squarely, and sallied out into the snowstorm. Reggie Pitt and Dick Hamilton watched him go without much hope.

It was indeed a strange Christmas morning!

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS GONG.



"CHEERIO, Reggie!" The two juniors turned in the great hall and looked up the wide staircase. Doris Berkeley was standing at the top, waving her hand. In

spite of her strenuous adventure the previous night, she was looking fresh and charming—as pretty a picture as one could wish to see.

"Merry Christmas, Dick!" she added, tripping down the stairs. "Where's everybody? Aren't the lazy bounders up yet?"

"We're the early birds," explained Nipper. "I say, you don't look very washed out, old girl! And that frock's ripping! It's not the one you were wearing yesterday."

"You surely don't expect a girl to wear the same frock two days running?" asked Doris. "Thank goodness we brought most of our bags with us last night! But what's this about food?"

"Have you heard anything?" inquired Reggie.

"Lots!" said Doris with a grimace. "Mary tells me that Phipps can't locate anything beyond a couple of biscuits on the dining-room sideboard. There isn't even any tea."

"Then you've heard the worst," said Nipper. "Awful, isn't it? A huge place like this, and nothing to eat! We're snowed up, too—no chance of any trains, or anything."

"Couldn't we hire a motor-car?" asked Doris.

"No harm in hiring one, but we should have a joy-ride of about ten yards and then dive into the first snowdrift!" said Reggie, shaking his head. "That's assuming, of course, that the motor-car could get here—which it couldn't. No, Doris, we're doomed to spend a fasting Christmas within these ancient walls. Doesn't it make you want to shout for joy?"

"I don't believe it!" said Doris firmly. "Mary told me that Phipps was going out to buy up the village."

"Which village?"

"I don't know, silly!"

"Neither do I," said Reggie. "My dear girl, there's no village for miles! If Phipps finds a cottage, and comes back with half a sack of potatoes, we'll acclaim him as a

hero. We can't expect him to do anything better."

"I'd enjoy even potatoes this morning," said Doris hungrily.

"Well, let's go upstairs and rout out some of the others," said Nipper briskly. "This is perfectly disgraceful! Nine o'clock, and hardly anybody up! You take the girls, Doris, and we'll dig out the chaps."

When they got upstairs they found many signs of activity. Irene Manners and Winnie Pitt were already out, and they were standing in the corridor, talking earnestly to Mary, one of the two maids.

"Food, of course?" asked Pitt, as he strolled up.

"Isn't it perfectly dreadful?" asked his sister.

"They say that fasting is as good as a month at Carlsbad——"

"Don't be horrid, Reggie!" protested Winnie. "Fancy talking of fasting to-day—Christmas morning! It seems too absurd! I can't believe that we shan't get any breakfast."

"Well, it's only a matter of time before you'll be forced to believe it, sis," replied Reggie. "I don't mind admitting that I've got an appetite like the kick of a mule. But what's the good of grumbling when there's nothing to eat?"

A wild howl of anguish sounded down the corridor. Fatty Little came into view—Fatty Little with haggard expression and horrified eyes.

"Is it true?" he burst out. "Isn't there any grub?"

"Not a bite!" said Pitt sorrowfully.

Fatty collapsed against the wall, his knees sagging.

"I haven't slept a wink all night!" he moaned in a feeble voice. "I was hungry in the train, I was hungry as we walked through the snow, I was famished before I got into bed. I couldn't sleep with the pain of it. And now there's no breakfast. I shall be gone before noon!"

"Gone?" asked Doris.

"I'm liable to die of starvation any day, if I miss a couple of meals," breathed Fatty hoarsely. "I shan't last another hour! What with no sleep, and this——"

"No sleep?" snorted Handforth, striding up. "By George! Hear that, Church? This fat porpoise says he got no sleep."

"He was snoring all night," declared Church. "In fact, once or twice he went sort of dotty, and babbled about plum-pudding and turkey! He was dreaming about grub for hours!"

"I dreamt I had a glorious feed!" said Fatty ecstatically. "There was turkey, roast potatoes, stuffing, peas, beans, cabbage, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, and every vegetable you can think of. We had plum-pudding, cream pie, doughnuts——"

"You howling ass, shut up!" snorted

Pitt. "What's the idea of making our mouths water like that? Besides, if you had all that list you ought to be dead! At any rate, you ought to be satisfied!"

"I only dreamed it!" roared Fatty.

"Well, I didn't even dream of food," said Reggie. "Be satisfied for small mercies. You're not likely to get any breakfast to-day."

By this time practically all the other unbidden guests were dressed and out of their rooms. They stood in groups along the upper corridor, discussing the dismal situation. And even the most optimistic fellow was compelled to confess that hope seemed dead.

"Without question, brothers and sisters, the situation is not without a murky aspect," declared William Napoleon Browne, the solitary Fifth-Former in the party. "Let us place our trust in Phipps, and pray that he returns with a pouchful of the champing material."

"Absolutely!" declared Archie Glen-thorne, appearing at last. "Trust Phipps. What-ho! The good old bevy of beauty! I mean, the girls, what? How frightfully braced you're looking, dear old things! Cheerio, Marjorie! 'Morning, and all that, Irene!"

Archie beamed his greetings to all and sundry. The girls seemed to have a greater reviving effect upon him than his famous cup of tea. And there was no doubt that the presence of Irene & Co. made a great deal of difference. Without them the party would have been dull, indeed.

"The best thing we can do is to face the situation calmly, and make the best of it," said Nipper. "It's no good anybody hoping to get back to London to-day. That's ruled out. We've got to spend Christmas here."

"A sealy prospect, Brother Hamilton, but we can only live in hopes," said Browne. "Once this troublesome food question is settled, we may work a little ginger into the party. Perhaps it will even be possible to arrange some jollities for the evening. Courage is the watchword. But courage, alas! is an uncertain quantity without food to back it up."

Boom, boom, boom!

Everybody paused and looked at one another. Then they stared down the wide, stately corridor towards the staircase. That strange sound had come from somewhere downstairs—echoing and booming through the empty spaces of the castle.

"What was it?" asked Irene cautiously, her blue eyes full of inquiry.

"Rummy!" said Nipper, frowning. "Sounded like a gong!"

Fatty Little groaned.

"A gong!" he repeated. "Great kippers, you don't mean——"

"But I expect it was one of the big clocks," went on Nipper. "It couldn't have been a gong, of course——"

Boom-boom-boom!

"There it is again!" exclaimed Doris. "And it can't be a clock, Dick! Clocks don't chime like that. Besides," she added, glancing at her wrist-watch, "it's only ten past nine."

"By George!" ejaculated Handforth suddenly. "Perhaps Phipps has got back."

"What?"

"Perhaps he's brought some food, and he is announcing breakfast——"

With one accord, the crowd raced down the corridor. Even the girls kept up the pace. The very thought of breakfast gave them added speed. And Fatty Little, in spite of his bulk, was in the forefront.

How he preserved his neck was a miracle! He tore downstairs like a human tank charging the enemy. At any moment he seemed liable to trip, and fly headlong. But, somehow, he maintained the perpendicular.

And as he ran through the big hall he gave a whoop. On the air there was the waft of a glorious odour.

"Coffee!" roared Fatty triumphantly.

He tore into the banqueting hall, and then suddenly drew up with a startled gasp. The others, crowding behind him, halted, too. They stood there, dumbfounded.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BREAKFAST OF MYSTERY.



A STAGGERING change had taken place.

Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt, who had passed through this lofty apartment half an hour earlier, rubbed their eyes, and stared. They had noted the bare, sombre aspect of the hall. They had seen the cold fireplace, the open table, with its bare surface.

A miracle had apparently been wrought.

In the fireplace a great log fire was leaping and crackling. The great table was no longer barren, but presented a picture of dazzling splendour. A snowy-white cloth was spread, and the surface of it was glittering with a perfect maze of silver and china and glass.

The table was, indeed, set for a veritable banquet. No mere rough-and-ready meal, such as Phipps might have conjured up—but a table fit for royalty. Not a thing was missing. The silver gleamed and sparkled. There were glorious flowers, and hundreds of wonderful Christmas decorations.

And the festive board was literally groaning under the weight of sumptuous dishes—foods of every kind and variety. The very air was filled with the hungry, appetising odour.

What was the explanation of this astonishing mystery?

Browne and Nipper, to say nothing of Reggie Pitt, were far more startled than the others. They were more shrewd—their brains worked more quickly. And they positively knew that the cold, barren kitchens



"Is it true?" he burst out. "Isn't there any grub?"

"Not a bite!" said Pitt sorrowfully. Fatty collapsed against the wall, his knees sagging.

of the castle could not have produced this feast. It was only half an hour since the kitchens had been explored. There had been no fire—no cooking facilities of any kind. What was more to the point, there were no human agents in those deserted domestic quarters. What, then, was the explanation? Phipps?

Undoubtedly, Phipps was a kind of magician when matters came to a crisis. The fellows had never forgotten how Phipps had come out of his shell when they had all been wrecked on a desert island, during one of the holidays. He had proved himself to be a man of resource and even genius.

But Phipps was hardly capable of this present miracle.

"Look!" breathed Fatty Little at last. "Look—grub!"

"But—but how?" asked Handforth, in a thick voice. "Who's done it? Great guns! This is a banquet for a prince! That table's set for thirty people, or more! We must be dreaming!"

Doris Berkeley sighed happily.

"If all dreams were like this, I'd be satisfied," she said promptly. "There's something solid about this aroma! Coffee! Yes,

and kidneys! I'll swear I can smell kidneys! I love 'em, too!"

"Kidneys!" panted Fatty, awed. "Where?"

By this time they were getting over their first startled amazement. They entered the banqueting hall cautiously, glancing from right to left, as though expecting somebody to spring out. Even now they couldn't believe that this was a reality. More than one fellow had a horrid suspicion that the picture would fade, leaving the table barren.

As was to be expected, Fatty was the first one to reach the festive board. He seized a huge dish-cover, grabbed it tightly, and pulled. With a yell of triumph, he held it aloft.

"It's real!" he roared joyously.

From the dish arose a cloud of overpowering steam. Fatty closed his eyes, and seemed to go drunk. The smell was so intoxicating that he lost his equilibrium and swayed.

"Kidneys and bacon!" he gurgled. "Look! All fried to a turn! Steaming hot, too! Oh, great pancakes—this is too good to be true!"

By this time other dish-covers were being raised—revealing poached eggs, grilled ham, welsh rarebit, mushroom omelets, cheese omelets, daintily-cooked cutlets, and other delicacies in utter profusion.

Beneath other covers there were steaming hot muffins—and every dish was of massive metal, with electric heaters beneath—so that the food was kept in perfect condition.

A huge ham reposed invitingly at one end of the table, and cold chickens flanked it on either side. There were cold tongues, and, in fact, so many varieties of rich foods that the unbidden guests were half-scared.

In the sweet line, the table was no less abundant. Cakes and pastries abounded, and there were enough delicious rolls, alone, to provide an excellent meal. Coffee and tea stood on the groaning sideboard, and everything was ready to be served on the spot.

"By George, it's solid enough!" said Handforth breathlessly. "Look here, before we start, we ought to investigate! We've got to find out who's done this!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Come on—let's go to the kitchens!"

"Not likely!" roared Fatty Little. "The stuff's here now—let's dash into it! If we go away, it might disappear as mysteriously as it came!"

"Something in that!" nodded Reggie, grinning. "We can't afford to take any chances in our condition. We're all famished. Besides, the only thing I want to investigate at the moment, is the table."

Even Handforth saw the force of this argument, and without any loss of time the delighted party sat down and commenced operations. Everybody helped themselves, and the great hall rang with laughter and

exclamations of satisfaction. The whole position was changed.

Instead of being prisoners in a deserted castle, with no prospect of decent food, the guests were partaking of a Christmas morning breakfast of the most glorious type. It was far better than they would have received in their own respective homes. It was a banquet of unbelievable splendour.

And the log fire, and the decorations, lent the scene the Yuletide aspect which was the one necessary feature. Drooping spirits revived by magic, and before the meal was fairly started the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls were in high good humour.

What did it matter about being bottled up in Dorrimore Castle for Christmas? Apparently, they were in for a jolly good time! And why ask questions? This was obviously an occasion to take what the gods sent them, and say nothing!

Every appetite was keen—and rendered all the keener by reason of the delicious dishes. The food vanished almost as magically as it had appeared. And towards the end of the meal the fellows began to ask themselves that same question—where had this food come from?

There were other questions, too. How had it been provided? And by whom? Who were these mysterious ghosts of Dorrimore Castle who conjured up royal banquets for unannounced guests? There was something positively uncanny about the whole business.

"We will all admit that the proceedings are somewhat spectral," observed Browne, as he toyed with a final roll. "However, it must be acknowledged that a visitation of this type is essentially welcome. Let us indulge in a little mass telepathy, and urge the spooks to remember that luncheon is usually served at one o'clock."

Nipper grinned.

"We ought to be jolly thankful to get a breakfast like this!" he remarked. "We can't expect luncheon as well, Browne, old man."

"If breakfast, why not luncheon?" asked Browne mildly. "One is just as probable as the other. While sharing your youthful curiosity regarding this spread. I must nevertheless put in a word of warning. There is an old saying, brothers and sisters, that urges us to let well alone. Why investigate at all? Surely it is better to let these ghosts do their cheerful work unhampered?"

"Ghosts be blowed!" snorted Handforth. "Now that my hunger's appeased, I can think clearly! This is a joke of some kind—"

"The best joke I ever heard of!" mumbled Fatty thickly.

"Pardon the intrusion, Brother Handforth, but I feel compelled to point out that Brother Little is in need of assistance," said Browne gently. "It is sad that such a promising young life should snuff out—"

"Who's snuffing out?" gurgled Fatty.

"There are grave indications of a coming

disaster," said the Fifth-Former solemnly. "It is not my wish to alarm you, Brother Little, but, as an expert, I am bound to speak. Is it really essential to demolish every morsel? Are we to leave no crumbs for the robins? Surely they deserve their Christmas breakfast, too? And I urge you, Brother Little, to remember that every button has its breaking-point."

"I've hardly started yet!" snorted Fatty indignantly.

"Your buttons, I have been informed, are tested to stand fifty pounds to the square inch," went on Browne. "However, the limit has obviously been reached, and utter tragedy lies ahead. Heed the warning of one who knows, Brother Little, and tear yourself away from this palace of temptation."

"It's all right, Browne—we'll tear him away in a minute," grinned Buster Boots. "We've kept our eyes on him—he's eaten double as much as everybody else. We'll attend to him."

"Why worry about Fatty?" growled Handforth. "What about that investigation? Blow Browne! Rats to his warning!"

"Alas, that it should come to this!" sighed Browne. "I am blown!"

"You ought to be ashamed to admit it," grinned Reggie Pitt. "But if it comes to that, we're all fairly blown after this feed—"

"Hallo!" interrupted Church. "There's somebody outside!"

They dashed to the windows, and beheld the figure of Phipps, plodding through the snow, bearing an enormous sack on his back.

CHAPTER V.

THE INVESTIGATION.



"WHAT-HO!" observed Archie Glenthorne. "I mean, Phipps, what? The good old lad has absolutely rallied round with the nose-bag! But he appears to be somewhat late for the fair."

"That doesn't alter his good work," said Dick Hamilton approvingly. "Phipps is a wonder! He went out into the cold snow, looking for grub, and he's come back with a sack full of it! Good old Phipps!"

"Let's go and welcome him in," suggested Bob Christine.

The girls joined in the mission, and there was a general move towards the great entrance hall. The door had already been unchained and unbolted, and it was flung open. Phipps was just coming along the terrace—plunging heavily through the masses of snow.

"By jingo!" ejaculated Pitt. "The sun!" "It's stopped snowing, too!" cried Marjorie.

It was a fact. The sky was clearing, and patches of welcome blue could be seen between the clouds. Snow was no longer falling,

and the morning was breaking out crisp and sunny. The great storm was over.

Phipps mounted the steps, and paused. He looked rather disappointed. Somehow, he had expected the fellows and girls to crowd around him, urging him to tell them what he had brought. Instead of that, they displayed a callous indifference to food, and discussed the weather! Phipps was hurt.

"Looks like being fine, Phipps!" said Handforth heartily.

"Yes, sir," said Phipps, setting down his sack.

"What-ho!" observed Archie, with genial good humour. "The return of the prodigal—what? I mean to say, the old good Samaritan pushes along. Food, Phipps—what?"

"I have been partially successful, sir."

"Topping!" said Archie. "Good gad! Steady, Church, laddie! There's no absolute necessity to bung snowballs at Archibald, is there? That one came frightfully near, dash it!"

"I aimed at Handy!" grinned Church.

Handforth started.

"Oh, did you?" he roared. "You aimed at me, eh? All right, you fathead, take that!"

He scrambled a snowball together, and hurled it at Church. It caught Irene Manners fairly in the neck, and Handforth collapsed. He actually turned pale.

"I—I say!" he gasped. "Sorry, you know! I—I didn't—"

"All right!" sang out Irene. "I'll pay you back for that!"

Her aim was much more accurate than Handforth's. She hurled a snowball, which took Edward Oswald in the very centre of his face. And the others, entering into the spirit of the affair, took sides, and a regular battle commenced.

After such a hearty meal they were fully fortified, and the breaking weather made their spirits rise buoyantly. It was Christmas morning—there was heaps of snow—and youthful spirits could not be denied.

Poor old Phipps stood looking on, dumb-founded.

Nipper, watching him, came to one certain conclusion. Phipps was obviously ignorant of that amazing breakfast. He had gone off to scrape together some eatables from the nearest cottages. He had succeeded. And he was grieved to see that his task was not appreciated.

"I have brought some food, young gentlemen," he said, in a sad voice.

"Good old Phipps!" nodded Christine. "Shall we join in the fight, you chaps?"

"Come on—let's have a good old rag!"

Phipps was wounded.

"I was rather expecting that the young gentlemen would welcome the food supplies, sir," he said, turning to Nipper. "I have obtained several loaves of bread, some butter, and even an assortment of cakes."

Furthermore, I have brought tea and condensed milk——"

"You've done wonderfully, Phipps," said Nipper heartily.

