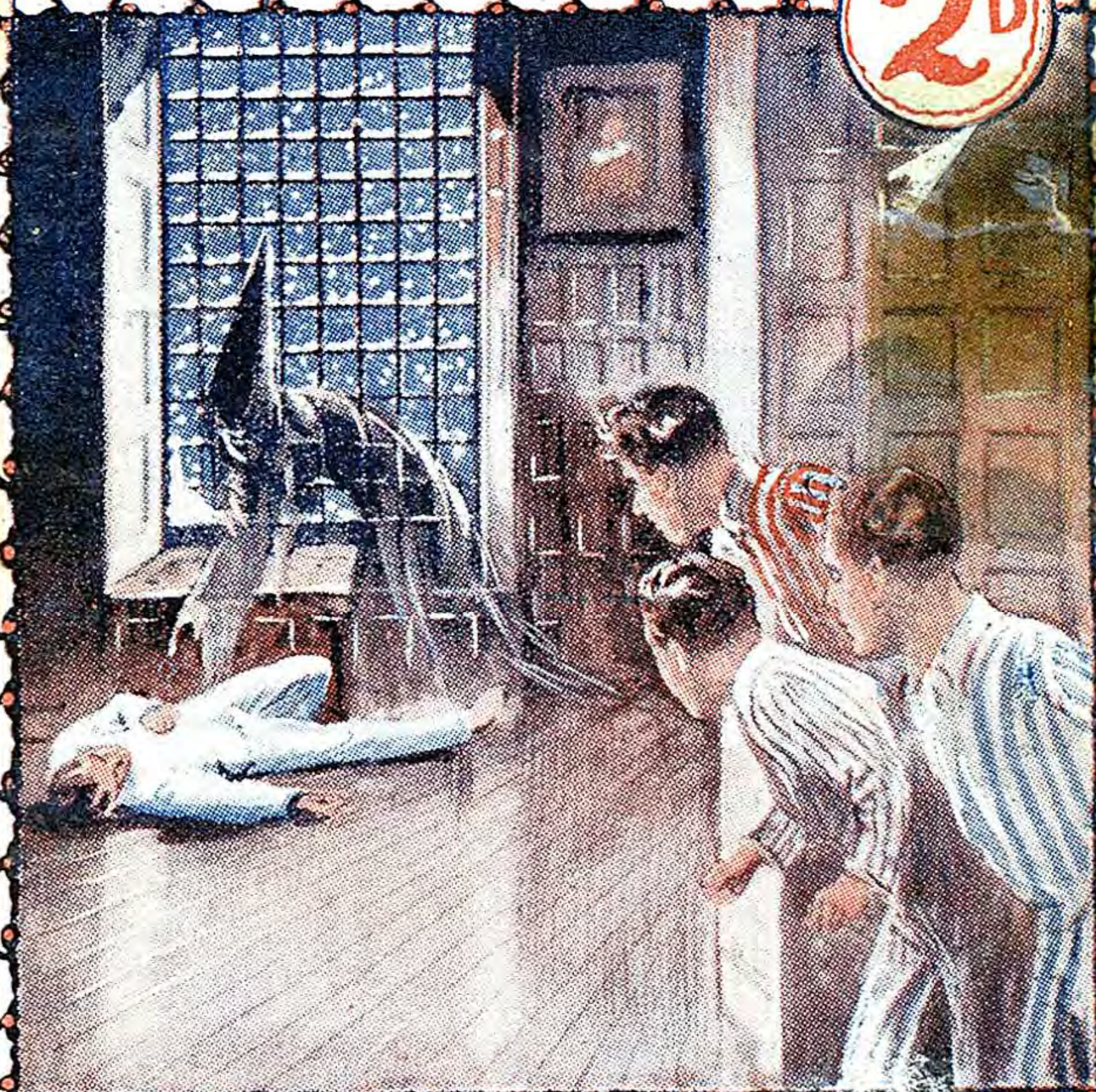


Special Christmas Number!

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The SPECTR OF HANDFORTH TOWERS!

Mystery, thrills and fun in this long complete Christmas story featuring the Boys of St. Frank's.

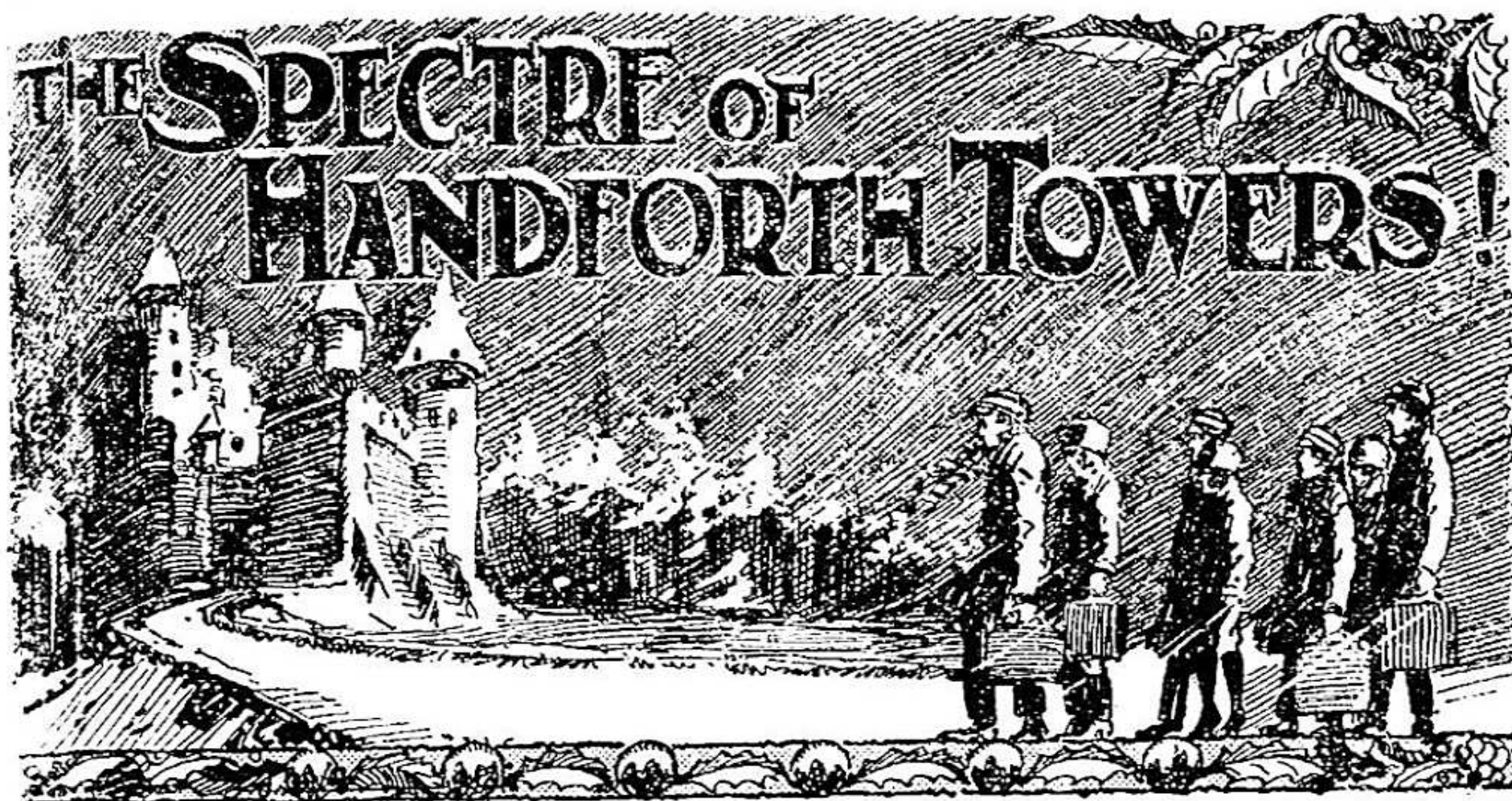
New Series No. 34.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

December 25th, 1926.



Edward Oswald Handforth was the first member of the merry Christmas party to align at North Washam. But the platform being more slippery than he expected, Handy's feet shot from underneath him and he turned a beautiful back somersault. "Not so dusty for a first attempt!" remarked Willy.



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

There are mysteries and thrills in this week's topping long complete Christmas yarn of the Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

THE HANDFORTH CHRISTMAS PARTY!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH leaned out of the window as the train slowed down against the snow-covered little platform. He peered eagerly at the ill-lighted lamps, and uttered a grunt of satisfaction.

"North Walsham!" he said triumphantly. "By George! And about time!"

He flung the door open, leapt lightly on to the platform, his feet skidded from under him, and he turned a back somersault.

"Jolly good, Ted!" said Willy Handforth, from the next window.

"My only hat!" gasped Handforth, sitting up dazedly.

"It might have been better," said Willy, as he jumped down. "Still, for a first attempt, it wasn't so dusty."

"Any more, my lad, and I'll rub your face in the snow!" said Edward Oswald, as he scrambled hastily to his feet. "Huh! North Walsham! A fine welcome to give, I must say! Why can't they put gravel on the platform, or something? I might have skidded under the train!"

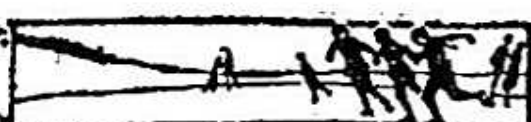
He looked round with relief, regretfully observing the fact that some of the Moor View girls had seen his undignified method of alighting. In fact, his minor was a long way from being the only witness.

But they soon forgot the incident as the party alighted. St. Frank's juniors were crowding out of several compartments, helping Irene Manners & Co. with their baggage, and generally making themselves useful. The little platform, too, was crowded with other holiday folk, and there was a general air of bustle.

Snow lay everywhere, and more was coming down—steadily falling flakes which settled as they fell, for it was freezing, too. In London, the merry holiday party had started off amid sleet, fog, and mud. But here, near the Norfolk coast, what a difference! Snow everywhere—a cold, crisp, healthy feeling in the air—and a real atmosphere of Christmas.

"Well, thank goodness we've arrived!" said Irene Manners, as she stood on the platform, tightening her fur. "Isn't it glorious here? Not a trace of mud—and snowing in just the way it ought to!"

"Rather!" said Doris Berkeley. "And am



"I hungry? Five hours without a bite of food—"

"Well, Ted wanted to get some lunch baskets," said Winnie Pitt. "We refused them, and we mustn't grumble—"

"But how were we to know that the train would be three hours late?" interrupted Irene. "The plan was to get to Handforth Towers in time for dinner, and it would have been all right if we had arrived at seven o'clock. But it's ten!"

"Oh, well, it's only two or three miles to the Towers, and then we shall have a royal welcome," said Ena Handforth. "My uncle's a sportsman, and I'm sure he'll give us all a wonderful time."

"And the hungrier we are, the better," said Doris, smiling.

There were over twenty in the party, and they all crowded down the platform towards the exit, with Edward Oswald Handforth in full control. The fact that Dick Hamilton was the captain of the Remove made no difference here. At St. Frank's, Dick was the leader, but at the present moment, Handforth considered himself to be the chief of the party. These were his uncle's guests, and they were under his wing.

"Now then, everybody!" he sang out, with a fatherly air. "I've got all the tickets, so if you follow me, you'll be all right. Don't forget your bags and things, and get a move on!"

"Talking to me?" said Chubby Heath, of the Third.

"I'm talking to everybody!" replied Handforth, firmly.

"Rats!" said Chubby. "Juicy and I are Willy's guests!"

This was rather a sore point with Handforth, and he frowned. But it was hardly the time for arguing, especially as he had reached the exit, and the collector was asking for his tickets.

General Gregory Bartholomew Handforth, D.S.O., Handy's distinguished uncle, had told his brother's three children that they could each bring their own friends to Handforth Towers for the Christmas holidays. And they had taken full advantage of this wholesale invitation.

Edward Oswald, always lavish, had brought eleven Removites, making a round dozen of them altogether; Ena was accompanied by five of her chums from the Moor View School; and Willy, much to the regret of many Third Formers, had only selected his two personal chums, Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon.

Still, the party was quite big enough to ensure a jolly Christmas, even if General Handforth had no other guests—which was most unlikely. For the general always maintained a big establishment at Handforth Towers, and was famous for his house parties.

He loathed London, however, and scarcely ever came there. Edward Oswald and Ena,

as a matter of fact, had never been to Handforth Towers at all, although Willy had paid a short visit once, a year or two back, with his mother.

Even this invitation had been unexpected—just one of the general's impulses. And Willy, at least, was enthusiastic.

"You'll absolutely love the Towers!" he had declared. "Just the place for Christmas. Great, panelled rooms—oaken rafters—open fireplaces. A lovely place, I can tell you!"

Willy had been there, and he knew. And it just suited Edward Oswald to bring a crowd of Remove fellows, so that he could show them that the Handforth family had its big country mansions. Yes, as good as Glen-thorne Manor and Tregellis Castle and Somerton Abbey, by George! Weren't the Handforths one of the oldest families in the country?

The leader of Study D had felt that it was his turn to show off a bit—to let St. Frank's know that the Handforths could do things as well as the titled aristocracy. So Edward Oswald had been in the best of humours ever since the journey had started.

Not that it had been a journey to sweeten anybody's temper. Fog and slush in London—jostling crowds at Liverpool Street—delays in getting out of the metropolis—and then further delays all down the line. And the train, packed almost to suffocation, after another tedious wait at Norwich, had finally reached North Walsham at two minutes past ten, instead of in mid-evening.

Naturally, all plans were upset, for the party was supposed to reach Handforth Towers for dinner. But who cared? It was only two nights to Christmas, and one couldn't expect anything else but delays at such a time. And there was such an abundance of good humour in the air that nobody minded.

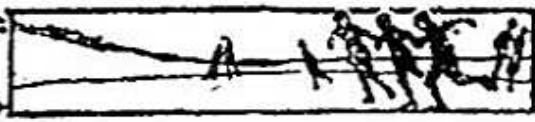
The snow alone had put Handforth and his party into the best of spirits. For this was the kind of Christmas weather they had hoped for, and which had seemed so remote in muddy London. The surprise was a very welcome one. North Walsham station was already converted into a fairyland of whiteness, with lights gleaming on the snow, and with myriads of flakes still steadily falling.

With Handforth still leading, the St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls went down the stairs—for the station itself was on a higher level than the road—jostled along the subway, and emerged into the station yard.

"Hang on here a bit," said Handforth briskly. "I'll locate the cars."

There were several big motor-cars waiting, and Handforth reckoned that his uncle had sent at least three to collect the young guests—perhaps four. Nobody would mind a little crowding, anyhow. And it was only a journey of about two and a half miles.

"Handforth Towers?" asked Edward Oswald briskly, as he ran up to the first car



he saw, and accosted the chauffeur. "We're all here—"

"Sorry, sir," said the man. "I'm from Bacton."

Two other cars that Handforth approached moved off as he prepared to put his questions. And when he looked round he found that the remaining ones were already filling with people.

"Rummy!" he said, frowning. "What's the idea?"

Willy came hurrying up.

"Haven't you located them yet?" he asked.

"No, but they must be here," said Handforth gruffly. "Uncle Gregory wouldn't be late—"

"Late!" echoed Willy. "I expect the cars came here at the right time, found the train was going to be hours late, and went back again. It might be a charabanc, you know—or a wagonette."

Handforth looked indignant.

"This is a nice go!" he said warmly. "Just when I wanted to show the chaps that the Handforths could do things in style, too! Not a car here for us—and nothing in sight! By George!" he added, pointing into the distance. "What's that place?"

"That's another station. I believe," said Willy.

"Rats! They wouldn't have two in a little town like this—"

"My dear chap, there are two railways, and —"

"That's it, then!" interrupted Handforth, with a look of relief.

"The cars have gone to the wrong station! You wait here, and I'll hurry off and fetch 'em. I'll give the chauffeurs a piece of my mind, too!"

Willy shook his head.

"Don't kid yourself, Ted!" he said. "No car would go to the other station, unless the driver was mad. This is the one for the London trains. We'd better ask here, and see if we can find out anything."

By this time all the cars had gone, and most of the foot-passengers, too. The station yard and the booking-office were beginning to take on a cold, deserted appearance. That active bustle of a few minutes ago had died down. The boys and girls were waiting just outside, curious, but too polite to make any pointed inquiries.

"Shan't be a tick!" said Handforth, as he ran into the booking-office.

He knocked against a porter.

"Oh, I say, do you know anything about the cars from Handforth Towers?" he asked breathlessly. "Have they been here earlier, or something?"

"Haven't seen a sign of them, sir," replied the porter. "There ain't been any cars here from Handforth Towers—not one all day, if it comes to that."

"Well, it's queer!" said Handforth, turning aside. "Thanks."

He went out again, and looked at the waiting group.

"There's a mistake, or something," he said apologetically. "There aren't any cars here to take us to the Towers."

"That's all right—we can walk," said Dick Hamilton.

"Walk!" roared Handforth.

"Do you think I'm going to let my guests walk nearly three miles? It's a mystery to me! I sent a wire this morning, and that was on top of a letter that I wrote two or three days ago. Uncle Gregory gave the right orders, I'll bet a quid. Somebody else must have blundered."

"Oh, well, what are we going to do?" asked Ena practically. "It's no good waiting here, is it? If the cars are on the way, we might as well be walking, and we shall meet them."

"But we don't know the way!" objected Handforth, greatly worried.

"We know that uncle lives at Trunton," said Ena.

"And I know the way, too," put in Willy briskly.

"Didn't I come here a year or two ago? Straight through the town, and then along the Mundesley road. Come on! We shall get cold feet if we stand about here."

And the whole party, much to Handforth's grief, started walking. This was not what he had desired at all!

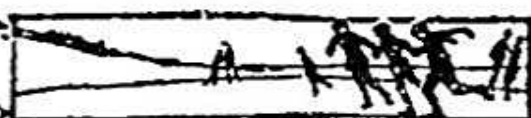


CHAPTER 2.

THE TRUDGE THROUGH THE SNOW!

NBODY said anything, but it was generally felt that something was rather wrong.

For, after all, when a gentleman invited a large party to his coun-



try house for Christmas, and when that country house was nearly three miles from the station, it was only common courtesy to provide a conveyance of some kind.

But Handforth and his fellow guests had arrived at the station, and not only was there no conveyance, but no message—no indication, even, that the party was expected. It was certainly curious.

And while the boys and girls started on their trudge in the best of spirits—three miles through the snow was nothing to them—Handforth himself was thoughtful and concerned. As they passed the adjoining station, he made certain that there were no cars waiting there. So they went on into the little town.

"Don't look so peeved, Ted," said Willy, as he fell into step beside his major, with Church and McClure on the other side.

"I am peeved!" growled Handforth. "And unless Uncle Gregory can give a jolly good explanation, I shall tick him off for this! What does he think we are—tramps? Does he expect us to walk miles and miles——"

"It may be one of his jokes," said Willy.

"Jokes!"

"Well, Uncle Greg is a bit of a sport, you know," Willy reminded him. "A pretty boisterous edition of the pater, if it comes to that. Why, if we stopped still and listened, we should probably hear him talking to his guests at the Towers! He's got a voice like yours, Ted—only more so!"

"Never you mind about my voice," said Handforth, all the sunshine having disappeared from his countenance. "I'm worried about this affair. It's so—so rude! I mean, inviting us down, and then neglecting—Hullo! What's this?"

He paused in his stride as they were passing a garage.

"I'll tell you what!" he went on. "We'll hire some cars——"

"Not likely!" interrupted Church firmly. "Don't be such an ass, Handy! There's been a misunderstanding, I expect, and nobody minds. These things do happen at Christmas time."

"All the same, it's too bad——"

"Nonsense!" laughed McClure. "Let's go on."

Nobody would hear of putting his suggestion into practice. The bulk of the luggage had been sent on days ago, and there was nothing heavier to carry than a few attaché-cases and small parcels.

North Walsham was very quiet, for most of the worthy inhabitants were already in bed. Willy, who was the possessor of an excellent memory, knew the way without any necessity to make inquiries. And this was a fortunate circumstance. For, after the town had been left behind, they were not likely to meet any pedestrians.

They passed through the lower end of the market square, and then turned down the

short slope and bore off sharply to the right, on the Mundesley road.

"Queer little old place, this," said Irene, as she found Handforth by her side. "Here we go round another curve now—and not a soul about! I hope Willy knows the way properly."

"If Uncle Gregory had sent the cars, Willy wouldn't have needed to know the way!" said Handforth, who was still thoroughly upset. "This is a bit too thick, Irene! It doesn't matter so much about the chaps, perhaps——"

"Well, we girls aren't grumbling," smiled Irene.

"Then you ought to grumble!"

"We're just as capable of walking as you are," declared Irene, with a certain amount of spirit. "You needn't think we're afraid of a little exercise. If it came to that, I'll bet we could walk you fellows off your feet!"

"That's not the point, Renie," said Handforth. "You oughtn't to have to walk at all. I simply can't understand——"

"Give it a rest, Ted!" pleaded Willy. "Don't keep chewing the rag, old man! We're walking, and if you ask me, it's just one of uncle's games."

"Then I don't think much of his sense of humour!" retorted Handforth.

"My dear old son, it's just what Uncle Gregory would do!" chuckled Willy. "You know what a beggar he is for walking."

"Is he?"

"Well, he walks ten miles every day of his life, anyhow," grinned Willy. "When I came down here that time, I was nearly without any feet by the time I left! It would be just like him to make a crowd of healthy school-boys and schoolgirls walk three miles through the snow."

This seemed a very likely explanation of the little mystery, and so the subject was dismissed. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Handforth's original fuss, nobody would have thought anything at all.

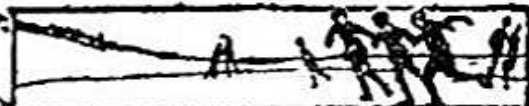
Indeed, this trudge along the quiet, snowy roads was rather fun.

And even Handforth's spirits bucked up considerably after the town had been left behind. They didn't meet a soul, and there had been little or no traffic along the roads, so the white ribbon stretched in front of them, in all its fresh glory.

Somewhere behind the clouds there was a full moon, and the diffused light was sufficient to show them the road and the hedges. And the countryside was assuming a wonderful aspect, with the snow clinging to every gate and every tree and twig.

"It seems to me that we're going to have a tremendous lot of snow before we've done," said Reggie Pitt, who was escorting Doris Berkeley. "The wind's rising, too—Whoa! Look out for this flurry!"

"It's a regular storm!" laughed Doris.



"A fine night to be walking!" said Handforth gruffly.

"If you don't dry up about walking, Ted, we'll drop you into one of these ditches!" said Willy, with exasperation. "Uncle probably failed to send the cars because of the snow. You ought to know what it's like, motoring on frosty roads—My hat! Blessed if I'm not bringing up the subject myself!"

"Forget it!" advised Dick Hamilton. "We shall be there soon."

Before long, they were entering the little hamlet of Swaffield, where everything was silent and dark. There were only a few houses, and then the road bore sharply round to the right, although a small lane branched off straight ahead.

"This way!" said Willy, as the crowd was automatically keeping to the road. "Up this lane!"

"Rot!" said his major. "Uncle Gregory wouldn't live up a cart track like that!"

"You fathead, this is the main road to Trunton!" said Willy. "It may be a bit narrow, but it's a jolly good road. It's like your nerve to call it a cart track!"

"Sure you're right, Willy?" asked Church.

"Haven't I been here before?"

