Amazing Xmas Story Of The St. Frank's Chums—Inside!

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THE IDEAL XMAS GIFT BOOK

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Quick-Action Story Of Amazing Christmas Adventures—Starring—

Archie's Christmas

CHAPTER 1.

"Dr." Archie Glenthorne.

"GREAT Scott! What's that?"

Handforth, of St. Frank's, applied the brakes of his Morris Minor hard as something vague and ghostly and indistinct ran across the lonely road just within range of the powerful headlamps. For a moment he caught a glimpse of the thing before it vanished amongst the bushes which were dimly visible alongside the road.

"A beastly pony!" he said, with relief.

"Oh, rather!" said the passenger who was sitting next to him. "I understand these New Forest ponies are a frightful nuisance, Handy, old thing. I mean to say, they're more than half wild, and they dodge across the roads like anything. Motoring in these parts is a dashed risky game."

—The Chums Of St. Frank's And The Girls of Moor View School!

Party!

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

In a lonely old house in the heart of the New Forest a party of boys and girls are gathering to spend Christmas with Archie Glenthorne. They are there with the fixed intention of enjoying themselves in spite of the black shadow of dread that hangs over the house. The strange and fearful adventures that befall them are vividly told in this thrill-packed Christmas story by E. S. Brooks.

"Well, I must say you've brought us to a fine place, Archie!" growled the ruddy-faced schoolboy. "Still, as we're going to your aunt's for Christmas, I don't suppose we ought to grumble."

"You'd grumble at anything anyway!" came a complaining voice from the rear.

Handforth's two sturdy chums of the Remove at St. Frank's—Walter Church and Arnold McClure—completed the little party. Lyndhurst had been left behind some time ago, and the little car was now well into the heart of the New Forest.

It had been a pleasant run from St. Frank's, and the boys had come through Southampton. It was evening now, and the wind was

blowing eerily across the desolate expanse of country, and the moon, in the cold sky, was only visible now and again as the scudding clouds parted.

"It was your idea to join Archie's party," went on Church—who had spoken from the rear of the little car. "Mac and I are only coming with you, Handy, so that we can keep you out of mischief. Personally, I'm not keen on the thing at all."

"Well, dash it, that's rather frightfully poisonous, what?" protested Archibald Winston Derek Glenthorne. "I mean to say, aren't you my guests? Or, rather, my Aunt Eustacia's guests? Things may not be frightfully bright at Forest House, but I dare say we shall enjoy ourselves. And don't forget that you're doing a pal a dashed good turn."

"Yes," said Handforth gruffly. "You two chaps had better shut up."

It was certainly not very gracious of Church; but, to tell the truth, he was cold and hungry, and the journey, for the last few miles, had been getting on his nerves. The uncertainty of what lay at the end of it, too, worried him. McClure, the Scottish junior, kept his own counsel—but he, too, was very dubious about this Christmas party of Archie's.

There were many peculiar features about it.

Of course, it was really Edward Oswald Handforth's idea. Even before St. Frank's had broken up for the holidays, Handy had noticed that Archie Glenthorne was going about the school looking troubled. And Edward Oswald, who regarded himself as a sort of father-confessor, had invited Archie to "spill it."

And Archie, after some hesitation, had "spilt it," with a vengeance.

IT appeared that Lady Bowers—Archie's Aunt Eustacia—who was a widow, and immensely rich, had been going a bit "queer" of late. She had always been more or less eccentric, and Archie had been rather afraid of her. Yet, at the same time, Archie liked the old lady, and he was frightfully worried about the way she was going on.

It was an understood thing in the family that Archie was down in Aunt Eustacia's will for a pretty healthy slice, but Archie was no money-grabber. His concern was in no way connected with his expectations. He was genuinely concerned about the lady—and it had occurred to him as a bright idea that it would be rather ripping to spend Christmas at Forest House.

Lady Bowers had been a widow for so many years that Archie almost looked upon her as an old maid. She lived a lonely life, hibernating, mostly, in her gloomy old mansion in the heart of the New Forest.

Archie had only been there once, and he knew that the house, for the most part, was shut up. Aunt Eustacia only maintained a small household, and her servants, like herself, were, to use Archie's term, "rummy." The whole bally place, he declared, gave him the creeps—and his previous visit had been made in the summer-time.

Handforth pricked up his ears when he heard all this. It sounded like the real "goods" to him. For Handforth was always out for excitement and adventure; and a creepy Christmas appealed to him.

It appeared, however, that this was just what Archie wanted to avoid. His idea was to make his aunt's Christmas a bright one—a really jolly one. He wanted to liven her up, to send joyous laughter ringing through those old, gloomy rooms. In a word, Archie constituted himself the doctor, and this treatment was what he ordered.

Aunt Eustacia had been given up by the rest of the family. She was hopeless. She was a perfect dragon for getting mixed up with queer cults. Lately she had been dabbling in spiritualism and the occult generally. And now she was obsessed by a new phase on the same lines.

It appeared that there was a queer old man living in the New Forest, only a mile or two from Lady Bowers' mansion; she had become an ardent disciple of this strange man.

"I don't know absolutely," said Archie, with unusual gravity, "but I believe this blighter is known as Nerki, the Necromancer."

"A spiritualist?" asked Handforth.

"Good gad, no!" said Archie. "Nothing like that. He's a queer old boy—a sorcerer. Dabbles in black magic, you know."

"Sounds good!" said Handforth heartily.

"That's all very well," went on Archie. "But my people believe that poor old Aunt Eustacia is rapidly going off her nut. Personally, I think she's had several screws loose for years, but that's by the way. In the main, she's all right—quite generous, and all that sort of thing. It's my private opinion that her lonely life in the Forest has given her a pretty jaundiced outlook—and this blighter, Nerki, has only made things a dashed lot worse. In fact, unless something fullblooded is done pretty soon, the old girl will end up in Colney Hatch."

"Well, what's your idea?" asked Handforth curiously.

"My people can't do anything with her—nor the rest of the family either," said Archie. "She won't see doctors, or specialists, or anything. She gets angry, and says that she's as right as rain, and all that sort of thing. Well, I've always been a favourite of hers, and we get on rippingly together. I mean, we absolutely kiss when we meet. Frightfully embarrassing, of course, but the old girl insists. Well, she always spends Christmas alone—like a bally hermit. Other years it hasn't mattered so much; but this year there's this sorcerer chappie in the offing. And I might mention that there's a yarn in the family that Forest House is haunted."

"By George!" said Handforth breathlessly.

"But only haunted at Christmas-time, if you gather what I mean," said Archie. "Well,

what with this haunting, and the sorcerer chappie, there's a distinct chance that Aunt Eustacia will go off the deep end. So it was my idea to potter down to the New Forest for the vacation, taking with me sundry lively chappies as pals. Then we can proceed to wake things up, liven the frightful place, and put some pep into the respected aunt."

"And it's a dashed good idea," said Handforth enthusiastically. "By George! Why shouldn't we invite Irene and Doris, and some of the other Moor View girls?"

"Great minds think alike!" beamed Archie. "I've already mooted the good old subject to Marjorie."

That had been the beginning of it. Handforth, eager to do the thing thoroughly, had suggested that such fellows as Vivian Travers, and Reggie Pitt and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and Fatty Little should be invited, too. Archie was quite agreeable. The only point was—would Aunt Eustacia be?

Anyhow, he had written to his aunt, and had put this suggestion. But he had done so diplomatically. He had expressed a wish to spend Christmas at Forest House, and he had added he would like to bring a few of his friends with him—schoolboys and schoolgirls who would make up a little party.