"At least, sir, I have done something," admitted Phipps. "But it seems that the young gentlemen are no longer hungry. And even the young ladies appear indifferent——"

"The fact is, Phipps, we've had breakfast."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"We've had breakfast."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Coffee, hot rolls, kidneys and bacon, omelettes, ham and tongue—— Oh, all sorts of things!" said Nipper. "A really ripping brekker, Phipps. You wouldn't believe it."

"I certainly find it difficult to credit, sir."

For once in his life Phipps allowed his mask-like face to register complete mystification. Suspicion was there, too. He gave Nipper a very keen look.

"I presume you are joking, Mr. Hamilton?" he asked frigidly.

"It's too bad, Phipps—sorry, old man!" grinned Nipper. "No, I'm not joking. An extraordinary thing happened soon after you went. We were all talking upstairs, and we heard a gong."

"A gong, sir?"

"Absolutely a gong," declared Nipper firmly. "And when we went down to the banqueting hall, everything was changed. You remember how we passed through it before you went for the grub? Remember how bare it was?"

"The recollection is still vivid, sir."

"Well, instead of that barren aspect, the place was transformed into a Lord Mayor's Show business," said Nipper. "A banquet of first-rate quality, Phipps. Amazing dishes and—— But what's the good of talking? Come inside, and have a look for yourself."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie heartily. "Why, dash it, the poor old lad is probably starving. I mean breakfast, Phipps? Have you indulged in a few forkfuls?"

Phipps drew himself up, pained beyond measure.

"Really, sir!" he protested.

"Oh, sorrow!" said Archie hastily. "Of course not! Absolutely not! You wouldn't exercise the old jaws before the young master had his manger filled, would you?"

"Well, there's plenty of grub inside—unless Fatty has polished off the lot," said Dick Hamilton briskly. "Come on, Phipps! Perhaps you'll be able to explain this rummy affair, too. It's beyond me."

They went indoors, Phipps leaving the sack just against the entrance. They went through the great hall, passed along the stately gallery, and turned into the banqueting hall.

"Hallo!" said Nipper, staring. "What the——"

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie, staring.

Phipps looked into the apartment with mild interest.

"There is certainly a change, sir; but I fail to appreciate the story of the banquet," he said. "If this is a jest——"

"Odds mysteries and puzzles! Absolutely not!" protested Archie.

They went into the hall in a kind of dream. Another startling change had taken place—silently, mysteriously, and without anyone being the wiser. The decorations were still hanging, the log fire was still blazing and crackling. But every sign of the recent breakfast had vanished.

The table was as bare as ever—the sideboard as barren as before. All the glittering silver had evaporated, the snowy-white cloth was not in evidence, and the china and glass no longer charmed the eye.

"My only hat!" said Bob Christine blankly. "It's gone!"

"But who—— How—— Why?" asked Nipper, staring. "I say, this is a bit too thick! How, in the name of all that's mysterious——"

Words failed him, and he caught the eye of Phipps.

"Honestly, Phipps, we're not spoofing you!" he added. "I meant to show you the whole bag of tricks. And there's nothing left! This is a marvellous piece of work!"

Phipps listened quietly while they told him the full facts.

"And this is the literal truth, sir?" asked Phipps at last.

"Positively copyright by Reuter, and Al at Lloyd's," declared William Napoleon Browne, strolling up. "While sharing your amazement, Phipps, I must, nevertheless, express my disapproval of your sceptical eye."

"We can't blame Phipps for not believing it, Browne," said Nipper. "But he needn't be doubtful for long. The ghosts cleared away so hurriedly that they left a few crumbs behind. Look here."

A close examination of the floor revealed any amount of crumbs. There were even tea splashes, and other evidences of the recent meal. Phipps was looking very thoughtful.

"A most singular state of affairs, young gentlemen," he observed. "I can offer no explanation. To the best of my knowledge the castle is untenanted. You do not really believe that the feast was provided by some supernatural power?"

"Great Scott, no!" said Nipper. "They're not ghosts of that kind. These rummy good-providers are only ghostly in the sense that we can't find out how they operate. There's something very queer about the whole business. Why on earth should these people adopt such secretive tactics?"

"It would be as well, sir, to institute a few inquiries," suggested Phipps.

"Yes, we'll investigate at once," said Nipper briskly. "We were going to start before, only we spotted you, and the snow battle started. We've got to get to the bottom of this mystery somehow."

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE.



THE trouble was, nobody knew where to start.

The obvious thing was to examine the castle kitchens—for there, if anywhere, the banquet had been prepared and cooked. But a visit to the kitchens was devoid of any satisfactory result.

"There's nothing here," said Nipper, looking round. "All the ranges are cold. Look at these electric cookers, too. They're in lovely condition—glittering and gleaming; but they haven't been used for days. The pantries are undisturbed, too. The crockery is untouched, and there's no sign of silver or plate. It's all locked away, I expect."

"Then where did that feed come from?" asked Bob Christine.

"A strange problem, brothers, and one that is far better left alone," said Browne. "Why inquire too closely? Surely we have nothing to grumble at? Let us venture forth into the morning sunlight, and join the revels. When the hour for luncheon arrives the spirits may again be kindly."

"Absolutely," nodded Archie.

"Whereas, if we pursue our investigations, it may be tantamount to hurling a spanner into the machinery," continued Browne. "Surely it is unwise to risk such a calamity? I am always one to delve into the inexplicable. But this is surely the exception that proves the rule?"

Nipper laughed.

"I don't see that it makes much difference, old man," he said. "We can't explain the affair, so we shall have to admit ourselves whacked. All the same, I'd give quids to know what it all means. It's so unusual—so unexpected. There's nobody in the castle, and yet— Oh, well!" he added. "What's the use? Let's get outside."

"Hallo! Here you are!"

Doris Berkeley and Violet Watson stood in the doorway. They were both looking flushed, and there were traces of snow on their coats.

"We're having some fine sport outside, you chaps," said Doris briskly. "What's the idea of staying in here? Who's spirited the banquet away?" she added. "We looked in the dining hall, and it's empty."

"No good asking us, Doris," said Nipper. "We came down here to investigate the mystery, but there's nothing to see. There must be a secret panel in the banqueting

hall—a passage leading to an underground kitchen, or something like that. But it seems so fantastic."

"A secret passage!" said Violet, her eyes sparkling. "Come on, let's go and look for it."

They all left the domestic quarters, and returned to the hall of mystery. Nipper was feeling a trifle uncomfortable. After all, they were all intruders in the castle—they had broken in during the blizzard in order to gain shelter. And they were now compelled to remain because of the snow-bound countryside.

But it seemed rather unfair to delve too deeply into this mystery. It wasn't their business. They were uninvited. Surely, as Browne pointed out, it was sufficient to accept the good things and say nothing?

It was rather a delicate position. In different circumstances, Nipper would have revelled in routing out the secret. But he somehow felt that any kind of prying would be indecent. Perhaps there was some reason for this extraordinary affair—some reason they couldn't even guess at. And, being intruders, it was opposed to all good form to interfere.

Most of the fellows and girls, however, did not realise this. Violet Watson, for example, was awfully keen on searching the banqueting hall for secret panels. But William Napoleon Browne, who held similar views to Nipper, delicately pointed out that it wouldn't be quite the thing.

"I suppose you're right," admitted Violet thoughtfully. "We're not supposed to be here at all, are we?"

"That's just it," agreed Nipper. "Of course, there's nothing supernatural about this. But it strikes me that we've stumbled on something that wasn't intended for our benefit. All we can do is to wait. Perhaps there'll be some explanation—"

"Oh!" cried Doris suddenly.

She was staring at the great carved mantelpiece over the old-fashioned open fire. She turned, and her face was flushed. Her brown eyes were alight with sudden excitement.

"Quick!" she shouted. "Vi! Look at this!"

"Whatever is the matter?" asked Violet, running over.

She, too, stared at the mantelpiece.

"Well I'm blessed!" she cried. "Oh, Doris!"

The fellows looked at one another and made a move across. One or two others had come in, and were equally interested.

"We can, at least, inquire into this girlish flutter," observed Browne benevolently. "Let us join the young ladies, and share their simple pleasures."

"Well I'm hanged!" ejaculated Bob Christine. "So that's what they're staring at! That photograph! I seem to have seen — Yes, by Jove, she's awfully familiar."

"Don't you recognise her?" asked Doris excitedly.

By now they were all examining a richly framed photograph which occupied a central position over the fireplace. Hitherto they hadn't noticed it—for all their attentions had been concentrated on the banquet. During breakfast, the table itself had attracted all eyes.

"I must confess the young lady is unknown to me," said Browne, shaking his head. "At the same time, truth compels me to admit that she is a peach. In fact, a bird of the finest plumage."

"Her dress is a bit old-fashioned," said Christine.

"You silly ass!" retorted Doris. "This photograph is ten years old, at least! Do you mean to say you don't recognise her?" she added, looking at the others. "Well, of all the blind——"

"It's Miss Halliday," said Nipper, with a start.

"Of course it's Miss Halliday!" said Violet. "But—but what does it mean? What's Miss Halliday's photograph doing here, in Dorrimore Castle? I've never known such an extraordinary coincidence!"

"The place seems to be full of surprises," said Nipper, shaking his head. "Yes, it's Miss Halliday all right."

"And who, if the question is not too inquisitive, is Miss Halliday?" inquired Browne. "I appear to be at a disadvantage. While you fellows are acquainted with this charming lady, I am left out in the cold. One of life's minor tragedies."

"She is the new under-mistress at the Moor View School," explained Doris. "Her name is Mrs. Thornton, really. She's a widow. Her husband was killed in a motor accident in Italy, a year or two ago. At least, that's what I believe. She's ever so sweet, but she hasn't told us very much."

Browne nodded.

"A diverting item of news," he admitted. "So this rare beauty is now teaching things at the Moor View School? A somewhat scaly descent in the social ladder. She has my deepest sympathy."

"Thanks awfully!" said Violet.

"Forgive me if I seemed somewhat cynical," apologised Browne. "But, knowing the tortures of Mr. Crowell and other St. Frank's Form-masters, I naturally assume that the Moor View Mistresses are similarly cursed. Youth will out—be it masculine or feminine."

"Anybody might think you were ninety!" said Doris coldly.

"One may easily be but seventeen in years, and ninety in wisdom," said Browne gently. "We Napoleon Brownes are celebrated——"

"We're not talking about the Napoleon Brownes—we're talking about Miss Halliday," interrupted Violet. "Oh, here's Irene!

Quick, Renie! Come and have a look at this!"

Irene Manners and Winnie Pitt were just as excited as the others.

"It's—it's so strange!" said Doris, frowning. "Of all the rummy things! Miss Halliday's photograph in Dorrimore Castle! She can't be more than seventeen here—and she's not more than twenty-seven now."

"It wouldn't be so queer if old Dorrie was a romantic sort," said Nipper, puzzled. "But he's not. He's a confirmed bachelor—always has been. There's more in this than we know of."

Irene's eyes looked shrewd.

"Do you remember what happened that night we had the party?" she asked keenly. "Do you remember that pendant of Miss Halliday's? Ted bumped into her, and it broke——"

"Yes, and there was a photograph in it," exclaimed Winnie. "It wasn't a photograph of Mr. Thornton, either! It was an old snapshot of quite a nice-looking young fellow."

"Oh, well, we could go on puzzling like this for ages," put in Doris. "But it doesn't seem to be worth while. There are so many mysteries in the castle that we can't keep pace with them."

"I came indoors to drag you out," said Irene. "The boys have found lots of brooms and things, and they're sweeping the lake. We're going to do some skating."

"Skating, eh?" said Christine briskly. "By Jove, that's fine!"

They hurried out, forgetting all about the mystery of the banquet, and the singular presence of Miss Halliday's photograph. Skating was undoubtedly of far greater importance.

CHAPTER VII.

FUN ON THE LAKE.



BIG things were happening outside.

The cessation of the snowstorm had changed everything. The morning was now clear and brilliant, the sun shining from a cloudless sky. Christmas day was turning out to be cold, frosty and bright. The weather was apparently determined to make up for its recent misbehaviour.

But for that wonderful breakfast, the unbidden guests would have turned their thoughts at once to home. They would have wondered if there were any trains—if there was any possibility of reaching London.

But, somehow, they were now reluctant to leave Dorrimore Castle. That breakfast gave promise of a similar lunch, and perhaps, even, a sumptuous Christmas dinner. There was an element of mystery and sur-

prise in the castle now—the one element that had the greatest attraction.

In any case, all thoughts of getting home were futile.

Phipps had made a good many inquiries while out, and had definitely learned that the railway service was completely cancelled. No trains of any kind were running. The blizzard had blocked the lines so completely that no through trains to London were possible until late that night at the earliest—and probably not until the next day. As for the roads, these were in a more hopeless condition still. For miles they were choked with snowdrifts, and no motor traffic was possible.

The party was compelled to remain at Dorrimore Castle, and the only course was to make the best of it. By all appearances, the enforced stay was not to be so barren of joy, after all. The one question in everybody's mind was—would the unseen "fairies" continue to do their good work?

There was nothing to do but wait—and there was no finer way of waiting than indulging in the winter sports. For here was sport, indeed! The grounds of Dorrimore Castle were a perfect paradise in that respect.

After such snow, and with the keen frost holding, one might have imagined oneself in the Alps. As soon as the lake was cleared, there would be skating of the finest quality. And practically every boy and girl had brought their skates.

Knowing what the weather was likely to be, they had come well provided, and had taken care to pack their skates in their bags. And the bags had been brought along during the snowstorm. Only one or two items of heavy luggage had been left on the snowed-up train, and these were not likely to be delivered for days!

When Nipper and the others reached the lake, they found plenty of energetic work in progress. Reggie Pitt and Buster Boots had found some brooms, and a number of the fellows were sweeping with a will. But they had made little progress.

The snow was over a foot deep—in some places two and three feet. The thickness of the ice was proved by the amount of snow—for that snow must have weighed enormously. Yet there was no sign of a crack.

"Where did you get those brooms?" sang out Nipper.

"We found 'em in one of the big outhouses," replied Reggie. "Boots has gone along to get some more—"

At this moment Buster Boots came running up.

"I say, there's a whacking great motor-sweeper in one of the other outhouses," he shouted. "If we can only get that going—"

"Let's go and try!" said Nipper briskly.

"Wait a minute!" panted Buster. "I've found lots of toboggans, too! They're all

stacked away—lovely ones! How about using 'em?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Come on!"

There was a rush, and the girls were just as eager as the boys. Over beyond the lake there were long hills, unhampered by any trees. The most wonderful toboggan runs could be made there. Buster Boots' news had electrified everybody. Now they would have some sport, indeed!

Practically the whole crowd rushed into the outhouse. At the rear of the castle there were endless arrays of these out-buildings. Most of them were locked up—many enclosed in inner courts. But nobody cared about exploring further. The toboggans proved to be of the finest and latest type—and there were plenty to go round.

"Just like old Dorrie," said Nipper eagerly. "Trust him to be prepared!"

"But he's never here!" said Tommy Watson.

"Dorrie's a man of impulses," declared Nipper. "He's always liable to get a sudden idea into his head at a moment's notice. For example, he might dodge back to London from one of his overseas trips, and hear that Derbyshire is full of snow. In that case, what does he do? He gets up a house party with whirlwind speed, shoots 'em all down here, and everybody enjoys the winter sports. That's Dorrie all over. And, naturally, he always has everything in readiness. He hates being delayed."

"Well, let's be jolly thankful he's a man of that sort," grinned Reggie Pitt, as he examined one of the toboggans. "By jingo! What a beauty! We'll have some ripping sport with these!"

Even the motor-sweeper was forgotten. The toboggans were hauled out, and there were many shouts of glee as the party set off across the snow for the hillsides. Skating could come afterwards. Indeed, skating was common-place compared to the unusual thrill of tobogganing.

If any members of the party had felt down in the dumps earlier, such feelings were now completely dissipated. There was no hardship in remaining at Dorrimore Castle for Christmas!

The previous night there had been long faces and heavy hearts. Everything had gone wrong. The prospect of being compelled to remain in this dreary, deserted place had appalled many of the fellows and girls. But Christmas Day itself had brought an amazing change.

What did it matter about being bottled up here by the blizzard? Who cared? There was sport of the most fascinating kind—and nobody worried over the Christmas festivities. In some miraculous way, they were automatically being provided. For there wasn't a member of the party who had any real doubts regarding food. Breakfast had

been a sheer joy. Surely luncheon would appear just as mysteriously?

As for parents and guardians, there was nothing to worry about on that score—for it was believed at the various homes that Lord Dorrimore was in residence at the castle, and it was impossible for any parents to discover the real truth. There was something unusual about this adventure—something which added greatly to its attractiveness.

Everybody was beginning to feel quite grateful towards Willy Handforth. The young rascal had perpetrated a practical joke of the "thickest" description, but everything was turning out well.

Within half-an-hour the hillsides of Dorrimore Park were looking like a replica of an Alpine winter resort. There was one toboggan slide already formed, and two or three shorter ones were in course of manufacture.

The longest run was a real beauty. It started on the summit of the highest hill, and came right down in a series of long curves, and stretched to the lakeside, swinging round the lake, and ending half-way up the slope of a neighbouring hillock. From end to end, the run was well over a mile long.

And with so many toboggans on it, and with the snow in such fine condition, the run soon worked itself into a state of glorious perfection.

Tremendous speeds were attained—particularly after the track had become beaten. And Nipper saw that some sort of regulations would be necessary. There had been one or two spills owing to the toboggans following too closely upon one another.

"There'll be a serious accident unless we adopt some sort of system," declared Nipper grimly. "Some of those toboggans are getting up a speed like an express train round that lower bend. And a collision at that pace would be disastrous. We shall have to work to a time-table—nobody must be allowed to start the run until the previous toboggan has had a fair start."

"Rats!" panted Handforth. "There can't be any mishaps in this soft snow! Come on, Church! Shove her in position!"

They were at the top of the run, and the chums of Study D had a big toboggan to themselves. All down the hillside fellows were hauling the toboggans up through the snow—those belonging to the girls as well as their own. And one or two enthusiasts could be seen whizzing down on the last lap of the run.