"You might have forgotten——"

"I might, but I haven't!" interrupted Willy coldly. "Is this the road to Trunton, or not? It is! If you don't believe me, you can look at that sign-post! Handforth Park is in Trunton, and the Towers are in the park. Is there anything else you'd like to know? Of course," he added sarcastically, "we'll go to Mundesley, if you like, and then walk round from there. It'll be about three miles further, but what do we care?"

Nobody disputed Willy's knowledge after that. And they all walked up the lane, while the snow continued to fall with greater density than ever. A fairly high wind was springing up now, too, adding to the wintry nature of the night. They came upon drifts, and in some places they were obliged to plunge almost knee-deep through the piled-up snow.

The coast, of course, was only a mile or two away, this part of Norfolk being cold and bleak throughout the winter. The northeasterly wind was coming right off the sea, carrying further loads of snow with it.

But the young people were warm enough—the exercise alone ensured this. And although the hour was late, there was nothing to worry about. They would soon be sitting down to a wonderful meal amid dazzling electric lights, to the accompaniment of the cracklings from the great log fire. It was something to look forward to—something to make them put their best foot foremost.

"We don't go right into the village of Trunton," said Willy. "As far as I can remember, we turn off about half a mile this side of it——"

"As far as you can remember?" interrupted Handforth. "That sounds cheerful! It's my opinion that you're going to lose us!"

"We're not interested in your opinions, Ted."

"That's what you'll do, you young bounder!" went on Handforth, with conviction. "You'll get yourself hopelessly lost, and we shall probably have to trudge along these roads all night! My only hat! Fancy having to rely on my minor, you chaps!"

Edward Oswald looked upon it as a terrible indignity. He was the big man of this party—and he had to play second fiddle to Willy! Having never been to the Towers himself, he was obliged to trust his minor to guide them there safely. It was too thick for words.

However, Willy seemed to be doing fairly well; for after about another mile, he called a general halt. An ancient gateway stood on their left, with high trees, stark and bare, on either side.

"What's this?" asked Handforth.

"We've arrived," said Willy, grinning.

"This is the entrance to the park."

"Good egg!"

"We're here at last, then,"

"Now for a good old feed."

The boys and the girls eagerly pushed on and entered the drive. But they were aware of a vague feeling of surprise. Again, this was not quite what they had expected. For that gateway had a forbidding aspect, and the drive itself was dark, eerie, and somehow mysterious.



CHAPTER 3.

RATHER STAGGERING.

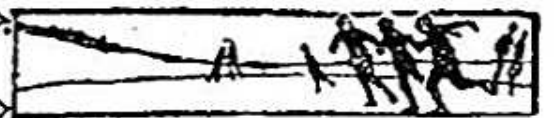
SILENCE fell upon the boys and girls as they walked up that drive.

There were bleak yew-trees on either side, and these reached their leafless branches up towards the sky, forbidding and ghostly. The increasing wind was whistling through the barren branches in a manner that created a curiously creepy sensation. That drive was hardly the kind of spot to be in at night, alone.

But there were a score here, and still they felt subdued.

And then, as they turned a bend, the yew-trees no longer impeded their view. Handforth Towers stood within sight—a gloomy, gabled structure which was not at all like the picture which the guests had in their minds.

There were two sentinel towers standing out against the background of sky, and the whole building looked more like a prison



than anything else. There were mullioned windows, and most of the walls were overcrowded with clinging ivy. But, most remarkable of all, only one dim light was showing!

"I say, this is a bit queer, isn't it?" murmured Willy into his major's private ear as they grew nearer.

"Queer isn't the word!" replied Handforth. "Everything's been queer, ever since we arrived at the station; but this takes the cake! Only one miserable little light! I thought Uncle Gregory was having a big party, in addition to us."

"That's what I understood, too," murmured Willy. "I say, do you think he could have made a mistake? Perhaps he isn't expecting us until to-morrow?"

"But I wired!" said Edward Oswald.

"Yes," agreed Willy. "That's nothing."

If the three Handforths were growing a little uneasy, so were the other young people. But they said nothing. After all, they were guests, and they knew their manners. And it wasn't fair to judge too soon.

"The place looks pretty awful, but you can never tell," whispered Reggie Pitt into Doris' ear. "It's past eleven, too, and I expect the greater part of the household is in bed. Let's hope for the best."

"I'm jolly glad to be here, anyhow," smiled Doris. "Oh, goodness! I'm tired! I didn't quite realise it until now."

She was not the only one. They had all had a day of rushing about—up early, and then hurrying and scurrying over last details, followed by a tiresome journey, and this long walk. It was something to be thankful for, at least, that they had arrived safely at their destination.

"Look here, Willy," said Handforth grimly, as a sudden idea smote him. "I believe you've made a mistake. This isn't Handforth Towers at all. You've brought us to the wrong place. By George! That's the explanation of it."

Willy grunted.

"I'll trouble you, Ted, to give me credit for being sane!" he said coldly. "Do you think I could forget a house like this? I recognised the towers in a flash. There's not another mansion of this type in the whole county. This is Handforth Towers, and thank goodness we've arrived! My hat! Won't I eat some supper! Just watch me!"

By this time they had arrived in front of the great porch. There was a wide gravel frontage, now one clean sweep of freshly-fallen snow. No footprints were visible—proving that there had been nobody here for hours.

"Oh, well!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath.

He thumped vigorously upon the door. In fact, he thundered upon it, releasing some of his pent-up exasperation. He was wild. These fellows had come down here to see

Handforth Towers, the wonderful ancestral home of his uncle—and this was the spectacle they were confronted with! It was totally opposed to what Handforth had planned, in his own mind.

"They—they don't seem to hear!" murmured Irene, after a wait.

"Then they must be deaf, or dead!" said Pitt. "Supposing we all have a bang? They might be in bed. It's nearly eleven."

Several of them helped Handforth, and they made such a noise upon the great door that the echoes were awakened.

"This is awful!" muttered Handforth miserably.

Then Irene gripped his arm.

"There's somebody coming!" she said, with relief. "Splendid!"

Everybody listened. Faint footfalls were heard on the other side of the heavy door, and then came the sound of great bolts being drawn back, followed by the rattle of a heavy chain.

The juniors and the girls looked at one another. Handforth gazed at Willy with a peculiar concentration, and Willy scratched his head.

"More like Newgate than anything else!" breathed Willy.

Then the door was pulled back, and a bent, wizened old man stood there, holding a guttering candle while he peered out into the crowded porch.

"My goodness!" breathed Handforth, aghast.

"Ah, so here you are then, at last!" said the old man in a creaky voice. "Ay, and about time, too! I thought ye was never coming."

"Is—is this Handforth Towers?" demanded Handforth, still sceptical.

"Sure enough, young sir," replied the ancient. "I take it that you're Master Edward?"

"Why, it's Rodd!" exclaimed Willy, pushing forward. "Hallo, Rodd, old son! You know me, don't you?"

The old man looked at Willy severely.

"Ay, an' I ain't like to forget you, either, Master Willy," he replied in an injured tone. "Many's the dance ye led me——"

"Ahem! That's all right," said Willy hastily. "This is Rodd, you chaps. Girls, this is Rodd—Uncle Gregory's butler. Once seen, never forgotten! Walk in. There's welcome on the mat!"

"By George! Then you were right," said Handforth blankly.

"As usual," grinned Willy calmly.

They all crowded into the great hall—a vast, gloomy place, full of dense shadows, and unutterably chilly. Rodd closed the door with a dull thud that sounded strangely sinister—particularly as he shot the enormous bolts and fixed the rattling chain.

"Just a minute, Rodd," said Handforth,



Again Handforth felt the sinister grip on his ankle. "Church! Quick!" he yelled. In great alarm his chums rushed out with a lighted candle—and at that moment the grip relaxed and Handy staggered forward. What was the meaning of these mysterious happenings?

feeling that it was up to him to assert himself in a really decisive way. "We know we've come to the right house—that's one point settled. But what's the idea? Where's Uncle Gregory? Why isn't he here to welcome us?"

The old butler hesitated and looked uneasy.

"The master says that you were coming this evening. Master Edward," he replied. "He gave me to understand that over twenty of ye——"

"Yes, I know; but where is Uncle Gregory?"

Again the old man hesitated.

"The master was called away," he said, his wizened face taking on a stubborn look. "He was called away sudden-like, but he told me to let ye know that he'd be back in good time for Christmas. 'Tell the boys and girls, Rodd, that I'll be with 'em for Christmas,' he says. That's how it is, Master Edward."

Handforth stared.

"But—but it's so strange!" he exclaimed. "Why should Uncle Gregory be called away like this? And where did he go to?"

The old butler became very dignified.

"It's not my habit, young sir, to ask the master his business!" he replied stiffly. "If ye'll all hang up your overcoats, I'll escort

ye into the dining-hall. Supper has been waiting for two hours."

"The train was late," explained Willy.

Then he broke off, noticing a rather alarmed expression on Irene Manners' face. The other girls, too, appeared to be uneasy. And Willy saw that they were all looking down the great, shadowed hall.

"My hat!" murmured Willy.

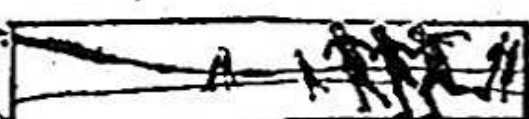
An old woman was standing down there—a bent old hag, she seemed, and she held another guttering candle. She reminded the girls of some old witch, particularly in that eerie atmosphere.

"Oh!" breathed Irene. "Who—who is she?"

"You needn't be scared," grinned Willy. "That's Mrs. Rodd, the housekeeper. A perfectly harmless old bird, I can assure you."

The butler introduced his wife a moment later, requesting the girls to place themselves in her care, so that they could remove their outer clothing, and prepare for supper. So the girls followed the old lady up the great staircase, and vanished. The juniors, in the meantime, were shedding their overcoats and generally making themselves at home.

But Handforth, standing aside, gave Willy a hard look—and Willy returned it with interest.



"This is awful!" murmured Handforth.

"Hardly awful, old man, but certainly a bit on the squiffy side," agreed Willy. "Did you like the way old Rodd answered you about Uncle Greg?"

"No, I jolly well didn't!" replied Handforth darkly. "It's my opinion there's something fishy about the whole giddy business."

"Now, Ted, don't get any of your melodramatic ideas," said Willy, with his usual level-headed calmness. "There's nothing fishy about it. It's hardly what we expected, but there's nothing wrong. Rodd was left with his instructions, and every preparation was made for our arrival. The only thing I can't understand is why Uncle Gregory should have gone off unexpectedly. But he'll explain when he turns up, so why worry?"

But Edward Oswald Handforth did worry, he worried very much.



CHAPTER 4.

AT THE HOUR OF MIDNIGHT.

REGGIE PITT held out his hands to the blaze.

"By Jove, this is something like the real thing!" he said cheerily.

"It only shows you mustn't judge too hastily," smiled Dick Hamilton. "You'd better turn your back on the table, Tommy—it's dangerous to look that way. We mustn't start until the girls come down."

"I hope they won't be long," Tommy Watson said hungrily. "I'm starving."

"They were in the dining-room—a great, oaken-raftered apartment with panelled walls. None of the juniors had troubled to wash or tidy themselves up. They were so hungry that all they wanted to do was to sit down at table. Besides, Rodd had not suggested any adjournment to the bed-rooms, and Handforth, of course, had never given the subject a thought.

A great log fire was blazing in the open grate, and the long table was packed with good, homely food. Indeed, the sight of that table had put everybody into a good humour. Uncle Gregory could wait until to-morrow. When all was said and done, he knew his duties as a host, at all events.

In the centre of the table stood an old-fashioned candelabra, with a dozen candles burning in it. It was provided with a great shade, which cast the light down upon the table, concentrating it there. The rest of the great apartment was in deep shadow.

The wind was still rising, and it could be heard whining round the old mansion, and a shutter would occasionally rattle. There was a feeling of mystery in the very atmosphere. But, at the moment, the table was the great attraction.

"Here we are!" said a cheery voice in the doorway.

The girls came in, looking bright and attractive after a quick tidy-up. And, somehow, their very presence dispelled a great deal of the gloom of the place. They brightened the old dining-room wonderfully.

"Food!" said Doris. "Oh, lead me to it!"

"Bravo, girls!" smiled Reggie Pitt. "This must be a record."

"When you're hungry," said Mary Summers, "you hurry."

And so they all sat down at the great table, chatting and laughing. The log fire crackled and roared, and the butler busied himself with the wants of his charges. Mrs. Rodd hovered in the background, presiding over the groaning sideboard. Hot coffee warmed up the guests wonderfully, and everybody voted the supper to be fit for a king.

"Didn't Uncle Gregory tell you anything else, Rodd?" asked Handforth, when the keen edge had been removed from his appetite, and when the others were fairly settled over the supper. "When did he go away?"

The old butler was trembling slightly.

"If ye'll do me a favour, Master Edward, I'd rather not say anything about the master," he replied, with a quick glance at his wife. "The master told me to make ye at home, an' to look after you all well until he came back. And that I'll do, young sir, to the best o' my ability, as ye may be sure."

"Of course, Rodd; I know that," said Handforth, nodding. "But what of the other guests?"

"The other guests, Master Edward?"

"I thought uncle had invited lots of people," said Handforth.

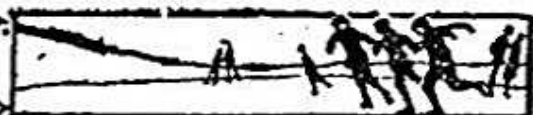
"There ain't any arrived, young sir—exceptin', of course, your good selves," replied the old butler, shaking his head. "Maybe they'll come to-morrow—to-morrow bein' Christmas Eve. The master knows best, sir."

Handforth felt rather helpless.

"But what about the servants?" he asked, trying to decide another point that had been worrying him. "I always thought that uncle maintained a big staff at Handforth Towers?"

"The missus and I are the only servants here," said Rodd, with another quick glance at his wife. "But we'll look after you, Master Edward, never fear. More ham, young sir?" he added, turning to Pitt. "Ah, it's the veal pie as you'd like, I dare say."

Handforth gave it up. After all, it was hardly the thing to question the old butler like this, in front of everybody else. But, to Edward Oswald's mind, the whole situation was growing more and more unpleasant. The other fellows and the girls, however, were finding nothing to grumble about. They weren't so sensitive as Handforth. He was a fellow who had a habit of forming all



sorts of exaggerated ideas in advance. And then he would be disappointed when he came face to face with the real thing.

"What about Christmas decorations?" he demanded, by way of changing the subject. "I don't see any about."

"The master didn't give any orders, sir," replied Rodd.

Handforth peered into the gloom, but he could see that the panelled walls were bare. There was not even a picture. And he had expected everything to be so different!

He had anticipated brilliant lights everywhere, hosts of servants, and numerous other guests.

He had expected the rooms to be festooned with holly and mistletoe, and endless carnival decorations of brilliant colouring.

And the reality was so gloomy—so drab! No other guests, and only an aged butler and an old witch of a housekeeper! To Handforth it was a shock, and to the others it was a mild surprise, with, perhaps, a tinge of disappointment in it.

For, after they had satisfied their appetites, they began to feel that it would be impossible to have much fun in this grim old house, with its shadows and its rattling shutters. Already they were beginning to feel the atmosphere of mystery creeping into their bones.

"As it's so late, young sirs, I am suggesting that you should excuse the young ladies at once," announced the butler, when supper was over. "The master expressly urged Mrs. Redd to look after the young ladies, and get them to bed well before midnight."

"Why before midnight?" asked Irene curiously.

"The master was very precise on the point, missie," replied Rodd. "'Before midnight, Rodd,' he says. 'Make certain that it's before midnight.' The missus is waiting now, young ladies."

Irene turned to the others.

"Well, I suppose we'd better go," she said, with an uncomfortable little laugh. "Good-night, Ted; good-night, everybody!"

All the girls cheerily said good-night. But they were looking just a little scared as they went out, escorted by the strange old housekeeper. Rodd went out, too, leaving the juniors entirely to themselves.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth in a thick voice.

"Anything the matter?" asked Pitt politely.

Handforth stared at the others.

"Yes, there is," he replied. "Everything's the matter! Oh, what's the good of keeping up this pretence? I tell you, you chaps, I'm jolly worried! Where's my uncle? And what was the idea of leaving these two old fossils to welcome us, and practically act as host and hostess?"

The juniors murmured their sympathy.

"It's no good pretending," went on Handforth. "You're just as surprised as I am—aren't you? Come on, speak out!"

"Well, yes," admitted Dick, Hamilton. "But we didn't want to say anything—"

"Say it!" interrupted Edward Oswald. "I shan't mind. We're all friends, aren't we? Don't you feel something—something—"

"Yes," said Church, with a little shiver. "Something. But I'm the same as you, Handy—I can't give it a name."

They were all glad that Handforth had made it possible for them to talk freely.

"Didn't you know about this, Willy?" asked Reggie Pitt, turning to the Third-Former.

"Know about what?"

"Well, about the peculiar gloom of the place—"

"There was nothing gloomy about Handforth Towers when I came before," replied Willy. "There were heaps of servants, too—and brilliant lights everywhere. I'll admit it seems jolly queer this time. But you mustn't take too much notice of Ted—you mustn't get any silly ideas."

"You can go and eat coke!" snapped his major. "I may be inclined to jump to conclusions over trifles, but this isn't a trifle. Where's uncle? That's what I want to know!"

He peered round at the door, and turned back.

"Another point," he said, lowering his voice. "What was the idea of insisting upon the girls going to bed before midnight? Now, there's a rummy bit of business, if you like!"

"It did seem—well, unusual," admitted Dick.

"Unusual!" breathed Handforth. "I didn't like it! In fact, I was on the point of telling old Rodd to mind his own dashed business! Can't the girls go to bed when they like, without being ordered?"

"Well, they weren't ordered—" began McClure.

"It almost amounted to the same thing," declared Handforth gruffly. "And before midnight, mark you! *Why?* What the dickens is there to be afraid of about midnight?"

"It's the hour of ghostly things," said Reggie Pitt solemnly.

"Here, chuck it!" said Church, with a glance over his shoulder.

"Yes, we don't want to talk about ghosts," smiled Dick Hamilton. "Of course, there's nothing in it, but in this atmosphere of gloom—"

"What's that?" gasped De Valerie, swinging round.

"Only the window rattling," said Handforth, with a start. "You ass, what's the idea of making me jump—"

He broke off as the grandfather clock in the hall commenced booming out the hour.

"Midnight!" breathed somebody.

And, somehow, a complete silence fell. The juniors, grouped round the great log fire, instinctively held their breaths, and listened to the strokes. And then, as the last one tolled out, the fellows looked at one another.

Something sounded in the distance—something in a far part of the old house. It was a cry, which rose to a shrill wail, and then died throbbingly away on the air.



CHAPTER 5.

THE LADY OF THE TOWER.

"HAT—what was that?" muttered Handforth shakily.

Nobody replied.

"You heard something, didn't you?" went on

Handforth, looking round. "I say, didn't you chaps hear—"

"It was only the wind, I suppose," said Dick Hamilton.

"The wind!" muttered Handforth. "That wasn't the wind! It—it sounded like—like— Look here, this place is getting on my nerves!"

He rushed to the door, flung it open, and ran out into the hall. Then he came to a sudden halt, and fell back. The other juniors had followed him, and they all held their breath.

The hall was almost in the dark. A single candle burned on a little table on the far side, and its flickering light, in a draught, was very unsteady. And there, half-way up the stairs, was a figure—a shape.

"Who—who's that?" asked Handforth, with a gulp.

The figure descended a few stairs.

"It's only me, young sir!" said a wheezy voice.

"Mrs. Rodd!" said Handforth, with relief. "I say, you needn't creep about like that," he added, with a note of indignation in his voice. "You gave me a turn for a second. Not that I didn't know who you were. What was that scream we heard a minute ago, Mrs. Rodd?"

"Just as midnight was striking," said McClure.

The old lady came down the remaining stairs, and in the faint light the juniors could see that her wrinkled face was uneasy. Her eyes were wide open, and staring.

"The Lady of the Tower!" she murmured fearfully.

"What?" muttered Handforth.

"The Lady of the Tower!" said the old woman, as she pushed past. "'Twas the Lady of the Tower!"

She went down the hall and vanished in

the dense shadows in the rear. A door closed, and the juniors stood there, more uneasy than ever.

"Why can't we have more light?" said Handforth fiercely.

He looked at the candle, which was now burning steadily.

"What's the good of a miserable candle—"

He broke off, for, without any apparent reason, the candle abruptly went out. It had been burning with a steady flame, proving that no draught was now affecting it. The hall was plunged into blackness.

"My only hat!" said Handforth shakily.

"Let's get back into the dining-room," said Church, making a dash for the door.

They all crowded in, glad to be back in the lighted room. Here, at least, it was comparatively cheery, with the big candelabra and the crackling fire, which sent the shadows dancing over the oak rafters of the ceiling.

"The Lady of the Tower!" said Handforth in a queer voice. "What did she mean?"

"Goodness knows!" said Willy, trying to keep his voice firm. "Dash it, we're not superstitious, or—"

"Where's Rodd?" interrupted Handforth. "Where the dickens has Rodd got to? Isn't there a bell here, or something? Can anybody see a rope, or a bell-push?"

"Steady, old man!" said Dick Hamilton quietly. "Don't get in a flurry! I expect Rodd will come back. There doesn't seem to be any bell-rope."

Handforth went to the door again, and was about to walk out when he paused on the threshold. It was black and mysterious out there.

"Rodd!" he shouted. "Rodd! Where are you?"

His voice echoed eerily, but there was no reply.

"Confound it!" muttered Handforth. "I'll tell him something when he comes!"

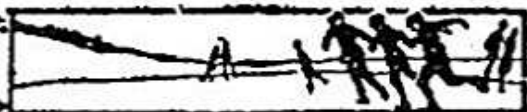
He walked out into the hall and tried to feel his way down to that door which the house-keeper had used—a door obviously leading into the domestic quarters. But before he got there something seemed to touch his face. He halted in his tracks, and his heart leapt.

"Who's that?" he muttered.

He took another step forward, and as he did so there was a thud on the other side of the hall, and he had an extraordinary sensation of someone gripping his left ankle.

"Oh!" he breathed unsteadily.

And then a door opened only two yards away from him, and Rodd appeared, carrying a candle. Handforth stared down at his feet, but there was nothing there—nothing to account for that ghostly grip, which had affected him only a second earlier. He took a deep breath. And Rodd, with a creaky



exclamation, stood staring at the wall. "The picture!" he muttered.

Handforth turned round, and saw that a heavy picture was lying on the oak floorboards. So this was the 'hud he had heard. That picture had fallen down. But why?

"What—what was that scream we heard at midnight?" asked Handforth, pulling himself together with an effort. "Didn't you hear it, Rodd? Your wife came downstairs, and said something about the Lady of the Tower."

"The Lady of the Tower!" shouted Rodd huskily.

He threw up his hands, and turned on his heel, and fled. Handforth was again in the dark, and his ears were struck by that throbbing cry once more, which seemed to come from somewhere upstairs. It hung on the air, and died away into a whispering wail.

With his heart fairly pumping within him, Handforth ran back into the dining-room and slammed the door. His face was pale, and he bent down and felt his left ankle.

"By George!" he panted. "This—this place is haunted!"

"The Lady of the Tower!" murmured Church, going nearer to the fire. "That's—that's what Mrs. Rodd meant! Oh, Handy, why didn't you tell us?"

"Tell you?"

"It wasn't fair to invite us to a haunted house——"

"I didn't know it was haunted!" exclaimed Handforth indignantly. "Did you, Willy?"