And Aunt Eustacia had replied in an extraordinary way. Everything, she declared, depended upon Nerki. If Nerki approved, all well and good. It was quite clear that this stranger, "sorcerer," who dabbled in black magic, had got Lady Bowers completely under his spell. And this only increased Archie's worry—and made him all the more determined to make up the party.

There was a certain fascination in it for the other proposed guests, too. They did not overlook the fact that they were accepting Archie's invitation as a favour to him. For Archie sincerely believed this was the only way of saving Aunt Eustacia from herself. Christmas at Forest House promised to be eerie, but this, in a way, only added to the attractiveness of the plan.

Aunt Eustacia extended a warm welcome to Archie's proposed party, but she insisted upon seeking Nerki's advice first. She had therefore made an appointment with Archie for this evening—to meet her at the lonely house of the mystic. She would introduce Archie to him, and if Nerki said "yes," then everything would be all right.

It was a strange proposition, and Archie Glenthorne was thoroughly uncomfortable about it.

"I mean to say, it just shows you how the old lady is influenced," he said. "Good gad! It's about time something was done! She can't call her mind her own these days—she can't invite people to her house without this frightful blighter giving his approval. And he actually wants to give me the once-over!"

Archie had written to Nipper, and he had been delighted when Nipper had replied, saying that he would certainly come if it was at all possible—and, what was more, he would bring his celebrated guv'nor, Mr. Nelson Lee, with him. This pleased Archie more than anything, for the shrewd youngster had half a suspicion that there was something queer going on down in the New Forest.

THUS it was that Handforth & Co., with Archie, were in the New Forest on this blustery, chilly evening.

"Which is the way now?" asked Handforth, as they came to a lonely fork in the road. "It says, 'Fordingbridge' on that fingerpost."

"That's the way, old boy," replied Archie. "We don't go as far as Fordingbridge, of course. Forest House is about three miles from here, and the place where Nerki lives is nearer. We ought to be coming to it soon. It stands to the left, some little way off the road, and you reach the place by a narrow track."

Handforth drove onwards cautiously, and the wind howled with increasing violence. Bushes which grew beside the road were bent back by the force of the gale, and occasionally they were whipped and tossed as though a giant hand had struck them.

"Well, it's the right kind of evening for this giddy business," remarked Handforth. "Pretty ghostly, I mean."

"Odds rubbish and nonsense!" protested Archie. "Dash it, there's nothing creepy in a gale of wind, is there? And this has always been a dashed lonely part of the country."

"What I don't like about it is that we're taking such a chance," said Church from the rear.

"How do you mean, old boy?" asked Archie.

"Well, I understand that your aunt is at this chap Nerki's place," said Church. "You're going to meet her there, and Handy and Mac are to wait in the car until everything is all settled."

"Absolutely."

"After that we're going on to Forest House."

"Absolutely twice."

"Yes, but supposing this Nerki chap puts the veto on the whole party?" asked Church. "That's the snag, Archie. It seems to me that we might be left out in the cold. We're taking an awful chance, coming like this. Of course, it was Handy's doing——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Archie suggested that we should come."

"Right on the nail, old thing!" said Archie Glenthorne complacently. "What I mean to say is this: if this black magic merchant induces Aunt Eustacia to rub out the party, we'll jolly well dish him by going just the same."

"Easy enough to say," remarked Church. "But supposing your potty aunt gives us the gate?"

"If you knew the old girl you wouldn't talk about her like that," said Archie severely. "Aunt Eustacia is an absolute

sport—take it from me. This visit to Nerki's place is just a bally formality. We're going along to Forest House, and we're the vanguard of the Christmas party. And that, I mean to say, is absolutely that. The other lads and the girls will trickle down to-morrow, as per programme."

"Of course," said Handforth. "Why can't you two chaps keep quiet? You can do nothing but grumble! Archie is only calling at Nerki's just to please his aunt. It doesn't mean anything, really."

"Well, it seems a funny arrangement to me," said Church. "Like taking a step into the dark. We don't know what the dickens we're in for."

"That's what makes it enjoyable," said Handforth, with a grin.

His one regret was that he would not be able to meet the celebrated Professor Ivan Nerki this evening. Aunt Eustacia would be waiting at the mystic's house for Archie—but she was not supposed to know that Archie had taken a chance, and had brought some of his guests along already. It rather savoured of taking things for granted.

Since Archie had first mooted the visit, Handforth, who regarded himself as something of a detective, had put certain inquiries into motion. At least, so he said. His chums knew that he had merely written to an uncle of his who sometimes wrote wordy articles on the occult for the monthly reviews. If anybody was likely to know anything about Nerki, this uncle would.

And he did.

Handforth's uncle, who was quite a sincere man, declared, in his letter, that Professor Ivan Nerki was one of the most astounding mystics of modern times. He was genuine. He was endowed with strange and mysterious powers. He lived alone in the New Forest, and there, in that peaceful atmosphere—which was conducive to sorcery—he performed strange experiments. His friends were few; those who were admitted to his "inner circle" could be counted on the fingers of one hand. He was a man, declared Handforth's uncle, who was living hundreds of years out of his own age. He was an alchemist, a necromancer of old, and he should, by rights, have lived his life during the Middle Ages.

As far as possible he was doing so—for in the wilds of the New Forest he had cut himself off from everything modern. He was a great man, but he loathed publicity, and journalists who had sought to interview him had been sent away unsatisfied. He lived his life alone. The Forest folk, round about, knew that he was no faker, and they believed in him implicitly. Handforth, after learning these facts, had been more interested than ever—and more anxious to meet the great sorcerer. He thought it very possible that Nerki would come to Forest House during the Christmas holidays.

"You're lucky!" said Handforth, as a great gust of wind swept across the road and nearly jerked the steering out of his hand. "Phew! That was a bit nasty! This wind's getting worse."

"How am I lucky, old boy?" asked Archie.

"I mean, meeting Nerki to-night."

"If that's what you call lucky, I'm frightfully sorry for you," said Archie gruffly. "I haven't the faintest desire to meet this blighting hermit, or whatever he is. A dashed unhealthy business altogether, if you ask me. That's the whole idea of the party—to get Aunt Eustacia out of the rut. I say, I hope it's a success! I'm really worried about the old girl. It's decent of you chappies—— Whoa! Odds bumps and heaves! What's the frightful game!"

Handforth, without warning, had swerved wildly across the road. The car had just gone down into a little dip and had turned a bend. But now Handforth sent the Morris Minor shooting almost at a right angle, and he was applying the brakes hard at the same time. The car jolted violently over the rough grass, and when it came to a standstill Handforth was perspiring.

"My only sainted aunt! That was a near shave!" he panted.

He climbed out of the car, and the others followed him. Not until then did they understand the reason for the violent swerve and the forceful application of the brakes.

Right across the road, blocking it from side to side, was the great trunk of a fallen tree.

CHAPTER 2.

The Home of the Mystic.

HANDFORTH was a better driver than Church and McClure had given him credit for. Many motorists might have crashed headlong into that obstruction with disastrous results. Handforth's presence of mind had saved them all from possibly grave injury.

"I didn't see the confounded thing until I was nearly upon it," said the burly schoolboy with a gulp." The tree must have blown down only a few minutes ago, or we should have found some other cars held up. Not that this is a very frequented road."

"Well, what are we going to do now?" asked Church practically.