"Isn't it glorious?" asked Irene breathlessly. "Thanks, Ted, for bringing my toboggan up! Who said that we weren't going to enjoy ourselves here? Why, we're having a perfectly wonderful time!"

"Rather!" agreed Handforth. "Ready, you fellows?" he added, taking his seat in front, and glancing round. "Good! Let her go!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BETTER THAN EVER.



WITH rapidly gathering speed, the heavily laden toboggan glided down the first slope of the run. Handforth was in control, and he meant this effort to be the speediest one yet. He was proverbially reckless, and the exhilaration of the sport was positively intoxicating.

"Hold tight!" he roared. "We're fairly off now!"

"Mind the corners!" gasped McClure.

After about a hundred yards the run took a sudden dip—with a swinging left-hand curve further down. Then another straight drop, and a perfectly glorious bend to the right. Until one has experienced the joys of tobogganing, one can have no conception of the thrill.

By this time the run was in perfect condition. The surface was glassy, and on either side the snowbanks were piled up to a height of three or four feet. It was like shooting down a tremendous furrow, and the toboggan hissed along with startling momentum. By the time Handforth & Co. reached the first curve they were almost out of breath. The pace was terrific, and the cold air hissed past their ears with a roar.

"This is what I call sport!" bellowed Handforth joyously.

They rounded the first curve in grand style, careering half up the bank—until, indeed, Church and McClure thought they were about to leap it. Then they swung round on an even keel again, and the next dip was like the sensation of a switchback—only a thousand times better.

"Hi! Look out!"

Handforth gave a perfect yell of alarm. Coming out of the second curve he saw something which nearly made his heart miss a beat. The toboggan was well on the run now—and was shooting down towards the lake with the speed of an express.

And there, about thirty yards ahead, Winnie Pitt was just setting her toboggan square in the very centre of the track. Obviously, she had had a minor spill, and in her laughing confusion had overlooked the fact that another toboggan would probably come tearing down. Her idea was to complete the run. She heard Handforth's wild yell, and turned her head.

"Oh!" she gasped, horrified.

ANSWERS

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There was no time for her to move. It was a matter of seconds. There was every element of tragedy in the incident, for a collision at such a speed would certainly be fatal.

Church, who could see over Handforth's shoulders, simply closed his eyes in silent agony. In a flash, he realised the truth of Nipper's recent warning. Some kind of control was absolutely necessary. But it seemed that it would come too late!

Winnie Pitt was helpless with sudden fear. Instinctively, she knew that she could never get clear in time. She just stood there, staring. She expected to be struck and swept aside. But a miracle seemed to hap-

pen. They struck a clear twenty feet from the run, and disappeared beneath the surface of the snow as though they had been swallowed up. Within the space of one second there was no trace of them. Just a mass of disturbed snow, and no other sign—not even a movement.

"Oh!" gasped Winnie. "They missed me! I—I thought——"

But her voice was drowned by the shouts of Nipper and Pitt and Irene and several others. Two or three fellows came tearing down the toboggan slide just as they were—it was the quickest way of reaching the spot. Others plunged to the scene from every direction—forcing their way through



He scrambled a snowball together, and hurled it at Church. It caught Irene Manners fairly in the neck, and Handforth collapsed. He actually turned pale.

pen. Even Handforth could never tell how he accomplished the thing.

But at the crucial moment he caused the speeding toboggan to lurch wildly.

It swung off at a tangent, leapt the snow-bank, and soared clean upwards ten or twelve feet into the air—missing the startled Winnie by mere inches.

It was an extraordinary effort—not skillful, but an example of sheer presence of mind. The toboggan performed a kind of arc, nose-dived, and there was a spray of snow like the explosion of a bomb.

Handforth & Co. and the toboggan vanished.

the dense snow. In places there were deep drifts.

The hillside appeared to be quite smooth—but, in reality, it was full of depressions and these had been completely filled by the blizzard the previous night. There was nothing to reveal their presence.

But what had happened to Handforth & Co.?

"They're buried!" panted Fullwood, as he came up. "All right, girls—no need to get alarmed. They can't have come to much harm. These drifts are as soft as down——"

"But they'll be suffocated!" panted Irene. "It all depends how deep——"

Fullwood paused, and started forward. The snow had heaved, and a solitary foot came to the surface. It waved about for a moment, and a whole leg came out. Then it vanished, and after another violent upheaval, McClure's face appeared, with snow clinging to him in festoons.

"Where—where are we?" he breathed feebly.

"Hurrah! They're safe!"

"Come on—let's lug 'em out!"

Church was seized, and pulled clear. It appeared that the toboggan had struck the snow exactly over the spot where a deep hole marred the smoothness of the hillside. It was almost like a miniature quarry—a depression of fifteen feet deep which had revealed no sign of its presence.

In a way Handforth & Co. had been fortunate.

If there had been little snow, they would have come to earth with a terrible crash. As it was, they had merely sunk deep into the snow. The rescuers floundered about up to their arm-pits—and still there was no sign of Handforth or Church. They were somewhere deep in the drift.

Then the snow heaved seven or eight yards away—where nobody thought of looking. Handforth came up, gasping and spluttering, and grabbing something by a desperate clutch. It was Church's left foot. The unfortunate Church was in an inverted position, but he was soon righted.

"By Jove, you're lucky!" exclaimed Pitt, taking a deep breath. "I thought you were all dead. And you're not even bruised!"

Handforth snorted, and shook himself.

"What's all the fuss about?" he demanded gruffly. "Where's Winnie? By George! I thought we were going to——"

"I don't know how you did it, Ted!" panted Winnie, running forward. "I thought I was going to be killed, too! How did you make the toboggan swerve like that? It was wonderful of you!"

Handforth hadn't the least idea, but he smiled with perfect calmness.

"Oh, that?" he asked carelessly. "You mean the way we jumped the track? Oh, that's nothing! Just one of the tricks, you know. Any skilled tobogganist can do those stunts!"

"You deserve a medal, old man," said Nipper, clapping Handforth on the back. "I've never seen a better example of quick judgment and presence of mind. You saved Winnie's life!"

"Rot!" growled Handforth. "Don't be an ass!"

He insisted upon treating the matter with complete indifference. To him it was a mere trifle—an incident to be dismissed without a second thought. But he visibly expanded when Irene paid him a glowing tribute, and looked at him proudly with her blue eyes.

"There's simply nothing to say, Ted," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "It was just too wonderful——"

"Oh, cheese it, Irene!" muttered Handforth uncomfortably.

Boom-boom-boom!

"What's that?" asked Church, staring towards the castle.

"Luncheon gong!" roared Fatty Little, with a leap. "I've been listening for it for ages! Hurrah! We're going to get another terrific feed!"

"Lunch!" said Pitt. "By jingo, I'm jolly hungry, too! Even after that breakfast! There's nothing like this air—and this sport—to give a chap an appetite! Who's going to be in first?"

"I am!" yelled Fatty.

"Perhaps it's only Phipps," suggested Tommy Watson. "It's not likely that there'll be another mysterious feed. I expect Phipps has made some toast, or opened a tin of sardines, or something."

"I could eat fried boot-leather!" said Doris cheerfully.

"Absolutely!" beamed Archie Glenthorne. "Rather a foul proposition for the old molars, but any port in a storm, what? I mean to say, if Charlie Chaplin can eat it, why can't we? All the same, I trust we shall have something slightly more juicy, old dear!"

"Let me warn you of one thing, brothers," said Browne, as they hurried towards the castle. "And you, too, sisters. Let me issue a word of serious purport——"

"Dry up, Browne!"

"None of your giddy lectures!"

"Alas! That my peaceful intentions should be so misunderstood!" sighed Browne. "I am merely hinting that we shall be wise to accept whatever is placed before us, and to refrain from asking questions. We are all hoping for a sumptuous luncheon. Indeed, there is every reason to suspect that the ghosts have been busy again. In that event——"

But as nobody was taking any notice of him, he shook his head, and dried up. The others were more interested in getting indoors than listening to Browne. They were full of curiosity. Would there be another unaccountable meal?

All doubts were soon set at rest. Crowding in, the unbidden guests found Phipps standing at the door of the banquet hall, calm and collected.

"Luncheon is served," he announced smoothly.

"You don't mean——"

"Yes, by George!" roared Handforth. "Look!"

They surged into the hall in a flood. The sight within dazzled them. The breakfast had been startling, but this luncheon was gorgeous beyond all expectations. The great table was a perfect picture.

Once again the mysterious forces had been at work!

CHAPTER IX.

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY.



"PARTRIDGES!" gurgled Fatty Little ecstatically.

"Quail!" cried Irene Manners.

"My only hat! Pheasants, too!"

Dish-covers were being raised by the excited guests, and all manner of welcome discoveries were made. The luncheon consisted of every kind of wonderful food. There was grilled salmon, delicately prepared soles, and several other kinds of fish. There was game, entrees, and all manner of roast joints. And the massive sideboards were literally smothered with sweets—trifles, and other cunningly prepared sweet dishes.

"Hang it all, we've got to admit that this is a feast of feasts!" said Nipper enthusiastically. "And we're ready for it, too!"

"But there's no turkey!" complained Fatty, looking round.

"You ungrateful glutton——"

"Yes, but it's Christmas Day!" snorted Fatty indignantly.

"Turkey isn't served until dinner-time—neither is plum-pudding!" said Handforth tartly. "And it won't be dinner-time until this evening."

"Shall we have a real Christmas dinner, then?" breathed Fatty.

"How should I know?" retorted Edward Oswald. "The chances are we shall. There's something rummy about the whole business; but why ask questions? Let's pile in."

"Excellent sentiments, Brother Handforth," nodded Browne. "Phipps, be good enough to dash about with the eatables. Soup? Splendid! You can pour us out a few chunks."

The luncheon party settled down to one of the finest meals they had ever partaken of. It was not merely a question of excellent food. Everything was superb. The silver and plate, the flowers, the general effect of the table, all contributed to the perfection of the meal.

Phipps thoroughly enjoyed himself. He appointed himself master of the ceremonies, and performed his duties with a smoothness and grace which did him credit.

"By the way, Phipps, what about it?" asked Archie. "I mean, the good old feed? Do you happen to know anything?"

"The affair is very mysterious, sir," said Phipps.

"Absolutely! But I mean——"

"I am quite at a loss to account for the precise nature of the procedure, sir," continued Phipps. "While I was upstairs attending to my duties this great apartment was locked from the inside. One of the maids hurried upstairs and reported the fact to me."

"Locked on the inside, eh?" mused Dick Hamilton. "Then we must have been right about that secret passage. It's certainly rummy."

"Very singular indeed, sir," agreed Phipps. "I thought it better to take no action, sir, and merely waited. And when the gong sounded I came here and discovered that the doors were still closed, but unlocked."

"Didn't you see anybody?" asked Pitt.

"Not a soul, sir. The room was perfectly empty."

"Empty!" echoed Fatty Little. "Do you call it empty when it contains all this stuff? By chutney! I reckon it was full!"

Phipps' story merely corroborated the general impression. In some unaccountable way the luncheon had been conjured up. But who the caterers were, or where they cooked their food, remained a deep mystery.

"We must not press our curiosity to breaking point, brothers," said Browne, towards the end of the lunch. "My present remarks are not addressed to the young ladies, since they, I am certain, are innocent of all curiosity."

"Oh, rather!" chuckled Doris. "Girls aren't curious a bit."

"Perish the thought," smiled Irene.

Browne looked rather pained.

"Correct me if I am wrong, but do I detect a certain note of cynicism?" he asked. "Is it possible that inquisitiveness is indeed a feminine weakness? Let us pass lightly on, without inquiring too closely. I was about to observe that we must be cautious. Undoubtedly we could dig up this mystery if we united our efforts on the subject. Of that there is no shadow of doubt. A certain amount of concentration and the truth would become apparent."

"Then why not have a shot?" suggested Handforth.

"Because we are intruders," replied Browne promptly. "Under no circumstances can we believe that this luncheon was especially provided for our benefit. No, it was not. It must be confessed that we are pinching somebody else's. Not that we will be conscience-stricken over that fact."

"If it's somebody else's, who's the somebody else?" asked Church.

"Probably a party of servants?" suggested Bob Christine. "When the cat's away, you know. Perhaps the butler arranged to give his pals a ripping spread, and the cancelled train service has prevented them from getting here. How's that for a solution?"

Browne beamed.

"An excellent effort, Brother Christine. Indeed an example of pure brain-power; but I venture to suggest that you are still a few miles away from the bull's-eye," he said. "The truth is obviously different."

"Of course," agreed Nipper, nodding, "if your yarn was true, Bob, there wouldn't be any secretive business of this sort. And the butler, instead of putting the feasts into an empty room, would lie low. In my opinion it's something a lot deeper—an old family tradition, perhaps."

"Good luck to the family tradition, then," grinned McClure. "I say, Phipps, what about some of that jelly stuff, with the blobs of cream on it? Pass it to Miss Pitt; I think she's eyeing it enviously."

Clang, clang!

In the distance the sound of a great bell broke the chatter round the table. The guests looked at one another in surprise. Their peace was being disturbed at last. But by whom? It was Christmas Day, and scarcely the time for casual callers.

"Phipps, laddie," said Archie, "kindly stagger forth."

But Phipps was already on his way, and the guests round the table waited with a curious sense of suspense. A moment later three figures entered the banqueting hall, and a snort of indignation went up.

"My minor!" roared Handforth. "My minor, and his blessed chums! They're the ones who got us into this mess—"

"Mess!" echoed Willy Handforth feebly. "Mess! Chubby, am I seeing aright? Juicy, is that table really there?"

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon stared with goggling eyes. The three fags were all wrapped up in overcoats and mufflers. They had just come along to see how the unfortunate stranded party was faring. Indeed, they had brought a few tit-bits with them.

And here they found a scene of absolutely appalling plenty. Even though the luncheon was nearly over, there was still sufficient to feed an army. Willy & Co. just stood there, breathless.

"Great pip!" breathed Chubby Heath. "And you woke me up twice last night, Willy, and said how sorry you were for everybody. Look at 'em! Fairly bloated with gorging!"

"Willy!" protested Ena coldly.

"Not exactly you, sis—but look at Fatty," said Willy. "Where the dickens did you get all this grub? I thought the place was deserted. What's happened? Who's the conjuror?"

"It's no good asking us, old son," said Buster Boots. "We're just as puzzled as you are. These good things happen, and that's all we can say. But now you're here we'll pass a vote of thanks. Phipps, the champagne. Here's to young Handforth, for providing us with the best Christmas we've ever known!"

The table rose and toasted Willy with a roar, not in champagne, but in ginger ale. But, as Reggie Pitt pointed out, it looked just the same. So what did it matter?

Willy & Co. stood there, dumbfounded. All the morning Chubby and Juicy had urged Willy not to go near the castle at all.

They knew there were no trains, and they knew that their victims were stranded. It seemed a very perilous proposition to even approach. But Willy had decided that a couple of suitcases of Christmas delicacies would have a soothing effect.

And here the party was simply wallowing in Christmas luxury. A great table in one of the corners was audibly groaning under the weight of piled heaps of oranges, bananas, grapes, melons, apples, and every choice fruit imaginable. There were chocolates and fondants and other sweetmeats in bewildering confusion.

"My only hat!" said Willy at last.

"And we didn't know it!" gurgled Chubby, sidling over towards the fruits. "I say, what about some grapes, you chaps? Is it O.K.?"

Browne waved his hand.

"Help yourselves, brothers—help yourselves," he said benevolently. "Always remember that this is a house of plenty. Gorge until you sway at the knees. There will still be ample for our own contingent!"

Willy & Co. were immensely relieved, partly on account of the fact that their victims were having a good time, and partly because they were permitted to share in the festivities. Indeed, the fags promptly decided that the attractions of Heath's home were insignificant compared to the allurements of Dorrimore Castle. Then and there they attached themselves to the party for good.

CHAPTER X.

HANDFORTH MEANS BUSINESS.



"BUCK up, Handy!" said Church impatiently.

"Only an hour or two of daylight left," added McClure. "You know what it is at this time of the

year."

"Everybody's gone out, too," said Church.

Handforth remained unmoved. He was sitting at the luncheon table, toying with a walnut. Everybody else had gone outside to continue the winter sports. The sun was shining, and it seemed a sin and a shame to waste a minute.

"Eh?" said Edward Oswald, at length.

"They've all gone out," said Church.

"We're waiting for you, old son—"

"Then don't!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "Buzz off! Who told you fat-heads to stick here? I'm waiting for you to go. As a matter of fact, I'm not coming out just yet."

"Yes, but—"

"There's something else to be done," said Handforth mysteriously. "It's too delicate to be left in any hands but mine. It's a case where tact and judgment are essential."

"Then come out with us!" snorted McClure promptly.

"You silly fathead!" snorted Handforth. "If you're trying to make out that I can't handle this job——"

"Which job?"

"This investigation."

"But you haven't said——"

"And I'm not going to say!" interrupted Handforth darkly. "My hat! You're pumping me. Just trying to trap me into saying something that'll give you a clue. But it won't work, my lads. Not likely! I'm not going to breathe a sound about my plans for watching this banquetting hall."

Church and McClure exchanged glances.

"Look here, you mustn't do that," said Church urgently. "Browne and Nipper and the other chaps are dead against it. They think we ought to accept the position, and do no prying. It's a case where we ought to let well alone. Inquisitiveness might be fatal."

Handforth rose grimly.

"Prying!" he repeated. "Inquisitiveness! By George! Get out of here, you insulting rotters. And don't breathe a word to the others, either. I was going to ask you to join me, but now I won't. I'll carry the whole thing through off my own bat!"

"All right!" said McClure, with a careless air. "We don't want to interfere in your old investigations. Come on, Churchy, let's get outside and join the sports. So long, Handy!"

Another swift glance had passed between Handforth's chums, and they made a move for the door. They were the last people left in the banquetting hall. Even Phipps had vanished. For Phipps was perfectly human, although sometimes one might not have supposed so. He had collected a sumptuous luncheon on a tray, and had retired to a lower region to share it with the two maids. At the moment they were very actively engaged. Phipps knew only too well that these banquets had a way of mysteriously vanishing when one's back was turned. He had missed breakfast, but he was taking no chances with the luncheon. If the tables were cleared when he came up again he would be perfectly indifferent now.