"I don't know it is haunted," replied Willy steadily. "There may be something to account for that rummy sound. Don't forget it's windy to-night, and in an old house like this, any peculiar piece of architecture might create an echo, or a whistling sound. If you'll take my advice, you chaps, you'll think about something cheerful, and not about ghosts!"

"Something grabbed my ankle out in the hall!" said Handforth. "I was standing there, in the dark, just when that picture fell."

"Rats! It was your imagination——"

"I ought to know best, Dick Hamilton!" said Edward Oswald. "Something gripped my ankle, I tell you! And that candle went out—without anybody blowing it or anything! I don't believe in ghosts, but—Listen! What's that?"

The other juniors jumped, and all became silent. In spite of themselves, they couldn't help feeling scared. The very air was full of suspense and tension. And as they held their breath, they became aware of a strange, unaccountable sound in the room. It seemed to come from one of the dim corners—rising and falling, and throbbing on the air.

"Oh, it's in here now!" whispered Church, turning pale.

Dick Hamilton gripped himself.

"It's something—in that corner!" he muttered.

He pointed, and the others looked with startled eyes, expecting to see they knew not what. But the corner was in deep shadow, and only that unnameable sound came out of it.

"I—I can't stand this!" muttered Handforth thickly. "Who's game to come over into this corner with me? We've got to find out what that sound is!"

There was a moment's tense silence.

"I'll go with you, Handy," said Dick steadily.

"Same here!" said Reggie Pitt.

The others hung back, waiting. Dick Hamilton pulled something out of his pocket as the three advanced into the corner. And Dick pressed a switch, and snapped on his electric torch. The darkness was shattered, and a bulky object resolved itself into a great armchair. The light played into its depths.

Handforth gave vent to a violent roar.

"Archie!" he hooted indignantly.

"The ghost!" grinned Dick.

Everybody was so relieved that they broke into a nervous laugh, and Archie, awakened by Handforth's roar, blinked and sat up.

"What-ho!" he said dazedly. "Good gad! A thunderstorm, what?"

"You—you fathead!" panted Handforth. "Was that you making that sound? It was your beastly breathing, you slacking rotter! And—and we thought——"

"Odds apologies and regrets!" said Archie Glenthorne, jumping up. "A thousand of the best, Handforth, old lad! I mean to say, an unpardonable offence—dropping off into the good old dreamless without permish! I mean, a chappie has his duties to his host!"

"Oh, all right, I forgive you!" said Handforth gruffly.

Willy looked round and smiled.

"Don't think I'm trying to be clever," he said, "but doesn't that just show you?"

"Doesn't what show us?" demanded his major.

"Well, there was Archie, taking a nap in that chair—a perfectly natural thing for anybody to do," explained Willy. "And what did you all think? You heard him breathing, and because the corner was dark, you thought he was some ghost! The imagination can do an awful lot, if you let it get away with you."

"Willy's right," said Dick Hamilton, nodding. "Good for you, Willy!"

"One moment, old cheese!" said Archie stiffly. "Am I to understand, dash it, that you mistook the Last of the Glenthornes for a bally ghost? Odds insults and slurs! Somewhat near the edge, I mean. Not only fruity, but absolutely ripe."

Willy grinned.

"Never mind, Archie," he said soothingly. "If Handforth Towers isn't haunted by anything worse than you, we shall sleep soundly enough to-night."



CHAPTER 6.

UP TO BED.

THAT little incident concerning Archie Glenthorne had undoubtedly shown the juniors the folly of giving way to imagination. And Willy's sensible warning was timely.

Nevertheless, the guests revealed a peculiar reluctance to go to bed. Perhaps they could not forget that that strange wail had come from somewhere upstairs. Besides, it was dark and gloomy up there.

"Let's stay round the fire for a bit," suggested Reggie Pitt, with a cheery note in his voice. "Let's tell a few yarns——"

"Ghost stories!" said De Valerie, with a grin.

"Stop that, you idiot!" growled Hamilton, with a glare.

"I was only joking," smiled Val.

"Well, you shouldn't joke like that," replied Dick gruffly. "We want to take our thoughts away from the subject of haunted houses as much as we can. Everything has helped to create the atmosphere of ghostliness. The wind outside, the wretched lighting of this place—no offence, Handy, old man—and the peculiar nature of Mr. and Mrs. Rodd. But there's really nothing wrong, so let's have a good old jaw about football."

"Or about our plans for Boxing Day," said Reggie Pitt. "Isn't there going to be a ball, or something? Handy told me there was a big fancy dress ball on the programme for Boxing night——"

"Fancy dress ball!" interrupted Handforth bitterly. "Some hopes!"

"But you said——"

"I said all sorts of things," admitted Handforth, with a mournful look. "But everything seems to be going wrong. I thought there would be heaps of people here, and that Uncle Gregory would welcome us, and that we should have the wireless on, and all sorts of other things. Why, I even thought that my uncle had engaged a special orchestra for the ball. I don't mind telling you fellows that it's a swindle."

"Hardly that, Handy——"

"An absolute swindle!" insisted Handforth. "Why, I wouldn't have invited you down if I'd known! I want to spend a merry Christmas—not a ghostly one! I'll bet you're all scared of going up to bed——"

"Oh, are we?" said a dozen voices.

"Of course, you'll deny it," growled Edward Oswald. "But all the same, you don't think much of the prospects. I don't mind admit-

ting that I'd rather be here, in front of the fire."

"We'd better not talk about——"

Dick Hamilton broke off as he felt a draught behind him, and as the candles gave a flicker. He looked round sharply, and the others turned their heads.

"The door's opened!" breathed Church, with a catch in his voice.

Slowly the great door was swinging open.

"If you're ready, young gentlemen," said a voice, "the bed-rooms are waiting."

Rodd appeared, and there were many breaths of relief.

"Can't you come in noisily, instead of creeping about like a cat?" asked Handforth, with a certain amount of irritation. "You're enough to give anybody the jumps, Rodd. We're not ready for bed yet," he added firmly.

"It's twelve-thirty, Master Edward," said Rodd steadily.

"That doesn't matter——"

"The bed-rooms are all ready, young sir."

"Well, they won't run away, I suppose?"

"The candles are lighted, Master Edward," continued Rodd, with a quiet, stately persistence. "It is an hour past my usual time for retiring, young sir. May I ask you to come?"

Handforth looked at the others, and then frowned.

"You can go to bed, Rodd," he said airily. "Don't wait up for us. Leave the candles in the hall, and——"

"Begging your pardon, Master Edward, but I must ask you to go to bed," said Rodd.

"Oh, look here——"

"The master insisted, young sir, that I should see you all abed before I put the lights out and went to my own room," declared Rodd. "I'm an old man, Master Edward, and I think I know best. If you will ask your young friends to come at once, I shall be obliged."

Even Handforth's obstinacy could hardly withstand this—especially as his companions got up and prepared to leave the dining-room. Old Rodd's request was tantamount to a command.

So, whether they wanted to go to bed or not, they were going. And they all felt that this was another adventure. So far they had only seen the hall and the dining-room. The upper part of the house was a sealed book to them.

"You needn't look so scared, you fat-heads!" said Willy, as he glanced severely at Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon. "What's the matter—afraid to go to bed? Frightened of the bogy man?"

They flushed with indignation.

"You rotter, Willy!" muttered Chubby.

"We're not scared!"

"I should hope not!" said Willy tartly, raising his voice so that the Remove fellows



"Look!" gasped Handforth hoarsely. Willy followed his brother's gaze, and he saw an uncanny apparition staring down at them from the square opening in the cellar above. It was a kind of skeleton face, with weird gaping eyes!

should hear him. "Scared, indeed! What about the girls? They went up to bed, didn't they? And they haven't come downstairs, screaming that their rooms are haunted! It would be a fine thing if we chaps were afraid to equal a bunch of girls!"

"Not so much talk, my lad!" said his major sternly. "Come on, all of you. By George!" he added, with an assumed yawn. "Half-past twelve! High time we were in bed, anyhow."

But Willy's words—apparently addressed to the two fags—had sunk in. The Remove fellows were certainly not going to show any hesitation when they realised that the girls had gone off to bed without the slightest quail. By this time they were probably sound asleep.

Out in the hall the table was full of candlesticks, with candles burning in each.

"We are going into the east wing, young sirs," said Rodd, as he invited them to take their candles. "Five bed-rooms have been prepared, with three beds in each. So if you will decide upon your own arrangements, we will go up at once."

"That's good," said Handforth. "You chaps with me?"

"Rather!" agreed Church and McClure.

The others soon came to their decisions, and a move was made upstairs. There were no lights, except those which they carried, and when they reached the landing, they could see corridors stretching away into the blackness. The wind was now howling more loudly than ever, and now and again a particularly violent flurry would boom round the house and shake it perceptibly.

"A wild night, young sirs," said the old butler, as he paused on the landing. "To your left, please. That is the east wing. The sleeping chambers are all adjoining—"

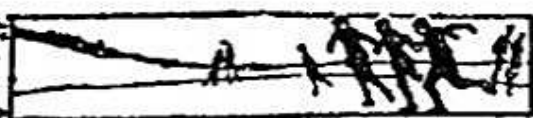
"Just a minute, Rodd," said Handforth grimly. "I want to know what your wife meant when she referred to the Lady of the Tower—"

"Hush!" breathed the old man, trembling.

"You bunked when I spoke to you before, but this time—"

"Hush, Master Edward!" quavered Rodd. "'Tis dangerous to speak of the Lady of the Tower. The very mention of her name may cause— Ah! I knew it! May we be saved on this night!"

He clutched at the heavy balustrade, and stared into one of the other corridors with frightened eyes. And before anybody could speak, that same unearthly cry arose—sound-



ing a little louder now, but just as mysterious and ghostly as before. - Indeed; it was even more terrifying because of its presence in the upper portion of the house.

"It's—it's down this corridor!" gasped Handforth, staring.

"The north wing!" muttered Rodd. "It's from the north tower——"

"Look here, Rodd!" interrupted Handforth tensely. "Is this house haunted?"

"Don't ask me, young sir—don't ask me!"

"But I am asking you."

"Then, Master Edward, I cannot reply," replied the old butler, trying to steady his voice. "I shall be pleased if you will respect my wishes."

"Well, there's one thing we can ask," put in Willy. "Where are the girls? We might as well know, in case of emergencies," he added, turning to the others. "They've got two bed-rooms, I suppose, Rodd?"

"Yes, Master Willy."

"Then where are they?"

The butler turned, and pointed.

"In the north wing, young sir," he replied unsteadily.

The juniors looked where Rodd was pointing. The north wing! This was a shock for them. Irene & Co. were sleeping in that wing, where the ghostly wail originated!



CHAPTER 7.

HANDFORTH—GHOST-HUNTER!
EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH started.

"By George, that was a good question of yours, Willy," he said, with a look of anxiety in his eyes. "So the girls are in the north wing, are they? Why did you put them there, Rodd?"

"The missus took them, young sir," replied the butler, "and it was the master who gave orders. The north wing is small, and there are only two chambers there—the doors being on the same side of the corridor, with a blank wall at the end. Have no fear, Master Edward. The young ladies are sleeping peacefully, I do not doubt."

"But—but that sound——"

Rodd shook his head, and looked rather sad.

"They did not hear," he replied softly. "The young ladies have not been disturbed. But we, perhaps—— 'Tis unwise, though, to speak on this subject. I bid you all good-night, young sirs."

He walked into the east wing, and there was nothing more to be said. Doors opened out on both sides, and the butler's words proved to be true. There were five bed-rooms ready, and three fellows went into each. Handforth & Co. closed their door, and for a moment or two there was silence.

"My goodness!" said Handforth, holding his candle aloft.

There was every reason for his surprise. The apartment contained a big, old-world bed—a four-poster with great hanging curtains, which only added to its gloominess. It was obviously supposed to accommodate the three of them. The room was draughty and cold. The carpet was almost ragged, and the rest of the furniture in the room was meagre and poor.

"Well, the bed looks all right," said Church, trying to be cheerful. "Better than one each. We shall be able to keep one another warm. But, I say, doesn't this room give you the shivers!" he added involuntarily.

"It gives me the pip!" retorted Handforth, with a growl. "It's—it's amazing! My Uncle Gregory has got pots of money, and this room simply yells of poverty! He's not a miser, either! He doesn't hoard his money up——"

"Perhaps he's not so rich as you think," said McClure. "Lots of these landed gentry are having a bad time of it. That's what my father says, anyhow. Although he's considered pretty well off, he has a hard job to make ends meet."

"We're not talking about your father—we're talking about my uncle," said Handforth coldly. "And he's rich—thundering rich! Wait a minute—I'm going to have a look at the other chaps—I want to see what their bed-rooms are like."

He went to the door and opened it.

"Hold on!" gasped Church. "Don't take the candle!"

"Afraid of the dark?"

"No—but it's not very cheerful without a candle, is it?" said Church gruffly. "Stick it on that little table, and leave the door open. Mac and I will be undressing."

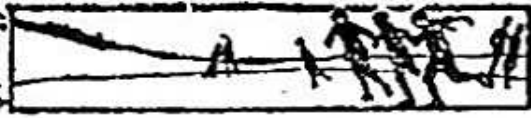
"Oh, all right," said Edward Oswald.

He went out, and had a look into the other bed-rooms. It was a shock for him to find that they were no better than his own. Indeed, two of them were much worse. They were draughty and damp, and the beds were wretched affairs. But the juniors made no complaints. They were Handy's guests, and they couldn't very well grumble.

"I'll have a talk to you fellows in the morning!" said Handforth, when they, in turn, asked him why he had come. "Good-night!"

He went back towards his own room, feeling grimly angry. This was a swindle, indeed! Instead of the Removites being awed and impressed by this wonderful Handforth mansion, they were probably regretting their acceptance of the invitation. It was an awful shock for poor old Handy.

Just before he reached his room he pulled up with a jerk. The door was still open, as Church had promised, and a thin gleam of



light came out into the wide corridor. And Handforth suddenly felt his hair tingle. For his ankle was gripped again—gripped just as it had been seized down in the hall! It seemed to him that his flesh was creeping.

"Oh, my goodness!" he breathed.

He hardly dared to look down. For here he could see—it wasn't utterly dark, as it had been on that former occasion. He pulled himself together, and stared down at his feet. The light from the open doorway enabled him to see his boots, and the upturned ends of his trousers. But there was nothing else—absolutely nothing!

"Great Scott!" he said aloud.

Was it imagination? The grip was still there—he could feel it distinctly. He moved his leg, and gasped. For the grip had tightened, holding him there, so that he could not go forward. The sensation was indescribable.

"Church!" he shouted hoarsely. "Quick!"

Church, in great alarm, came rushing out with the candle. At the same second Handforth staggered back, that uncanny hold having been relaxed.

"The light!" he croaked.

"What's the matter?" shouted Church, his voice cracking.

Handforth seized the candle, and held it down towards the floor. Then an expression of dazed amazement came into his face, mingled with something that was very akin to fear.

The floor was bare, the walls and the wainscoting were clean and smooth. There was nothing of an unusual nature. For a wild moment, Handforth thought that he had caught his foot against a projection—a protruding board, or something. But that couldn't be, for he had felt the grip on the very skin of his ankle. He swung the light round again, and put it on the floor. An idea had come to him.

Quickly, he pulled up his trouser leg, and pushed his sock down.

"Oh, corks!" he whispered.

There was a mark on his ankle—clear, irrefutable proof that *something* had actually seized him! His imagination could not be responsible for this.

"Did something bite you?" asked McClure, puzzled by this investigation.

Handforth didn't reply. He picked up the candle again, and hustled his chums into the bed-room. He had an overwhelming desire to look over his shoulder, into the depths of the dark corridor, but he conquered it.

He was relieved when he closed the bed-room door and set the candle down. But Church and McClure could see by his very face that he was scared.

"What—what happened, Handy?" breathed Church.

"I don't know," replied Edward Oswald. "I wish I did. But as I was coming along the passage, something grabbed hold of my ankle. Just like it did in the hall!"

They looked at him incredulously.

"You fancied it, old man—" began Church.

"Look!" hissed Handforth. "Is that fancy?"

He held up his ankle, and that mark was still visible, although it was now losing its angry appearance.

"But—but this is too rummy for words!" said Church. "There's a mark here, right enough—and it proves that something must have grabbed— Oh, but it's impossible, Handy! What *could* take hold of your ankle?"

Handforth commenced undressing.

"All I hope is that you don't have anything like it," he said. "By George! That would be awful! You're my guests, and so are the other chaps. I don't want any of you to think that this place is really haunted."

Before Church and McClure could reply, they heard the sound of a crash, and then footsteps rushing in the corridor. There were voices, too! Handforth rushed to the door and opened it.

"What's that?" he asked, looking out.

"There's something wrong in our bedroom, Handy!" panted Jack Grey, as he ran up. "A vase fell off the mantelpiece without being touched! It splintered to bits, and —"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "You must have knocked it—"

"We were in bed!" shouted Reggie Pitt, as he arrived. "De Valerie was just crossing from the window when that beastly vase crashed into the fireplace. We weren't anywhere near it. It's an absolute mystery."

"The wind must have blown it when Val opened the window—"

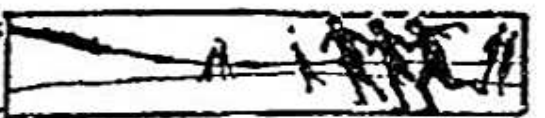
"He didn't open the window!" broke in Grey. "There wasn't any draught at all—and, besides, the vase is a huge thing, weighing pounds. A hurricane couldn't have dislodged it. And the mantelpiece is as wide as a table!"

"I'm getting out of this place!" said De Valerie shakily. "I'm going to get dressed again, and I'll walk in the lanes all night! I'd rather do that than sleep in a haunted room!"

"What's the trouble here?" asked Willy, as he came up. "Don't be an ass, De Valerie! You can't go out—it's snowing harder than ever. Pull yourself together, my son!" he added severely.

De Valerie pulled himself together—promptly. The sight of that Third Former, cool and calm, was probably the reason for this quick recovery. A Remove fellow could never allow a fag to give him a lesson in courage.

"I—I was only fooling, of course," said Val awkwardly. "All the same, I don't think I shall get much sleep. I can't understand what happened. That vase was standing there—"



"If it comes to that, you're not the only one," interrupted Willy. "Do you know what happened in my room just now?"

"What?" they asked, in one voice.

"Chubby took his shoes off, and put them under the bed, and before he could look round, they whizzed headlong into a corner."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, aghast.

"As I told Chubby, I wasn't going to have his shoes under my bed!" said Willy indignantly.

"But—but the shoes?" asked Church. "You say they whizzed into the corner, without anybody throwing them?"

"Of course not!" said Willy. "I chucked them there!"

And he went off, grinning. The Removites seriously thought about falling upon him, and administering a thrashing on the spot. But, perhaps it wouldn't be a wise move. So they went back to their bed-rooms, and Handforth was far more worried than ever. What was to be the next adventure on this startling night?



CHAPTER 8.

THE FIGURE IN THE MOONLIGHT!

"READY?" asked Handforth, in a low voice.

"Yes—if you really mean it," said Church.

They were in bed—

Church in the middle, and Handforth and McClure on either side of him. Handforth was on the point of putting out the candle, which stood on a little table beside him.

"Of course I mean it," said Handforth. "We can't have this candle burning all night—not that it would, anyhow. There's only about enough to last an hour. And then where should we be, in a sudden emergency? I'll have it next to my hand."

He snuffed it out, and the bed-room was plunged into darkness.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped McClure, sitting up. "What about the matches?"

"Don't get scared—they're here, beside the candle," growled his leader. "You don't think I'd forget the matches, do you? Take my advice, my lads, and get to sleep as soon as you can. It's nearly one o'clock, and I want to be up by seven, at the latest. I'm going to find out what's happened to Uncle Gregory!"

"Six hours!" muttered Church, as he snuggled down.

"What do you mean—six hours?"

"Six hours before we get up!" replied Church. "That means all these hours of misery. We can't sleep, Handy!"

"Rats!" retorted Handforth, sharply. "You'll soon forget the ghosts—"

"Ghosts be blowed!" interrupted Church.

"I'm talking about this bed! Is this a mattress we're laying on, or a pile of bricks? Dash it, I don't like to grumble when I'm a guest in a house, but how the dickens do you expect us to sleep on this ghastly thing?"

"Sorry!" muttered Handforth. "It is a bit awful, isn't it?"

The mattress was the most uncomfortable one that Handforth had ever encountered. It was all lumps and mountains. It didn't matter which way the juniors tried to repose, they encountered snags. One might have supposed that the mattress contained lumps of wood, instead of hair. As for feathers, the very thought of feathers was ridiculous. Even the pillows were lumpy.

"And my uncle's practically a millionaire!" murmured Handforth. "To-morrow, my sons, there's going to be the most unholy row that ever happened in Norfolk! If I had known this, I wouldn't have accepted the invitation for worlds—or let these other fellows in for it, either. What a game! Uncle Gregory is going to hear something from me—and it won't be just 'Good-morning'!"

"But he may not be here," said Church, as he writhed on to his other side, only to find that the rocks and crags were worse.

"He's bound to be here before the day's out, anyhow," replied Handforth. "It's Christmas Eve to-morrow, and old Rodd said that uncle promised to be back before Christmas. When I meet him—"

"Listen!" murmured McClure, sitting up.

"Eh? Listen to what?"

"I heard something just now—over against that other wall," replied Mac tensely.

They all sat there, silent. The blind was drawn, and the moonlight was streaming into the bed-room through the mullioned windows. The clouds, evidently, were breaking a little, for the moonlight kept appearing by fits and starts. At the moment, a patch of it was upon the faded carpet.

Tap-tap-tap!

Vaguely, but nevertheless audibly, the sound of rapping came to the ears of the three juniors. They weren't sure where it was proceeding from. But it seemed to originate over in one of the far corners—against the outer wall. They sat there, holding their breath.

Tap-tap-tap!

It came again, ghostly and mysterious. And now they were certain that it came from that outer wall. Handforth muttered something under his breath. This wasn't an ordinary haunted house! It seemed that every room was haunted! Even the hall and the corridors were haunted!

The moonlight went out, as an extra heavy cloud scurried across the face of the moon, and the bed-room was plunged into darkness.

Handforth slowly and cautiously slipped out of bed. He was feeling apprehensive, but he was not going to show the white feather!

He meant to discover the meaning of that rapping!

His bare feet touched the cold floor, and then, with extra caution, he crept round the four-poster, and made towards that corner. His bare foot touched something on the floor, and for the moment he got a start. But it was only a shoe, and he went on again.

Rap-rap-rap!

Handforth gritted his teeth, and resolved to make a sudden rush into the corner. If anything was there, he would grapple with it. But at that moment the moon came out again, and a gasp sounded from the bed.

"Look!" came Church's startled voice.

Handforth spun round; his heart nearly stopped.

Near the window there was a white figure—a shapeless, indistinct, vaporous object. It hovered there, and to Edward Oswald's startled gaze it seemed to be suspended six inches from the floor. And then it moved towards him!

"By George!" he shouted. "I'm not scared!"

He made a rush—a blind, desperate bound. And the next second he was grappling—not with a ghost, but with something which gasped and gurgled. He was on top, too, and he hammered fiercely.

"I've got you!" he gasped. "I don't know who the dickens you are, but you're going to be slaughtered for playing these silly games! I'll teach you to play the ghost, you miserable beggar! Strike a match, Mac! Bring the candle, Churchy!"

"Hold on!" shouted Church, in alarm. "That's not a ghost, Handy——"

Biff! Crash! Slam!