The moon was shining fitfully on the scene, and the wind was hooting coldly across the road. There was a suggestion of snow in those clouds; and, indeed, even as the boys stood in a group, they felt a few stinging flakes drifting along on the wind.

"Looks like being a white Christmas," remarked McClure.

Handforth was staring about him, and he ignored the remark.

"It seems to me we ought to be able to get round the obstruction," he said. "There aren't any deep ditches or hedges—— Hallo! This looks rotten, though!"

He had walked a few paces, and on this side of the road he had found that it was impossible to get round the fallen tree. For there was a stretch of soft, boggy ground just beyond the grass which bordered the road, and if he attempted to drive the car across it he would get hopelessly embedded.

He walked across the road, and, to his dismay, he found a bank between three and four feet high. His Morris Minor could do all sorts of wonderful things, but it couldn't climb four-foot banks.

"Looks as if we're done," said Handforth, shivering, and pulling his overcoat more tightly about him. "We shall have to leave the car here and walk on."

"There's a light just beyond those trees," said Mac, pointing.

"Nerki's place, perhaps," said Handforth, with interest.

"Can't be," put in Archie. "It's a bit farther on—and it's half a mile from the road. That light must come from one of the woodcutter's little cottages. I believe there are lots of them dotted round and about, here and there, in this place and that."

"Well, I'll tell you what," said Church. "Let's go along to the cottage, and you and Mac and I can wait there while Archie meets his aunt. Perhaps we can get a cup of tea, and some grub. I'm chilled to the marrow, and famished."

"It's not a bad idea," said Handforth grudgingly. "Of course, I should have thought of it myself in another minute. You chaps are always forestalling me. By George! I'd give half a crown for a good cup of hot tea at this minute."

Handforth was thoughtful enough to leave his car in the very middle of the road with the side lights and the tail-light switched on. It would thus serve to warn any other motorist who happened to come along.

Then the four schoolboys climbed the fallen tree, and walked onwards until they came to a low stone cottage which stood near the roadside. A friendly light, warm and ruddy was glowing from one of the windows.

They approached the door, and Handforth knocked. Within a minute the door opened, and the wind, rushing in, caused an old-fashioned oil lamp, standing on a table, to flicker and flare. The door opened right into a room, and a bent old man, with grizzled whiskers, looked inquiringly at his visitors.

"There's a tree fallen across the road, just a little way back," explained Handforth. "We're stranded, and we were wondering if you could——"

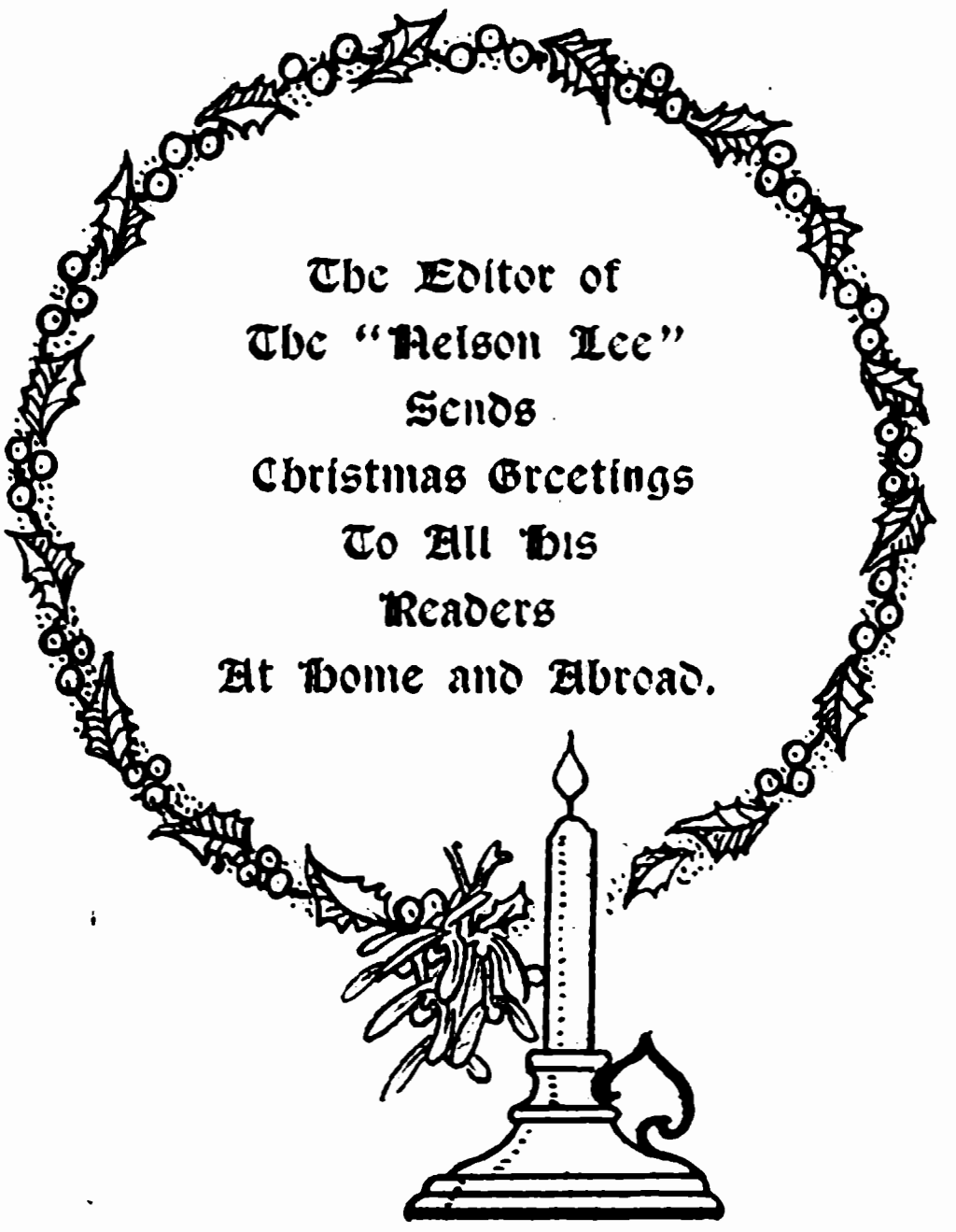
"Come in, young gentlemen—come in!" said the old man cordially. "A tree down, ye say? I ain't surprised! Like as not there'll be many more down tonight, with this gale."

They went in, and they found the room warm and comfortable. A stoutish, elderly woman, with grey hair, appeared from a doorway at the rear.

"This is my wife, young gentlemen," said the old man. "My name's Samms. Lived here, man and boy. Do a bit of woodcutting and charcoal burning."

"My hat!" said Handforth. "Charcoal burning, eh? Just like we used to read about in the fairytales, when we were kids. I didn't know there were any charcoal burners nowadays. Well, look here, could you provide us with some hot tea and some bread-and-butter, or something? We're willing to pay for it, of course."

"Ye no need to talk of pay, young gentlemen," said the woman. "We be queer mortals if we couldn't help stranded travellers such as yourselves. Sit ye down.



I'll bustle about and make ye something hot."

"Well, it's most awfully good of you, and I shall jolly well insist upon paying," said Handforth firmly.

Archie was tempted by the warmth to stay—but he resolutely buttoned his coat and turned to the door.

"Well, old things, I'll be trotting," he said. "I don't suppose I shall be long, and it's very likely that Aunt Eustacia has her own car with her. In fact, it's a cert. So I'll call for you soon, and—— Good gad! Is anything wrong?"