"Hold on!" said Handforth gruffly.

"Sorry, old man, there's no time——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Handforth, striding forward. "You rotters! You traitors! Are you going to leave me in the lurch?"

"My only topper!" groaned McClure.

"Didn't you tell us to clear off? Didn't you say that you wouldn't have us at any price?"

"Never mind what I said!" retorted Handforth. "I've been thinking this thing out, and you're both going to stay. We'll see this thing through together. There's a mystery here, and we've got to unravel it."

"But Browne says——"

"Blow Browne!"

"Nipper and Pitt agree——"

"Bother Nipper and rats to Pitt!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "They don't know what they're talking about. I'm as keen on the winter sports as anybody, but I shan't be able to rest until we've probed this riddle. In other words, we've got to hold a vigil in this room."

"Hold a which?"

"A vigil."

"It'll be a lot better to hold Irene's arm on the lake!" said Church thoughtfully. "Think of it! Swinging round on the ice—performing figures of eight——"

"Turning somersaults, and biffing over," added McClure, grinning.

For a moment Handforth looked dreamy. The soft light came into his eyes as he dwelt upon the alluring prospect—not of biffing over, but of holding Irene's arm. He suddenly became stern, however, and glared.

"Trying to weaken me, eh?" he snorted. "Well, my sons, it won't work! We're going to hold a watch in this room."

"It's a watch now," said Church. "A minute ago it was a vigil."

"You howling ass, they're both the same thing, aren't they?" roared Handforth, exasperated. "I've got it all planned out. The other chaps are too slack to take any trouble—too lazy to elucidate the mystery. So it's left to me. Now, it stands to reason that they're only waiting for us to clear out before taking all this stuff away."

"Who's only waiting?"

"How do I know?" snapped Handforth. "The people who provide these giddy feasts! We've got to find out who they are. As a matter of fact, I've got a theory," he added carelessly.

"Smugglers?" asked Church. "Or coiners?"

Edward Oswald started.

"How did you know?" he demanded suspiciously. "That's it—coiners! I read a detective story once where a gang of coiners gets hold of a big country mansion and turns it into a huge plant. That's what happened here. My idea is to get on the track of the gang!"

"Marvellous!" said Church patiently. "But, considering the coiners have provided us with such jolly good grub, won't it be a dirty trick to round 'em up? In any case, why not wait until after dinner? Let 'em provide us with a Christmas dinner before shoving the half-nelson on 'em!"

Handforth started again.

"Yes, there's something in that," he admitted thoughtfully. "But we needn't expose them at once. My scheme is to make a preliminary investigation. And we're going to start now."

Handforth strode towards the big doors, and raised his voice.

"Well, come on out!" he bellowed. "Let's join the others!"

They got out into the hall, and Church and McClure were pulled to a halt.

"That was just to fool the gang, in case they were listening!" breathed Handforth tensely. "Now, come on—follow me!"

Heavy curtains were hung over the doorway of the banqueting-hall. They were pushed back into thick folds, and Handforth & Co. dodged behind them, and re-entered the great apartment without being visible. And it was only a matter of moments to go down on all-fours, and reach the comparative safety of a huge lounge. Behind this there was room for them all—and they were able, moreover, to keep a watch on the room through some tiny spaces in the pattern of the woodwork at the back of the lounge.

"Not a sound!" breathed Handforth warningly.

There seemed to be no help for it now. Much against their will, Church and McClure were drawn into the inquiry. All their instincts urged them to hurry out and join in the sports on the toboggans and on the ice. But Fate was against them. When Handforth got a fixed idea into his head, nothing short of nitro-glycerine would shift it.

The minutes passed—five—ten. This was nearly the limit of Handforth's endurance. He was a fellow who believed in action. Patience was not one of his virtues. His general plan was to dash into anything in a ram-headed fashion. With Handforth, finesse was an unknown quantity.

He had been sidgiting for some little time, and the crouching position was giving him the cramp. Church and McClure, wise in their knowledge of their leader, breathed no word. A sound of discontent from them, and Handforth would have been encouraged to stick it. They were hoping against hope that he would throw the game up.

In fact, after the vigil had lasted fifteen minutes, he was on the point of doing so. He was thoroughly exasperated by the inconsiderate behaviour of the mythical gang, and he was even more exasperated by the statue-like patience of his chums.

"Rats!" he breathed at last. "There's nothing doing! I'm getting sick of crouching here like—"

"Great Scott!" murmured Church abruptly.

He stared through one of the slits in the woodwork—and stared in such a way that even Handforth could see there was no spoof about it. McClure had caught his breath in, too. They were looking across the great hall.

A small inner door had opened, and a man was looking cautiously through the crack.

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORY OF HENRY BRUCE.



AFTER a moment the door opened wide, and the man passed quickly through. In a dozen strides, he reached the other doorway, and closed the great double doors. He locked them, and turned, smiling.

"All right, Tom!" he said softly. "All clear!"

Handforth & Co. watched in astonishment. But while Church and McClure were frankly surprised, Handforth was terribly disappointed. The thing wasn't panning out right at all!

In the first place, there wasn't even a secret panel! These two men—for another one had followed the first—had merely come through an ordinary doorway. And under no circumstances could they be mistaken for desperate coiners. As a matter of fact, they looked suspiciously like footmen. At all events, they were wearing footmen's uniform.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Handforth disgustedly.

The footmen had brought enormous trays with them, and they were working with the skill and precision of long service. There was no amateur bungling here. And as they worked, they made various comments.

"Rare appetites the young folks have got!" said one. "Leastways, there's no wasting of the food this year, Fred. Still plenty for us, too. Fity we can't come out in the open like."

"I can't see why we shouldn't," remarked the other. "But Mr. Yates is as obstinate as ever. He fair makes me wild, the old idiot! What does it matter, anyhow?"

"He's thinking of Mr. Bruce, maybe," said Tom. "Rum thing he hasn't turned up yet. It wasn't the snowstorm, Fred. He's usually come a day or two before Christmas Eve other years. And as he's not here, why can't we show ourselves to the young folks, and explain? It seems so queer to them, I should think."

"Yet there's nothing in it, really," said the other footman, as he lifted his big tray. "But, there! Old Mr. Yates is as stubborn as a mule. Wants things to go on year after year just the same. It's no good talking to him."

They went out with their big trays, and the banqueting-hall was left in silence. Handforth & Co. breathed hard, and looked at one another with strange expressions.

"Rummy-looking coiners, I must say!" murmured Church.

"By George!" said Handforth. "There's

something fishy about this! I believe those chaps were real footmen!"

"Never!" said McClure, staring.

"But you never know," went on Handforth, with a frown. "It might be one of their dodges to dress themselves up—"

"You dotty ass!" snorted Church. "You're crazy on coiners and smugglers! Those men were just ordinary servants. I'll bet they belong to the castle staff. And they've taken their trays along to that big wing on the other side of the hall."

"Which wing?" asked Handforth blankly.

"My dear ass, there's one of the wings all locked up," said McClure patiently. "Don't you remember the iron-studded door? There's a passage at the back here which leads into a rear lobby. And that iron-studded door is there. There's no secret passage, or anything."

"I'm going to have a look!" said Handforth grimly.

He leapt over the lounge, and Church and McClure tried to haul him back. But he reached that small inner door before they could climb out of their concealment. And they weren't in the least surprised when Handforth started back, confronted by the two footmen.

"That's done it!" said one of them, with a scared look. "I thought you locked them doors, Fred? There's one of the young gents here— No, three of 'em!" he added, as Church and McClure emerged.

"It's all right—we were hiding behind the lounge," said Handforth. "We've been doing some investigating. I've got my suspicions, I can tell you! What are you doing in this castle?"

In spite of their surprise, both the footmen smiled. They couldn't help it. There was something rather comical in Handforth's stern, authoritative air.

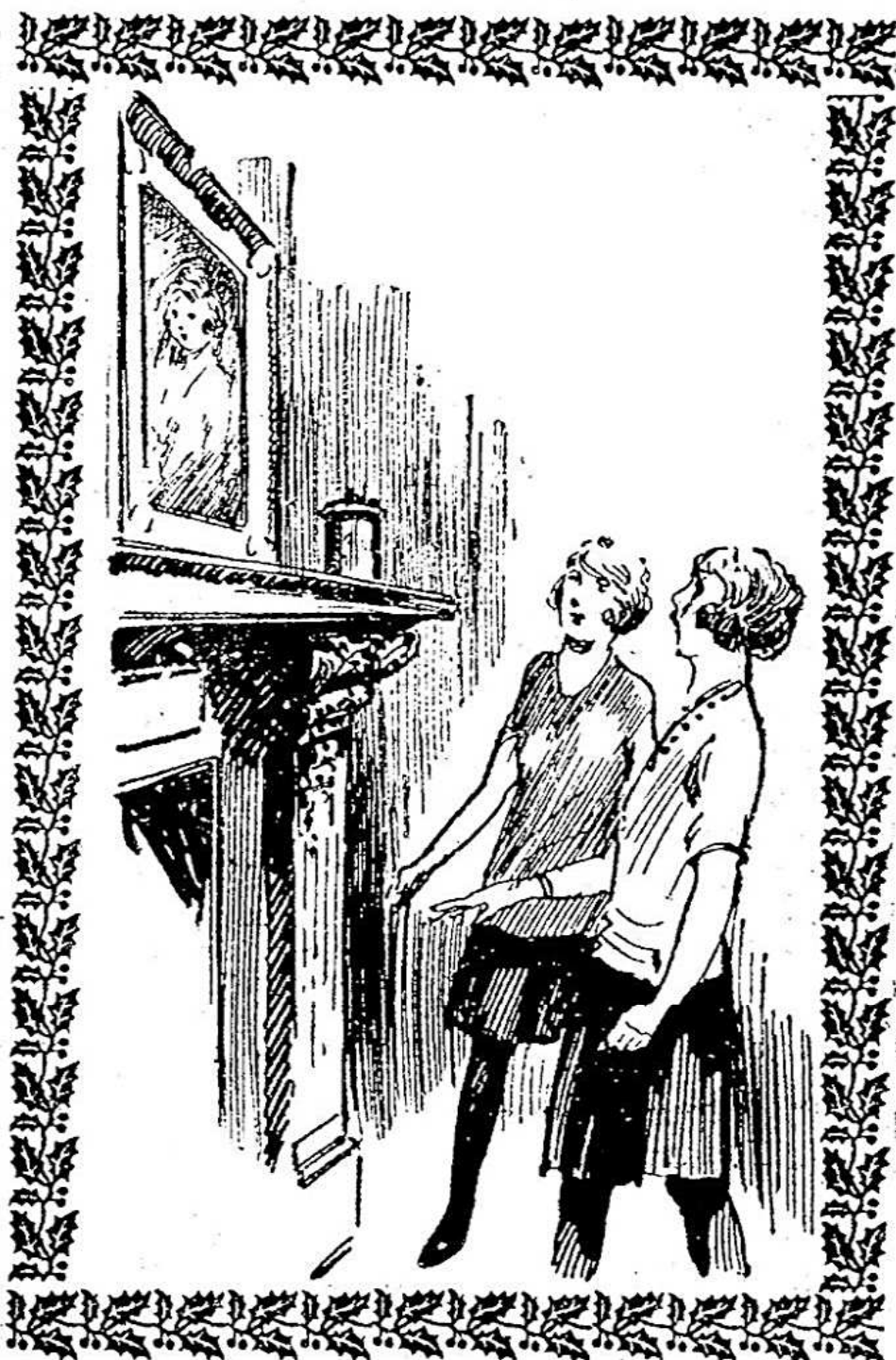
"It's all right, young gentlemen," said Fred. "We're on the staff—two of his lordship's indoor men, see? Nothing funny about us, sir. I suppose we'd best take the young gents along to Mr. Yates, Tom?"

"We can't do nothing else," replied Tom, nodding.

The footmen had lost their scared expressions now, and were looking rather amused. They didn't seem at all displeased at being discovered. And, without offering any further explanations, they asked the juniors to accompany them out into the corridor.

They passed along a stone-flagged passage, with a low, arched ceiling. Then they came to an ancient lobby, where a great studded door faced them. A corridor to the left led into the great hall. But the studded door opened upon a small wing of the castle which none of the fellows had explored.

They passed through, and were immediately struck by the signs of life. Two kitchen-maids appeared for a moment at an angle of the passage, and then a stout old man in the garb of a butler appeared.



"Quick!" she shouted. "Vi! Look at this!"

"Whatever is the matter?" asked Violet, running over.

She, too, stared at the mantelpiece.

He halted in his tracks, and regarded the three juniors with a frown.

"What's this?" he asked sharply. "Fred! What's this?"

"Sorry, Mr. Yates, but the young gents were hiding in the dining-hall," said Fred apologetically. "We didn't know anything about it until—"

"Young rascals!" interrupted Mr. Yates. "I might have expected it! There's no holding these young 'uns! Ah, well! It's done now, so I suppose we'd better make the best of it."

"But—but what's the idea?" asked Church. "Who are you?"

The stout old man drew himself up.

"I am Yates—Lord Dorrimore's butler," he said, with dignity. "I am the head of this household. It's a pity you allowed your curiosity to get the better of you, young gentlemen. And yet, in a way, I'm relieved," he added. "I never could get on with mystery. I do wish Mr. Bruce was here—that's all! Come inside, young sirs, and sit down."

They entered a comfortable room, and regarded Yates with mild astonishment. But all thoughts of villainy had gone. Handforth & Co. were becoming more and more convinced that the mystery had an innocent explanation.

"I didn't think we should be able to keep it from ye as long as this," admitted the butler, as he sat down. "Well, well! I'm not sorry. It's a queer situation— But wait!" he added, frowning. "By whose permission did you young people enter Dorrimore Castle?"

"We didn't have any permission," said Handforth. "We were stranded in the storm, you know, and we broke in."

"Were ye bound for some other house?"

"No," put in Church. "We're all St. Frank's fellows, you know. It was just a joke on somebody's part. He knew that Lord Dorrimore was away, and invited us down here on a fool's errand. But in that blizzard—"

"Ay, ye had to find shelter, no doubt," admitted Yates, screwing up his lined face. "I guessed as much! St. Frank's boys, eh? And I dare say the young ladies are friends of his lordship, too? Often enough he's spoken of ye."

"Oh, rather!" said Handforth. "Dorrie's a great pal of ours. Lord Dorrimore, I mean. Why, dash it, you don't think we'd have broken in last night if we hadn't been friends of your master's. He's a sport, is Dorrie! We knew he wouldn't mind."

Yates allowed his face to break into a genial smile. The ice was broken, and they were getting acquainted. Then he looked worried again.

"At any other time, young gentlemen, it wouldn't have mattered," he said. "Lor bless you, I'd have been the first to offer you the castle's hospitality! But I guessed you were friends of his lordship, and that's why I took no action to put you out. It's awkward, though," he added slowly.

"Look here!" said Handforth. "What's the mystery about? Why on earth should you hide yourselves away like ghosts? And why provide banquets for thirty or forty people, instead of twenty?"

Yates shook his head.

"I dare say it seems strange to you, young gentlemen; but there's a reason in it," he replied. "If Mr. Bruce was here, as he ought to be, things would have been different. I dare say he would have told ye everything. A fine gentleman, Mr. Bruce. We're all worried because he hasn't turned up. Not a Christmas has he missed for ten years past!"

"But who's Mr. Bruce?" asked McClure wonderingly.

"Mr. Henry Bruce is a distant connection of his lordship's family," replied the butler slowly. "Maybe I'd better tell you a few of the facts. There's nothing wrong in 'em, Heaven knows! A sad story, young gentlemen! That's what it is—a sad story!"

"Then there's nothing crooked at all?" asked Handforth, disappointed.

"Bless you—no!" said Yates. "Crooked? In Dorrimore Castle? Whatever put such an idea into your head, young gentleman? There's no family in the county with such traditions as ours! And although Mr. Bruce isn't exactly a Dorrimore, he's connected with the blood."

"And you expected him to come here for Christmas?"

"Not a Christmas has he missed for ten years," repeated Yates musingly.

"But you don't mean to say that you prepared that terrific banquet for one guest?" asked Church, aghast.

"Ay, for one guest," nodded the old man. "Queer, eh? Maybe it is, but Mr. Bruce has all my respect for his faithful heart. Some folks say it's sheer sentimentality, but it does me good to see it! Ay, there aren't many gentleman as true as Mr. Henry Bruce!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE ASTONISHING TRUTH.



HANDFORTH & CO. were rather bewildered.

Even in this short space of time they had discovered a great deal. There was nothing at all mystifying in the source of the banquets. They were obviously prepared in this wing of the castle, and conveyed to the banquetting hall by the rear passage. But it was still unexplained why such care should be taken to do everything so secretly.

That wing was very private. From within it could only be reached by means of the studded door. Once that was bolted on the inside, the wing was shut off from the rest of the castle like an independent dwelling. And nothing could be detected from outside, for the snowdrifts were piled ten and twelve feet deep against the old walls, and no close approach was possible. Moreover, all the windows were thickly curtained on the inside. Nobody had suspected that the wing was fully occupied by many members of the ordinary household. Undoubtedly, they had maintained an extraordinary silence.

"Ay, there aren't many gentlemen as true as Mr. Henry Bruce," said Yates, who had a habit of repeating himself. "And this year he hasn't turned up! It's worrying, young gentlemen—very worrying."

"But you haven't explained why—"

"It's a short story," interrupted the butler sadly. "And there's no secret about it, either. All the countryside knows. I'm surprised ye haven't heard."

"Who could we hear from?" asked Church. "We've been bottled up since we arrived last night. Perhaps Chubby Heath's people know, but they're so busy with their Christmas party, I dare say they forgot to mention it."

"Ten years ago to-day," said Yates slowly. "Just ten years ago, young gentlemen. Henry Bruce was only twenty-five then—one of the finest youngsters you could ever wish to set eyes on. A great favourite of his lordship's, too. They were together in a big exploring party through Africa."