"I know that!" snapped Handforth. "Ghosts don't yell like this!"

Biff! Crash!

"You—you chump!" roared Church. "You're half killing Mac!"

"Mac!" yelled Handforth, ceasing his attack.

"It's poor old Mac you've got on the floor!" said Church, jumping out of bed. "He got out a few seconds after you did, and went towards that corner. I expect you mistook him for a ghost——"

"My hat!" gurgled Handforth.

He got up, and stared down at the groaning McClure. The latter sat up, nursing his left eye, and rubbing his jaw.

"Oh, corks!" he groaned. "I'm half dead. You—you dangerous lunatic! You howling madman! In another minute you might have murdered me!"

"Why the dickens didn't you say who you were?" asked Handforth indignantly.

"A fat lot of chance I had!" snapped McClure, struggling to his feet, swaying dizzily. "I was just going to investigate that rattling——"

"That was my game, too," interrupted Handforth. "We both had the same idea, and you must have been close behind me. But why didn't you give a gasp, Churchy? You said 'Look!' and when I looked round I saw Mac and thought he was something else!"

"Well, I saw you—and thought you were something else!" said Church. "It was the moon, I suppose—suddenly coming out like that."

"Sorry, Mac, old man," said Handforth soothingly. "But I did see something, and it looked awful, and it seemed to me that it was suspended in mid-air. I can't make it out—— And as for you, you fathead, you've got your socks on; I didn't hear you until I felt you!"

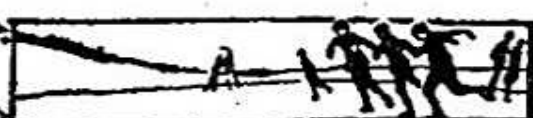
"I can't sleep with cold feet," complained McClure. "Not that I shall sleep at all now, anyhow! Crikey! What a lovely black eye I shall have in the morning! For goodness' sake, Handy, don't do any more ghost-hunting to-night!"

They were about to get back into bed, not having found a satisfactory explanation of the latest mystery, when something else happened. It seemed that something fresh was taking place in this house of mystery every five or ten minutes.

The uncanny rapping had not been explained yet, but the chums of Study D, being level-headed fellows, fully realised that that phenomenon might easily have a very simple explanation. A loose piece of ivy, perhaps, broken down by the wind, and swaying against the outer wall. An explanation of that sort would easily account for the sound.

But the juniors were not even allowed to make any conjectures on the subject; for, before they could hold any further discussion, or even remember what they had got





out of bed for, a fresh sound came from outside, on the landing.

There was a kind of gasping scream—nothing ghostly about it, but alarming enough, nevertheless. And it was followed by a shout—a desperate, frantic appeal.

"Help!" came the cry. "Help!"



CHAPTER 9.

THE SPECTRAL PRESENCE.

DICK HAMILTON jumped out of bed in a single spring.

"Come on!" he exclaimed. "There's some-

thing wrong!"

"Begad!" gasped Montie. "Somebody is appealin' for help! It seems to me, dear old boys, that there'll be no rest for anybody to-night!"

"I couldn't sleep, anyhow!" shouted Watson.

They rushed to the door, and got outside just as Handforth & Co. were tearing out of their own bed-room. Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey and one or two others added to the crowd.

"Who yelled just now?" asked Pitt quickly.

"Goodness knows!" replied Handforth. "We all seem to be here—at least, there's a big crowd of us—"

"Listen!" interrupted Church.

And as they all fell silent, the cry came again:

"Help!"

But this time it was more subdued. It was much weaker, as though the one in distress was at his last gasp. And that appeal came from the great landing, at the end of the corridor. Handforth was looking startled in the light of the candles that the other juniors were holding.

"My minor!" he said breathlessly.

"By Jove," said Dick Hamilton, "I believe it is!"

"One of his tricks——" began Watson.

"No!" snapped Handforth. "He wouldn't play a trick like that—and his voice was too weak, too. Quick! Come on, we've got to see what's wrong with him."

He ran to the end of the corridor, and the others accompanied him. But they were in such a hurry that the candles were extinguished by the very force of their rush. They were all plunged into darkness, but this did not deter them. Handforth was the first to reach the landing, and he suddenly pulled himself up, and the others ran into him from behind.

"Look!" said Handforth, his voice shaking.

And this time it was no junior in pyjamas, no second McClure! Something was at the

far side of the landing. And at the very first glance Handforth felt his heart leap wildly. This thing was indeed a spectral presence!

It was not shapeless, but very visibly apparent. The figure was that of a woman—a kind of mixture between a mediæval lady, with a long, cone-shaped hat, and a sort of witch. The figure was crouching, as though bending over something on the floor.

"The Lady of the Tower!" breathed Handforth tensely.

"By Jove, yes!"

"The ghost!"

The juniors, in spite of their alarm, and their creepy sensations, found it possible to stand their ground. But perhaps this was because they were held there—so magnetised that they couldn't move.

For they knew—they had absolute proof—that this figure was no dressed-up trickster. It was not luminous, as a faked ghost might have been, but just whitely visible, the outline being distinct, in spite of the general sense of unreality which the presence created.

For the juniors could see right through it!

They were at such an angle that one of the landing windows was in line with them. That ghostly presence stood between them and the window, and they could see the criss-cross window-bars right through her.

A moan sounded, low and pitiful.

"Help!" came a husky whisper. "Oh, help!"

The Spectre of Handforth Towers moved. It seemed to glide away from the spot, and the juniors watched it with starting eyes. The figure straightened herself, and then one of her hands was raised, pointing straight at them. A laugh came, a faint, shrill kind of cackle. And in the same second the spectre resolved itself into a wreath of thinness whirled round in the air, and vanished before the juniors' very eyes.

The spell seemed to be broken.

"Oh!" breathed Tommy Watson. "What—what was it?"

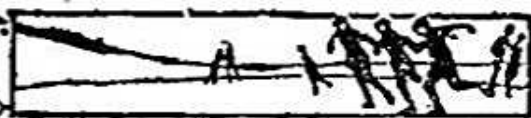
And then, from out of that north wing, came the sound of the throbbing cry—the Lady of the Tower going back to her haunt! The whole thing was uncanny in the extreme. Something moved just at that spot where the presence had been. And Handforth rushed over.

He dropped to his knees and shouted.

"Quick!" he yelled. "It's Willy! Lights! Willy, old son!"

Somebody managed to strike a match, and the candles were illuminated. They crowded round, shaking and trembling. Willy Handforth was in his major's arms. The fag was prostrate, with his head on Edward Oswald's lap. And in the candlelight his face was deathly pale, and his eyes were closed.

"The poor kid's fainted!" muttered Hand-



forth frantically. "That—that ghastly thing had got hold of him! Get some water——"

"Look!" said Church. "He's coming to!"

Willy slowly opened his eyes, but the colour did not return to his cheeks. The pallor of his face was eloquent of his recent experience. And as he opened his eyes his expression became fixed and horrified.

"Don't touch me!" he gasped. "Go away——"

"It's all right, Willy," murmured Handforth. "It's me."

"Oh, Ted!" breathed Willy, his tense expression relaxing. "Oh, thank goodness! Has—has she gone? I—I don't seem to remember——"

"Stand aside, you fellows. I'm going to carry him to his bed-room," said Handforth grimly. "He's had a terrible shock."

This was pretty evident, for Willy, although a Third-Former, was one of the pluckiest fellows at St. Frank's. And his steadiness in the dining-room had been an indication of his nerve. But now he looked a wreck.

In his own bed-room, Willy was gently laid on the bed, and the sheets and blankets were pulled over him. Water was forced between his chattering teeth. But Handforth was still worried. His minor's face was almost death-like in its pallor.

"It's—it's all right," said the fag shakily. "Don't—don't crowd round me like this, you fellows, I shall be O.K. in a few minutes."

"Leave him alone for a bit," murmured Dick Hamilton.

They gently pulled Handforth away, allowing Willy to recover himself, without being flurried by their presence or by questions. They stood in a scared-looking group by the mantelpiece, where several candles were burning.

"That—that spectre!" said Handforth, with an anxious glance towards the bed. "I think it got hold of Willy, or something. I want to find out the truth——"

"Leave him alone for a minute," urged Dick.

"I suppose you're right," admitted Handforth. "But what was it? The figure of a woman, and she was bending over poor old Willy! And we could see right through her! Did you notice it, you chaps?"

"Yes, of course!" said Pitt, sorely puzzled.

"I am trying to see how trickery could be responsible," muttered Hamilton. "And yet it seemed so supernatural."

"Trickery!" interrupted De Valerie, his voice harsh with the tension of the adventure. "It couldn't have been trickery. Hang it, I'm not superstitious, but I've seen a ghost to-night—a genuine spirit! That—that thing was transparent—and it vanished into thin air, too!"

"I'm beaten," confessed Dick, scratching his head. "Did you notice the way it went into a kind of smoke wreath, and then

vanished altogether? Right in front of our eyes, on that bare landing!"

"I—I want to get out of this house!" said Jack Grey, with a shiver. "I wish I'd never come! There's Willy, too. For all we know, he may be out of his mind, and a thing like this can bring on brain-fever——"

"I'm going to question him!" said Handforth grimly.

He refused to wait any longer, and they took the candles and went back to the bed. Willy was lying with closed eyes, but he opened them as the juniors gathered round. And they were pleased—and relieved—to see that he had recovered his normal healthy colour. This was a great joy to his major.

"Thank goodness that awful pallor has gone from your face, Willy," he said breathlessly. "How do you feel, old man?"

Willy looked rather sheepish.

"I'm all right," he said. "I was an ass to yell like that, and give you all a scare. But—but that thing——"

"Yes, what about it?"

"I—I can't remember properly," replied Willy, a puzzled look coming into his face. "At least, I don't believe I can tell you anything. There was something hovering—something——" He passed his hand over his eyes, and shook his head. "No, I—I don't seem to know——"

"But why were you there, Willy?" asked Dick Hamilton.

"There?" said Willy slowly. "Where?"

"On the landing."

"Was I on the landing?" said the fag in surprise. "I can't quite—— Oh, yes!" he added, with a sudden start. "By jingo, I've got it now! Of course!"

"Well?" they chorused eagerly.

Willy was looking more sure of himself.

"Of course, I've got it," he repeated. "I was worrying about Ena and the other girls. That's right. I just wanted to see if they were safe, you know, and I thought it a good idea to make sure."

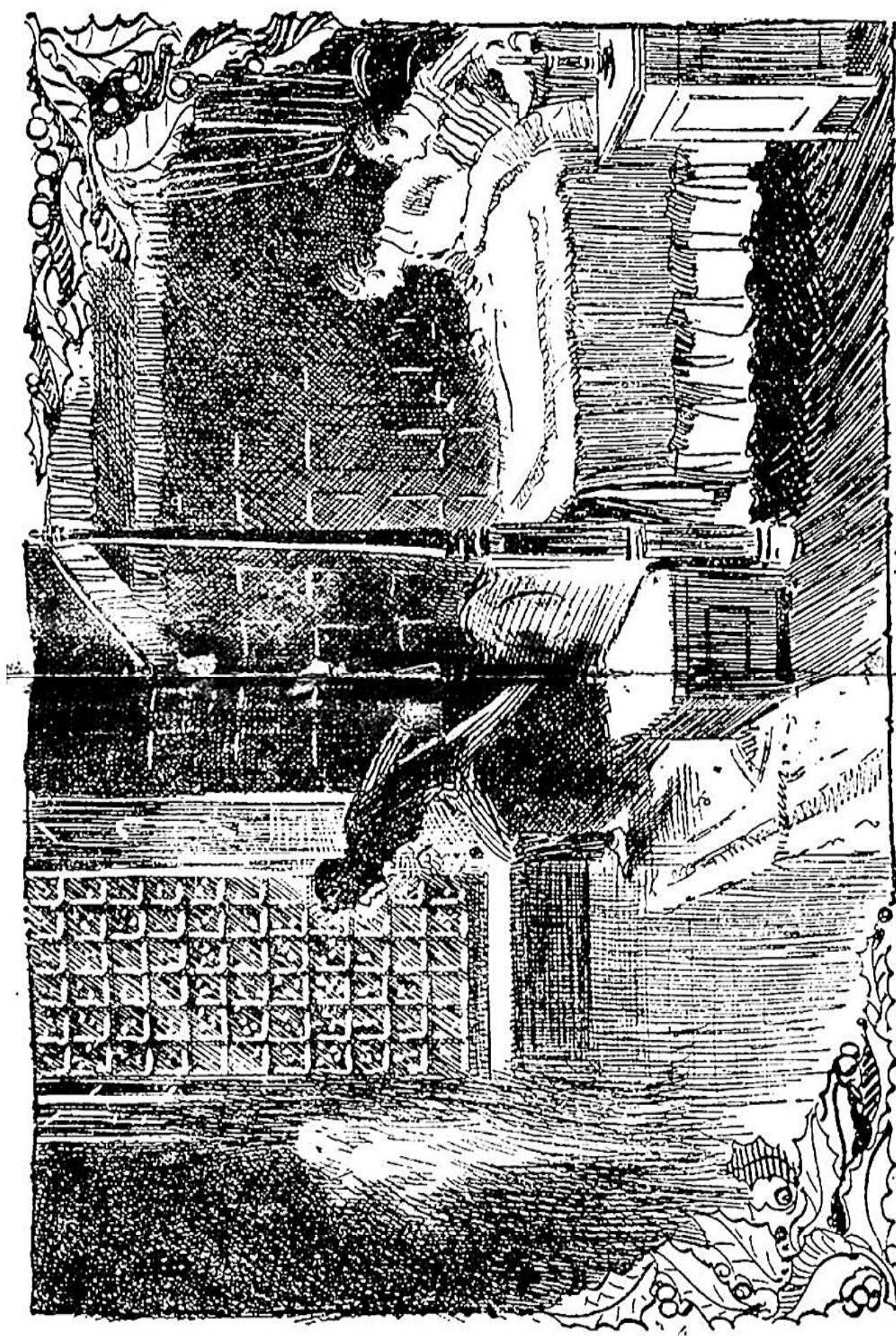
"I'm worried about them, too," muttered Handforth, frowning. "I've been thinking about the girls. How is it that we've been making all this noise, and they haven't come out to see what's wrong? And why haven't they had any adventures? I've got an idea that there's something wrong."

"Don't interrupt, Handy," said Dick. "Go on, Willy."

"Well, I was just going into the north wing, you know," said Willy. "You see, I could easily tap on the girls' doors, and ask if they were all serene-o. If they sang out that everything was O.K., I could have gone to bed in comfort. I wasn't thinking about ghosts—you know how much I care for ghosts, anyhow."

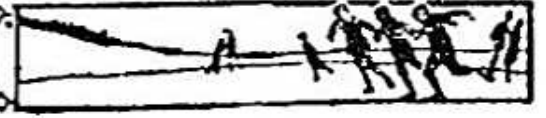
"Well?"

"Well, then it happened," said Willy impressively. "I just got into that north wing



Handforth gritted his teeth as he approached that white, filmy shape near the window. It hovered there as if suspended, and then it moved towards the horrified man. "By George!" he cried. "I'm not scared!"

Summoning up all his courage, Hady made a blind desperate rush!



when that—that horrid-looking female figure appeared. My stars! It seemed to develop right in front of my giddy eyes. I backed out on to the landing, and— Yes, I believe I tripped, or something. I know I sang out for help. That thing was right over me—but I can't quite say— No, I don't think I can get hold of it all. Do you know what happened after that, Ted?"

"Nothing happened," said Handforth. "At least, the spectre simply vanished, and we went forward and found you unconscious. By George, I don't wonder at it! It was enough to scare anybody. And you say the thing was right on the top of you, hovering near by?"

"I—I felt it!" muttered Willy. "It—it seemed all filmy——"

He broke off, and shivered.

"But what about the girls?" he went on, starting up. "I tell you, Ted, I've got a feeling that there's something wrong in the girls' bed-rooms! I can't tell you why, but I'm *certain*. Why haven't they come out? We ought to find out something for certain."

"We're going to!" replied Handforth, with sudden determination.

CHAPTER 10.

ANOTHER STARTLING MYSTERY.



DICK HAMILTON nodded.

"Yes, we'll all find out if the girls are safe," he agreed. "Hang it, we couldn't possibly go to bed

without making some inquiries. Do you chaps realise that we haven't heard a sound of the girls since they left us at a quarter to twelve, in the dining-room?"

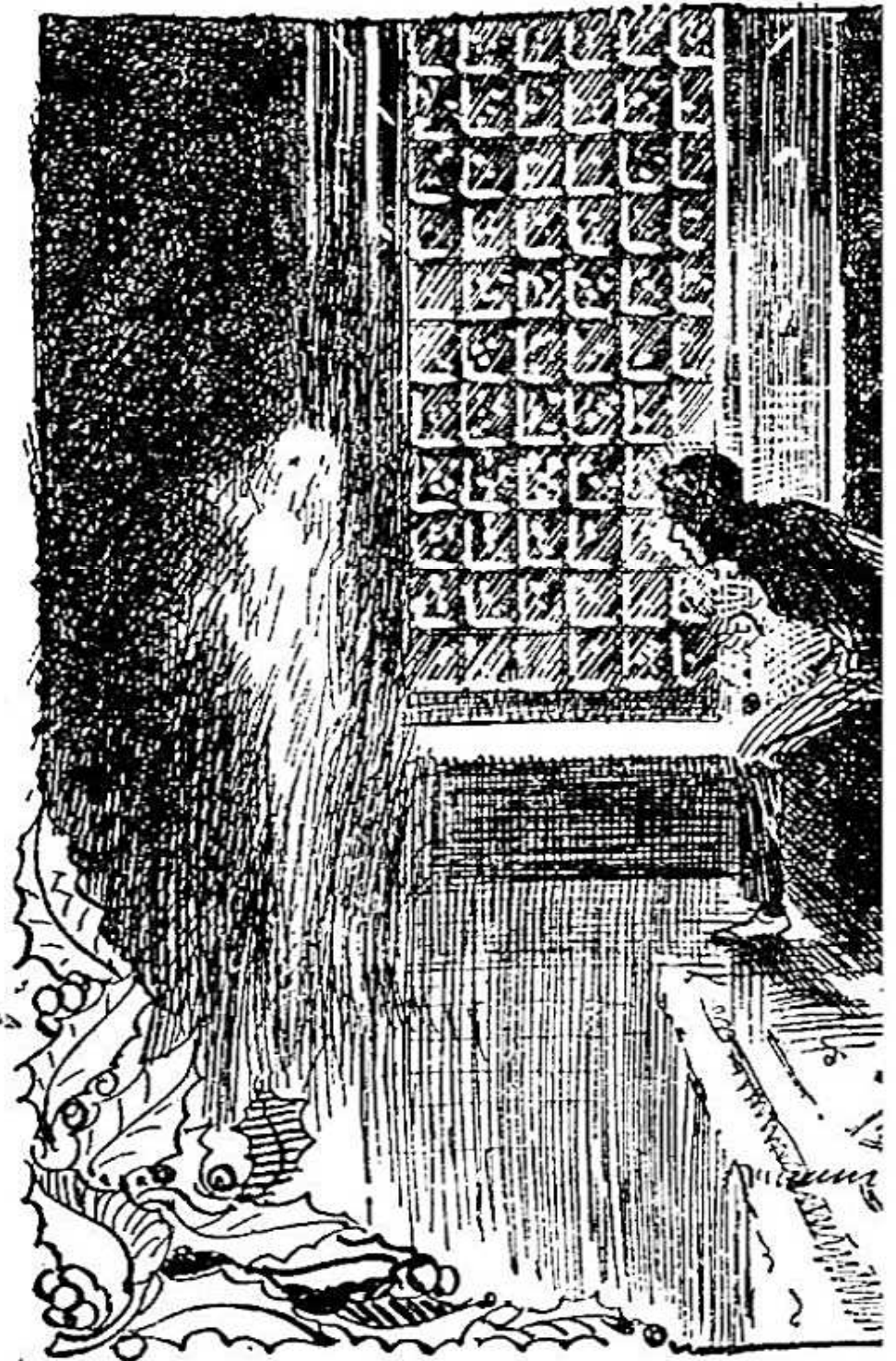
"By jingo, that's true enough!"

"And it's rather too good to be true," continued Dick. "If this house is really haunted—and although it takes a lot to convince me, I'm on the verge—isn't it only reasonable that the girls would feel some of the effects? We're not babies—we're not kids! And yet those six girls haven't made a sound!"

"It's extraordinary!" agreed Pitt, taking a deep breath. "Now you come to mention it, it seems—well, funny. We've been so busy that we haven't had time to think of them before."

"But—but do you think that something's happened?" asked Willy breathlessly.

"Whatever we think, you've got to stay in bed," replied his major. "You've had your dose for to-night, my lad, and you mustn't step out of this room again. I'm worried about the girls—I've got an idea that they've been drugged, or something. It's the only way to account for their silence!"



Handforth gritted his teeth as he approached suspended, and then it moved towards the h
Summoning up all his c

"If they've been drugged, this ghost is a pretty material one, then," said Dick Hamilton grimly. "But you mustn't get those fantastic ideas, Handy. Although it seems so impossible, there's just a chance that they are really asleep. They were tired, you know, and they went up before any of these startling things happened. Let's go and make sure, anyhow."

"But we can't go into their bed-rooms!" protested Pitt. "My sister wouldn't mind me looking in, but the other girls——"

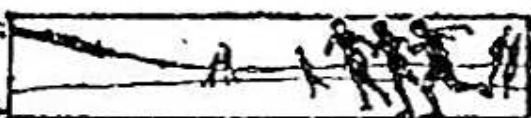
"We can knock on the doors, I suppose?" interrupted Handforth. "We only want them to sing out that they're safe."

Dick Hamilton scratched his head.

"It's rather a delicate affair," he said slowly. "We've got to be careful. If we wake them up, and ask if they're safe, they'll naturally want to know what the alarm is about. And if we don't tell them, they might stay awake, and then get jumpy—especially if they hear that moaning sound."

"Wouldn't it be better to let them sleep?" asked Watson.

"Yes, and then we don't know whether



ape near the window. It hovered there as if
George!" he cried. "I'm not scared!"
a blind desperate rush!

they're safe!" protested Handforth. "No, we've got to hammer on their doors, and ask if they're all right. I couldn't sleep a wink if I didn't know."

"We can easily invent some slight excuse after we've awakened them," said Hamilton. "Come on—let's go and get it over."

They all crowded out, leaving Willy in bed. And they went out on to the landing again. And then penetrated the north wing. This was the haunt of that ghost—an added puzzle. It was indeed strange that the girls should have seen nothing and heard nothing.

This time the juniors had plenty of lights, for there were three or four candles among them. And the place did not seem so eerie now. This corridor was much smaller than the one in the east wing, and comparatively short. It was very draughty, and one of the candles blew out, and the others flickered dangerously.

"Easy!" said Handforth. "We don't want to be left in the dark here. Yes, old Rodd was right—there are only two doors, so we can't make any mistake. Now, you chaps, keep quiet. I'll tap on this door, and when

the girls answer, I'll ask for Ena. If she's in this room, I'll just say 'Good-night,' and wish her happy dreams. How's that?"

"Good!" said Hamilton. "But supposing she isn't in this room?"

"It won't matter; the other girls will tell me so, and I'll wish them good-night," replied Handforth. "We shall have gained our object, anyhow. We only want to hear that they're all right."

"Go ahead, then," said Pitt. "Fortunately, they know you pretty well, Handy, so they'll simply think that it's one of your usual potty ideas. So the rest of us had better keep absolutely mum."