Archie had found that old Samms, the charcoal burner, was regarding him with a strange, frightened expression.

"Where be you goin' young gent?" asked the old man. "Ye was talking of Aunt Eustacia. Ye don't mean Lady Eustacia Bowers, by any chance?"

"Absolute," said Archie, beaming. "My aunt! I'm her nephew," he added unnecessarily.

"Then ye're more than welcome in my house, sir," said Samms. "The good lady is rare kind to me. Why, if it wasn't for her, sometimes the missus and me would starve. Aye, she's a good 'un, is Lady Bowers."

"Just what I've always said," smiled Archie. "At the present moment she's having a sort of chin-wag with a certain Mr. Nerki, and I'm trotting along to Mr. Nerki's place——"

"'Tis ill to speak lightly of Professor Nerki," said the old man tremulously. "Ye go there now, young sir? Alone?"

"Alone? Of course," said Archie. "Why shouldn't I?"

"I wouldn't go near that old house at night, alone, not for a hundred pounds," said Samms, his eyes shifting queerly in their deep sockets. "Aye, not for a thousand!"

"Good gad!"

"He's a devil, young sir—that's what he is—a devil!"

"I say, you know, isn't that rather frightfully strong?"

"I ain't saying it disrespectful, sir," went on the old charcoal burner, lowering his voice. "Professor Nerki is a magic worker—aye, black magic! He can do things that no mortal man can do. He's in touch with the spirits and the ghosts!"

It was plain that the old man was in fear. Mrs. Samms had come in, catching some of the conversation; and she was standing at the inner door and she was looking frightened.

"Don't go, young sir—don't go!" she said tremulously. "Not to that house alone."

"But I'm not frightened," said Archie patiently—although it must be confessed he was beginning to feel just a little "queer" inside. "I mean to say, what could happen to me?"

"Mebbe nothing will happen. But if ye displease the great Nerki, as like as not he'll turn ye into a wild horse!" said old Samms.

"Good gad!"

"Aye, ye may look startled, young sir," said the charcoal burner.

"But that's absolute rubbish, old thing!" protested Archie. "Turn me into a wild horse! We're not living in the Middle Ages—and I don't believe they could do those frightful things in the Middle Ages, either."

"You are young, and therefore your experience is limited, young sir," said the woodcutter mysteriously. "'Tis not more than a year ago that a drunken vagrant, a tramp, disturbed the great Nerki while he was in the midst of his solemn meditations." The old man looked nervous, and his lip quivered. "'Tis said that the tramp was then and there turned into a wild horse. Aye, and that same horse can be seen galloping every moonlight night."

"My only sainted aunt!" ejaculated Handforth, startled. "I nearly ran over a wild-looking pony, which ran across the road——"

"'Twas the same—the same!" murmured the woman, awed.

"Oh, chuck it!" said Handforth uncomfortably.

"Nerki has but to wave his hands and utter his magic incantations, and things happen which you or I do not even dream of," said the charcoal burner. "Do you think, young sirs, that I have not seen this wild horse? Aye, and I have heard it whinny in the night—and the sound is like the mad laugh of a man!"

Archie buttoned his coat more tightly.

"Well, old things, I must say that you're making me feel slightly blue at the borders," he said. "Not that I believe any of this stuff. Good gad, no! Things like that can't really happen. Well, toodle-oo! See you later, chappies. That is, of course, unless I'm turned into a bat, or some such noisome creature."

"Ay, and Nerki can do that, too," said Samms impressively. "Take care, young sir, not to displease him."

Archie was glad enough to escape from the cottage. He felt shivery as he strode up the moonlit road, with the wind bustling and nooting around him.

"Dashed piffle!" he muttered impatiently.

He felt angry. Those people had seemed so homely, so hospitable. Yet, at the very mention of Nerki's name, they had changed. Archie realised that they were superstitious forest folk—and there are no more superstitious people in the whole length and breadth of the country.

"Well, this won't do," murmured Archie, bracing himself. "I mean to say, this is where the Pride of the Glenthornes must square his shoulders and do his stuff."

He realised more forcefully than before how necessary it was to get his aunt away from the influence of this mystic. Perhaps the man was genuine—perhaps he was a trifle mad, and believed in his occult researches. But Archie was of one mind concerning the healthiness of such an occupation.

Presently, after he had walked some distance up the lonely road, he saw a narrow track, leading off sharply to the left. The moon was shining brightly at the moment, and Archie could distinctly see the marks of automobile tyres in the soft surface of the track. Some distance away, on rising ground, clumps of dark trees could be seen.

And Archie did not doubt that Nerki's lonely home was situated amongst the trees. He left the road, and took to the track; and as he did so a feeling of strange and mysterious lonesomeness gripped him. He felt, in that moment, that he was unprotected, and if anything happened to him none would ever know of his fate.

He looked about him, and he could see no gleam of light in any direction. Nothing but the bare, undulating country so characteristic of the New Forest. Great clumps of trees, spinneys, patches of gorse, and, no doubt, here and there, a treacherous bog.

Now that he had left the road behind, he had lost sight of it. He seemed to be in a great world of desolation. He had never believed that such an isolated place existed in peaceful England.

The increasing wind, and the occasional flurries of snow, only tended to increase the eeriness of Archie's surroundings. Overhead the moon showed occasionally; and the clouds, ragged and angry looking, were scudding more quickly than ever across the stormy heavens.

"I say!" muttered Archie abruptly.

He had turned a bend in the track, and, by so doing, he had passed an angle of one of the clumps of trees. And there, some distance ahead, he could see the black, sinister outline of a strange looking dwelling. There appeared to be a conical tower at one corner, and close to the house grew a number of gaunt yew trees. Archie was irresistibly reminded of a churchyard, and again he shivered.

Not a light was showing in that grim building; and the very appearance of the place, instead of bringing him a feeling that he was near to human habitation, had just the opposite effect.

Flutter-flutter-flutter!

Handforth suddenly sent the little car swerving wildly across into the ditch. He had just caught sight of a tree-trunk that lay sprawled right across their path. "Phew!" muttered Handy. "What a narrow shave."

Archie jumped sideways as something came down quite close to him from the neighbouring trees. He dodged, and as he stared upwards he saw a great black thing fluttering between earth and sky. It hovered for a few moments, its enormous wings outspread, and it partially concealed the moon.

"Odds shocks and staggerers!" muttered Archie, who was shaken.

He knew that the thing was only a bat. Yet he wondered. He doubted. He had never seen such an enormous bat before. And as he looked he saw others. Four or five of the monstrous creatures were flapping about in the wind, between the trees and the house. The very sight of them sent cold shivers down Archie Glenthorne's back.

But he gripped himself again, and set his teeth. This was sheer rot.

"I mean to say, bats!" he muttered. "There's nothing to be scared of in—— I say—— Well, of all frightful——"

There was a hedge running alongside the track now—a dark, black, impenetrable hedge. And it seemed to Archie that he saw two

great, luminous eyes staring at him from the intense depths of the hedge. His first impulse was to run. But he caught his breath in, and took a quick step forward.

And when he reached the hedge, there was nothing—nothing but the blackness.

"You absolute chump!" he muttered angrily. "I'm dashed if you're not getting imaginative now!"

Yet, when he turned aside, to continue his walk to the house, again he saw the great luminous eyes—and this time it seemed to him that they were hovering in the very air. Just eyes, by themselves, without head, without body.