"But what happened ten years ago?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"Young Mr. Bruce was to be married on this very day——"

"Married?" interrupted Handforth, pained. "My only hat!"

"Dry up, Handy," muttered Church.

"All this fuss over a giddy wedding?" snorted Handforth. "By George, I thought there was something exciting in it! And it's only a wedding anniversary! Of all the fat-headed——"

"Wait a moment, young gentleman," said Yates severely. "Maybe ye won't sneer so much after I've told you——"

"Sorry!" muttered Handforth, flushing. "I didn't mean to sneer."

"There was no marriage," went on Yates solemnly. "You see, the young lady was only seventeen—a rare sweet young lady she was, too! I can see her now—all dressed up in her wedding gown, ready. Ay, what a shame it was—what a criminal shame! But her parents have suffered the penalty. They're dead now—both of 'em!"

"I suppose the wedding was stopped, then?" asked Church.

"His lordship, ye see, knew nothing of young Mr. Bruce's difficulties with the girl's parents," said the butler. "In his usual generous way, he placed the castle at Mr. Bruce's disposal. The wedding was all fixed—and everything was arranged for Christmas Day. We had the house full of guests, and there was to be the finest banquet that ever these walls saw!"

"My hat!" exclaimed Church. "Then it was all fixed to the last detail?"

"Not a thing was left undone," replied Yates, his voice becoming husky. "It makes me kind of queer when I think of it. And then, just when they were setting out for the church, her parents came along, and took her away. His lordship was rare upset, but he could do nothing. Ye see, the young lady was under age, and then it came out that she'd practically come to Mr. Bruce against her parents' wishes. A colonel, her father was—a hard, flint-hearted old soldier, who had no soul above money."

"I suppose this Mr. Bruce was poor?" asked Handforth.

"As poor as many another young gentleman who has made his fortune," replied Yates grimly. "What's money, when a man starts life with brains? That was young Mr. Bruce! But the young lady's people forced her to marry a man of their own choice. Poor young thing, she was tricked into it somehow! A rare young reprobate, her husband was, too! It's all very sad, young gentlemen."

"But even now I don't understand——" began Handforth.

"About the banquets?" asked Yates. "Well, after it was all over, young Mr. Bruce was fairly crushed. It was a case of real love, if your young minds can understand what that means. And Mr. Bruce took it to heart. For months he was broken—absolutely broken."

"And then?"

"After he heard of the young lady's enforced wedding, he went off to America," said the butler, shaking his head. "I don't know the rights of it exactly, but we all take it that he wrote to Lord Dorrimore. Leastways, when Christmas came, his lordship ordered most of the servants away, and left me in charge, with orders for the rest of us to live in this wing over Christmas."

"What a rummy idea!" commented Church.

"Not so strange as ye might think," replied Yates. "We had orders to prepare the banquet, just the same as we had prepared it on the wedding-day a year before. And we had orders to serve the dishes just as though all the guests were present. But we had to lay the tables quietly, and then go. And young Mr. Bruce dined alone."

"With all those empty places?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Ay, and with the memory of his lost bride," replied the butler. "Sentiment, eh? Maybe, young gentlemen. But some folks do queer things in this world. More than once, people have shut up their houses, and left them to rot. Young Mr. Bruce wasn't like that—he just wanted to come here every year, and spend Christmas with his memories. And it was a whim of his to have the banquet ready, as though every guest was present. For three days he was left undisturbed, and we weren't allowed to go near him. He saw nothing of us, and we saw nothing of him. We crept about like shadows, and allowed the poor young gentleman to live in the past."

"My hat!" said Handforth, with a queer glance at his chums.

"I don't expect ye to understand," went on Yates sadly. "I dare say ye'll think it's all nonsense. But there it is. And every year since Mr. Bruce has come here and spent Christmas Day. And the banquet's been set out. It was three days on that first anniversary, but it's only been Christmas Day since. And Mr. Bruce has never missed one—until this year. We've always left him alone for those sacred twenty-four hours. His lordship's orders. No matter what happened, we weren't to show ourselves."

"So that's why these rummy things have been happening?" asked Church.

"Just so, young sir—that's why," replied the butler. "We thought maybe Mr. Bruce had come with a party this year—although it did seem rather queer. But I'd had my orders from his lordship, and I stuck to them. During recent years, it was Mr."

Bruce's habit to call us out on Boxing Day, and to have the household running after the usual style. No doubt the old wound isn't giving so much pain. They say that Time is the greatest of all healers. All the same, I'll swear that Mr. Bruce loves the memory of that young lady as much as ever."

Handforth & Co., in spite of their youthful contempt for sentiment, were rather touched by the story. The old butler's distress was obvious. Of course, the facts were clear enough now. It was merely a peculiar fad of Henry Bruce's to come to the castle every Christmas, and re-enact that ten-year-old banquet with the ghosts of his bride-to-be and all the guests. Expense was nothing. For even if Lord Dorrimore was unwilling to foot the bill—which Lord Dorrimore was not—Bruce was now a man of wealth himself. It was one of his secret whims to keep up the custom which had begun nine years earlier. At that time, probably, he had had no intention of coming to Dorrimore Castle every year. But in memory of the girl he had lost, he had made this yearly pilgrimage to the grim old mansion.

"Well, I'm glad we know the truth, anyhow," said Handforth, after a short pause. "Of course, I suspected it all the time. I knew there was something about love or a wedding in it."

"Or coiners!" said Church sarcastically.

Handforth turned red.

"You never can take my jokes!" he said tartly. "Just as if I really thought there were coiners—here! What an idiotic idea!"

"Perfectly dotty!" said McClure, nodding.

"Eh? I mean— Oh, rather!" agreed Handforth, with a sickly look. "Dotty isn't the word! Of course, we'll keep this mum, you chaps. No need to tell the rest."

"Maybe it'll help if ye say nothing to-day, young gentlemen," agreed the butler, nodding. "To-morrow it doesn't matter. I'm rare worried about Mr. Bruce, too. Never once has he failed—"

"This storm has delayed him, I suppose," said Church. "Well, anyhow, we'll be going. Might as well go out and join in the sports," he added, rising. "Thanks awfully for telling us all that, Mr. Yates."

"By the way," said Handforth carelessly, "there's just one thing that we'd like to know. Is there going to be any more of this secret food stunt? Shall we get a Christmas dinner?"

Yates lost his sad look, and his eyes twinkled.

"A Christmas dinner such as ye've never seen before," he replied heartily. "If ever a party of young folks were in luck's way, you are! And right glad I am to see it—there's been too much of this wonderful food wasted in previous years. Sentiment may be a good thing, but it's a rare shame to waste good, honest food."

McClure grinned.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Yates—there'll be none wasted to-day," he said, with conviction.

CHAPTER XIII.

KEEPING THE SECRET!



IRENE MANNERS tried to look severe.

"Wherever have you been, Ted?" she asked.

"We've been having some wonderful sport—and now it's nearly dark! I believe you

kept away just to avoid helping with sweeping the lake!"

Handforth & Co. hotly denied the charge.

"As a matter of fact, we've been—we've been— Oh, well!" said Handforth helplessly. "Those banquets, you know. We thought it would be a good idea to make a few inquiries—"

"You know what Handy is, Irene," put in Church hastily. "In spite of all the advice, he WOULD investigate."

"Did you discover anything?" asked Doris interestedly.

Church laughed with assumed carelessness.

"Discover anything?" he repeated.

"What on earth should we discover? It's a jolly rummy thing how these feeds are provided! By jingo! Let's have a toboggan run, Handy!"

Church and McClure managed to drag Handforth away. They had come outside into the crisp air, and dusk was already beginning to fall. They hadn't realised how the time had gone. And while they had been listening to Yates, the other members of the party had been active.

Tobogganing had been progressing merrily. But the fellows had taken it in turns to help with the lake. The frost held firm, and the sky was clear. There was every prospect of a moonlight night.

Some genius had suggested clearing the ice so that moonlight skating could be indulged in, and Handforth & Co. arrived on the scene just in time to see the final lap. The lake was clear—a glorious stretch of ice, where one could skate with sheer delight.

The motor-sweeper had been brought into use, after Dick Hamilton had spent some little time in coaxing the engine. And it had proved a wonderful help. It had cleared all the worst of the snow away, and a squad of fellows with hand-brooms had put on the final touch. The ice was now as clean and smooth as a billiard-table.

But no skating was indulged in. It was generally agreed that nobody should go on the ice until after tea—always supposing that tea would be forthcoming. For there was an element of uncertainty in all the meals. Even Handforth & Co. were a bit dubious about tea.

"Well, never mind," Nipper was saying. "Old Phipps can fake up some tea, I'll bet—so we're safe. He brought tea and milk and things in that sack this morning."

"What-ho!" beamed Archie Glenthorne. "The choice old brew! Good gad! The

very thought of it sends the blood of the Glenthornes shooting the dashed rapids! Tea! Lead me to it, laddies!"

"I can understand your impatience, old son, but it's hardly time yet," chuckled Fullwood. "We've just got to watch Fatty. He's tobogganing at present—and, incidentally, enlarging the run—but as soon as tea-time arrives he'll scoot for the castle. He's never been known to miss a meal-time."

"No need to rely on Phipps," said Handforth with a sniff. "We shall get a better tea than he can conjure up. I can see it now. Toast and muffins and rich cakes—all covered with icing—pastries by the

morrow. There would only be a lot of talk, and Yates seemed to think that the subject was sacred. Church and McClure didn't agree, but they were anxious to respect the old man's wishes.

"Yates?" said Nipper. "What are you talking about, Handy?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Handforth hurriedly. "Must have been thinking of something or other. That's the worst of keeping mum—I mean, you needn't pester me with questions. I'm not going to tell you what we've discovered!"

"Curiouser and curiouser—to quote the immortal words of one Alice," said Browne



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thousand, and everything you can wish for. Old Yates won't fail us!"

"Who won't fail us?" asked Fullwood.

"Yates!"

"Who's Yates?"

"You fathead! Don't you know? I—I mean—"

Handforth paused with a startled expression in his eyes. He was acutely aware that Church and McClure were glaring at him fiercely. And the other members of the group were frankly curious.

There was no actual reason why the secret should be withheld from the whole party, but as the subject was a delicate one it was perhaps wise to wait until the

benevolently. "While respecting your simple desire to resemble a boiled owl, Brother Handforth, we must nevertheless press for an explanation. There are two questions of vital importance. Firstly, who, or what, is Yates? Secondly, what have you discovered? You will observe that we are all jellified with suspense."

"Don't be an ass, Browne," said Church. "It's only Handy's rot."

"There are, of course, two grades of Brother Handforth's rot," admitted Browne. "My keen instinct assures me that this present grade is technically known as the cat's whiskers, or, alternatively, as the pelican's pyjamas. In other words, Brother

Handforth is a solid mine of information. Let us dig, and gather a few nuggets."

Handforth glared.

"You'd better not dig me!" he snorted. "And what do you mean by calling me a mine!" he added with a roar.

"The mine seems to have exploded!" grinned Fullwood. "Cheese it, Handy! Cool down, and tell us who Yates is. It's no good wriggling about now. You've got to—"

"You can go and eat coke!" said Handforth tartly.

He walked off, and indignantly joined his brother and sister. In fact, he was so indignant that he didn't actually realise who they were until he was talking to them. He would never have approached them in a sane moment.

"Poor old Ted!" said Willy sadly. "Something's happened. Look at that flushed brow! Look at that haggard frown!"

"Ted's been thinking!" said Ena carelessly. "He always goes like that when he thinks. He can't help it, poor thing. Think of the strain!"

Handforth started.

"Who told you to come and speak to me?" he asked, glaring at Willy. "I'm not going to tell you anything about Yates! Not a word! So don't ask!"

"Who's Yates?" inquired Willy.

"I told you I wouldn't say a word!"

"But you've mentioned somebody we don't know," interrupted Ena. "Who is Yates—a St. Frank's fellow?"

"No, he isn't!" said Handforth triumphantly. "Yates is a butler. But you needn't pump me for information—"

"A butler, eh?" said Willy slowly. "By jingo, I've got it! Ted's dropped on something in connection with those banquets. Yates! Of course, he's the butler at Dorrimore Castle, here! Chubby Heath's pater was talking about him a day or two ago."

Handforth looked rather peculiar.

"Then—then you know?" he gasped in alarm.

"Know what?"

"About Yates?"

"We know that he's the butler here, but that's all," said Willy. "He's away with all the other servants, isn't he? Aren't we in the castle alone? That's what I understood, anyhow."

The look of relief which swept over Handforth's face was significant. Church and McClure, who had come up, were freshly alarmed. Handforth was a perfect encyclopedia of hints when he carried any secret. He was certainly not cut out to be an actor. His control over his face was nil.

"So Yates is away, is he?" he said, with such exaggerated carelessness that Church and McClure squirmed. "If that's the case, why talk about him? And all the other servants are away, too, you say? You

seem to know all about it, my son. Why should I tell you the truth?"

"The truth?" asked Willy, staring.

"I—I mean, why should I refer to the subject?" went on Handforth hurriedly. "Where's my toboggan? Let's have some sport."

But by this time Dick Hamilton and Fullwood and Pitt and two or three of the girls had closed round him.

"Hold on!" said Nipper grimly. "Five minutes ago you remarked that old Yates wouldn't fail us. It doesn't need highly concentrated deductive power to guess that Yates is in the castle at the present moment."

"You rotter!" roared Handforth. "Who told you?"

"You did!"

"But he isn't in the castle!" hooted Handforth. "At least, I didn't say—I mean— Oh, my hat!"

He paused, confused.

"The spectacle of Brother Handforth twisting himself into sundry knots is painful in the extreme," said William Napoleon Browne gently. "Can we stand by and witness this exhibition of agony? No, brothers! Let us, therefore, take Brother Handforth in hand and untwist him forthwith."

CHAPTER XIV.

DORIS JUMPS TO IT.



CHURCH and McClure were feeling rather hopeless.

Handforth had said so much now that he couldn't very well get himself out of the tangle. It was so like him, too. He always made up his mind to keep as mum as an oyster, and he always blurted things out. Trusting a secret to Handforth was tantamount to using a megaphone.

"Come on, old man—you can't keep this up," said Nipper. "You've been making some investigations, haven't you? What about Yates? Is he really in the castle?"

"I'm not going to answer your dotty questions!" said Handforth defiantly. "And you'd better not question these asses, either!" he added, glaring at Church and McClure. "They've nearly let the secret out already."

"You howling ass!" roared Church. "We haven't said a thing!"

"It was you who mentioned Yates!" snapped McClure indignantly.

"So there is a secret?" asked Fullwood.

"A secret? Who said so?"

"You did, a minute ago."

"Oh, what's the use?" groaned Church. "It's no good now, Handy—you'd better tell 'em everything. You've made every-

body curious, and they'll never be satisfied until they've heard the rest."

"If you chaps know the truth about the mystery, it won't take us long to find out," declared Buster Boots. "We'd all decided to take no notice. But if some of us know, we might as well all know."

"Of course," agreed Irene. "Out with it, Ted!"

"Oh, well!" said Handforth gruffly. "It's nothing much. I can't see why you're all so inquisitive. How do you know there's a secret, anyway?"

"He can't help it, poor chap," said Doris sadly. "Mac, old son, are you going to speak up, or shall we roll you in the snow?"

McClure looked alarmed.

"Here, steady!" he gasped. "I'll tell you——"

"Not a word!" thundered Handforth. "If you breathe a syllable, Arnold McClure, I'll smash you into smithereens!"

"That'll be quite interesting," said Irene.

"I—I mean——" He paused and turned red. "Well, not exactly into smithereens, but I'll punish him severely!"

"And if he doesn't speak, we'll roll him in the snow!" chuckled Doris. "Mac, you're between two fires! Which is it going to be?"

"Why hesitate?" put in Ena. "Grab him!"

The Removites stood by, grinning, while four of the girls seized the unfortunate McClure, hurled him over, and rolled him violently in the snow. In about twenty seconds he was hardly recognisable. He had become converted into a kind of human snowball.

"Stop!" he panted. "Chuck it, you girls; There's nothing much to tell—and there's no reason why you shouldn't know. Lemme get up, and I'll trot it out. It's all Handy's fault, anyhow."

Within ten minutes everybody knew the full story.

They had all gathered round, and after McClure had exhausted all the facts he could remember, Church supplied a few more. And Handforth, who had remained distantly aloof, at last felt impelled to butt in, so that he could give the true version.

"These jabbering asses have blabbed everything now, so I might just as well speak!" he growled. "This is what comes of trusting a secret to chaps who can't hold their tongues!"

"Why, you gibbering idiot——" began Church violently.

"Peace, children—peace!" said Pitt. "We all know Handy, so why worry? Go it, Handy, old son! Speak your piece now!"

Handforth gave such a vivid account of the vigil, and the subsequent adventures, that his listeners frankly refused to believe

him. His account of that ten-year-old wedding party was positively comic.

"There's only one thing to do," said Nipper firmly. "We've got to make it known to Yates that we all know. There's no need for any more secretive business. We'll give him the tip to come out into the open."

"Yes, by jingo, and there goes the gong!" said Pitt, as the welcome sound floated across the snow-covered slopes. "Hallo! Look over there. The whole castle's lit up now!"

"My hat! So it is!"

Turning, the members of the party saw that many of the windows were blazing with brilliant illumination. It was deep dusk by now, and the short winter's afternoon had drawn to a close.

Most of the fellows were feeling rather relieved. It was good news to learn that the Christmas dinner was a certainty. And they fully appreciated their astonishing luck. The more they thought of it the more they marvelled.

They had come to Dorrimore Castle on a fool's errand. Willy Handforth had japed them, and the previous night's blizzard had left them stranded. And it so happened that in this apparently deserted castle a day of feasting had been arranged—for guests who were no more than memories.

Nothing could have happened more fortunately. And now that the truth of the matter was out there were many conjectures as to why Henry Bruce had failed to turn up.

There were other conjectures, too.

The girls were particularly attracted by the story. There was a romantic touch about it that appealed to them, although the fellows affected a lofty indifference. They felt that they were above any such sentimental stuff. But in their hearts they were gripped by the strange story.