"You silly ass—" began Handforth aggressively.

"For goodness' sake, don't argue here!" urged Church.

Handforth sniffed, and then held up a warning finger. He doubled his fist, and rapped upon the door fairly lightly. At all events, he considered that it was a light rap. He knocked quite hard, really.

All the juniors held their breath, and waited; but no reply came. The only sounds they heard were caused by the buffeting of the wind outside, and the whistling of it down this draughty corridor.

"Better knock again," whispered McClure. Thump-thump-thump!

This time, Handforth knocked vigorously. For, indeed, he was becoming very worried. Those knocks were sufficient to have awakened Rip Van Winkle, but still there was no reply, no sleepy girlish voice asking what was the matter.

"I knew it!" said Handforth tensely. "There's something wrong in this bed-room! What the dickens can we do? I say, do you think it would be all right if we opened the door and peeped in?"

Before anybody could give him any advice on the point, the problem solved itself—and in a strange, unexpected way. Without the slightest warning, and for no apparent cause, the door slowly swung open of its own accord.

"Great Scott!" muttered somebody.

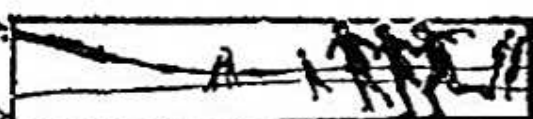
A fierce draught of air swept out, and every candle was extinguished in a flash. But there was a window immediately opposite, in the bed-room, and the startled juniors could see the door still opening—*against the force of the draught!* Something touched Handforth lightly on the face, for he was standing in the very middle of the doorway. Other touches came—icy and chilling.

"Oh!" he muttered.

He put out his hand, and gave another gasp.

"Snow!" he ejaculated. "Snow—blowing right through the room. I—I thought for a minute—"

"Out of the way, Handforth!" rapped out



Dick Hamilton curtly. "There's something thundering wrong here! I'm going in, whether it's the right thing or not. We've got to know the truth."

As he spoke, he flashed on his electric torch, and the beam of light cut through the darkness of the bed-room—one of those sleeping-chambers which had been set apart for Irene & Co. Dick took four strides into the room, and then he pulled up short, his face expressive of blank, utter amazement.

And through the doorway crowded the other juniors.

For Dick's electric torch revealed a staggering fact. This room was empty—not merely empty of human presence, but empty of furniture! The windows were broken and ruined, and in one corner half the upper part of the wall was completely missing. The full fury of the storm was pouring into the apartment.

"What—what does it mean?" asked Hamilton dazedly.

"But—but they couldn't have been in here at all!" shouted Handforth, staring round. "Nobody would put a dog in here to sleep! It's not a room at all—it's a ruin! Then where are the girls?"

"Goodness only knows!" said Dick.

"Let's—let's look in the other room," put in Reggie Pitt. "By jingo! That's it, of course! Old Rodd must have made a mistake. Instead of being divided into two parties, they're all together, in the other room—I expect there are two beds in it!"

"We'll soon see!" said Handforth desperately.

They ran out of that strange room, and Handforth did not wait to conform to the proprieties again. Instead of knocking, he turned the handle of the second door, and burst into the bed-room.

One glance was sufficient.

This apartment was as bare as the other, and even more ruinous. The snow was driving in relentlessly, and there were drifts of it even against Handforth's feet as he stood there.



CHAPTER 11.

THE HOUSE OF SURPRISES!

HANDFORTH TOWERS had provided a few shocks on this eventful night, but this latest one was the most startling of all.

The six girl guests had vanished!

Where were they? What had become of them? No wonder the fellows had heard

no sound of their girl chums since they had been escorted up to bed by the witch-like Mrs. Rodd. That thought hit Handforth like a blow.

"Where's that old hag?" he shouted. "Where did she take the girls to? What has she done with them? I'll search this house from roof to cellar——"

"Steady, old son!" interrupted Dick quietly. "Don't get excited——"

"I will get excited!" interrupted Handforth. "You haven't got a sister among them, Nipper! I have—and so has Pitt—and so has Willy! Do you think we're going to let this thing stand as it is?"

"Of course we're not!" said Reggie Pitt grimly. "By Jove, I'm going to find out where Winnie is! I—I wonder if those two old people are sane? Perhaps they've done something to Sis and the other girls!"

"I want to have a look in that first room again!" said Dick, trying to calm the others down. "Why did the door open without being touched? I had a look at the lock, and the catch works perfectly. How did it open——"

"Anything can happen in this house!" said Handforth, in a queer voice. "I believe that old couple have murdered my uncle, and hidden his body in one of the cellars! And as for the girls——"

"Look! There's a light!" shouted somebody.

They turned, and beheld a light on the landing. And a moment later, old Rodd appeared, bent and wizened, and dressed in a quaint old dressing-gown and carpet slippers. A woollen nightcap was perched on the top of his head.

"My, but ye gave me a start, young sirs!" he said as he came up. "I thought 'twas burglars!"

Handforth rushed up to him.

"Where's my sister?" he demanded. "Where are the other girls? Answer me, you old sinner——"

"Master Edward—Master Edward!" protested the aged butler. "What's the matter with ye? There's no call to talk like that——"

"Where's my sister?" insisted Handforth. The old man frowned.

"Missy Ena is safe enough!" he said testily. "Do ye think this is a madhouse, or what? What are you looking in these rooms for? Why aren't ye all abed? Gallivanting about at this time o' night——"

"We came here to look for the girls!"

"Then ye'd no right to!" said Rodd severely. "My word! What are ye coming to nowadays? An' why should you come here, in this ruined wing? These rooms haven't been habitable for nigh on ten years."

"You told us the girls were here, didn't you?" asked Handforth.

"Ay, an' can't an old man make a mistake without you getting panicky?" asked the

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butler, more impatiently than ever. "My memory ain't what it used to be—no, not by a long way! My wife took the girls somewhere else, an' ye can be sure that they're asleep, and perfectly safe."

"We want to know where they are——"

"Then ye won't!" said the old man angrily. "I never heard of such a thing! Get ye to bed! Ay, I'll report this to the master when he comes back, young sir! Fine goings on! I'll have ye know, Master Edward, that I'm in charge of Handforth Towers, an' I won't have ye ordering me about! Mrs. Rodd took the girls safely to bed, an' there they'll stay, without being disturbed until the morning! I'm surprised at the lot o' ye!"

He stamped off, and Dick Hamilton couldn't help smiling.

"After all, I suppose we are a crowd of asses!" he said. "The old fellow must have meant the south wing when he told us about the girls. We've been getting all sorts of funny ideas, and they're asleep all the time, in another part of the house, where they couldn't hear our noise."

"That's about the size of it," agreed Reggie. "What a lot of mugs!"

"Let's get back to bed," said Tommy Watson practically.

But Handforth refused.

"It's all very well to accept that old beggar's word!" he said stubbornly. "I don't believe him! I distrust him—and I distrust that old witch, too! There's something about this house which is all wrong!"

"It's certainly a house of surprises!" agreed Dick drily.

"More like a house of shocks!" snapped Handforth. "I never knew it was a partial ruin before! And I want to know where the girls are before I have a wink of sleep!"

"But you can't," insisted Nipper, taking Edward Oswald's arm. "The old boy is shocked. He thinks we ought to be in bed and asleep, and he's probably right. So many things have happened that we don't quite know what to believe. But we needn't jump to fantastic conclusions."

And so, although Handforth was very upset, he agreed to go back to bed. And all the rest went, too. There seemed nothing else to do. But there was scarcely a fellow who did not feel vaguely uneasy. They could not forget that extraordinary spectre—the Lady of the Tower.

"Well, I've got rid of them!" said Handforth, as he stood inside his own bed-room with Church and McClure. "I'll give them just five minutes to settle down, and then I'll make a move."

His chums were staggered.

"Why, what are you going to do?" asked McClure quickly.

"Do!" said Edward Oswald. "I'm going to investigate."

"But, you ass, you mustn't go out alone!" protested Church. "You might get yourself

into a mess, or something! Go to bed, Handy!"

"Do you think I can go to bed, leaving everything in this state of uncertainty?" demanded Handforth. "Ever since we came into this house, there's been mystery! First, the unexpected absence of Uncle Gregory, the absence of servants, and everything in general; then that wailing cry in the night, and old Mrs. Rodd coming down the stairs, looking scared out of her wits. That thing which gripped my ankle! My hat! It makes me shiver to think of it!"

"Then don't think of it," said Church gruffly.

"Everything's wrong!" continued Handforth. "We go to bed, and we hear rappings, and then poor old Willy has the fright of his life. Rummy things happen in other bed-rooms, too! That ghost appears—the Lady of the Tower! Did you ever see anything like it?"

"Never!" breathed McClure uneasily.

"She may appear in this room next——"

"Here, dry up!" said Church, diving into bed, and snuggling down. "Since you're saying such a lot, Handy, I might as well tell you that I'm fed-up with the place, too. Your Uncle Gregory! His marvellous estates in Norfolk—his fine mansion—his millions! My stars!"

Handforth frowned.

"Don't rub it in!" he said bitterly. "Do you think I'm not feeling pretty sick, too? It's been nothing else but worry and trouble ever since we got here. And there's Ena," he added, his jaw looking stubborn again. "It's all very well for Nipper and the others to tell us to go to sleep, but I'm not having any. Where's my sister? And Irene?"

"I was wondering why you hadn't mentioned Irene," said Church.

"But I've been thinking about her!" snapped Edward Oswald. "Fast asleep in one of the other wings, eh? Perfectly safe, are they? How do we know?" He glared at his chums in the candlelight. "How do we know?" he added fiercely.

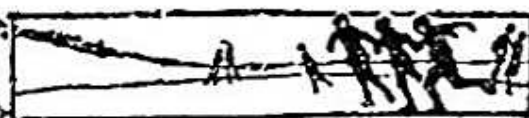
"Well, don't look at us so accusingly," said Mac. "We haven't spirited the fair damsels away!"

"Spirited away!" muttered Handforth, his eyes filled with alarm. "By George! I—I wonder—— Oh, but what's the good of standing here, and guessing? I'm going out to investigate."

"Look here, Handy——"

But Handforth waved his hand, and strode to the door. Before his chums could stop him, he had gone out, taking the candle with him. This was all very well for him, but Church and McClure were left in the dark. They crouched in bed, and listened to the moaning of the wind as it sighed round the mysterious old house.

"Oh, corks!" said McClure. "What—what shall we do?"



"Jiggered if I know!" said Church. "I'm not going after him, if that's what you're hinting at. He can go on his investigations alone! The rater! He might have left us a candle!"

"What was that?" breathed Mac, with a jump.

"Eh? I—I didn't hear—"

"It's all right—only your clothes on that chair by the window!" said McClure, with relief. "You ass, why couldn't you put your things in a heap, instead of hanging your shirt up like a ghostly scarecrow?"

Church stared across the room in the faint gloom.

"You ass!" he said indignantly. "They're your clothes!"

"By Jupiter, are they?" said McClure, with a shiver. "Oh, I wish he'd come back, the ass! Goodness knows what's going to happen to him! He—he might meet that ghost, or perhaps he'll fall down the stairs backwards, and break his neck! You know what a clumsy fathead he is."

And so, Church and McClure huddled them-

selves in bed, a prey to every fear and worry. They did not want to go out into the dark corridor now, for it was impossible to tell which direction Handforth had taken. And there was the Lady of the Tower, too. They might run into the ghost! It seemed to them, in their present mood, that they could not do better than remain in bed. As a beginning to the Christmas holidays, this adventure was not exactly auspicious!

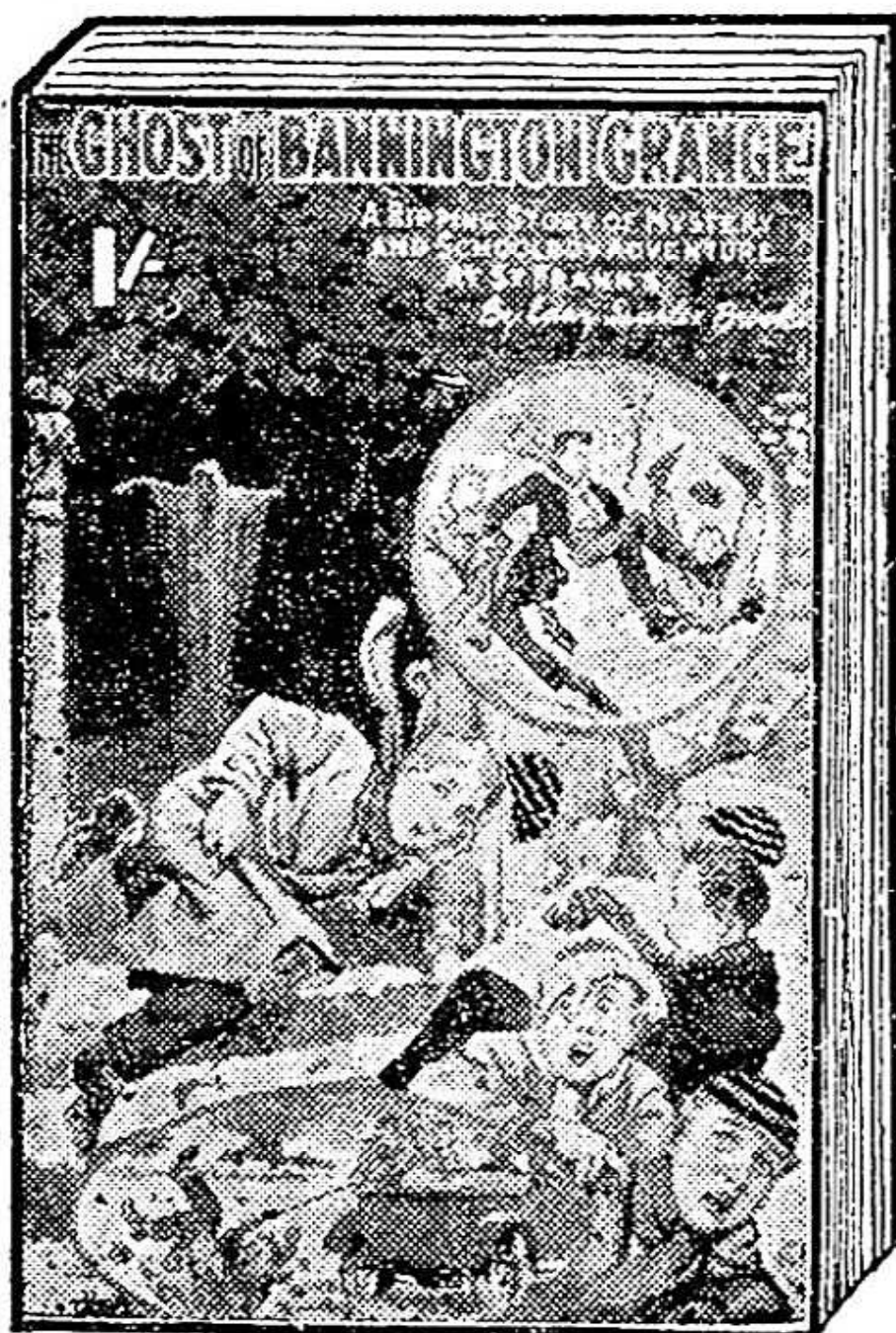
And while they tried to fool themselves that they might fall asleep, Handforth was out on that big landing, candle in hand, peering into the dense shadows. There was the north wing and the east wing, but he couldn't quite see where any other quarters of the house lay.

"Anyhow, I'm going to find out!" he muttered grimly.

There was nothing of the recklessness which usually characterised Handforth's activities. He was genuinely worried about the girls—about Irene, but about his sister most of all. When it came to a real emergency, Handforth gave first thoughts to Ena.

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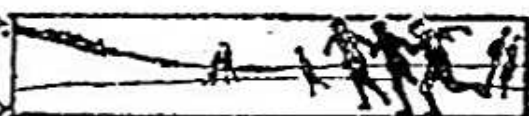


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He turned, meaning to penetrate a narrow passage which opened out from that part of the landing which had not yet been explored. And as he turned, something moved and came into the radius of his flickering light.



CHAPTER 12.

INTO THE CHASM!

HANDFORTH started back, and he nearly dropped the precious candle.

"It's only me, Ted!" whispered Willy, as he stepped into the circle of light.

"You—you young bounder!" said his major, pulling himself together. "What do you suppose I thought it was? Of course it's you! And what are you doing out of your bed, after what I told you?"

"I'm better now, old man——"

"That's no answer!" said Handforth severely. "You had a terrible scare, Willy—I never saw you so pale in all my life! You're looking better now, but I warned you to keep in bed, and——"

"Rats!" interrupted the Third Former. "I heard you prowling about, and, besides, I've been making some investigations on my own. I heard about those empty rooms, and it seemed rummy at first. But there's nothing to worry about. The girls are all safe, and fast asleep."

His major looked at him eagerly.

"How—how do you know?" he asked. "Who told you?"

"Well, I know—I've made a few inquiries," replied Willy, with an exasperating return of his normal coolness. "You needn't look at me like that, Ted. Ena and the others are O.K., and the best thing we can do is to get back to bed."

He glanced at his watch.

"Yes, it's nearly time," he added.

"Eh?" said Handforth. "Nearly time for what?"

"Old Rodd was saying something about that ghost," replied Willy. "It seems that she appears at certain hours. It's better not to be out in these corridors, Ted. Let's get into our bed-rooms."

Handforth looked at him in a very straight way.

"You know something!" he said grimly.

"I know a lot!" agreed Willy. "In fact, old Suncliffe has often told me that I know a jolly sight too much!"

"You young ass, I mean you know something about this house!"

"I don't know whether you take me for a magician, or what," said Willy patiently. "How should I know more than you? I came in at the same time, and I haven't had any more chances of investigation than you have. Of course, I may have used my brains a bit more——"

"If you're going to stand here, arguing, I'll finish with you!" interrupted Handforth exasperatedly. "You say that the girls are quite safe, and that there's nothing to worry about."

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I do know," said Willy sweetly.

"You—you——" Handforth broke off, and grasped his minor by the shoulder. "Look here, Willy, be a sport!" he urged. "We're brothers, aren't we?"

"So mother says."

"We're both of the Handforth blood!" said Edward Oswald impressively. "And this is Handforth Towers! It's—it's a question of family honour! We've brought these guests here, and we've let them down! If you know anything more than I do, it's your duty to tell me."

"Of course, we may have different ideas of duty——"

"Are you going to tell me, or not?" hissed Handforth.

"But, my dear, poor old chump, what can I tell you?" asked Willy patiently. "There's one thing I know for certain—and you can take my word for it. The girls are perfectly safe, they're unharmed, and they're snugly in bed. Honest Injun! That's absolutely official and cast-iron."

"Then where are they?"

"Ah, now we're on a different subject," said Willy, shaking his head. "I've given you my word that the girls are O.K., Ted, and you'll have to be satisfied. Or, if you like, you can be unsatisfied. I don't care which."

"You—you secretive little bounder!" exclaimed Handforth, going red. "You've just discovered something, and you won't let me into the know!"

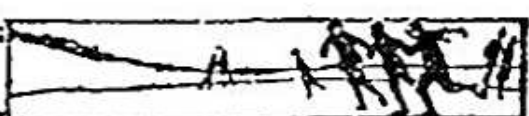
"You've hit it!" agreed Willy, nodding.

"I'll force you——"

"Rats!" said his minor. "Do you know why I'm so firm, Ted? Because, fortunately, I know your little ways! If I tell you where the girls are, you'll dash there, just to make sure. And when you dash anywhere, you're like an earthquake. They haven't been disturbed, and if I can help it, they won't be. So, as I said before, if you don't like to take my word, you can leave it."

He walked off, bidding his major good-night over his shoulder. And Handforth stood there, fairly boiling over. He marvelled, too, at the rapidity with which his young brother had recovered. Just like Willy! Although he had gone through that harrowing experience, he was himself again in next to no time!

"By George!" breathed the Removite. "He knows something, and he won't tell me! Me! He won't tell me! Did you ever hear anything so absolutely awful? I'll never forgive him for this—never, as long as I live."



He looked round into that narrow passage again, and started. His eyes gleamed. And, in spite of his threat, he forgave Willy on the spot. Of course, Willy must have come out of that passage—and that was where he had discovered the truth about Irene & Co.

"It won't take me five minutes to find out the truth," murmured Handforth. "If Willy can do it, so can I! I'm jolly glad he didn't tell me now. He can't crow over me that he whacked me on a matter of investigation. I'll snap my fingers in his giddy face, the grinning young monkey! The nerve!"

Handforth ventured into the passage, already making up his mind what he would discover. In fact, everything was now obvious. The east wing was inhabitable, and the north wing was a ruin! The other part of the house, into which he was now penetrating, was also habitable—and he would probably find Irene & Co.'s shoes outside their doors. By George! That was how Willy had discovered them—a simple little trifle like that!

It seemed very plausible, but, unfortunately, Handforth couldn't find any shoes to substantiate this theory. In fact, he was so intent upon finding out where the passage led to, that he had no time to look for shoes. To be quite exact, he lost himself. And that, of course, was exactly what Handforth *would* do.

The passage wasn't such a simple affair as he had imagined. It proved to be quite short, but it led into another corridor, which apparently ran down one side of the old mansion. For there were windows all along, through which the moonlight streamed. Glancing out, Handforth could see a vista of snowy wastes, with trees standing out of the white wilderness. Snow was still coming down in flurries, rattling against the window-panes like the pattering of fingers.

Then he turned a corner, and went into another passage. But this seemed so dirty and it smelt so musty that he came to the conclusion that it was a disused section. The windows were half covered with cobwebs, and there was thick dust and grime on the floor. Even old Rodd wouldn't have allowed the young lady guests to inhabit this part of the Towers.

So Handforth turned back.

And now he found that he wasn't quite sure of his bearings. To add to his worries, he was passing a cracked window when a gust of wind came in, and blew out the candle. He was plunged into complete darkness, for the moon had gone behind a black cloud.

"Rats!" muttered Handforth irritably.

He felt for his matches, and then he came to the conclusion that he hadn't got any. He was only wearing his pyjamas and his dressing-gown, and his pockets were empty.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he told himself, although he knew very well that it did. "The moon'll be out again in a tick. What

an ass I was not to borrow Dick Hamilton's torch! After this, I'll never move a yard without having an electric torch on me!

He groped his way to the end of the corridor, and then turned to the left. There were two passages that he could select—one to the left, and one to the right. He knew that his route lay to the left. At least, he was certain in his own mind. Strictly speaking, he ought to have gone to the right.

And now he found himself in a perfect maze of old lobbies and passages and rooms. Handforth Towers was evidently like many another old country house—full of quaint wings and corridors. Such a house is difficult enough to search, even in broad daylight. But in the small hours of the morning, with a candle, and with utterly no knowledge of one's bearings, it is more like a gigantic Chinese puzzle. Added to all this, there was the uncomfortable knowledge that the place was haunted.

So Handforth's position was not exactly a cheerful one.

But he was an optimist, and he was firmly convinced that he knew the way back to his own bed-room. And it must be confessed that he had now lost a great deal of his interest in the girls. He was still anxious about them, but he was far more anxious to get back on familiar ground.

The moon came out again, and he could see all sorts of queer shadows ahead. Once he paused, his heart leaping into his mouth. There was an alcove just in front of him, and something was moving in the deep recesses of it. But there wasn't the slightest sound—and the mysterious movement continued.