A mournful, wailing cry arose—and from so close at hand that Archie jumped. The next second he could have kicked himself. It was certainly an eerie sound, but it was familiar enough. Merely the hooting of an owl.

He felt reassured. Those luminous eyes he had seen! An owl—of course!

Yet, even as he came to this conclusion, he distinctly saw two owls squatting on the branch of a tree, away to his right. Their eyes glinted in the moonlight—but there was nothing particularly terrible about them. Their eyes were not the same as those other luminous eyes he had seen.

He was quite near the house when it seemed to him that he heard a whisper of laughter just against the dark hedge. The wind was noisy, and perhaps Archie's ears had played him false. He was not sure. He looked intently in that direction, and as he did so something rose above the hedge. It was black and conical, and as it rose higher it took on the appearance, ridiculously enough, of a witch's hat.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie, thoroughly startled.

He knew that he was not wrong, for a head had followed the hat, a queer, misshapen face showed indistinctly in the moonlight, a wrinkled face, with hollow eyes, a great hooked nose, and nutcracker jaws.

A typical witch.

And then the jaws opened, and a wild screeching cackle of laughter burst out upon the night. Archie's very blood seemed to freeze in his veins.

Then, before his eyes, that hideous creature arose into the air, and Archie saw that it was a witch, mounted upon a broom. Long trailing garments floated in the wind, and then, at that second, a great black cloud obscured the moon, and the darkness shut down.

CHAPTER 3.

The Sorcerer.

A MINUTE later, Archie Glenthorne was so bewildered that he did not know whether the thing had actually happened, or whether it was merely a trick of his imagination.

It was so fantastic—so unreal.

The blacking out of the moon had confused him. After a moment, recovering himself somewhat, he ran along the hedge, to a spot where he had previously seen a gap. He leaned over, and at the same moment a rift in the cloud allowed the moonlight to show through. Archie could see a wide, untidy paddock on the other side of the hedge; but there was no living thing in sight.

"This is dashed well getting on my nerves!" he muttered.

He was, in fact, in a nervous state now—and he knew it. It was ridiculous. He thought of the stories that Mr. and Mrs. Samms had told him.

Well, there was no sense in staying out here, all by himself. His Aunt Eustacia was in the house—and five minutes in her presence, Nerki, or no Nerki, would restore his balance.

He saw a big, old-fashioned porch in the centre of the house-front, and he moved towards this quickly. He had an irresistible desire to run—to get indoors without a second's waste of time. And he knew that he was afraid. It was a strange sensation for Archie; for, usually, the aristocratic schoolboy was contemptuous of all ghost stories, and it took a great deal to shake his nerves.

He got within the porch, and he could see a heavy door in the depths. The moon had come out again now, and a glinting beam broke through the porch, and Archie could see great metal studs on the door.

He reached forward, intending to feel for a door knocker, or a bell. But as he did so, the door itself silently and mysteriously opened inwards.

"I mean to say! Great Scott!" muttered Archie, with a gulp.

He knew that he had not touched the door, yet it had opened of its own accord—and so silently, so eerily, that Archie hung back, almost fearful of entering.

And then, as he stood there, it seemed to him that two objects reached out from the utter blackness of the doorway. They resolved themselves, even as Archie stood motionless, into two bony hands, which seemed to be visible, although there was utter darkness around them.

The schoolboy tried to utter an ejaculation, but the sound choked in his throat. For he now knew that they were not ordinary hands at all—but the fleshless hands of a skeleton.

He braced himself up to make a backward leap; but he was a shade too late. The skeleton hands reached forward, touched him, and he was suddenly jerked clean forward through the doorway, into the mysterious blackness of the interior.

"I say! Help!" gasped Archie frantically. "Good gad! This is too absolutely frightful——"

Then he pulled himself together. Perhaps it was the sudden perfume of incense which struck his nostrils. It was something tangible, something he was familiar with. And, suddenly, he recovered his balance.

"Rot!" he said fiercely "You can't fool me with all these bally tricks! Where the

dickens are you? You, with the faked arms?"

But not a sound came to his ears. And when he half turned, expecting to find the door still open, he saw nothing but blackness. And he could tell, by the very muffled sound of the wind, that the door had closed again. And now, too, that grip upon him had gone.

He took a step backwards, as though to find the closed door; but something touched him lightly in the back, as though to prod him onwards. He spun round savagely, striking out. But his fists only smote the empty air.

This thing was getting like a nightmare, and Archie decided to end it. He strode forward boldly, feeling in front of him as he did so.

And then, without warning, without his entering—consciously—any room, or doorway, he found that he could see. He was not in a passage, as he had believed, but in a great room, the sides of which were entirely black, so that he could not tell, with any degree of accuracy, how large the apartment was.

But his attention was attracted by the extraordinary character of the ceiling or roof. It was, indeed, a black dome, and he could distinguish the domed shape owing to the fact that all the familiar signs of the Zodiac were gleaming luminously above. The effect was most impressive—and mysterious.

"Well, this is rummy," murmured Archie. "Anyhow, there must be somebody here, working these tricks!"

He looked about him. The only light in that strange place was given by the Zodiac signs above. He turned, but his gaze could not penetrate in any direction. Then, as though by magic, he saw something—right in front of him, even as he looked. It seemed to come from nothingness, to glow before his very eyes.

The first thing he saw was a quaint-looking brazier, and it was glowing dully, with a ruddy, coppery fire. On the top of this brazier stood a cauldron.

And from the cauldron arose an evil-looking steam, or smoky vapour. Then it was, through the steam that Archie saw a bent old man, seated on a stool on the other side of the brazier. He was feeble looking, with a crinkled, parchment-like face. His beard was long and white, and his hair stood out untidily on either side of the conical hat which was perched upon his head.

Archie was not quite sure whether this creature was alive, or whether the whole apparition was an illusion. But he was irresistibly reminded of a necromancer of the Middle Ages—an alchemist.

"Sit!" said a low, mysterious voice.

"Eh?" ejaculated Archie.

He saw that the figure was pointing; a bony hand had risen from the stick which projected from the cauldron. And now, as Archie looked, he saw that a chair had appeared in the darkness.

"Well, of course, just as you say, old thing," muttered Archie.

He thought it was a poisonous idea, but there was nothing else to be done. He sat down, half expecting to crash to the floor. For he was not certain that a chair really existed. Yet he found that he was sitting quite comfortably.

"You are of good courage, my friend," said the low voice. "Not many of my visitors reach this far without an exhibition of——"

The voice broke off, and Archie now saw that the strange old man was looking straight at him. And suddenly the cauldron was snatched away from the brazier, so that the glow from the burning charcoal fell full upon the visitor's face.

"But what is this?" said the voice, now sharp and intent. "What are you doing here? Who are you, boy?"

Archie was relieved. Now that there was more light, he was satisfied that the figure on the other side of the brazier was real—it was human.

"Well, I like that!" said Archie. "Somebody dragged me in here, and I'm told to sit down, and then you ask me who I am. Dash it, I don't think you've treated me very politely, Mr. Nerki."

"You know me, boy?" asked the old man.

"Not from Adam. But who else can you be?"

"You are flippant!" said the old man sternly. "Yes, I am Nerki, the Sorcerer. What were you doing outside my house? Why did you come to my door?"