"What a terrible shame!" said Irene, as she walked towards the castle with the other girls. "Fancy that wedding being stopped like that, at the very last hour. No wonder the poor chap was nearly crushed."

"But what about the girl?" asked Doris thoughtfully. "My hat! Think of it! She wasn't very much older than we are, only seventeen, you know, and after her parents had hooked her away they forced her to marry somebody else. I say, what a miserable trick!"

"I wonder if she's alive now?" ventured Winnie.

Doris laughed.

"Alive?" she repeated. "Of course she's alive."

"How the dickens do you know?" demanded Marjorie Temple.

"Because I know her."

"You know her, Doris?" asked Fullwood, who happened to be near. "You didn't tell us this before——"

"My dear chap, it's as obvious as the nose on your face," replied Doris frankly. "I can't understand why these other duffers haven't guessed the truth. She's Miss Halliday!"

"Miss Halliday!" cried the other girls.

"Of course," said Doris calmly. "What about Miss Halliday's photograph in the middle of the mantelpiece in the banquet hall? Didn't we all agree that it was taken about ten years ago? It's just a case of putting two and two together. Miss Halliday is the girl in the case."

Irene took a deep breath.

"I say, this gives it a personal interest, you know," she exclaimed. "So the man she was forced to marry was named Thornton. And he's dead now. Oh, I wonder—— I say! I've got an idea——"

"Don't you pinch mine!" interrupted Doris, with a frown. "I've got an idea, too. Miss Halliday's a widow now, and this fellow, Henry Bruce, ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself for keeping up this memory stunt."

"But she hasn't been a widow for long, you know, and perhaps that's why he hasn't turned up this Christmas," suggested Violet Watson. "But what have you got against Mr. Bruce, anyhow?"

Doris shook her curls.

"Why, the very fact that he's kept up this custom proves that he still loves her," she replied. "And now that she's a widow he hasn't even attempted to go near her. He's a fine kind of chap!"

"Perhaps he's married?" suggested Winnie.

"Oh, yes!" said Doris sarcastically. "I can catch his wife letting him come on this errand if he is. No, it's a thousand to one that he isn't married. I think we ought to do something——"

"Well, let's have tea to start with," said Fullwood crisply. "Here we are, no time for more intrigue now, girls. Come on."

They were just entering the big hall, and Church and McClure, who had rushed indoors in advance of everybody else, appeared with Yates, the butler, and the two footmen hovered in the rear.

"It's all right, you fellows, I've brought Yates," said Church. "We went and hammered on the door of that private wing, and fished him out. Everybody knows, Yates, so let's be friends."

Yates seemed relieved. A load was off his mind. And under the exceptional circumstances he had been worried by the presence of these uninvited guests. It would be better for everybody concerned now that the position was thoroughly understood.

CHAPTER XV.

HENRY BRUCE'S DELUSION.



TEA was a jolly meal. It was served in the fine old drawing-room of the castle, where every atom of furniture was worth thousands. Even the juniors, who were reckless with furniture as a rule, behaved themselves very carefully here.

The smart maids had appeared, not the girls Irene & Co. had brought with them. They belonged to the castle. Indeed, within half an hour a complete change had come about.

Although the household staff was considerably less than normal, they had come back to their ordinary quarters, and the customary routine was in full swing.

Yates was something of an autocrat. He was left in charge of the castle for such long periods that he was virtually the master of the house. In his own way he was quite an important man. And he set himself out to offer all the hospitality that Lord Dorrimore's mansion could provide.

He knew, of course, that all these guests were Dorrie's friends, and he was quite satisfied that the genial peer would approve of his action. Everybody was feeling more comfortable and at home.

"You ought to be jolly thankful to me," remarked Willy Handforth, patting himself on the back. "I invited you to the castle, don't forget. It was my wheeze."

"On the whole we'll forgive you," said Pitt generously. "I've noticed that you've palmed yourself here, too. And I've also noticed that you didn't even do that until you found out what a good proposition it was."

"It only proves that my judgment is uncanny," grinned Willy. "Something told me to bring you all down here. At one time I thought I was an awful young cad for doing such a trick. But just look at the result!"

"It is gratifying to hear, Brother Willy, that you are at least capable of remorse," said Browne kindly. "I will confess that I had never attributed such human qualities to you. There are hopes for you yet. Incidentally, how would you like to pass my cup along to the generous fount?"

Browne was lounging elegantly on one of the settees, and Willy passed his cup to Irene for more tea. But as he was walking in front of one of the windows he paused.

"Hallo!" he ejaculated. "What's this—fairyland?"

"Oh, look outside!" exclaimed Winnie excitedly.

In the distance thousands of coloured lights were visible, and it wasn't long before the source of them was recognised.

They were festooned round the lake, and the effect was exceedingly charming.

"Old Yates!" said Handforth approvingly. "I noticed the lamps when we were out there, fixed to those ornamental rustic arches and things. Good old Yates! He's turning up trumps!"

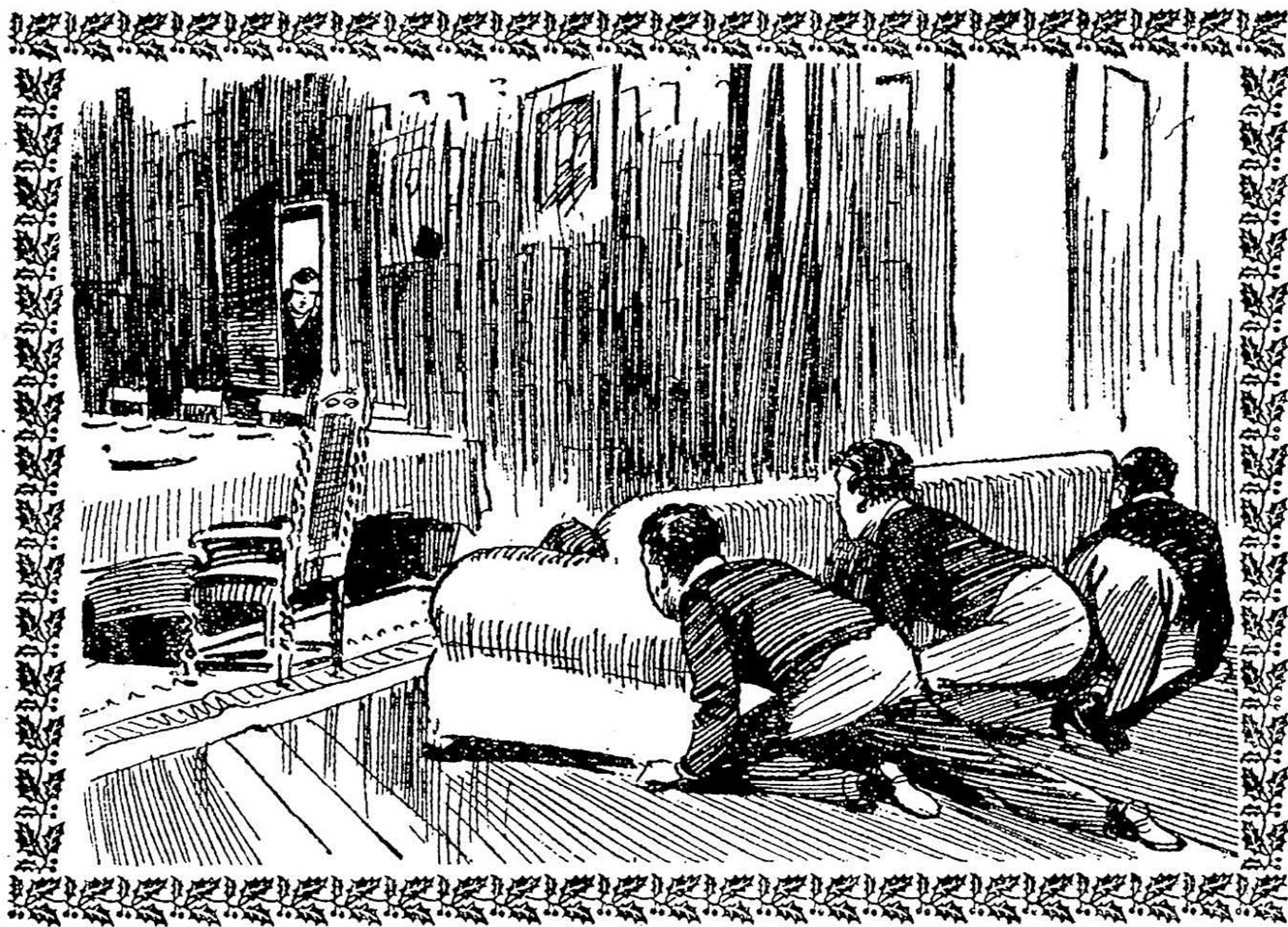
Later on, when they went out into the frosty night, they were even more delighted. It was moonlight, and the ice was perfection. Skating under such conditions was a pure joy.

All round the lake were hundreds of the twinkling lights, and every member of the

of the day. When one remembered the breakfast and the luncheon, one's imagination positively reeled at the thought of the coming dinner.

And it was certainly the weather for healthy appetites. The skating, combined with the frosty air, gave everybody a keen edge to their hunger. And most of them had eaten sparingly at tea-time, having thoughts for the coming Yuletide spread.

Yates had announced dinner for seven-thirty. By six-thirty the skating was abandoned. The girls were anxious to get indoors to dress, for everyone of them had



A small inner door had opened, and a man was looking cautiously through the crack.

party was enjoying this Christmas Day with unalloyed pleasure. They had never expected anything so topping. Christmas at their respective homes would have been dull by comparison.

And it was all the more welcome because they had awakened that morning with a feeling of being imprisoned in a barren, foodless fortress. And they had actually spent the day in one long succession of thrills.

Enjoyable as the skating was, however, many thoughts were turned to the coming Christmas dinner. It was the star turn

brought fancy costumes, and they needed time to don them. And the St. Frank's fellows decided to honour the occasion by appearing in evening dress.

There was a hint, too, that the dinner would be followed by all sorts of Christmas games and jollities. In fact, the evening was working up as only a Yuletide evening can. William Napoleon Browne was full of ideas, and he had already decided to appoint himself Master of the Ceremonies. He was just the fellow for the job.

The gong for dinner sounded at last, and the guests entered the banqueting hall

feeling much more important than on former occasions. A footman was standing on either side of the door, and Yates was in full command within. Phipps, not to be outdone, was standing by in reserve.

As for the table, it was a sheer glory.

The luncheon had been wonderful enough, but the dinner was fit for any royal palace. And these uninvited guests settled themselves down to the spread with merry laughter and happy jokes.

And just at that time a solitary figure was mounting the snow-covered steps in the front of the castle. A big limousine had just rolled away, a sign that the roads were being used again.

The solitary figure was that of a tall man, clothed in a big fur coat and a soft hat. He was about to ring the bell when he tried the door. It opened to his touch, and he strode in.

With a sigh of relief he closed the door, and looked across the big hall with a fond gaze. Then he started. To his ears came the distant sounds of laughter—the chink of china and silver.

"What on earth——" he began.

He frowned, and the expression on his face was one of mingled anger and astonishment. Henry Bruce had arrived at Dorrimore Castle expecting to find the place empty as usual, apparently deserted, as it had been on nine Christmas Days.

He peeled off his overcoat, removed his hat, and smoothed his hair. He was a man of handsome features and well set-up frame. Although his age was thirty-five he looked many years younger. Indeed, he had altered little since that fateful Christmas Day, ten years earlier.

With a grim look in his eyes he strode down the wide corridor, and entered the banqueting hall unannounced. He stood there, staring. The scene was an animated one, over a score of boys and girls seated round that sacred table, laughing and joking with any amount of noise.

"Good-evening!" rapped out Henry Bruce abruptly.

All eyes were turned upon him, and several of the juniors jumped up. For a moment there was intense silence. Doris Berkeley's eyes gleamed, and so did Irene's. They recognised him on the instant. He was the original of that little photograph they had seen in Miss Halliday's pendant. Any doubts they may have had were thrown aside for ever.

"Mr. Bruce, Mr. Bruce!" exclaimed old Yates, hurrying forward. "Thank Heaven you've come, sir!"

"What is the meaning of this, Yates?" asked Bruce quietly. "You know my wishes, and——"

"Precisely, sir, precisely!" interrupted the old butler in agitation. "But the circumstances are very exceptional. These

young ladies and gentlemen are here by necessity."

"Necessity!" repeated Bruce. "I am glad to see you, Yates, but I am disappointed. It seems that because my arrival was delayed by twenty-four hours you have taken advantage——"

"That's not fair, sir!" interrupted Nipper quickly. "Yates did everything in his power to keep the secret. We were stranded outside the castle in last night's blizzard, and we broke in. There are young ladies in our party, and we had to find shelter. And we all happen to be close personal friends of Lord Dorrimore's."

Henry Bruce's expression changed.

"Oh!" he said slowly. "I take it, then, that you are boys from St. Frank's? And these young ladies—— Why, of course! Dorrie has often spoken to me of you. I apologise for my brusqueness. Young ladies, please accept my humble regrets," he added, bowing.

Yates was obviously relieved.

"We were worrying about you, sir——" he began.

"Man may make plans, Yates, but the elements destroy them," interrupted Bruce. "I expected to arrive in Southampton three days ago. But my liner was caught in a severe storm, and lost her propeller. We crawled in only this morning, and I have been travelling ever since. I was determined to reach Dorrimore Castle in time."

The juniors exchanged rapid glances.

"Look here, Mr. Bruce," said Nipper quietly. "I hope you don't mind, but we couldn't help finding out the reason for this banquet, and your solitary Christmas visits. You have only to say the word, sir, and we'll quietly leave. The last thing we want is to disturb your——"

"No, no!" interrupted Bruce. "Certainly not!"

"We are intruders, sir," said Handforth. "I think we'd better go!"

"Yes, we must!" chimed in two or three of the girls.

Henry Bruce was struck by their sincere words.

"Let's settle all this at once," he smiled. "Circumstances always alter cases, don't they? For the moment I suppose I am host in this household—although, I confess, rather a tardy one. Will you all accept my invitation to spend Christmas with me?"

"Thanks awfully, sir!" chorused the juniors.

"My only request is that you should excuse my presence at this banquet," continued Bruce quietly. "For me, this anniversary is a solemn one—even more solemn now than formerly."

The guests were silent.

"So I would like you to carry on, and enjoy yourselves thoroughly," went on Bruce. "Do not quieten your voices on

my account. Be happy, and be joyous. I will be content."

"But why is this anniversary more solemn than it used to be, Mr. Bruce?" asked Doris. "Please answer me."

"Because it is in memory of somebody who is dead," replied Henry Bruce softly. "Need I say more than that?"

With a bow, he retired, and the Christmas dinner continued with everybody's feelings somewhat subdued. But Doris Berkeley's eyes were gleaming. She leaned across to Irene.

"Did you hear?" she whispered. "He thinks she's dead! No wonder he was upset to find us all here! Renie, old girl, he's suffering from a delusion! My hat! Have we got to get busy? I should think we jolly well have!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GREAT IDEA.



IRENE MANNERS looked startled.

"A delusion?" she repeated. "But—but"

"Don't you remember?" asked Doris. "Didn't Miss

Halliday tell us that her husband was killed in a motor accident in Italy about two years ago? And didn't she show us one of the newspaper reports?"

"But it was in Italian—we couldn't read it!"

"Yes, but she told us that the papers all said that both she and her husband were killed!" exclaimed Doris. "She was found unconscious—and was in hospital for weeks. Everybody thought she was dead. And we jolly well know that she was glad to be freed from her husband—although she never wanted him to come to such a tragic end."

Irene's eyes suddenly glistened.

"You mean that Mr. Bruce saw those reports?" she asked.

"He probably saw the American versions of them," replied Doris, nodding. "And all this time he's been under the impression that she's dead! Perhaps even Yates thinks so! Miss Halliday has chosen to keep silent."

"She couldn't do anything else, could she?" put in Winnie Pitt. "If Mr. Bruce didn't come to her, she couldn't possibly go to him. I don't suppose it ever struck her that he's labouring under a delusion."

"What are you girls whispering about?" demanded Bob Christine, from the other side of the table. "There's no need to be subdued. Mr. Bruce told us we could carry on, didn't he?"

"Right-ho!" said Doris. "We'll talk about this afterwards," she added to Irene, in a whisper.

It was fully half-an-hour before the dinner party recovered its normal spirits. And then they took Mr. Bruce at his word, and made up their minds to thoroughly enjoy themselves. After all, this sentimental custom of his was entirely a personal concern.

He had retired to the library, and although he was inwardly upset to find the castle overrun with young people, he showed no sign of it. Yates went to him later, and explained all the details of the party's presence. And Bruce realised that he could do nothing to alter the situation.

"There's a train to-night, sir, if you would like me to give the young ladies and gentlemen a hint," suggested Yates eagerly. "They've got the service going again, and there's a special train for London leaving Buxton at midnight. If you'd like me to mention—"

"No, Yates, I wouldn't think of it," interrupted Bruce. "I was only disappointed for a minute or two. Indeed, I have been pondering. Perhaps this solitary vigil of mine is too morbid. Perhaps I am mistaken. To-morrow I think I shall join my young guests."

"Ay, that's good hearing, sir," said old Yates, his eyes brightening. "And now that the young lady's passed away—"

"Hush, Yates," interrupted Bruce. "Time is a great healer, but this is a subject I prefer to keep to my own thoughts. But I do believe that Providence has taken a hand in my affairs this Christmas. I shall make this the last of my lonely pilgrimages. I shall always come to Dorri-more Castle, but I shall make different plans."

Yates was inwardly overjoyed to hear this piece of news.

In the meantime, the dinner party had dispersed into the drawing-room and the other reception rooms. The fellows were not likely to forget that Christmas dinner in a hurry. From first to last it had been a triumph.

And there was a promise of a wonderful evening.

The girls, however, had collected in a corner of the drawing-room to themselves. They were talking animatedly when Nipper and Pitt joined them.