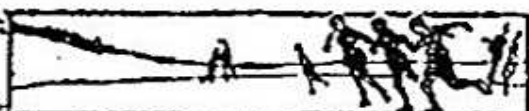
A black shape, restlessly rocking to and fro! It was some moments before Handforth could pluck up enough courage to creep nearer—and then he found that it was only the shadow of a fir-tree branch, which happened to be in a direct line with the moonlight, and which was waving to and fro in the wind.

"Thank goodness!" he muttered shakily.

He walked on, his heart now thumping, not merely with a vague apprehension, but with positive anxiety. And he suddenly discovered that he had walked into a passage that had no outlet. No opening, that is. In front of him there was a door, and it was closed. He knew he hadn't come this way, and he was on the point of turning back.

"No," he decided. "I'll go through here—it'll probably lead me straight on to the landing. I expect I've been going round in circles."

He opened the door cautiously. It creaked protestingly, as though it had not been disturbed for years. And a dank, earthy, mouldy odour assailed his nostrils. Everything was pitchy black beyond—utterly, absolutely dark.



Handy went right through the doorway, and only saved himself from falling into space by clutching at the doorpost in the nick of time. He was dangling in the open, the snow beating on his face, and a big drop beneath his feet.

"Only a cupboard!" he muttered in disgust. He took one or two steps forward, feeling cautiously in front of him with his hands. Then an extraordinary sensation came over him. He felt that his feet were sinking into the solid floor, the boards were sagging! Crash!

With a yell, Handforth tried to get back, but it was too late. He had not been mistaken, for the floor-boards, ancient and rotted, gave way under his weight, and he found himself plunging headlong downwards into an abyss!



CHAPTER 13.

THE SECRET OF THE CRYPT.

HANDFORTH thought that his last moment had come.

As he fell, he gave vent to a wild, despairing cry.

It wasn't one of his usual shouts, which the St. Frank's fellows knew so well. It was a real appeal for help, uttered quite involuntarily. For in that dreadful moment the unfortunate Removite felt that he was plunging to his death.

And then, before he knew it, he landed with a hard thud on a solid stone floor. The shock was heavy, but, fortunately, he

fell on his feet, and rolled over sideways. And there he floundered for a moment or two. Dead silence reigned. And here the earthy smell was greatly increased.

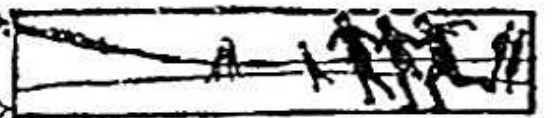
"Oh, corks!" said Handforth painfully.

He sat up, trembling in every limb. But, to his infinite relief, he found that his limbs were whole. He had escaped with only a few bruises, and he sat there, trying to think what had happened. He had no idea where he was, or what was the nature of this place into which he had dropped. He was afraid to move far, in case he plunged down into another chasm.

But his present predicament was easily explained. In fact, there was no mystery about it at all. He had stepped into a chamber which had been locked up for years, in all probability—a place where the damp rot had been allowed to hold full sway. And his weight had caused the ancient timbers to collapse. It was a perfectly natural accident, and in no way due to ghostly influence, or to the plottings of an unseen enemy. Edward Oswald had got himself into this mess entirely by his own blundering methods.

And then came a change.

As Handforth sat there he heard mysterious footsteps—soft, padding footfalls from somewhere overhead. Now and again there



was a slight creak, and he suddenly saw, too, that his prison was being filled with a ghostly radiance. He started up horrified.

"Ted!" came an anxious voice. "Ted!"

"Oh!" breathed Handforth. "Willy!"

His relief was heartfelt. The last person in the world he had expected! His startled wits had jumped to all sorts of fantastic conclusions, but now he knew that Willy was near by, he felt his panic subside. Any human presence, indeed, was welcome—but his minor's most of all. For he could pledge Willy to secrecy over this unhappy business.

"Here!" he shouted quickly. "Hi, Willy! Down here! I fell through the floor——"

"You would!" came Willy's voice scornfully.

An explanation of the radiance came. The bright light of an electric torch blazed down through the gap in the flooring. Willy had been coming along with that torch, and it was the reflected light of this which Handforth had first seen.

"Hurt?" asked the Third-Former.

"No, thank goodness!" said Handforth, looking up and shading his eyes. "I'm jolly glad you came, Willy, I can tell you! Lend us a hand out of this fearful place, for goodness' sake!"

"Just a minute," said Willy. "You seem to have accidentally dropped into a secret crypt, or something. If you can't discover anything by design, Ted, you generally discover it by accident! Rummy chap!"

Willy was quite cool, and he gingerly stepped to the edge of the hole, and then lowered himself. He dropped lightly on to the rotten fragments of flooring beside his major.

"How—how did you find me?" asked Handforth, in wonder.

"I didn't find you; I was after you all the time," explained Willy.

"What?"

"Did you think I was going to let you wander through these disused wings with only a candle?" asked the fag tartly. "I was expecting that candle to blow out long before it did, and I was ready to bet my shirt that you hadn't got any matches. So I thought it just as well to keep my eye on you, Ted. It's not safe to let you wander about alone!"

Handforth was so relieved at seeing the torchlight, and to have the comfort of his minor's presence, that he did not fire up at this remark.

"Well, it was like your nerve to follow me!" was all he said. "I went into that rotten cupboard, and the floor gave way——"

"I know something gave way," said Willy, nodding. "I was right at the end of the passage, waiting for you to turn the corner before I came round. But I see there wasn't a corner, only that door. I saw you open it, and then I heard a crash. My hat! I thought I should find you in bits!"

Handforth looked up, and was surprised to find the rough edges of the broken flooring almost within reach. He had fancied that he had fallen twenty or thirty feet, whereas, in reality, the depth was not more than six.

"It's not a cupboard up there," went on Willy, following his major's gaze. "It's a little lobby, with some narrow stone stairs going up. One of the sentinel towers, I suppose. We're right at the base of the tower, now," he added, flashing his torch down and stamping on the stone floor. "Seems to be a sort of crypt, or something. A hidden chamber, perhaps."

Handforth was looking at him queerly.

"The tower!" he muttered. "I say, that ghost——"

"You needn't worry, this is the other tower, at the other end of the house," interrupted Willy, with a little shiver. "I don't suppose she'll disturb us. Hope not, anyhow. I've had enough of that lady!"

"Yes, rather!" agreed his major. "Come on, let's get out and go back to our bedrooms. But I want you to tell me what you've discovered——"

"Oh, give it a rest, Ted!" interrupted Willy. "And let's have a look at this place before we go back. H'm! Nothing to write home to mother about. No secrets to discover."

The light of the torch revealed the fact that the place was bare. There were stone walls, and the old oaken woodwork overhead. The floor was of stone, and there was nothing there except the fragments of flooring that Handforth had shattered. Willy pushed them aside with his foot.

"Yes, we might as well go," he admitted. "We'll have another talk to-morrow—— Half a tick, though! What's this? Aha! A discovery, or my name isn't Captain Kidd!"

He was focusing his light upon one of the flagstones at his feet.

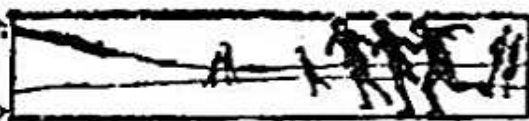
"Ye ring in ye floor!" he said impressively. "Look, Ted! Ten to one there's a subterranean passage under this. We're on the verge of discoveries!"

Although he spoke lightly, he was genuinely excited. Now that the debris was pushed away, they could see a rusted iron ring in that particular flagstone. And an iron ring meant that the flagstone was raisable.

"Let's get it up!" said Handforth tensely.

"You bet!" agreed Willy. "Come on! Heave-ho!"

He set the torch on the floor, and they both gripped the iron ring, and exerted all their strength. The flagstone resisted, having been untouched, probably, for years—for centuries. There was no fake about it. The interstices were filled with genuine mould, and that sort of thing could not have been imitated. This flagstone had not been raised for generations.



NEXT WEDNESDAY!

"HANDFORTH'S GHOST HUNT!"

A skeleton—hidden treasure
—and a ghost!

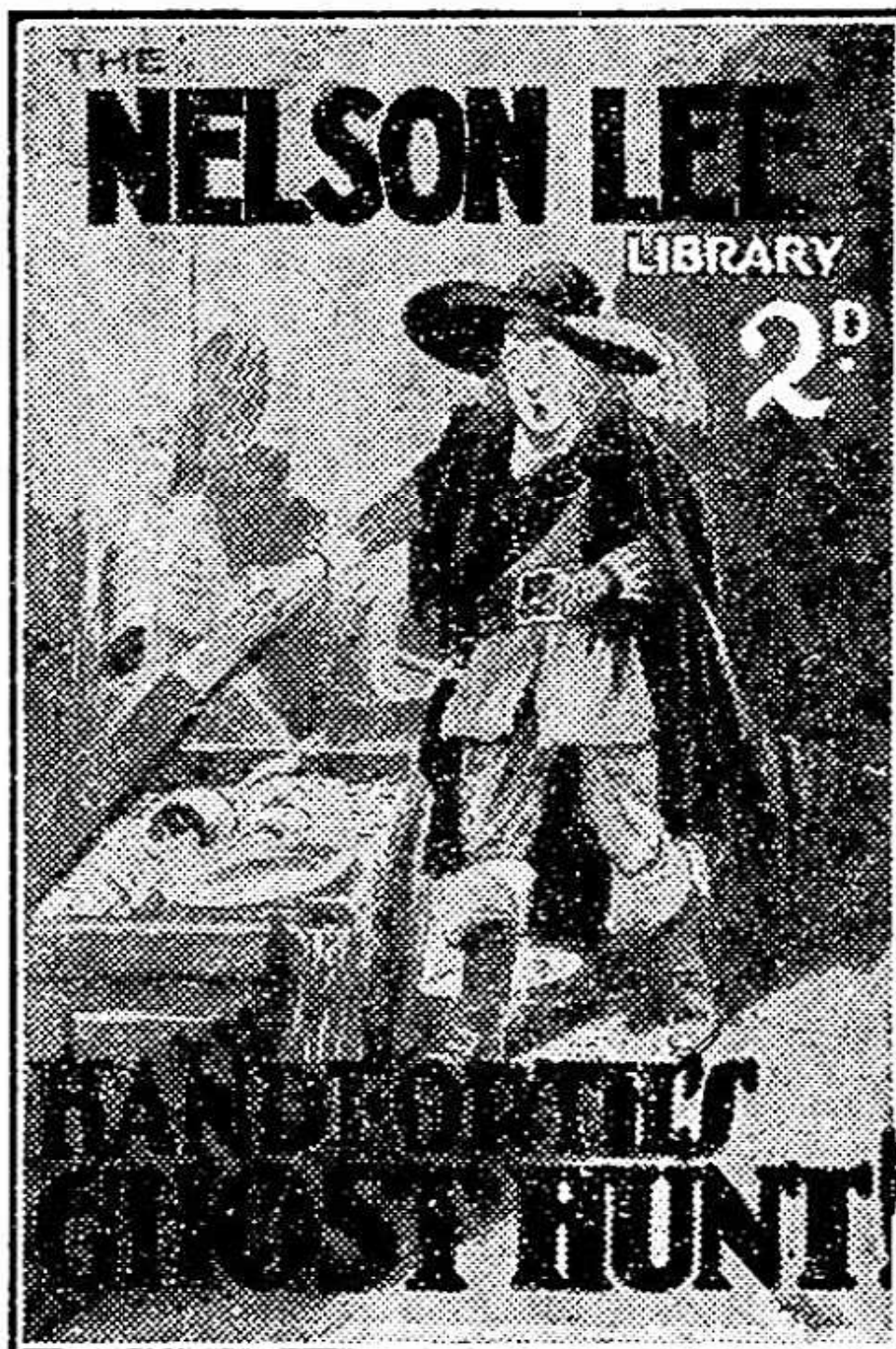
Handforth is determined to
investigate these mysteries.

It is still Christmastide at
Handforth Towers. The holi-
day party is in full swing.

Loads of fun, thrills and
mystery in next week's rollick-
ing yarn.

"SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!"

More rousing chapters of this
brilliant new war serial.



*Next week's stirring mystery yarn is full
of real thrills. Look out for this cover on
the bookstalls.*

ORDER IN ADVANCE!

"It shifted!" panted Handforth. "Come
on—again!"

They were both thrilled now, and they
perspired as they tugged with every ounce
of strength that possessed them. And at
last the flagstone came up from its bedding.

"Got it!" said Willy triumphantly.

They laid the heavy stone right back, and
there was now a gaping square hole in the
floor, with blackness beneath. An earthy
smell rose—a smell which reminded the two
juniors of graves. But they were too ex-
cited to feel any fear.

"The torch!" said Handforth tensely.

He was prepared to jump right down, but
Willy grabbed the torch and pushed him back.

"You ass!" he gasped. "You might kill
yourself in earnest! Before we go down
there, we've got to be certain that it's safe."

He went on his hands and knees, and
flashed the light into the black hole. Hand-
forth joined him, and they stared down. For

a moment they said nothing—they just
looked.

The crypt was small, and quite square.
Immediately below was a stone floor, but
there was something else—something right
underneath the hole. A heavy-looking sea-
chest, of the type that one associated with
Spanish galleons. And, lying across it was
a skeleton, with tattered fragments of rotted
clothing clinging to it!

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Hand-
forth, with a catch in his voice.



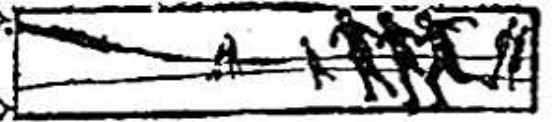
CHAPTER 14.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

HIS was a discovery, indeed.

Even Willy, usually so
cool and collected, was
fairly agog with genuine
excitement. His face was

flushed, and his eyes were gleaming. Neither



he nor his major were frightened by the sight of that gruesome relic below. The whole adventure was too fascinating to allow of fright.

"Let's go down," breathed Handforth. "And don't forget that this is my discovery! I found it, my lad——"

"We won't quarrel about that," interrupted Willy tensely. "But hold on before you drop into this place, Ted. It hasn't been disturbed for hundreds of years, by the look of it."

"What does that matter—it's got a stone floor?" said Handforth. "There's no fear of falling through. Besides, it's only four or five feet down——"

"What about gas?" said Willy grimly. "Carbon monoxide, or whatever it is. It's a pity you don't think of these things, Ted. Before we drop into this place, we've got to test the purity of the air. I'm not taking any chances—especially as nobody else knows we've come here."

This was a very wise decision, and characteristic of the shrewd Third-Former. He pulled a piece of string from his pocket, and quickly tied Handforth's candle to it. Then he lit the candle and prepared to lower it.

"Hold on!" gasped Handforth. "If there's gas down there, you'll blow us to bits!"

"You—you chump!" snorted Willy. "It's not that sort of gas! If it's unsafe to go down, the candle will peter out. If it burns brightly, it proves that the air's breathable. Haven't you heard that before?"

Handforth, abashed, said no more, and Willy lowered the candle. It burned brightly, even when it was on the floor of the crypt. And a moment later the pair were down there, taking a closer look at the curious relics. Very gingerly, Willy touched the skeleton, and a portion of it collapsed.

"Thought so!" he muttered. "You see, the slightest touch is enough. We can't know anything for certain, but we can make a guess. Hundreds of years ago, this poor beggar must have been shoved down here by some of his enemies, and he died by starvation. Either that, or there's something in this chest that he treasured, and he came down here of his own accord and died over it."

Handforth was struck by one of Willy's words.

"Treasure!" he gasped. "Great jumping corks! You've hit it, Willy! I mean, I've hit it! This is my discovery, blow you! This chest is full of treasure! Doubloons, by George!"

"Pieces of eight!" said Willy sarcastically. "Don't be an ass, Ted! Just because we find an old sea-chest, it doesn't mean that we've found a treasure. It's probably full of old papers or clothes——"

"Let's have a look, anyhow," said Handforth breathlessly.

"Not now, old man," urged Willy. "We'll wait until to-morrow—until it's daylight. Even though the daylight won't come down here, we shall feel safer. There's something comforting in the knowledge that there's sunshine outside. Let's get back to bed now."

"Just one peep——"

"My dear chap, it's no good!" said Willy impatiently. "Look at the fastenings! We can't do anything without tools. Can't you see? We shall need a crowbar to open this chest. Leave it until the morning."

Handforth was convinced at last, and he glanced upwards to get a hold on the edge of the square gap. And then he stared with sudden horror. His limbs stiffened. He could see right up—through the first opening, and up to the other cavity, through which he had tumbled, the pair being in line. And he caught a glimpse of a pale, ghostly face—a kind of skeleton face, with wild, staring eyes that seemed unearthly.

"Look!" he gasped chokingly.

Willy looked up, startled by that shout, and just caught the merest glimpse of the horror. But even that glimpse was enough to fix the thing on his mind. His face was as pale as Edward Oswald's as he snatched the torch and flashed it into the opening.

But the light revealed nothing.

"Quick!" panted Willy. "We'll look into this."

In a moment he was in the other cellar, and Handforth came scrambling after him. But it was not such an easy matter to go farther, for when they attempted to haul themselves out, the rotten woodwork crumbled in their fingers.

"It's no good," said Willy. "It's gone, whatever it was. We can't hope to get it now. Let's cool down. Phew! That thing gave me a start, I can tell you. What was it, Ted? Did you see it clearly?"

"A face!" said Handforth. "It wasn't a human face, Willy, it was something horrible—a sort of spectral——"

"It couldn't have been one of the chaps?"

"Good heavens, no!" interrupted Handforth. "It was grey; and didn't you see the eyes? The eyes were like——"

He broke off and shivered.

"It's high time we got back to bed," said Willy gruffly.

They lowered the flagstone into position again, and stamped it down. Then they hoisted themselves up, Willy going first, and Handforth helping him. This time they managed to get a firm hold, and they were soon out in the draughty passage. Handforth was curious to see the nature of that cavity.

As Willy had said, it was not a cupboard, but a kind of lobby, with stairs leading up into the tower. They closed the door, and, at Willy's suggestion, they took a piece of



the broken wood and jammed it hard under the door as they closed the latter.

"We can't lock it, but we can make it secure," said Willy. "If any of the chaps come along here exploring, they'll try this door, think it locked, and go away. We don't want anybody else falling through that flooring."

Handforth nodded.

"We don't want anybody else making discoveries, either," he said. "Remember, Willy, not a word; not a sound! This is our secret, and we're going to carry out these investigations on our own. Why, it might be a Handforth family skeleton!"

"It's a skeleton, anyway."

"For all we know, those poor remains downstairs may be the bones of one of our ancestors," continued Edward Oswald. "So we'd better keep it to ourselves, and breathe nothing to a soul until we've opened the chest—not even to Uncle Gregory." He paused. "But where is Uncle Gregory?" he added, frowning. "I can't help thinking that old Rodd has done something sinister."

"That's a good word, agreed Willy, nodding. "But you mustn't get these silly ideas, old man. Why, Rodd has been in Uncle Greg's service before he was born."

"How the dickens could he be in his service before he was born?"

"Before Uncle Gregory was born, you ass!" said Willy. "Why, old Rodd was butler to our great uncle. He's been in the family all his life. He's a sort of institution. There's nothing wrong with Rodd."

"Well, it's jolly queer!" growled Handforth.

They went off, deciding that it was high time to get some sleep, although, in reality, the hour was not particularly late. They thought that dawn would soon be upon them, but so much had happened in a short time that they miscalculated. It was only just about two o'clock, in point of fact.

Willy led the way down the passages and corridors.

"This is the best of having a good memory," he said. "We've only got to turn another corner, and we shall be on the big landing. Then we can be in bed in two minutes, and have plenty of sleep before nine."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "I thought it was nearly breakfast-time."

They were just going to turn an angle when another disturbance came, and this time from an unexpected quarter. Somewhere in their rear came a low, fiendish chuckle. They both paused, and looked round.

"What—what was that?" asked Willy, startled.

He need not have asked. Down the long passage, at the far end, the moonlight was streaming in. And there, fully in the beam,

was a figure. Not the Lady of the Tower, however, not one of the St. Frank's juniors. This figure was a mere shape. And if Handforth was scared, Willy was pale with sudden apprehension.

"Look!" he breathed. "There's—there's something—"

"Oh, the whole house is full of ghosts!" said Handforth, between his teeth. "By George!" he roared. "We'll chase it!"

His exasperation overcame his nervousness, and he ran madly down the corridor.

Willy, after a moment of hesitation, followed. And as he started running, he heard the great hall clock striking the hour of two.

"Goodness!" he whispered to himself.

Handforth found himself engaged in a chase—for the spectre was in full flight. It seemed to glide down an adjoining passage, and then, in front of Handforth's eyes, it grew dim, and seemed to disappear. He found a doorway in front of him—a wide-open doorway.

But even as he rushed up, the door slammed with a crash which shook the whole corridor. Willy rushed up at the same moment.

"It went through here!" roared Handforth.

He tore the door open, and went to rush through. Then, in the nick of time, he checked himself, clutching at the doorpost. There was no corridor beyond here—but the open air, with a black void beneath his scrambling feet!



CHAPTER 15.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS!

EXACTLY what lay below, Handforth did not know.

He could only see that this door was set in the outside wall, a good distance

from the ground. The snow was beating into his face as he struggled back.

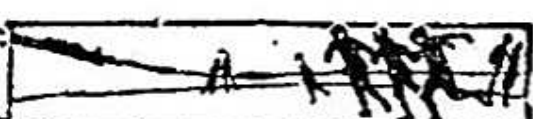
"Oh, Ted!" gasped Willy. "Why do you do these things? I—I thought you were going that time!"

"But that thing went through here!" muttered Handforth, amazed. "It went through, and slammed the door behind it. And look! There's nothing down there but undisturbed snow! There's not even a scrap of ivy on the wall! Where did it go to? I've never believed in ghosts before, but—"

"You're sure the figure came through here?"

"Certain! Didn't I nearly blunder after it?" asked Handforth.

They stood there, puzzled by this fresh mystery. Willy, indeed, was looking far more worried and startled than he had looked throughout the whole adventure. The moon came out, and they could see the snow-covered ground, some distance below. And



it was obvious that nothing human or material could have passed that way.

"It beats me," muttered Willy anxiously. "Ted, it fairly beats me!"

They turned aside, and Willy closed the door. He was about to examine the immediate surroundings, when he started.

"Listen!" he said softly.

In the distance, and apparently from downstairs, they could hear heavy footfalls, and then voices. Presently there was another voice—one that rose loudly above the others.

"Uncle Gregory!" yelled Willy.

"What!" gasped his major.

"Come on, Ted!" said the Third Former. "Good egg!"

He raced back towards the landing, and fairly flew to the head of the staircase. Handforth was hot at his heels, and at the same moment Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt and several others came running out.

Downstairs, the hall was blazing with light—powerful lamps of the petrol-vapour type were being held aloft by several men. They were all wearing heavy overcoats, and two or three of them were obviously chauffeurs or grooms.

"Hey, boys!" bellowed a voice which sounded like the blast from a megaphone. "Now then, Edward! Come along, Willy! Where are you, my lads? Ah!" he added, with another blast, as he looked upstairs. "So there you are, eh?"

Dick Hamilton stared.

"Who—who's this human dynamite explosion?" he asked.

"It's Uncle Gregory!" grinned Willy.

He ran downstairs, and at the foot stood General Gregory Bartholomew Handforth, D.S.O. He was a big, bluff old soldier of the true Handforth type, and this voice of his was his natural one. He was an enormously exaggerated edition of Edward Oswald, and his red face, with its huge white moustache, was wrinkled with a wide smile. His eyes were twinkling merrily.