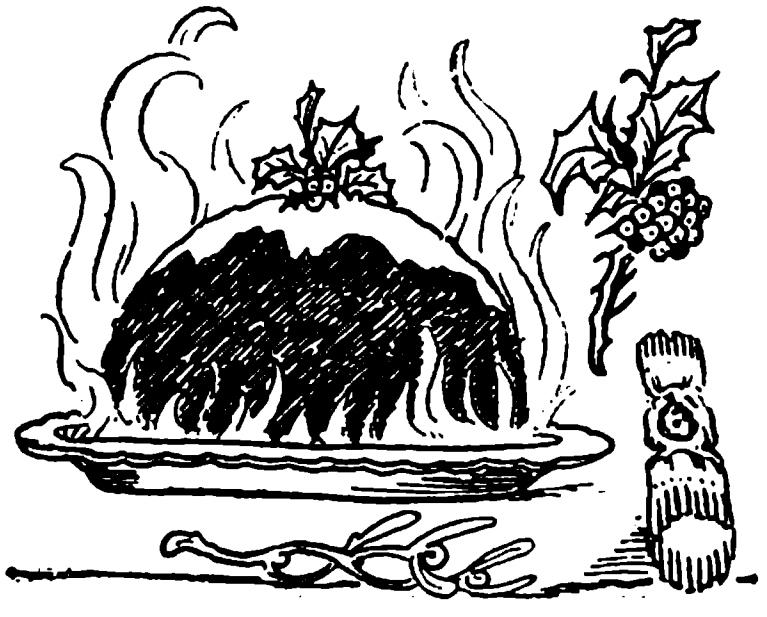
"Well, wasn't I expected?" replied Archie in some bewilderment. "My name is Glenthorne—to be exact, Archibald Winston Derek Glenthorne."

"Ah! I am beginning to understand," said Nerki, nodding. "Yet I think there must be some mistake."

His eyes, in the reflection from the glowing charcoal, seemed to burn red, like a cat's. Perhaps it was only a trick of the reflection—but it gave Archie a queer, uncomfortable sensation.

"You see, my Aunt Eustacia—that is, Lady Bowers—arranged with me to be here this evening——"

"You are wrong!" broke in Nerki harshly. "What folly has brought you here to-night?"



"But, really——"

"Lady Bowers is a great and gracious woman," continued Nerki reverently. "You should be proud, boy, to have such an aunt. She is a believer—a faithful student of the black arts."

"That's just the trouble," said Archie. "Well, I mean, the fact is——"

"The fact is, Lady Bowers made an appointment with me for Thursday evening," said Nerki curtly. "You were to come later, and I understand that my disciple was to have put certain matters before me, seeking my advice."

"Your disciple?" asked Archie wonderingly.

"Boy, are you so dense?" said the old man. "I am referring to Lady Bowers."

"Oh, rather! I get you now. Of course," said Archie hurriedly.

"You will therefore go, and if it pleases me, you may return—but not until my disciple herself has been here," said Nerki. "It is her desire that I should gaze into the mystic crystal, so that I may foretell the immediate future."

Archie was puzzled, for he had known nothing of the altered appointment. As a matter of fact, Aunt Eustacia had sent him a note, altering the day, but, unfortunately, this note had arrived just after Archie had left. So he knew nothing of the change.

Because of this—and because of this only—he had been subjected to all these extraordinary manifestations. He shrewdly realised that if he came on Thursday evening he would be admitted either by Nerki himself, or by a servant.

There was something else on for this evening—and Archie suddenly jumped to the conclusion that Nerki was expecting a different visitor. So all those fakes—and Archie was more than ever convinced that they were fakes—had been prepared for another. And it was clear that Nerki was angry.

"Now, boy, you will go!" said the old man. "Come, I will escort you to the door. And let me advise you to walk quickly away, lest you should see strange things—things which may frighten you."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie. "To tell you the truth, professor, old thing, I'm rather jellified already. I shan't be at all sorry to get away from this dashed chamber of horrors!"

He had risen, and before he had moved a couple of steps, the brazier with its glowing charcoal had vanished; and it seemed to fade into nothingness. The signs of the Zodiac, overhead, flickered, and vanished, too. Archie found himself in total darkness; but the hand of Nerki was on his arm.

"Come!" said the deep voice.

The next thing that Archie knew was that the cold night air was blowing on his face. He was out in the porch, and the moonlight looked almost cheerful.

"Heed my warning, boy!" said Nerki, his mouth very close to Archie's ear. "Say nothing of what you have seen this night. Say nothing to a living soul. People who talk of what happens in the home of Nerki, the Sorcerer, meet with strange and terrible misadventures."

Archie was about to reply, but when he half turned the old man had vanished. Archie felt before him, and his hands encountered the metal-studded door. It had closed without a whisper of sound. He strode forward into the moonlight, and it required all his will-power to prevent himself from breaking into a run. But Archie, in spite of his appearance, was no simpleton. Neither was he a coward. He had an instinctive feeling that if he did start running it would become a panic-stricken flight. And that would never do. The Glenthornes did not indulge in that sort of thing.

He walked steadily, firmly, and he had not gone far before he saw, in the distance, another figure. Some instinct warned him to draw back, behind the shadow of a clump of dense bushes, and there he lurked, waiting. He knew that this other figure was no apparition—but a human being.

The man who approached was looking about him from right to left, nervously. The moonlight shone upon him for a moment, and Archie saw that he was a skinny, unpleasant looking fellow, and his eyes were shifty and set close together.

Suddenly the man halted, gasping audibly. For the sounds of soft, thudding hoof-beats had come, and they could be heard above the bluster of the wind.

Archie caught his breath in, and his spine seemed to tingle. For there was something unreal, something unnatural, in the sound.

Thud - thud - thud—thud - thud - thud—THUD-THUD-THUD!

The hoof-beats increased until the sounds were so close that Archie expected to see a great horse go galloping past. But he saw nothing.

"The ghost pony!" came a horrified exclamation from the man. "The ghost pony!"

He broke into a run, sobbing with fright, and he vanished in the darkness towards the house.

And Archie Glenthorne, trembling in every limb, managed to find his way back to the road.

CHAPTER 4.

Turned From the Door!

THE bright lights of a big motor-coach did much to restore Archie's balance. He was in contact with the real world again. He could see that the coach was full of people—country shoppers, no doubt, on their way home from one of the surrounding towns. The spluttering of the coach's engine, accompanied by an occasional noisy misfire, sounded like music in Archie's ears.

As he approached the charcoal burner's cottage he saw that the coach had stopped

further down the road—its further progress barred by the fallen tree. There were one or two other cars there, too—and on the further side of the obstruction, two other coaches. Quite a traffic jam. Archie felt that the countryside was quite crowded.

"Hallo! You haven't been long!"

Handforth had emerged from the cottage, and behind him were Church and McClure. They had come out, in fact, to lend a hand with the fallen tree; for old Samms had told them that an effort was to be made to shift it.

"What's the verdict?" asked Church eagerly.

"There's been a bally mistake," said Archie. "My aunt sent me a letter, or something, and I didn't get it. The appointment is for Thursday, not to-day. A most frightfully awkward predic., old things. I mean, we're more or less stranded."

"Thursday!" said Handforth. "That's the day after to-morrow!"

He looked at Archie more closely, and the moon was shining very brightly just then. Perhaps it was the effect of the moonlight, but it seemed to Handforth that Archie's face was deathly pale.

"By George! You look queer!" said Edward Oswald, with concern. "What's the matter, Archie? Have you seen a ghost?"

"I've seen Nerki—and it's practically the same thing," replied Archie shakily.

"My only hat! What's he like?" asked McClure.

Archie told them of his experience. He was reluctant to mention the apparition of the witch, but the story was out before he could prevent himself. He told of the skeleton hands, and the mysterious black room with the doomed roof and the zodaic signs.