"What's the plot?" inquired Reggie. "I'll bet you girls are up to something fishy. Some new parlour game—"

"Nothing so trivial," interrupted Doris, severely. "I say, let's take Reggie and Dick into the secret! We can't do much without them, anyhow."

Nipper chuckled.

"What's the sinister scheme?" he asked.

He soon lost his smile, however, when the girls explained their theory concerning Henry Bruce and Miss Halliday. In fact, both he and Pitt looked very dubious.

(Continued on page 40.)



THE CITY OF MASKS ;

or, THE CASE OF THE BOY KING !

A Gripping New Tale of Detective Adventure, introducing SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER.

FOR NEW READERS.

The story takes place in the wild and mountainous country of Carlovina, 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 Carlovina. 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, Carlovina's unscrupulous Prime Minister. Having secured a document which proves Sarjo's plans, Blake arranges for Tinker to impersonate King Peter, the latter, as Tinker, being presumed to be confined to the palace as the result of injuries from a fall off a horse.

(Now read on.)

"MR. CLODIE, sister," said Tinker, his voice sounding exactly like her brother's, "has come to collect money. In the good old days we would have chained him up in a damp dungeon with plenty of rats and frogs and given him time to repent his rashness. Those happy days are over, unfortunately, so we must be very nice to Mr. Clodie and ask him to be merciful."

"I guess I don't want to give you a bad jar, sir," said the young millionaire. "If I can see my dollars safe, I'm not going to start squealing for them all in a lump. I've got your paper, and, as I told Mr. Brown, if it's going to be honoured, I'm not particular about waiting. Some of your Cabinet Ministers don't seem too cheerful on the subject, but I'm not downhearted."

"The subject is dismissed," said Tinker. "We undoubtedly owe you a lot of money, but I forbid business to be discussed at dinner."

It was quite an informal little party, and after dinner they adjourned to the music-room, and Celia played and sang to them for half an hour, and then said good-night. Tinker went out with her to give Peter a call.

"Why did Mr. Brown bring that American gentleman here, Billy?" she asked.

"I expect he thought he might be useful," said Tinker. "Clodie is a hustler, and a real good chap in a row. I like Clodie."

"He certainly isn't bashful," said Celia, smiling. "How quickly things alter! I think my Uncle Paul would as soon have asked a gorilla to dine with him as this American gentleman. Whatever can have prompted him to buy up our wretched bonds? He'll never get paid, poor fellow."

Tinker could have told her, but he kept quiet. King Peter was full of grumbles, so Tinker promised, if things could be made to fit in, to hurry on the meeting and so reduce the length of his Majesty's captivity.

"But what are you going to do?" demanded his Majesty for the umpteenth time.

"I keep telling you I don't know, you ghastly worry," said Tinker. "I have to play my part, but as the gov'nor hasn't fixed it, I can't tell you what it is or how it will pan out, but you may be sure it will do you a bit of good."

"And if you foozle it?"

"Over the frontier neck and crop for us, Peter, or else an early grave," said Tinker. "Your head of the secret police, that vile Veilburg, will be a lively card if we do foozle it. Things are going on in the City of Masks to-night that would freeze his chronic grin if he knew. You'll have the chance to be a real king when I quit the job, young feller, if you'll only pull yourself to bits—I mean, together—and get on with it. Now, I'm hopping it, so down on your marrow-bones, base caiff, and kiss my royal hand."

"Hop it, then, before I wring your royal neck," said Peter. "I'm an ass for letting you do this, and I know it."

"And you also jolly well look it," said Tinker.

In drapers' shops in Kamfak there was an extraordinary demand for green silk in small quantities. Next day the King sent for Mr. Secretary Brentschi. Tinker walked up and down the room several times before the secretary arrived. It was no light ordeal to face Brentschi while masquerading as the King, for Tinker knew that those shifty eyes were as sharp as needles. Luckily, the afternoon was dull and cloudy, and the room was not very light.

"I'm thinking of going deer-stalking for a couple of days with my tutor, Prince Darro, and my school friend, Mr. Jones, so I have decided to hold a meeting of the council at nine this evening," said Tinker.

"It is an awkward time, sir."

"I can't help that. Please communicate with the Prime Minister and the other members. I shall attend at nine."

"Very good, sir!" answered the secretary, bowing.

Tinker breathed more freely, feeling sure that he had bluffed Brentschi, and summoned the captain of the royal guard.

"Have you got your orders, Blimp?"

"Everything cut and dried, sir," said Captain Coggs, with a grin.

"Well, get ahead with it," said Tinker.

"Sarjo thinks I'll bring all the documents signed. Let Rivastoff through the minute he comes."

Tinker was with Peter when the sham doctor arrived to treat the sham Tinker for a sham fall from his horse.

"It's working," said the ex-bandit. "The secret police are massing. The order for the round-up of the loyalists will become law the minute you hand the signed document to Sarjo. The real round-up won't begin till after midnight, for the plan is to catch their victims at home and unprepared. That dog Veilburg will let his bloodhounds loose as soon as he gets the signal to do so."

"They'll assemble at police headquarters."

"Yes, and they're drifting in now, not dreaming they are being watched," said Rivastoff, with a pleased laugh. "Ah, but this Mr. Brown is a great man. Well may they call it the City of Masks, for to-night it will earn its title, for there will be many masks in the streets."

Ten minutes before he was due at the council meeting he had a brief meeting with Celia, and brave as she was, the princess could not conceal her nervousness.

"What if they discover the fraud, Billy?" she asked. "What if they unmask you?"

"It won't matter a ha'porth of jam," said Tinker. "If they turn up, we've got them. If they don't turn up, we shall know they've got wind of the plot and then we shall beat them."

"How plucky you are, Billy," said Celia. "Good luck!"

THE ARRESTS.

"GENTLEMAN, the King!"

Mr. Secretary Brentschi bowed almost to the carpet as he held open the door of the Council Chamber. Sarjo, Bizer, Prince Darro, and Colonel Zuss stood up and bowed in turn.

"They're here anyhow," thought Tinker, walking towards his chair, "so they haven't rumbled the jape."

He placed the leather portfolio on the table and unlocked it, and took out the documents it contained.

"I am sorry to have brought you here at this unusual hour, gentleman," he said, "but my school friend, Mr. Jones, will soon be ending his visit and returning to England, and I want him to shoot a stag before he goes, and my head ranger informs me that we have some very fine ones. The least I can do, after disturbing you like this, is to offer you my hospitality to-night when business is over."

If they had known what he really meant by his hospitality, they would not have bowed and muttered their grateful thanks.

"Here are the papers, Mr. Secretary," said Tinker. "I have waded through the tiresome things, approved of them and signed them."

The Prime Minister and Prince Darro exchanged glances, certain that the guileless King had walked into the snare.

"Your Majesty seems to have overlooked one of the documents," said the secretary. "There appears to be one missing."

"Which one is that?"

"The one concerning the new taxation on wine, sir."

Tinker yawned, but he was watching keenly. Sarjo, Prince Darro, and Bizer did not move a muscle, but he saw the colonel give a surprised start.

"Oh, that thing," said the sham King. "I had it read over to me, and I didn't like it. You're putting an extra tax on the cheaper wines which only the poorer people drink, and it struck me as unfair. I think they pay enough already, and the tax is scarcely worth collecting. If we are so desperately hard up for money, gentlemen, let us find another tax that will not come on my poorer subjects."

There was a silence—rather an uneasy one—and then Prince Darro, who, as Peter said, liked to hear his own voice, stood up.

"I humbly venture to disagree with your Majesty," he said, "and I am quite sure that the other members of the council share my view. This new tax is not so much for the purpose of raising fresh revenue as to help to collect the other tax on wines. Mr. Secretary has figures which tell us that it has been and is being shamefully evaded, and the revenue suffers, not in the towns so much as in remoter districts and in the villages."

"That is quite true, sir," put in Sarjo. "We have examined the returns."

Tinker hid another yawn, one of Peter's yawns to the absolute life.

"The new act will bring all wine-sellers on the register again," went on Prince Darro. "Your Majesty may be assured that the increase is too small to make any real difference to even the poorest, but it would stop these wholesale evasions of the tax. Instead of being a trivial affair, it is a most important one. I therefore ask your Majesty to send for the document and sign it."

"Is that the opinion of the rest of the council?" asked Tinker.

The others nodded, and Tinker put his hands in his pocket and leaned back lazily in the gilded chair.

"Well, it's not my opinion," he said. "Wine's dear enough, and this is a wine-drinking country. If we are being robbed, let the people who are paid to look after our revenue attend to their duties. I'm not going to sign that thing, so let us get to the next business."

There was another silence. They sat staring at Tinker in dumb amazement. Then Prince Darro's sallow face flushed, and he rose to his feet again.

"As your Majesty chooses to flout the opinion of the council," he said, "I beg to be allowed to resign from it."

"'Flout,' my dear cousin," said Tinker, "is not a pretty word to use to a King."

"I know no better word to express my thought, sir," said Darro. "You have flouted the Supreme Council."

"You had better restrain yourself, prince," said Tinker. "Don't make a fool of yourself. There is going to be no further tax on cheap wines. You will kindly withdraw the word 'flout,' and apologise for using it to the King. Come, I am waiting!"

"I will put it then that your Majesty, without giving any reason of the least value, has gone against the wishes of the council in this matter," said Prince Darro, with a sneer in his voice.

"That is a little better," said Tinker. "What about the apology?"

"I have nothing to apologise for."

"You insult me by daring to tell me I have flouted the Supreme Council, and then you think you have nothing to apologise for," said Tinker grimly. "You forget, cousin, that I am the Supreme Council. Because I turn down a trumpery thing like this you dare to use such language to me. I'll give you time to think over your apology, cousin—time to compose one in verse, as you're a poet."

Tinker's right hand came from his pocket and descended on the striker of the silver bell. As the clear note sounded, the door was flung open, and Captain Coggs strode

in, followed by six men of the Royal Guard and stood at the salute.

"Arrest Prince Darro, captain," said Tinker.

Again there was a hush, and Blimp laid his gloved hand on Darro's shoulder.

"Your Highness is my prisoner," said Blimp gruffly. "I arrest you in the King's name."

"Why, this is madness!" blustered Darro, purple in the face. "Surely, Peter—surely, sir—"

"Gawsh! Don't argue!" growled Blimp, dragging the prince to the door. "Fall in, there!"

Colonel Zuss, his moustache quivering and his eyes goggling with excitement and rage, raised his voice.

"I protest, sir, I protest!" he almost screamed. "I am commander of the King's guard. It is outrageous. If your Majesty wished an arrest to be made, the order should have been given to me. This man—"

"You are no longer in command of the Royal Guard," said Tinker. "After daring to use such language to me, I cashier you. Such language is high treason. I am commander of the Royal Guard. Captain, arrest that man!"

The ex-colonel almost foamed at the mouth, lost all control of himself and his dignity so far as to make a running kick at Blimp. The giant captain of the guard used no ceremony. He tucked one brawny arm round the corsets of the disgraced colonel, carried him to the door, and pitched him to his men.

"Guard-room," he said, "and see they don't get away!"

Then, with one gloved hand on the hilt of his sword, Blimp strode back with a rattle of spurs. Bizer and the Prime Minister had not stirred. Blimp shot a glance at Tinker, and passed on, dragging back the curtain of the secretary's room. Brentschi was at the telephone. He glanced round at the big soldier with a scared expression as Captain Coggs gripped his arm.

"The king wishes to know why you're using the 'phone, Mr. Secretary?" said the captain of the Royal Guard. "Come in here!"

With a push, he sent the secretary staggering through the curtained doorway. Two of the guard, with fixed bayonets, were stationed at the outer door. Blimp put the receiver of the telephone to his ear, and waited, hoping that the call had gone through.

"Is that Mr. Brentschi?" asked a voice.

"Right," answered Blimp.

"Mr. Veilburg has just started for the palace. I'm Nalderg. We've found out that Brown, the King's tutor, is a Government spy, working for the British Foreign Office. He's even worse than that, for he's Sexton Blake, the famous private detective, and we expect the boy Jones to be his assistant. They must be arrested and deported at once without the King's knowledge."

"Right!" said Blimp. "Ssh! I can't talk any more, for somebody is knocking at the door."

That was Blimp's cunning. He had heard enough, and he knew he could not imitate the secretary's voice, and he thought it time to stop before he aroused the suspicions of Nalderg, who was Johann Veilburg's second-in-command.

"The secretary, sir," he said, as he entered the Council Chamber, "has rung up the headquarters of the secret police."

"And the news, captain?"

"Mr. Veilburg is now on his way to the palace with some very important news, sir."

"If they have only just discovered that, captain, they certainly don't earn their pay. Colonel," said Tinker, "arrest these three rogues, and make a clean sweep of it. Have Veilburg detained till I can deal with him. Don't be rough with the old man; though he is the chief blackguard, though the secretary runs him close. You see, Sarjo, I not only read your wine-tax, but I also read what you had written underneath it in indelible ink. That murderous plot of yours has come badly unstuck, thanks to the King's tutor."

The sentries stepped back to make way for Sexton Blake and Mr. Arthur P. Clodie.



The giant Captain of the Guard used no ceremony. He tucked one brawny arm round the corsets of the disarmed colonel, carried him to the door, and pitched him to his men.

"As the secretary seems to have been interrupted, you had better tell him the news, Colonel Coggs," said Tinker.

At his new title Blimp saluted, only hoping that the real King would confirm it. Brentschi was cowering against the wall, perplexed and terrified, and Bizer was white and shaky. Sarjo sat with folded arms, looking steadily in front of him.

"Mr. Veilburg has discovered, sir, that your tutor, Mr. Brown, is a spy in the pay of the British Foreign Office, and that his real name is Sexton Blake, the famous private detective."

"We've bagged the lot, guv'nor," said Tinker, "the Supreme Council and the secretary thrown in. Mr. Sarjo, Mr. Bizer, and Mr. Secretary Brentschi, permit me to give you the pleasure of knowing Mr. Sexton Blake. I had to tell them, guv'nor," he added, "for Veilburg has tumbled us when it's too late, and is coming along to arrest and shoot us, or else deport us. Round 'em up, Blimp, my best of colonels."

"Then it's not the King!" yelled Bizer, disillusioned at last. "We've been fooled!"

"I knew it, but not until it was too late," said Sarjo bitterly. "I knew it when

he ordered Darro's arrest. Peter would never have had the courage.

"Treason, treason! Help for the King! Treason!" shouted Bizer.

"Gawsh! Don't make such a row, Bizer!" growled Colonel Coggs. "This is a respectable palace, and yelling is forbidden. Outside, and not so much row."

"Back you dogs!" said Sarjo, as four soldiers advanced. "I demand to see the King! Where is the King?"

"Out of it!" said Blimp. "Keep a sharp eye on the secretary and that lawyer chap, sergeant. Ah, would you?"

Brentschi had made a bolt for it. He pulled up short when he found himself facing Sexton Blake's automatic pistol. Blimp checked Bizer's outcry by grabbing the lawyer by the shoulder and giving him a shake that made his teeth rattle. And at that moment the lieutenant who had just had the pleasure of putting ex-colonel Zuss under lock and key came in with another file of men.

"Lieutenant," began Sexton Blake.

"Captain, if you please, guv'nor," said Tinker. "I have the King's word for it, if we pull off the stunt."

"Please take charge of these prisoners, then," said the private detective, smiling. "I am very pleased to hear of your promotion, which, if delayed, is well deserved. Has Veilburg come yet?"

"He is waiting, sir," said the lieutenant. "He was very persistent, but I took it upon myself to refuse to let him through until the meeting of the Council was over."

"Absolutely correct, captain," said Blimp. "I was coming along to attend to that, but was kept busy."

"Don't let Veilburg see the prisoners, captain," said Blake. "Tell him the King wishes to see him, and send him along. Take your men off. You'll have to play the King a little longer, Tinker, so show your mettle, and see if you can fool the head of the secret police."

Veilburg, who was kicking his heels impatiently in the officers' room, was more than surprised when he was informed that the King himself wished to speak to him. Veilburg did not want to see the King, but the Secretary. Blimp, who was in the corridor, nodded to him.

"The meeting's over, and the King is alone, but you may go in," said Blimp.

"It must have been a very short meeting, captain."

"I don't know," said Blimp. "They've all cleared out, anyhow, except his Majesty. He's waiting, so get a move on."

Sexton Blake and Mr. Arthur P. Clodie, from li'l' old New York, were in the Secretary's room. Hat in hand, the chief of the police entered, and bowed to Tinker, who had a quill pen behind his ear, and pretended to be reading a paper.

"Oh, you, Mr. Veilburg," he said, looking up. "Just look at this, please, and tell me who wrote it."

It was the forgery Tinker had received at the opera, asking him to meet the king's tutor at the cathedral. Now that Veilburg knew that the king's tutor was Sexton Blake, the celebrated private detective, the sight of the paper gave him a shock.

"Come, who wrote that?" said Tinker. "It will be unfortunate for you if you lie to me, Mr. Veilburg. Who wrote that forgery?"

"The secretary, sir."

"Who instigated it?"

"Prince Darro, sir."

"With the knowledge and approval, no doubt, of the Prime Minister, Bizer and Colonel Zuss," said Tinker. "Is that so?"

"I believe so, sir," said Veilburg, longing to leap at the youngster and strangle him, but only too conscious of the fact that the accursed giant of a captain of the Royal Guard was close at hand. "It is from the Supreme Council, sir, that I take my orders."

"You are a tame sort of blackguard, then," said Tinker, "and were quite willing to be a murderer and shoot my young friend in cold blood. The news you have come in such a hurry to impart, not to the king, but to the junta, is very stale news to me. Didn't it strike you, Veilburg, when at this late hour that the king's tutor was Mr. Sexton Blake that I must be more than a fool—nothing but a crazy idiot—if I could have had such a well-known person foisted on me as my tutor, without knowing who he was?"

"It is not my business to form opinions about the king, sir," said Veilburg. "Perhaps I did think so when the news came. I have always been suspicious of this Mr. Brown, especially since I encountered him on the cathedral steps."