"Good lad, Willy!" he said, thumping Willy on the back with so much force that the unfortunate fag nearly collapsed. "Well done! Good lad—good lad! We played them a good joke, didn't we?"

"You bet we did, Uncle Greg!" grinned Willy.

Handforth reeled as he came downstairs.

"Joke!" he said dazedly.

"Joke!" repeated the other juniors on the landing.

General Handforth burst into a roar of laughter. For half a second, Willy feared that the whole house was going to collapse.

"Steady, uncle!" he chuckled.

"It's pretty ancient, my lad, but these old walls will stand more than my laughter," bellowed the general. "Handforth Towers has withstood the storms of centuries. Well, boys, what are you going to do with me? A fine way to treat guests, eh? But I expect you'll forgive me!"

They all came crowding down now, too amazed and relieved to have any feelings of resentment. The blaze of light from the numerous lamps was also cheering after the darkness and the candle-flickering.

"What—what does it mean, Uncle Gregory?" asked Handforth, as he grabbed at the general. "We've had an awful time!"

"Good! Just what I wanted!"

"Eh?"

"I was determined to test your nerves, my fine young lads!" thundered the general, with another burst of laughter. "Don't boys like ghosts and mystery at Christmas time? Egad! I thought I'd give you a taster. You can always trust Uncle Gregory to enjoy a good practical joke!"

"Odds swindles and frauds!" murmured Archie Glenthorne. "Then—then we've absolutely been hoaxed, what?"

"Absolutely!" chuckled Willy.

"And the Lady of the Tower——"

"That was me!" said Willy, grinning.

"You!" howled his major. "Then—then you were in this swindle?"

"Poor old Ted, I was the chief conspirator!" said Willy calmly. "I was the chap who put the idea into Uncle Gregory's head!"

"He was—egad, he was!" megaphoned the general. "This lad is going to be a terror when he grows up, mark my words!"

"If you ask me, sir, he's a terror now!" said Reggie Pitt. "But we don't mind him—and we forgive everything. We're too jolly pleased to do anything else! Besides, he's a born wonder! Whoever would have believed that he was spoofing?"

"If we had had any sense, we should have known!" said Dick Hamilton. "In fact, I did suspect him once, but I dismissed it. Willy, you're a young terror—but you have my congratulations!"

"Thanks awfully," said Willy cheerfully.

"Wait a minute!" stormed Handforth. "Wait a minute! Have—have we been japed ever since we entered this house?"

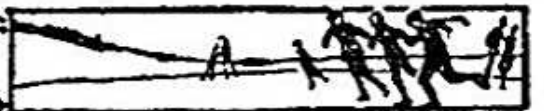
"Every minute of the time!" said General Gregory, with a chuckle. "I'm glad to see you looking so happy, though. I was half afraid you'd all seize me, egad, and throw me into the snow! Good lads—fine lads! Hanged if you're not taking it in the spirit I hoped for."

"Just a minute, uncle," said Handforth. "I've always understood that Handforth Towers was a jolly fine mansion, with a great park, and electric lights, and——"

"So it is!" interrupted Willy. "But you're thinking about the place where Uncle Gregory lives."

"Then—then isn't this Handforth Towers?" gurgled Edward Oswald, a light bursting upon him.

"It is—and it isn't!" replied Willy calmly. "You see, this is the old Handforth Towers—the ruined one. Uncle's real home is half a



mile up the road. That's the genuine Handforth Towers, and it was built by Uncle Gregory's grandfather, or somebody, about seventy years ago. A real mansion, you know—with everything tip-top. This place here has been shut up for years."

"My only hat!" said Handforth blankly.

"But—but why did we come here?" asked Church.

"Because there weren't any cars at the station—and because I led you here," replied Willy blandly. "Without me, the thing couldn't have been done. As a matter of fact, Ted, I was down here at the beginning of the week, and Uncle Greg and I fixed everything up."

"You—you mean on Monday?" asked his major. "But I thought you had just gone to Twickenham, with some of Juicy Lemon's people, or something."

"I only gave you a little hint, and you guessed the rest!" grinned Willy. "As a matter of fact, I was down here, fixing up the plans for the little jape. I think we did it pretty well, don't you?"

"And—and what about Rodd?"

"Rodd and his wife, of course, were in the know," said Willy. "They did pretty well, didn't they?"

"And what about Ena?"

"Oh, Ena!" interrupted General Handforth. "She's asleep—and so are the other young ladies. Egad, boys, I must say that you know how to pick 'em! Fine girls—wonderful girls! Good gracious, how they laughed!"

"Laughed!" gurgled Handforth. "Were they in the know, too?"

"My dear chap!" protested Willy. "You don't think we'd play the ghost on Ena and the girls, surely? They had supper with us, just to keep up appearances, and then Mrs. Rodd took them out, and escorted them to a back door—where a motor-car was waiting. Within ten minutes they were at the Towers, safe and sound."

"Well, I must say you did it completely!" smiled Dick Hamilton. "No wonder we couldn't find the girls when we searched for them!"

General Handforth laughed heartily.

"Well, boys, I gave you until two o'clock!" he said. "Egad, I didn't mean to keep you here all night! And I gave Willy full instructions that if any of you were really badly scared, he was to tell the truth about it. At the first sign of real trouble, he would have let the cat out of the bag. But, egad, I'm infernally pleased to know that you lasted out the time. Boys, you've got nerve!"

"So has Willy, sir!" said Reggie Pitt feelingly.

"I just want to ask something!" said Handforth, in a thick voice. "What about that rummy scream we heard——"

"That was Rodd—through a specially constructed tube!" said Willy. "We practised it

for an hour the other day, before we got it perfect. It took him a long time to develop the throbbing note perfectly."

"Something grabbed my ankle——"

"Oh, that!" said Willy. "A cord, stretched from skirting to skirting, Ted! I worked it from one of the rooms—but when you had a look you couldn't find it, because I had withdrawn it by then. I suppose it felt just like somebody grabbing you, when you felt it against your ankle, and couldn't see anything."

"But it happened downstairs as well——"

"Of course it did," nodded Willy. "Anything that happened without an apparent reason, you can put down to Uncle Gregory and me. We faked up strings in different places, knowing that they couldn't be seen in the gloom. We made one or two boards loose, so that they operated different catches. I'll bring you here to-morrow, and show you the whole bag of tricks. That vase was knocked off the mantelpiece by one of my little gadgets——"

"Yes, but what about the ghost?"

"Easy!" said Willy. "Here she is!"

He went into a corner of the hall, and from behind an old piece of furniture he took out something which somewhat resembled an umbrella. It was covered with gauze, but when Willy opened it, it took on the shape of a human figure. In the brilliant light, it seemed ridiculous.

"All I did," said Willy, "was to slip out of my bed-room, and find a position on the landing where the ghost would look most effective. I flopped on the floor, and held this thing up over me—and from the corridor entrance you could see right through it. Don't forget the gloom made all the difference—it looked like the real thing. And at the crucial moment, I touched the catch, and whirled it round, and dropped it through the banisters. And Rodd was down below, waiting to hide it up."

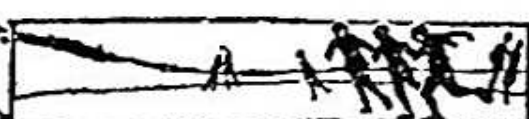
"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth.

"It only shows you how a perfectly simple thing can look supernatural," said Dick Hamilton soberly. "No wonder these fake spiritualists spoof their clients! You only need to get the atmosphere of haunting, and work a few tricks, and the imagination does the rest!"

"But there wasn't any imagination about my minor's face!" snapped Handforth. "He was as pale as a ghost himself when we found him——"

"Well, my dear chap, I had to make it look real," said Willy. "Of course, I faked up my face before I started on the job—gave it a proper pallid look, you know. And then, after you had tucked me in bed, I managed to wipe it off without you noticing me. That's how I recovered my usual colour so nicely."

"All I can say is that you're the limit!" smiled Reggie Pitt. "But it was such a



ripping practical joke that we can't help admiring you. And General Handforth, too

"General Handforth, nonsense!" boomed the general fiercely. "I'm Uncle Gregory! Uncle Gregory to all of you, my lads! And now that we've had our little fun, I can promise you a merry Christmas."

And the St. Frank's party was so happy at the turn of events that there was no thought of being resentful.



CHAPTER 16.

A BIT OF A DIFFERENCE!

RODD himself was in evidence now, and he was a very different man, too.

Although he was still old and wizened, that mysterious look had gone from him, and he was smiling with genial contentment. He was more upright, too—and less like an old miser. He had been acting a part, as his wife had done. For Mrs. Rodd, in reality, was a kindly, gentle old soul, as the girls were ready to assert.

Very soon there was a tremendous bustle afoot.

The St. Frank's party rushed upstairs to those gloomy bed-rooms, and they didn't mind the shadows now. The old house had lost its terrors. They hastily dressed, and were soon ready. In all the previous excitement they hadn't had time to wonder regarding their trunks and suit-cases—which, of course, were waiting at the Towers, ready for them.

And a general move was made for the exit. The old half-ruin was left behind, and the boys, with General Gregory at their head, marched upon the three motor-cars which were waiting on the old drive. It had stopped snowing now, and the full moon was shining brilliantly.

They started off, and when they reached the road they continued their way in the direction of the village. Then they turned into another drive—this time a beautifully kept one, and presently came to the modern Handforth Towers.

And it was the kind of mansion that Handforth had pictured—a fine place, blazing with electric lights, and full of servants. And here were the Christmas decorations that everybody delighted to see.

"Well, boys. I'm not going to keep you up," said their host, with a twinkle in his eye. "It's getting on for three, and you can go off to bed as soon as you like—and you won't be called until mid-day—just in time for luncheon, eh? But there's plenty of cold snacks in the breakfast-room, if you'd—Egad! That haunted house must have given you an appetite!"

The juniors lost no time in attacking the cold snacks. And Rodd waited upon them

again—but in a very different manner now. Everybody was feeling happy and contented—with the possible exception, perhaps, of Edward Oswald Handforth. He felt that his dignity had been slighted.

And he was not very cordial when Willy drew him aside.

"I don't want to speak to you, my son," he said coldly.

"It doesn't matter what you want," said Willy. "We've got to have a little chat. You're not bearing malice, I suppose, because of that ghost jape?"

His major grunted.

"It's not a question of malice, you young ass," he replied, frowning. "I don't believe in malice, anyhow. But I think it's thick—thundering thick!"

Willy grinned, and bit into a sandwich.

"But look here," he said in a lowered voice. "Although we've explained everything, there's something that's still a mystery—something that Uncle Gregory and I didn't plan at all!"

"What do you mean?"

"That skeleton and the chest!" murmured Willy impressively. "And that second ghost. Didn't you notice how startled I was?"

"But—but wasn't all that in the jape?"

"Great Scott, no!" breathed Willy. "And don't talk so loud, you ass! We've got to keep this to ourselves. There's something rummy about it—something more mysterious than I like! When I saw that queer-looking figure, I nearly had a fit."

"Didn't you fake it—honour bright?"

"Honour bright!" said the fag earnestly. "I haven't any more idea of what it was than the man in the moon!"

Handforth took a deep breath, and glanced round at the others.

"Shsssh!" he warned. "Willy, my lad, this is my discovery! Don't breathe a word about it to anybody—until I'm ready!"

"Well we found that sea-chest and the skeleton, and we saw something," agreed Willy, frowning. "There's no trickery there. Ted. And that face, too! Remember that face that looked down on to us? Do you wonder that I was startled?"

The leader of Study D took a deep breath.

"Good!" he said tensely. "We'll say nothing about it for the present, but we'll organise a ghost hunt, either to-morrow or the next night! And this time it won't be a lot of fakery, but the real thing! By George, a genuine ghost hunt!"

And after that they went to bed. But, although they were happy and comfortable under the hospitable roof of the real Handforth Towers, it seemed distinctly probable that there would be some more excitement before the Christmas holidays were over!

THE END.

(More mystery and thrills in "HANDFORTH'S GHOST HUNT!"—next week's rollicking story of the St. Frank's Christmas Party at Handforth Towers.)

Rousing New War Serial!

You can begin it now!

SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!



By

ROGER FOWEY

THE GERMAN INVASION RE-TOLD

JACK BENNETT and his two chums, TOM LEE and BUSTER KIRK, fall into the thick of the fighting around Cliff House School when Germany invades England in a War of Revenge. After discovering that a master named STUTZ is a spy, they go to Whitehall with papers taken from Stutz, and General Marlow sends the trio to Chillen Quarry to destroy some enemy guns. This the chums do and are almost captured by the advancing enemy. Together with a wounded lieutenant and a wounded gunner, the three take refuge in a cave, from which they watch the Germans advance across Wye Valley and over the downs beyond. The

enemy have advanced as far as Faversham, and have also made many landings on the east coast. In their cave, the chums are cut off from the British, and are presently joined by an airman named Warren, whose machine has crashed. Accompanied by Warren, Jack goes at night to a German aerodrome which has been established not far from the cave. They find six big German bombers lined up, one having just arrived. "I've seen that type before—I can handle 'em!" Warren says quietly. "We'll get away in one of those bombers—and I think we'll pinch the one that's just come in!"

(Now start on this week's thrilling chapters.)

A Desperate Chance.

AT the airman's side, Jack stood staring through the darkness in the direction of the row of big bombing 'planes. He could hear the guttural voices of the group of mechanics as they moved away.

There came a faint, jerky, cracking noise from the machine which had just landed, and Jack knew that it was the sound the hot exhaust pipes were making as they cooled in the chill, dew-wet night air.

"You—you mean we're going to bag that machine!" he gasped to the young airman.

"We are!" Warren whispered. "It'll be easy enough once we're all aboard and the engines are running. It's absolutely our only chance of getting those two wounded chaps away. Besides that, it'll be a million to one against our getting through the firing-line on foot. If we can get that 'bus, we'll be back in London well inside an hour!"

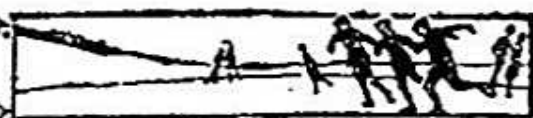
For a space, they remained crouching by the

bushes. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness after the blinding glare of the search-light, Jack could make out the squat shapes of bivouacs well behind the row of machines. Here and there the light of a candle glimmered weakly. Faint, but very clearly, came the voice of an operator from the field wireless station—its gaunt frame aerial poking up against the lighter-darkness which marked the sky.

"Better get back to the others," the airman said. "The sooner we start on the job, the more chance we've got of bringing it off."

They turned and pushed cautiously through the bushes to the thin wood beyond. There was no sign of life anywhere as they scouted silently across the road, and then moved on towards the cliff.

As they went down the rough, grassy slope, Jack saw, far ahead, lurid splashes of ruddy light which marked the firing-line. The enemy had set a battery of heavy guns back of the woods at Challock Lees, and every few seconds



one of them sent a heavy shell screaming over the downs—Jack could see the stabbing tongue of red, white-tipped flame as the gun went off.

Far beyond the dark, wooded crest of the downs Very lights kept popping towards the sky—little balls of white light, interspersed now and again with coloured blobs of fire—signals to distant artillery.

As they neared the caves, Jack saw that the whole of the woods on the other side of the valley was now alive with guns. The smacking crash of their explosions spanged to his ears—and every little while he saw the shattering burst of answering shells from British artillery.

He saw one shell burst in Bilting. It was just an eruption of spurting red light which, for the fraction of a second, lit up the whole of the tiny village. He saw shattered cottages and rent, tumbled thatched roofs limned in lurid light—he glimpsed gaping walls and piled, smashed brickwork—he saw a group of marching German infantry caught in strange attitudes as they shrank from the shell-burst—then the vision was gone. It seemed seconds later that he heard the reverberant roar of the explosion.

"That was a big 'un!" grunted Warren. "Gosh! Hark at it over there?"

He nodded towards Canterbury. The sound of the battle that raged in and around the cathedral town came to them like a giant drumming, behind which was the incessant rattle of rifle and machine-gun fire. It was a tumultuous, thudding roar—the clamorous voice of weapons and fighting men.

In it, too, there was something that made Jack's heart beat faster. In that moment, he got a mental vision of the ancient town—of grim men battling in the narrow streets, of prostrate khaki figures crouched behind broken walls, cuddling rifle-butts, firing by the momentary glare of bursting shells. He visioned hastily-built barricades—bayonets gleaming steelily—wounded Britishers fighting desperately, while ever the grey, iron might of the invader pressed them back.

Then he forgot it all in the need for cautious climbing down the steep slope which led to their cave. They pushed through the alder bushes and crawled into the narrow entrance.

"All right, Buster—it's us!" Jack grunted, as he found the barrel of a rifle jabbed towards his face, then they were inside and telling the others what they had seen, and what they intended to do.

On his rough couch of yielding alder bushes, the wounded officer raised another protest.

"Look here, you chaps, leave me a bit of grub and some water and carry on on your own. I'll be safe enough here—our chaps will start a big push and recapture the valley in the morning. I'll be all right, and I don't want to hamper you in—"

"You're coming with us, sir!" Jack told him. "We're not going to leave you here!"

"Besides, you're going to be useful!" the airman told him. "We're going to lay you on the floor of the 'plane, just by the bombing sight. When we get the old 'bus up, I'm going to bring her round, over the 'drome, and we'll drop the whole blessed cargo of bombs on those other five machines. You can have the pleasure of dropping some o' the bombs! Now, what about moving off? There's no sense in delaying longer than we need to!"

They made their preparations swiftly. The wounded gunner took one of the revolvers in his sound hand; Tom took another and Buster took the airman's revolver; the wounded officer

had his own. Jack and the airman handled the two rifles.

"I think we can manage to put up a bit of a scrap if it comes to it," Warren said cheerfully. "I'll lead the way with the gunner, you bring up the rear, Jack."

He helped Buster and Tom to get the officer from the cave, and all of them assisted in carrying him up the slope at the end of the cliff. Near the cross-roads, they had to crouch flat to earth for a while as a battalion of German infantry marched steadily and heavily along the road to Wye, then the little party of Britishers dashed across the road and were soon concealed in the bushes within view of the big enemy bombing 'planes.

Bombing the Enemy.

EVERYTHING was quiet. Voices came from from the camp back of the machines, but the six big 'planes showed dark and deserted.

"Think there'll be a sentry on them?" Jack asked the airman.

"Can't see one," Warren answered. "If there is, we'll soon fix him. Anyway, here's what we'll do; there's a door on each side of those machines, and we'll get the officer and the gunner inside, then the fat lad can stand by with one of their machine-guns ready to beat off anybody who starts being nosey about what we're doing. I'll get into the pilot's seat, then I want you and Tom to stand by each of the propellers. When I give the word, haul 'em down and start the engines—then both of you duck under the wings, hop in by the doors and shut 'em afterwards—you can leave the rest to me!"

That sounded simple enough. When he had explained just how the propellers should be given the turn which would start the giant engines, they went ahead again—now crouched down and moving as silently as possible.

Jack and Warren scouted in front, but they could see no sign of any sentry over the machines.

"They think they're safe here," the airman grunted. "They'll get a shock in a little while. Ah, there's the 'bus we're after!"

They waited for the others to come up, then moved to the heavy shadow beneath one spreading plane of the machine. The airman made a quick survey of the fuselage, while the rest remained on the ground, listening to the creaking of the fabric as the mighty craft swayed and heaved slightly in the night wind.

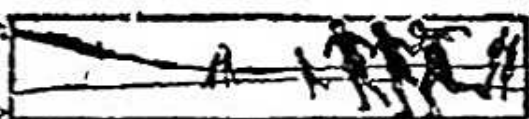
"Right—come on!" Warren's voice hissed through the darkness, and he helped the gunner aboard; Jack assisted as the wounded lieutenant was passed up through the narrow, bullet-proof doorway.

"Don't forget to kick those chocks away from the landing wheels before you climb in!" Warren called softly. "Stand by the propellers now—wait till I call before you swing!"

He disappeared inside. Jack and Tom ducked under the wings to the front of the machine. For long seconds there was silence, although Jack could hear the airman moving inside and something kept clicking in the two engines.

Two hundred yards away, he could see the open end of a bivouac. Clearly, he could make out a German air-mechanic crouched by a candle, writing. Some figures were grouped together by a big tent. An oil lamp was alight inside it, glowing faintly on the figures. Someone was addressing them.

In a flash, Jack realised who and what they



were—the pilots and crews of these six machines receiving their instructions! These bombers had flown over from Germany and now, undoubtedly, they were due to fly on to London. Somewhere or other, there was certainly a squadron of fighting 'planes ready to pick them up and escort them!

"Right—swing hard!"

Warren's voice came clearly, and Jack tucked his hands over the rounded edge of the propeller. He held his breath, tensed, and then swung down with all his strength. There came an instant of spluttering—and then a wild, mad roar as the engine fired and Jack flung himself back from the draught of the propeller.

Madly now, he raced round and beneath the broad wing-tip; he glimpsed Tom running in from the other side. Jack dived for the landing wheels and he saw Tom struggling to haul the opposite chock away. The 'plane was bucking and heaving, engines roaring wildly, then they jerked the two great chocks away and both leaped for the openings in the fuselage.

Even as they moved the chocks, the 'plane lurched forward. Jack just got a grip of the lower edge of the doorway, kicked at the ground and managed to haul himself up; he saw Buster struggling to aid Tom on the other side, then he was lying flat with the wounded gunner slamming the sliding door shut.

"Are they in—yes? Hooray!" came Warren's cheery voice, thinned by the roar of the engines. "That gang over there have spotted us—let 'em have a few shots, Buster!"

Buster's machine gun bellowed from somewhere towards the rear of the long cockpit, then Jack picked himself up, just as the airman switched on the interior lights—neon-gas tubes set along the tops of the rounded walls.

The centre of the floor was a clutter of instruments, with four sets of apparatus grouped about the square, glass shapes of bomb-dropping sights; the wounded officer was lying by one of them, his teeth gritted, his face dead-white from the pain he had suffered when he had been lifted into the craft.

Jack felt the floor of the machine bumping and jerking as the giant bomber tore over the rough ground, gathering way for its leap into the air.

"Don't think we'll do it!" Warren's voice came. "No—yes! By Gosh, this is going to be close!" Jack peered over the airman's shoulder through the glass screen ahead. He got a dark glimpse of rushing trees, bushes, figures with lifted rifles against the white surface of a star-lit road—a mad bump and then, quite suddenly, the smooth sensation which told they had left the ground. Jack saw tree-tops, felt the craft tilt to one side and swing—it seemed that they must hit the trees, but they missed them, and then they were climbing steadily, and still turning.

"Done it!" Warren's voice was exultant. "Stand by the bombs—we're going to let 'em have it in a bit! Curse it!" he gasped suddenly. "I forgot those searchlights!"

The interior of the craft was abruptly lit by a blinding white glare, as the nearest of the enemy searchlights sprang to life and swung full on them. Once again Buster's machine-gun filled the air with shattering sound. Through the roar, Jack heard the tearing, unmistakable bark of an anti-aircraft gun from the German camp—then Buster's shots got home and the searchlight snuffed out.

"Now!" Warren roared. "Now the bombs—we're going over 'em—two hundred feet up. Let 'em have it, lads. Steady—here we go!"

Jack pitched himself beside the bomb-dropping apparatus nearest the airman. The gunner and

the officer and Tom bent above the other sights; Buster still worked the machine-gun.