"I say, cheese it!" protested Handforth uncomfortably. "You've been seeing things, Archie! It's just your imagination. You can't expect us to swallow——"

"I know it sounds poisonously imposs; but it all happened," interrupted Archie. "Don't think I'm falling for that sort of bunk, though. Good gad! Absolutely not! The whole dashed business was done by trickery. What's more, I'm going to see that my Aunt Eustacia doesn't go to that blighter on Thursday."

Handforth was thoroughly excited. He knew that Archie, far from being imaginative and panicky, was level-headed and shrewd. The determined way in which he stuck to his story convinced Handforth that it was true.

"Of course, those skeleton hands could have been easily wangled," said the burly leader of Study D. "I mean, phosphorous paint, and wires, and all that sort of thing. Easy as pie, with a black background. By George! I've a good mind to go to Nerki's place, and have a look round."

"Not now, old lad," said Archie quickly. "We must get along to Forest House, and interview the good lady. I mean, it's getting fairly late, and we must have things straight. Considering that it was her own dashed fault for changing the appointment, and failing to let me know in time, she can't very well give us the gate."

By the time they got to the scene of action the fallen tree had been shifted sufficiently to allow of one-way traffic. And an A.A. scout had now appeared, and was directing operations. Archie was glad to see that familiar uniform. He felt that this part of the country was not so dreadfully remote, after all.

"I wish you'd let me go with you to that place," grumbled Handforth. "I'll bet I'd have spotted how those tricks were worked"

But Archie Glenthorne wasn't listening. Although feeling much better, he was still considerably shaken by his experience. And he was worried, too. There was something grim and ugly about the whole business. It wasn't right that people should dabble in witchcraft and sorcery.

"Odds rot and piffle!" muttered Archie impatiently. "Before long I shall find myself believing in the beastly hokum!"

He was glad when the little Morris Minor was once again on the road; he was glad, too, that a well-filled motor-coach was gliding along just in front. The sight gave Archie a feeling of comfort—of companionship.

"Well, it's up to you, Archie," said Handforth, as they drove along. "Things seem to be in a bit of mess. You're not even expected at your aunt's place, so nothing will be ready for you."

"Oh, well, it's a whacking great house, with lots of spare rooms," said Archie. "Trust to me, old things. I'll see that everything's all right."

Before long he warned Handforth to go more slowly; and presently some big, old-fashioned iron gates came into view. They were closed, and they looked forbidding.

"This the place?" asked Handforth, peering through the window. "I can't see any house."

"It's just a bit back, hidden by the trees," explained Archie. "Hold on a minute and I'll stagger out and open the gates."

He was half afraid that the gates would be locked—for he knew his aunt's eccentricities. But he was relieved to find that they opened readily enough, and he pushed them back, and hooked them, so that the wind would not blow them to again. The flurries of snow were getting heavier, and already the roads and the hedgerows were becoming whitened.

The little car turned into the short drive and passed through an avenue of gaunt poplars. Then Forest House itself came into view—a dark, sprawling pile, outlined against the gloomy sky. One or two windows of the lower floor were glowing warmly. Yet, somehow, the old mansion had the appearance of being forlorn.

"Sure this is the place, Archie?" asked Handforth doubtfully. "Ugh! It gives me the creeps!"

"You should see Nerki's house if you want the creeps!" retorted Archie. "This is a fine old place—and on a summer's day you'd say

that you'd never saw a more picturesque old English country dwelling. I mean to say, it's one of the show places of the Forest."

They got out of the car at the foot of the wide steps, and they all mounted to the big stone porch, which was half overgrown with creepers. Only a dull glow showed in the fanlight. Archie found the bell, and rang it. And presently the door opened, revealing a middle-aged man dressed in black. He was clean-shaven, with shrunken cheeks, and eyes which were half hidden in deep hollows. The expression on his face was melancholy.

"Well, here we are," said Archie brightly. "Oh, my goodness, I'd forgotten! We're not expected, are we? I don't know you!" he added, fixing his monocle more firmly into his eye, and surveying the man with disfavour."

"I don't know you, either, young gentleman!" said the man, without budging an inch.

"I say, isn't that rather—— Well, perhaps not!" said Archie. "The fact is, old thing, I'm Archie. You know. Archie Glenthorne. I dare say my Aunt Eustacia ——"

He broke off, for the man was backing away, and thus inviting them to enter. And they found themselves in a meanly-lit hall.

"I'm sorry you did not give me your name at first, sir," said the man. "I am Wren—her ladyship's butler. I think it must be a long time, Master Glenthorne, since you visited at this house."

"Oh, years!" replied Archie. "In fact, donkeys years. Well, where's the lady? We may not be expected, but I haven't the slightest doubt that we shall be welcome."

"Yes, sir," said Wren, and his voice contained a doubt.

He did not invite them to remove their hats and coats. But moved straight across to a door far down the hall. And Archie, after hesitating uncertainly for a moment, followed. Handforth & Co. did the same.

"I am sorry to disturb your ladyship," said Wren, as he stood in the open doorway, "but Master Glenthorne is here, accompanied by three other young gentlemen."

"Dash it all, why all the formality?" asked Archie, moving forward. "Kindly remove the old carcase, laddie! Come on, you chappies. Why, bless the dear old heart if it isn't Aunt Eustacia in person! What-ho! Greetings of a seasonable nature, and all that sort of thing!"

Archie fairly sailed into the apartment, which was a quietly furnished drawing-room. Lady Bowers had been seated at a table near the fire, evidently reading by the light of the only lamp which was burning in the great room. But now she was on her feet.

"You may go, Wren!" she said shortly.

She did not even look at Archie, who had done his best to brighten things up. Handforth & Co. stood uncertain, and their first impression of Lady Eustacia Bowers was not a happy one.

She was tall, her gown was somewhat old-fashioned, and her age was uncertain. Her face, serene and kindly enough in repose, was now set into a hard expression which suggested anger and annoyance. At the same time there was a far-away look in her eyes, as though she had been disturbed in the midst of some deep meditation. Archie was pained—and more determined than ever to carry on with his plan. As a child he remembered Aunt Eustacia as one of the jolliest, happiest women imaginable.

"What does this mean, Archie?" asked the lady, in a voice of uncompromising severity.

"Well, you see, old thing——"

"And please do not make use of any of those ridiculous terms."

"Frightfully sorry! No disrespect, aunt, old dear!" said Archie hurriedly. "The fact is, I thought everything was fixed for this evening."

"Didn't you get my letter?"

"That's it—that's just it," said Archie. "I went to Nerki, as per arrangement, but he told me that the appointment had been scratched. Said something about Thursday. Well, I didn't know, and here I am. These chappies are pals of mine, and——"

"You cannot remain in this house, Archie," interrupted Lady Bowers curtly.

"Eh?"

"You heard what I said."

"Oh, rather! But, you see——"

"You say that you have seen Nerki? Tell me exactly what happened?"

Archie did not tell his aunt exactly what had happened; but he gave her the gist of his talk with the mysterious Mr. Nerki. And Lady Bowers listened with an anxious light in her eyes.

"So you took it for granted, Archie, that Nerki would give his sanction?" said Aunt Eustacia coldly. "You even brought your friends with you."

"Well, you see, it's your sanction that really matters," explained Archie, beaming. "I mean to say, you're the jolly old hostess and it's up to you. All the other members of the party are coming down to-morrow——"

"I am angry with you, Archie," said Lady Bowers, her eyes full of sudden alarm—and fear. "How dare you take such a liberty! You must send telegrams to all your other friends, and they must be prevented from making the journey to-morrow."