"You did not consider a man who stooped, wore glasses, and looked so limp, ought to have such a grip, eh?" said Tinker. "You have been properly fooled, Veilburg! I hope you enjoyed the night you spent in the rain with the secretary. You are still being fooled, and I must find someone else to place at the head of my secret police. However, I will not discharge you at once, for I want you to send a few instructions to your second, Mr. Nalderg, I believe? Kindly use the Secretary's telephone."

Tinker struck the bell, and Blimp entered.

"Mr. Veilburg carries a weapon for which he has no use, and which he wishes to hand over to you, colonel," said Tinker.

"Thanks!" growled Blimp.

Veilburg took a revolver from his pocket and gave it to Blimp.

"Bluffed to the last!" said Tinker. "I say, Veilburg, if you're not the champion ass of the universe, I must be the champion actor! Oh, Blimp, my dear old warrior, this is too funny! The whole thing is a scream!"

Tinker threw himself back in the big chair and burst into a peal of laughter.

"Ten thousand fiends!" cried the chief of the police, clenching his hands. "It's not the king, but the English boy!"

(Continued on page 40)



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 BROOKES, 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.

What you want to see first is your own personal acknowledgment, isn't it? Let's hope YOUR name is included among the following: Leagueite 499 (no address), Samuel N. Pugh, Jack M. Sidaway, J. Walker (Old Hill, Staffs), F. Power (Birmingham), A. Leeming (Hillsborough, Sheffield), Nelson Leeite (Bluntisham), L. G. Jaekel (Teddington), J. Panther (Balham), J. C. McKay (South Shields), John (Manchester), Leslie Cavalier (Tottenham), Dick Hamilton (Holloway), J. Parr (Platt Bridge), Cyril A. Hinge (Margate), S. Fletcher (Knightsbridge), The Unknown (Bradford), William Sulins (Stratford), Prairie Maid (Toronto), Herbert (Wroughton), Albert Morgan (Sheffield), Alan Smyth (Tunstall), R. Myers (Johannesburg), Robert Carney (Liverpool), Queen of the West (Bath).

The questions you ask about the St. Frank's district, Leagueite 499, induce me to mention a subject which I have been avoiding of late. To tell the truth, I've been fudging it. It's the only word to use. That general map, eh? Groans from a few thousand geographical fiends! What about it? That's the question you're asking, and I don't blame you. I believe I promised the General Map for the autumn, didn't I? And now it's Christmas-time! To tell the truth, I wouldn't have dared to mention the matter at all if it hadn't been Christmas week! But there's a general feeling of goodwill just now, so I've risked it. If you don't forgive me at this time of the year, I must be in a pretty serious fix. But I'll tell you what. I'll make a promise—a cast-iron, gilt-edged promise. On my honour, you'll have that General Map next year! This sounds a long time, doesn't it? But it'll be next year within a week. I'll get together with the Editor, and we'll see if we can't publish that map before the end of January.

I don't quite agree with you about the illustrations, Joseph C. McKay. You ask me to put it to the other readers, so I will quote from your letter: "Having looked at the pictures in the book, you begin to read, and before you have read very far you can generally jump to the situations through the medium of the pictures, and know exactly what is about to happen, evidently, spoiling the grip of the story. But with no pictures the reader starts his story without any idea of what will happen." Of course, there may be something in what you say, Joseph, but without the illustrations, Our Paper would be rather heavy-looking, I'm afraid. Besides, the remedy is in your own hands. Use your will-power, and refrain from looking at the pictures until you've finished the yarn. I wonder how many readers agree with you on this interesting little point. As for guessing your age, I wouldn't attempt anything so rash.

Many thanks, J. Parr, for your welcome Christmas-card. Incidentally, it was the first one I have received this Christmas, and I particularly appreciate it, seeing that it comes from such an old friend as yourself. Thanks, also, for the interesting article you enclosed. I agree heartily. Needless to say, I reciprocate your good wishes, and hope you will have a happy Christmas.

What a remark to make, Prairie Maid! Just as if I should forget you! Your first letter was of such a striking character that I have always remembered it. I'm awfully pleased that you Canadians like Clive Russell. At least, I hope your compatriots share your liking for Clive. I will remember your wish, and I'll try to bring Clive into the yarns comparatively often. But, of course, I cannot promise to actually feature him. The trouble is, if I bring in Clive Russell too much, I'll get lots of readers from Australia asking me what's happened to Jerry Dodd. And as for the South African readers—I'm simply afraid to think of what they'll say! There isn't a South African boy at St. Frank's—yet. Before long—But wait! I'd better be cautious, or I shall have lots of S.A. readers pelting me with reminders.

There's still time for me to repeat my Christmas greetings of last week, and I do so with all sincerity and friendliness to every reader of Our Paper. Wouldn't it be jolly if we could all gather round

My goodness! We should need a pretty big fire, shouldn't we? All the same, when I'm sitting at my own fireside on Christmas-night, I shall be quite sure that every one of you will be with me in spirit. And that's the next best thing, isn't it?

* * *

Of course, just when I'd expressed my Christmas greetings as a wind-up to this week's chat, the Editor comes along with the news that there's another page to fill up! So here I am, still at it. Some of you, I dare say, will be quite pleased, for you've now got a chance of seeing your acknowledgments this week. So here goes for another batch:

* * *

Alan Redway (Wimbledon), Pre-War Reader (No. 1), League Member 3,123 (Peckham), Jack Ricketts (Hayle), Francis Norman (Plumstead), J. Bedford (Cardiff), H. R. Johnson (Barnsley), H. Frederick Mullett (Combe-St.-Nicholas), Fullwood 11 (Prestwich), Lionel Moxom (Rochdale), Leslie Smith (West Bridgford), M. Gibbons (Manchester), Leslie Bristoll (Acton), Joe Krietzman (Stepney), William J. Aldous (Norwich), Nipper of Remove (Brighton), R. A. Ablewhite (Barnet).

* * *

According to your letters, THE MONSTER LIBRARY OF COMPLETE STORIES has apparently made quite a big hit. Honestly, I haven't had a single grumbling letter. Everybody seems to be highly pleased with the production. I'm particularly glad, because I took a lot of pains some weeks ago to impress you with the fact that the new library would be something DIFFERENT. I don't think I exaggerated, did I? Anyhow, I haven't been accused of writing fairy-tales yet!

* * *

Without wishing to make this feature an advertising page, I would like to remind you that No. 2 of THE MONSTER LIBRARY has been on sale for some days. If anything, it is better than No. 1. "The Black Sheep of St. Frank's" is our old friend Reggie Pitt.

* * *

When I first introduced him, you will remember, Reggie was several kinds of a bad lad—although not, of course, a consistent rotter, term after term, like Ralph Leslie Fullwood used to be. Reggie Pitt was such an absolute bounder that he soon earned himself the nickname of "The Serpent." But he redeemed all his misdeeds in the same series. And this series, of course, is fully contained in No. 2. of THE MONSTER LIBRARY. At the beginning of the book Reggie is a rotter—but at the end he turns out to be the decent fellow you are all familiar with now. I thought, perhaps, you would like to have this little reminder. Sorry if I've wasted a lot of good space.

* * *

You are looking well ahead, Alf Bateman. The stories concerning "The White Giants"

won't appear in THE MONSTER LIBRARY for some months. You see, they have got to await their turn. The Editor can't play pitch-and-toss, as it were, with all these series. Some were more popular than others, no doubt, but they will all appear in due course. That is, let me remind you, providing the circulation of THE MONSTER LIBRARY is big enough. I'm afraid some of you fellows will lose your interest as soon as Christmas is over, with the result that No. 3, out in the middle of January, will receive a nasty jar. I say, don't let that happen, will you?

* * *

Sorry, Francis Norman, I really can't tell you how many introductions you have made towards the League. But if you write to the Chief Officer, he'll dash about from department to department, stir everybody up, and send along the information in next to no time.

* * *

It's rather early to talk of binding-cases for THE MONSTER LIBRARY, J. Bedford. But you're not the only one who has raised this interesting question. Most of you want special binding-cases provided at the end of every six numbers. It's a ripping idea—but the great trouble is, how many enthusiasts are there like you? I'm afraid the project would be too costly—unless, of course, hundreds of you wrote and expressed your eagerness to purchase such binding-cases. Take my tip, and write to the Editor—he's the man in an affair of this kind. But there's plenty of time yet—another five months before even the first binding-case will be required.

* * *

I'd like to put in your announcement, together with your address, regarding back numbers, H. Frederick Mullett, but this Sale and Exchange business is being reserved for the League Magazine—which will soon be with us. There will be a whole page devoted to back numbers then, and you'll naturally have as much chance as everybody else. Lots of fellows have asked me to print their announcements, but I haven't done so because it wouldn't be quite fair to the others. Writing this chat, you know, is a risky business. I've got to be so jolly careful!

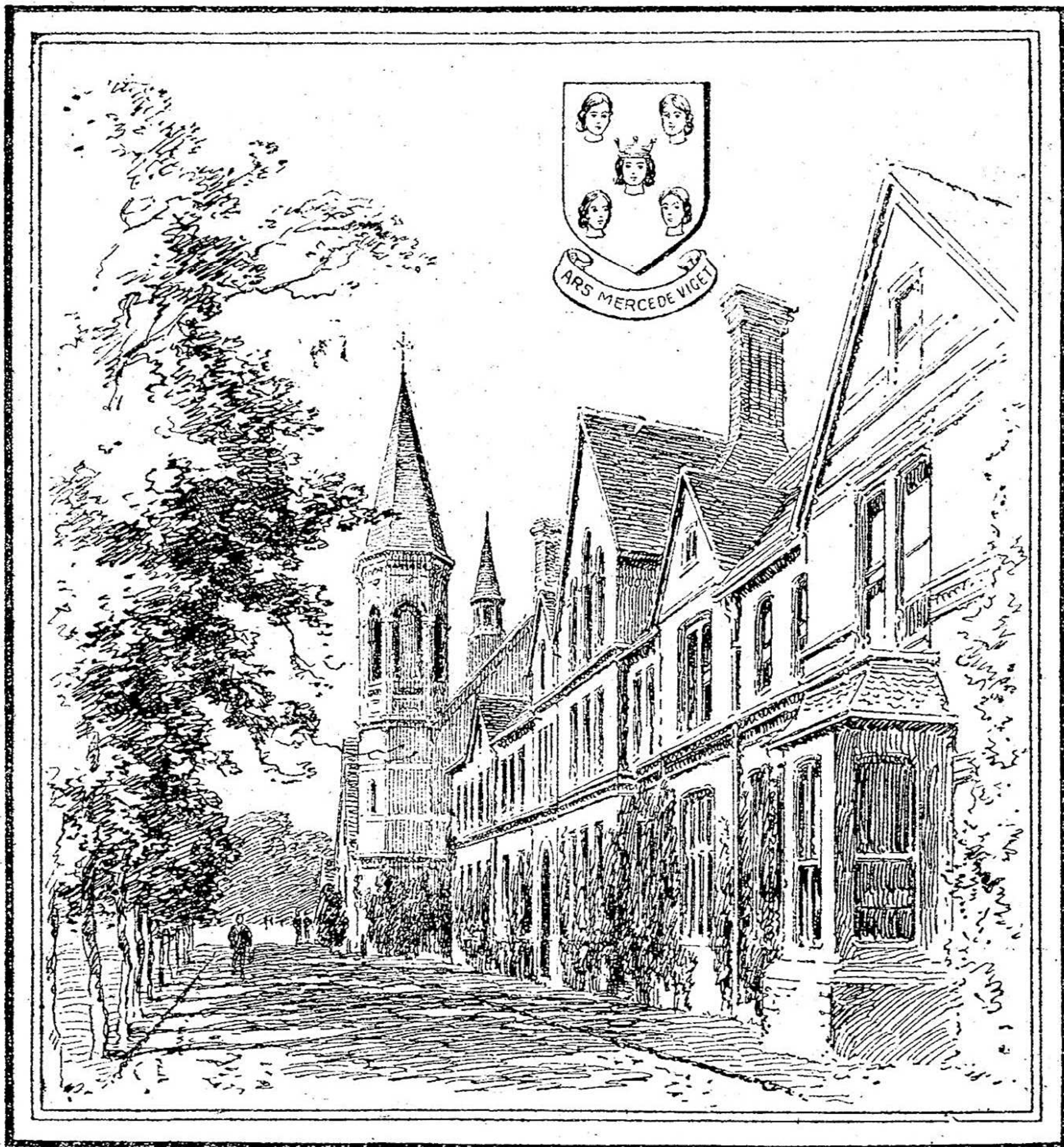
* * *

Thanks for your interesting letter, M. Gibbons. I quite understand that you haven't got time to join the League. With a son of ten months to look after, I'm not at all surprised. It is cheering to note that you refer to him as a future reader. You needn't worry about people smiling at you and your husband for reading Our Paper. I have had letters from grandfathers and grandmothers, and it always bucks me up to realise that my yarns are apparently read and enjoyed by boys and girls from the ages of ten to eighty.

E. S. B.

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Special Sketch by Mr. Briscoe, for "The Nelson Lee Library," of
READING SCHOOL



Reading School was founded in 1125, and restored by Henry VII. in 1486. There are about 400 day boys and 120 boarders, and the school is divided into four houses and a

separate Junior School. The chief sports are rowing, swimming, cricket, and Rugby football. The O.T.C. numbers 300 cadets, and a shooting eight is sent every year to Bisley.

"THE GHOSTS OF DORRIMORE CASTLE."*(Continued from page 31.)*

"Of course, you're right about Miss Halliday being the girl," said Nipper. "And I believe that he's under the impression that she was killed in that accident. But as for bringing them together——"

"Too delicate!" said Pitt, shaking his head.

"It all depends upon the way it's worked," insisted Irene. "Think of it! Those two being separated ten years ago—and Mr Bruce still unmarried! And Muriel Halliday a widow! Why, it would be simply wicked to ignore a chance like this!"

"But, my dear girl——"

"It's no good, Dick—you've got to help us," said Doris firmly. "We can bring off

a glorious surprise. Mr. Bruce thinks that she's dead! We've got to get her to the castle, and put everything straight!"

"Yes, but——"

Nipper and Pitt paused helplessly. In an affair of this sort they felt out of their depth. But the girls talked to them. And, gradually, their expressions changed. They began to take a keen interest in the plot. After all, it was just the type of thing for Christmas!

The mystery of the castle was explained, and the episode was over. And all members of the party were agreed that they had spent one of the most enjoyable Christmas Days they could remember.

But there was another episode waiting to be unfolded.

THE END.

"THE CITY OF MASKS."*(Continued from page 36.)*

"This way, if you please, Mr. Veilburg!" said the quiet voice of Sexton Blake.

The private detective had discarded his stoop and his spectacles. Behind Blake stood Clodie, who stopped chuckling to light a cigarette.

"Wal," said the American "I'd got a silly sort of notion in my brain-box that you English had sort of forgotten to hustle a huss if you ever knew how. I guess I'll wipe that notion out for keeps, Mr. Blake, for you and your young partner can hustle fit to beat the craziest jazz band on earth. I can see my dollars coming good and straight now you've rounded up that gang of thieves, for Carlovina can sure pay if she's put on her legs and run properly. Gee, this stunt is worth coming for, anyhow!"

Blake pointed to the telephone.

"I want you to ring up Nalderg," he said to the scowling ex-head of the secret police. "I have written down what you have to tell him on this paper. We have had one little encounter, Mr. Veilburg, and you ought to know from that that I am an awkward person to quarrel with. What I have written may not be the exact truth, but it is some of your own medicine, for the secret police have not much respect for the truth. And be very careful. One trick, one word out of place, either too little or too much, and you'll regret it!"

"We'll hang the guy on a sour apple-tree," said Clodie. "Gee, I'm enjoying this circus! Let it rip!"

Veilburg wiped the perspiration from his face, glowered savagely at Sexton Blake, and then read what the detective had written.

"Police headquarters," he said sullenly.

He got his call at once, for though the telephone-operators usually took their time, they were prompt enough with the police.

"Hallo, Nalderg—it's the chief speaking," said Veilburg. "The king has signed, so carry on promptly at midnight. I may not be there, but don't wait for me. Carry out everything as we arranged it, and be as quick about it as you can. No shooting if it can be avoided. Two men ought to be enough for each arrest, for they will be quite unprepared. Get the fellows away a few at a time, but warn them that no raid must be made till it strikes midnight."

Veilburg paused, and his listeners could hear a voice mumbling over the wire, and then Veilburg spoke again, glancing at the paper.

"There's one change of plan," he said. "Keep your prisoners in their own houses and the motor-cars will be sent round later to collect them. It's a big order, but I think we can manage to make a clean sweep without letting Kamfak know what has happened. There must be no hitch. No, that is all; but act quickly and carefully."

(Concluding Instalment next week.)

Next Week's Story of the Boys of St. Frank's will disclose the plot foreshadowed at the end of the story you have just read. It is entitled:—

"THE NEW YEAR REVELLERS!"

and also describes the New Year adventures of our merry holiday-makers at Dorrmore Castle. Look out next week for the first list of Organising Officers of the St. Frank's League!

AS SIMPLE AS A B C.

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 26. Dec. 26, 1925

SECTION

A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

Being a regular reader of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare myself to be a staunch supporter of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and that I have introduced Our Paper to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with Membership Number assigned to me.

SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

I, Member No..... (give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.

SECTION

C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," which I will read with a view to becoming a regular reader of this paper.

(FULL NAME)

(ADDRESS)

IMPORTANT.—Complete and post off this form before the next issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY is on sale. Otherwise the form becomes out of date and useless.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership.

Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C by running the pen diagonally across both Sections. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

Member Applying for Bronze Medal: It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms are needed, and these must be taken from copies of the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A

and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided the forms are taken from the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medal can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B, which has been revised for this purpose. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for ½d., provided the envelope is **not** sealed and no letter is enclosed.

Special Xmas Number!

Here's a grand Christmas twopennyworth, lads. Five ripping sports stories, two competitions and a crowd of fine articles. You certainly mustn't miss the Special Christmas Number of the

BOYS' REALM

Which do you like best—Soccer or Rugger? There is a grand long complete Christmas tale about each of them in this Wednesday's REALM. See specially A. S. Hardy's tale of League football on Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

It's called

"The Christmas Recruits!"

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