There were twelve little trigger catches set by the sight, each controlling a bomb. Through the glass, Jack could see a miniature picture of what lay beneath the machine, while a small, round black spot marked where the bomb should strike when it was released.

Jack saw the three other searchlights come into play—he saw the German bivouacs and tents—then one of the questing beams from the searchlights slicked for an instant on the five bombers remaining on the ground. In that moment, the black spot slid over the central machine.

Jack's hands, tensed on the triggers, snapped two of them. The sight slid on—over the barking anti-aircraft gun! Jack snapped another trigger. He now saw the camp beneath the fatal black spot—three triggers clicked!

And then came the explosions of the first bombs they had dropped. The picture beneath Jack's eyes was lit by the most awful glare of lurid red light that he had ever seen. He heard a gigantic roar—then everything was wiped out as their 'plane pitched and jumped and bucked wildly.

For minutes the 'plane seemed to rock in the air. They were flung over the floor. Jack heard the gunner exclaim as his wounded shoulder got hurt, and then they steadied and Warren called to Jack:

"Come an' look at this!"

Jack scrambled up and moved forward. The airman had pulled the machine round, and it was easy to see the German aerodrome and camp.

The five bombers were blazing furiously, and the blaze scattered every second as some of the bombs the machines carried went off under the fierce heat. The camp was blotted out—because the others had dropped bombs at the same moment as Jack. Little black figures were running wildly; one searchlight was still questing like a silver finger into the sky, flicking about in the opposite direction from that which Warren had taken.

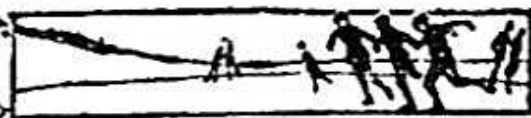
"Done it!" the airman yelled cheerfully, through the roar of the engines. "We're safe as houses now! Got plenty of bombs left, haven't you? Then we might as well bust up a few of those big guns in the valley before we make for home. Stand by! I'll fly higher this time, and we'll use our own search-light!"

Jack bent over his own bomb-dropping apparatus as Warren spoke. The airman reached out, pulled a switch, and the ground immediately beneath became lit in a big white circle—against the middle of which the black spot of the bomb-sight showed steadily.

Warren left the light blazing as he yelled:

"I'm going over Wye, then I'll fly along those woods towards Charing. Drop bombs every time you see something worth hitting! I'll shout when I'm going to climb; we'll have to go high over the firing line because of the shells!" The 'plane roared on, a bare five hundred feet above ground. Jack glued his gaze to the square of clear glass before him; actually the glass was a tilted mirror, but he did not realise that; the sights worked on the periscope principle and were all controlled by the pilot, who automatically adjusted them to allow for air speed and cross winds.

The white-lit earth slid below them. Jack saw that Warren shifted the circle of light so that the black spot rested near the rim—giving plenty of time to see what was lit up and if it was worth bombing.



A road slid beneath them—a brook—a cluster of cottages, all shell-torn and broken. Three enemy lorries lay in a tangled heap in a field—a whole row of guns all earth-stained and broken with crumpled figures amidst the wreckage—a church-spire—red roofs—Wye!

The town slipped away, and then, on the side of the road, Jack saw a battery of German howitzers, shirt-sleeved German gunners busy about them. The black spot flicked midway between two of the guns, and Jack snapped a trigger. The battery slid into the darkness, but Jack glimpsed, later, the red flash of the bomb he had dropped and those which the others in the 'plane had loosed.

This time, the bomber was higher and the explosions did not affect them.

They went on. They blew up half a column of German lorries as they crossed the Canterbury road, then came to a battery of big guns somewhere near Eastwell. The bomber passed over them, and changed them to scrap metal.

"Going up in a minute—drop all you've got next time!" Warren yelled.

It was at a point where the Maidstone and the Chilham roads cross that the young Britishers rained death and destruction for the last time. The cross-roads had been blocked by a well-timed shell from some British battery. The place was a tangle of guns, supply waggons and tanks. Nearly a dozen bombs hit that crossing—hit it all together!

Warren snapped off their search-light, and the floor of the craft tilted as he began to climb. They soared upwards with the pulsing roar of their dropped bombs surging to their ears.

The Flight to London.

AT three thousand feet, Warren flattened out and headed for London, just as Jack discovered, and drew aside, the steel panel of an observation window in the floor of the 'plane; but without their ground light there was little enough to see.

He spotted Faversham by the click of exploding weapons, and he traced the line of battle by the ragged spurts of Very lights. Here and there, fires were raging in captured villages, or places where the fighting was fierce. He could trace where the line curved away down towards Hastings, then the whole thing was left behind and they were flying over black countryside.

"Got to chance being spotted by our own chaps and shot at, now!" Warren called. "I'm going higher!"

The machine climbed; as they went up he told Jack to look for coloured cartridges to fit the signalling-light pistol which was stuck through one side of the fuselage. It was a queer affair with three barrels, and into the breeches Jack thrust a red, a white and a green cartridge.

"Let 'em go when I give the word," Warren told him. "That's the signal that we're British—but they might not take any notice of it!"

High now, close upon ten thousand feet, they stormed through the air. London slid below them—darker than the darkness, with the Thames like a silver ribbon through its heart. Here and there, the long, questing beam of a searchlight struck upwards, looking for them, but the machine slipped safely past.

Soon, the airman put the captured 'plane in a long dive, guided by a winking light far beneath and ahead of them. Straight for the light, they hurtled. Very suddenly it snapped out.

"They've heard us—let those signals off!"

Warren yelled. "Quick! Keep on shooting 'em!"

Jack obeyed, and the balls of coloured fire streaked downwards in a shower of golden sparks. A searchlight stabbed at them, found them and held them in its long beam. An anti-aircraft gun tongued flame; shrapnel burst above and behind them as Jack loosed more signal lights.

The winking light came into being for a few seconds, then once more went out. It was plain that the men in the aerodrome for which Warren was making were not at all sure of them. The searchlight still held them, but Warren made no attempt to move from it.

Again Jack loosed signal lights—and then again, while they flew steadily down the beam. They were not five hundred feet up when a whole battery of searchlights settled on them, the winking light came into being once more; ground-lights flared and illuminated a shadow-filled stretch of level grass.

Then they were speeding towards the ground, there came a bump, followed by rough running and swaying leaps as the giant craft ran over the ground and came to a stop.

From all directions, armed soldiers raced towards them, pausing with levelled weapons some distance clear of the machine.

"It's all right boys!" Warren growled the words as he slipped from the pilot's seat. He snapped the catch on one door and dropped to the ground, moving towards an officer who approached him with revolver ready.

Two minutes later, and soldiers were swarming round the machine, clambering in with a stretcher for the wounded lieutenant, and finally carrying him away.

Just before he went, he gripped Jack's hand.

"I won't forget this," he said. "Good luck!"

He went off with the wounded gunner, while the Cliff House boys accompanied Warren to report to the aerodrome commandant.

"I crashed just by Wye Valley, sir," the airman said. "Sorry I lost my machine, but I've brought back a Hun 'bus that's about twice as big as the one I had!" He smiled cheerfully, and the commandant's stern features relaxed.

"We'll call that a fair exchange, Mr. Warren. Who are these boys—cadets, aren't they?"

Warren explained how they came to be there, and the commandant looked keenly at the lads. "You'll want to report to General Marlow, I expect," he said. "Well, I'll report for you. Warren, take them with you and see that they get a decent meal and some rest in your quarters. If General Marlow wants you, boys, you can go on to him in the morning!"

They saluted and went off with Warren. Soon they were sitting down to the first decent meal they had had for what seemed ages, and then they turned in with Warren in his quarters at the back of the aerodrome.

"Wouldn't mind being an airman," granted Buster. "They don't half do you well when you do get back to your aerodrome. And, I tell you what, Jack—before we go anywhere else, I'm going to see that we take some grub with us! We could have had a decent time in that cave if we'd had proper food!"

"We'll take a tank next time, then you can carry all the grub you want!" Tom grunted. "My hat, I feel tired—and I wonder what happened to Smiler and all the others?"

"I expect they got away all right," Jack answered. "The last I saw of 'em, they were getting away with the soldiers. They're safe enough!"

There was but little doubt that the Remove lads had managed to escape. They had got well

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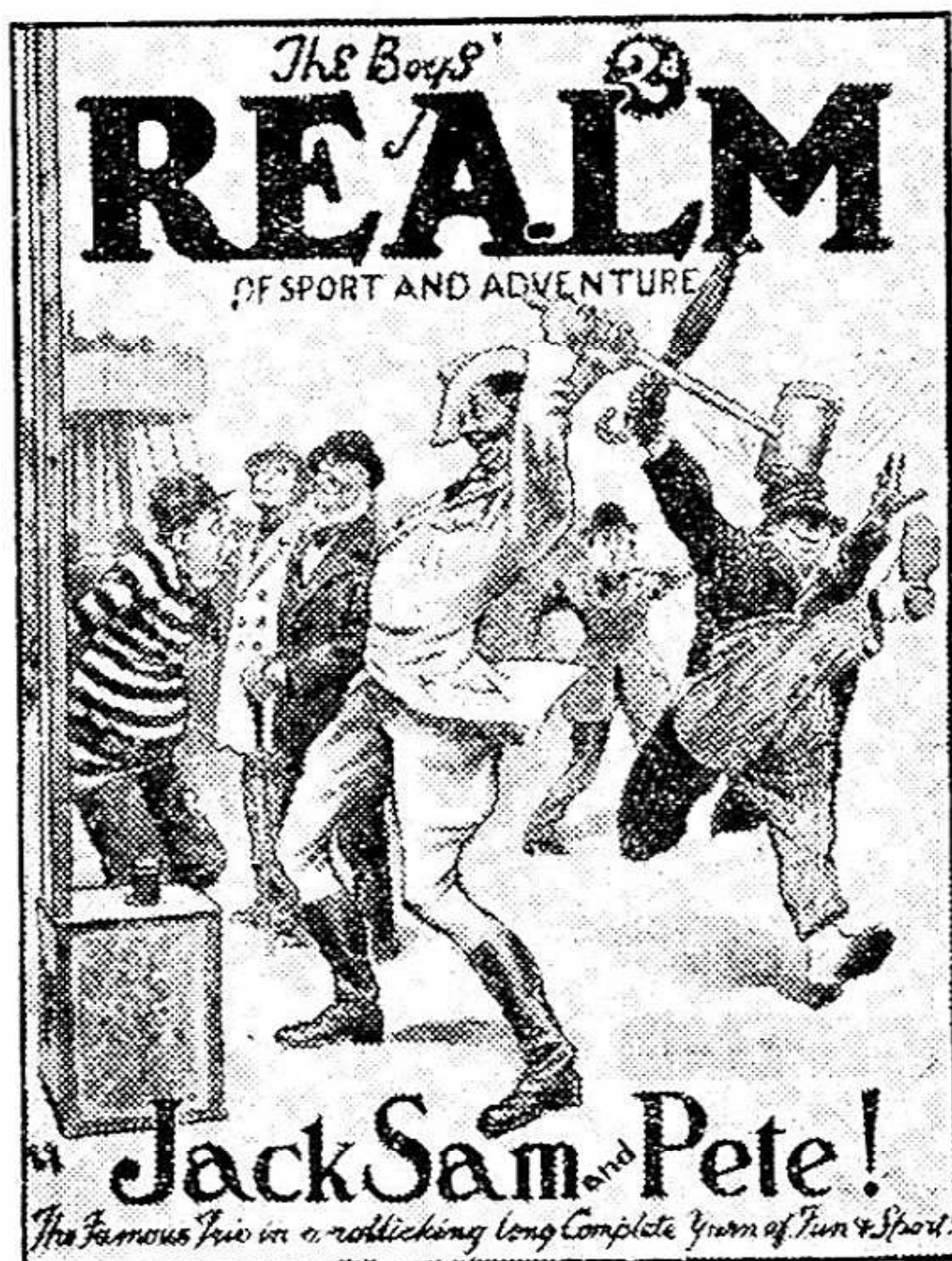
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clear of the quarry, and it was only Jack and his chums who had been in peril.

In a little while, the trio were sleeping soundly.

The Approaching Disaster.

BRIGHT sunshine was streaming through the window of the cubicle they shared, when they woke in the morning. Jack roused first, and he wakened the others.

There did not seem to be anyone about; they washed in a bucket, which they filled from a barrel containing rain-water. They discovered that Warren had left his own cubicle, and they borrowed some of his cleaning kit to smarten themselves up. By the time that they had got some of the mud and chalk off their uniforms, Buster announced that if he didn't get some sort of breakfast he would probably faint.

When they went out to the aerodrome, all the machines had disappeared, and there were no mechanics about the hangars. They strolled across to the cook's quarters, where they had had their meal the night before.

The three stoves were burning, and some sort of stew was boiling merrily in a big dixie, but there was no sign of the cook.

"Runny!" Buster exclaimed. "Everybody seems to have sheered off. Well, there's some bacon over there—and there's bread on that shelf! Marmalade—bully beef—potatoes! This is all right, we can get our own breakfasts, the cook won't mind!"

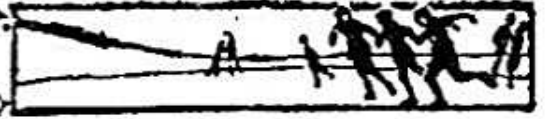
It was all the same if he did mind, because they started in straight away and within ten minutes were standing round as hefty a spread as they had had since the war started. Buster cooked the bacon and fried the potatoes, and he did the job well.

For twenty minutes they ate steadily. It was when their appetites had been lulled that they all observed, at the same moment, that no one had yet shown up across the aerodrome.

"Last night, the place was full of people!" Tom exclaimed. "Where the dickens can they have all gone to?"

They moved to the door of the cookhouse. The vast green expanse of the aerodrome showed bare and empty, save for the crumpled shape of a wrecked fighting 'plane over on the far side. The doors of the hangars were wide open, but the machines had all gone.

"Some firing going on, not far away—there wasn't any shooting round here last night!" Jack observed, and the three stood listening to the



racket of firing which came over a tree-dotted ridge to the north.

They all looked towards the ridge. The sun was shining on the leafy trees, and where the ground dipped a little, they could just glimpse Harrow Hill with three latticed wireless masts jutting above the wood there.

Between the trees on the ridge they saw little, cotton-wool puffs of smoke; above the trees, more puffs sprang from nothing, and then drifted away on the wind.

"Look, there are soldiers up there—running!" Buster gasped. From the top of the ridge, little brown figures came. Some stopping to look round and fire—others plunging on down the slope.

"Well, I'm dashed!" Tom muttered. "Looks as if—"

"There's somebody over there—by the wireless hut!" Jack cut in, and he pointed to a long, tarred hut not far away. A man was standing by the door, with field-glasses levelled on to the ridge.

Without a word, the three began to run across towards him. He lowered his glasses as they came up, and stood looking at them keenly.

"Where's everybody gone?" Jack asked.

"Most of 'em are up on the ridge there!" the wireless operator told him, and he nodded towards the rising ground. "That's where you ought to be!"

"Why? What's up?"

The operator laughed in a hard, tense fashion.

"What's up, eh? I'll tell you what's up! While we were shoving every man we could get to hold the Germans up down by Faversham and Canterbury, he was massing for an attack from the north. He's been moving forward all night and he broke through at Barnet at six o'clock this morning. Now there's fightin' going on all the way from Woodford to Harrow Weald—if the Germans keep movin' at this rate, they'll be at Marble Arch by three o'clock this afternoon!"

The trio stared at him, aghast. Slowly, they took in the full meaning of what he was saying. They all knew that the enemy had made several landings on the East Coast, but they had not known that he had moved as swiftly as this.

That gigantic attack through Kent—the scene of which they had just left—had drawn the British reserves.

Now, the enemy had smashed across Essex, and was forging round the North of London. He was at London's very gates, so swiftly had he moved!

Behind the operator, half a dozen others were working at their instruments, taking in messages from the field wireless instruments out in the thick of the fighting, while one man relayed them to Whitehall and another did the same to the Headquarters of the British troops operating in that area.

Plainly enough, this isolated wireless station had been made a nerve centre, and the chums caught some of the messages as they were relayed by wireless telephony.

"We are falling back from Friern Barnet, sir. Colonel Hammond hopes to hold the enemy with the barricades at Wood Green!"

"Major Brace is sitting tight at Hale End, sir—but the enemy are bringing up tanks through the forest."

"Mill Hill gone dead, sir—can't get anything through."

"Cheshires have gone into action at Harrow Weald. The Seaforths are coming across Bushey-heath, but they're up against tanks."

"Enemy tanks reported at Tottenham along the Enfield road, sir!"

So it went on, a tale of disaster, while the three chums stood listening and watching the little figures which kept moving on the ridge before them. Suddenly, a call from one of the operators sent the man with the field glasses leaping to the instrument. He listened for a few moments then turned to the others and yelled:

"Boys, we've got to hold out here for an hour! They're sending some marines to guard us, after that Whitehall will take everything direct!"

As he spoke, there came a break on the ridge as the British were forced over the crest. Dark, squat figures showed amidst the trees now—Germans!

Something caught the attention of the chums along the Edgware Road, which ran close against the aerodrome. They saw a field-gun tear along the tram lines, then the horses were pulled up almost on their haunches ere the drivers wheeled them round and the gun's crew detached the weapon. It fired one shot—then an enemy shell hit it.

Then seconds later, and a German tank came into sight from behind a broken, shattered hoarding, which partly obscured the chums' view of the road. They saw the tank lumber on to what was left of the gun, plunge across the wreckage, and then come on.

The tank turned towards the side of the road. There was an iron railing here, and it snapped like wood before the prodding nose of the giant, ungainly vehicle.

The sun gleamed on its drab sides, and smoke wreathed from its forward gun. From the turret, machine-gun belched continuously at unseen targets. Squat and ugly and evil it looked, with its spreading armour-plate guarding its caterpillar tractor. It seemed to poise, looking towards the wireless hut—the control centre for the Britishers fighting so valiantly.

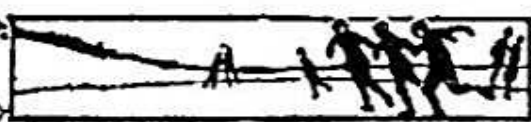
The German tank heaved forward, lurched, and then waddled down the steep slope to the aerodrome and came straight towards the hut.

"Look at that—they're coming at us!" the chief operator yelled. "If they smash us up, the field-stations can't report to Headquarters! It'll mean chaos! It—"

He broke off. Jack and the others saw the tapering, wicked muzzle of the tank's gun spit flame and bluish smoke, straight at them!

They flung themselves down. There was a fierce screech, a shattering explosion, and the three were flung over and over in a shower of earth and whirling smoke. Through the mark and dust, Jack saw torn earth by the side of the hut, glimpsed Tom and Buster scrambling to their feet—and then there came another tearing screech as the enemy tank fired again!

(If the wireless hut is destroyed, the German advance upon London is certain to succeed. Can the Cliff House boys do anything to avert this disaster? There are more amazing war thrills in next Wednesday's exciting chapters—order your copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY in advance! It's the only way to make sure of it!)



THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

All LETTERS in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Any enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

FRIENDSHIP AND GOODWILL.

IN this season of goodwill, a word about friendship and what it means to us will not be out of place. Life would be a gloomy existence without this wonderful gift. Happily, most of us can count upon at least one kindly soul in whom we can confide our troubles and our joys.

It may truly be said that the sum total of our happiness can be measured in terms of friendship. In the long run, friendship means more to us than gold, and we should all try to cultivate it in that feeling of goodwill towards others which the spirit of Christmas brings home to us. As the chief purpose of the League is to foster friendship, I trust that every reader of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY will make up his mind this Christmas-tide to join the ever-increasing circle.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Alex. Huggins, 3, Dudley Drive, Partick, W.2, Glasgow, wishes to correspond with overseas readers interested in cricket and stamp collecting.

Arthur Weston, 40, Leswell Lane, Kidderminster, wishes to obtain Nos. 1 to 6 and No. 9 new series NELSON LEE LIBRARY. These are out of print. If any reader can oblige with these copies the price offered is twopence each plus postage.

Charles N. Smart, O.O., 7, Copley Hill, Erdington, Birmingham, would like to hear from other O.O.'s in his neighbourhood who are willing to help him form a club; also from members who are ready to become members.

James Gall, 23, Virginia Street, Aberdeen, wishes to correspond with members.

Jack Sanders, 2, Palace Street, Prince of Wales Road, Kentish Town, N.W.5, wishes to correspond with a reader on a ranch.

Harold Richmond, 2, The Willows, Chorltonville, Manchester, wishes to hear from readers in his district who will come into his Athletic Club.

A. C. Cleeve Sculthorpe, Errington Post Office, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, wishes to hear from readers willing to join his Correspondence Club.

Stanley W. Crowe, 63, Canterbury Road, Westonville, Margate, wishes to hear from readers in Australia and England.

G. H. Keely, Highbury, Helen Street, Lane Cave, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader between 16-18, who

is interested in sports and reading, and who is a student at an English or South African college or public school.

T. Cushing, 1, Stafford Street, Earlham Road, Norwich, wishes to hear from readers in his neighbourhood.

F. Edgar Coomber, 35, Corinne Road, Tufnell Park, N. 19, wishes to hear from readers in his district who will help to form a club.

H. Robinson, 88, Nottingham Road, Mansfield, Notts, wishes to correspond with members.

A. B. Butcher, 12, Barrett Road, Birkdale, Southport, wishes to correspond with a member interested in motor engineering.

Harold Dell, "Field View," Parsloage Barn Lane, Ringwood, Hants, wishes to hear from members who would like to see his amateur magazine, "The Report," 3d. post free.

Tom Fleming, Chapelhill, Cruden Bay, Aberdeen, wishes to hear from members in Birmingham and Liverpool.

Gerald Wolledge, 29, Sydney Street, South Kensington, London, S.W. 19, wishes to hear from members in his district on the subject of clubs.

Miss Edna Smith, 14, Cadogan Street, Chelsea, S.W. 3, wishes to hear from readers.

Edgar A. Mittelholzer, Coburg Street, New Amsterdam, British Guiana, wishes to correspond with stamp collectors.

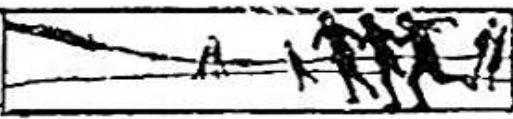
Miss Holly Langham, 18, St Andrews Road, St. Vital, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, wishes to correspond with a reader in Australia who is interested in cricket, wireless, the country and its customs, and anything of interest.

Leslie W. Cox, 28, Alton Road, Trebrook, Liverpool, wishes to hear from members in his district for the purpose of forming a club; he also asks for a correspondent in China.

H. Cliff Cavenett, 150, Three Chain Road, Solomontown, South Australia, wishes to correspond on sports with readers in England and Canada.

Cyril A. Rawlings, 71, Abinger Road, Deptford, London, S.E.8, wishes to correspond with stamp collectors; Rhodesia, New Zealand.

J. J. Hoser Cook, 21, Rook Street, Poplar, London, E.14, wishes to hear from readers anywhere.



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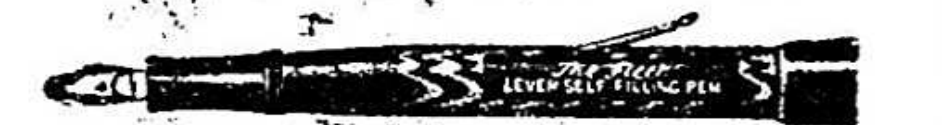


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