"But Nerki won't really put the lid on the party, will he, aunt?" asked Archie anxiously. "Dash it, I thought it was only a sort of formality. I mean, this is your house, and it's up to you——"

"You do not understand, my boy," said Lady Bowers quietly. "There are so many things that none of us understand. But Nerki knows all. Nerki is more than a man; he is a link with that vast realm of which we only hear whispers, and catch glimpses. And only a chosen few of us are even permitted these whispers and glimpses. Until

the great Nerki gives his consent, you cannot remain."

Archie looked at her in wonder—and with deep concern.

"If you say so, aunt, I'll wire to the others," he said. "But we can stay, surely? You haven't allowed me to introduce——"

"It is better that you should not introduce me to your friends," interrupted Lady Bowers. "They are intruders in this house. deathly pale, and her face became haggard and drawn. Her eyes were blazing with anger as she pointed to the door.

"Go!" she said stiffly. "Leave my house!"

Handforth gulped.

"I apologise, Lady Bowers!" he exclaimed contritely. "I didn't really mean to——"

"I will accept your apology, but you must go—you and your friends!" said the lady.

The door of the mystic's house opened and skeleton hands reached out and dragged Archie forward into the blackness beyond the doorway.

They are here without Nerki's permission. And their influence within these walls may be bad."

"I say, Lady Bowers, isn't that a bit thick?" protested Handforth. "We're harmless enough. Still, we can take a hint——"

"I say!" said Archie, in distress. "No need to get offended, old boy."

"Well, Nerki seems to be the master of this house," said Handforth bluntly. "We can't stay here without Nerki's permission! And I'll bet he's nothing but a trickster and an impostor!"

Church and McClure tried to stop him, but they were too late. It was characteristic of the blundering Handforth to blurt out his private views in that way. Lady Bowers flushed deeply at first, and then she turned "Do not dare to argue. Do not remain another minute in my presence. Go!"

And, to Archie's acute distress, Handforth & Co. departed. Handforth, at least, had been turned out. Until this minute Archie had had an idea that Nerki was merely another of Lady Bower's hobbies. He was now beginning to dimly understand that the mystic had gained an almost hypnotic hold over his aunt.

"You must go, too, Archie," said Lady Bowers. "There are things about this house which you do not understand. It is better that I should be alone. Nerki knows all; and if he pronounces it safe for you to be here for Christmas, you may come—you and all your friends. But I cannot know for certain until Thursday. You will meet me, as arranged, at seven o'clock in the evening."

Archie was shrewd enough to see that argument would be useless. His aunt was in a highly nervous condition. He had accepted her decree without protest—but, at the same time, his determination to help her, with or without her consent, was doubly strengthened.

"Very well, aunt," he said quietly. "I'll be trotting, then. See you again, at Nerki's place, seven o'clock Thursday."

He knew that this was no moment for affectionate farewells, so he walked straight out. Wren, the butler, was waiting in the hall, and Archie was escorted to the front door. He found Handforth & Co. in the porch, and the snow was now coming down fairly thickly.

"Well, this is a fine Christmas party!" said Handforth bitterly.

Thud!

The door closed behind Archie, and the sound was unfriendly.

"Odd changes and alterations!" said Archie. "The poor old girl has aged ten years since I last saw her!"

"I thought you were so affectionate that you kissed when you met?" asked Handforth tartly.

"Old lad, this is no time for rotting" said Archie, and his voice was unusually earnest. "Something frightful is happening to Aunt Eustacia. I'm worried. She has let this Nerki blighter get such a hold over her that she's little better than a slave!"

"And your aunt is wealthy, isn't she?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"Absolutely! I've been thinking the same as you, Handy—but we may be wrong," said Archie, after they had walked some few yards down the drive. "I'm not saying that Nerki is a crook and a swindler. It was frightfully indiscreet of you to say a thing like that in front of my aunt. He may be genuine. We don't know. Lots of these chappies are in earnest, and they think they know all sorts of rummy things. Must be a kind of self-hypnotism."

"Why not call it madness, and have done with it?"

"Well, it's all frightfully distressing—and I tell you, Handy, that I'm going to have my own way," said Archie. "Aunt Eustacia needs help. She'll have it! What's more, that Christmas party is going to come off—Nerki or no Nerki!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Gathering of the Clans.

"BY George! That's the spirit!" said Handforth heartily.

Church and McClure were not so sure about it. Their reception at this lonely old house had not engendered in them any keen desire to spend Christmas under its roof.

"I think we'd better chuck the whole thing up and go home!" said Church gruffly.

"You wouldn't do that," said Archie. "Dash it, you wouldn't let a pal down, would you?"

"Yes, but hang it——"

"You've seen Aunt Eustacia—and you can see what a state she's in," went on Archie. "Good gad! We can't leave her to the mercy of this bally sorcerer! Trust me, old things, and I'll guarantee that you have a ripping Christmas."

"What about a ripping supper to-night—to say nothing of a ripping bed?" asked Mac practically.

"Good enough," replied Archie. "Handy's car is here, and Fordingbridge is only a few miles away. We'll find a hotel and everything will be all serene. We can book rooms until Thursday, and I'll foot the bill. Don't forget, laddies, that you're my guests."

"Well, of course, that's different," said McClure.

The prospect of staying in a hotel was not unpleasant. And very soon Handforth's little car was bowling along in the moonlight, with snowflakes drifting across the windscreen in occasional flurries.

In Fordingbridge they not only found an excellent hotel, but they were made extremely comfortable. And Handforth & Co.'s spirits rose rapidly. There was plenty of life here, and the prospects of a good meal was cheering in itself.

Archie, having settled the details, proceeded to get busy with pen and paper.

"Who are you writing to?" asked Handforth.

"Nobody," replied Archie. "I'm sending telegrams. These wires are going off to-night—to the rest of the gang!"

"What!"

"Absolutely."

"You're doing what your aunt suggested—putting them all off?"

"Don't be so absolutely potty!" said Archie coldly. "I'm putting them all on! I'm telling the lads and the lassies that everything's O.K., and I'm asking them to foregather here, in this hotel, to-morrow. Might as well have the party all nice and intact so that we can move into Forest House when we get the all-clear signal."

Handforth scratched his head.

"Aren't you taking an awful chance?" he asked. "I mean, after what happened to-night, it's pretty certain that your aunt will kybosh the whole party. Nerki is certain to——"

"Nerki can eat coke!" interrupted Archie coldly. "Blow Nerki! Dash Nerki! I've invited the chaps and the girls to this party, and that's that! We're going to spend Christmas at Forest House, whatever the blighter says. If it comes to a pinch, I'll lock Aunt Eustacia up in her own dashed room and pinch the house! My blood, I might tell

you, is absolutely up! Boiling, seething! I'm out for action!"

And he sent the telegrams off, every one of them.

The truth of the matter was, Archie was rather fond of his aunt, and to see her practically in the power of this man, whether he was a genuine psychic or not, brought out all his determination. Alone, he could do nothing. But a noisy Christmas party of young people in Forest House would, without question, make a tremendous difference.

And when Archie Glenthorne was set on a thing, that thing generally happened.

IN the morning Archie and his guests awoke to find the countryside white. And snow was still falling. But the daylight made the boys feel confident and hopeful. Even Archie began to wonder if he had really gone through that strange experience last night. Perhaps he had imagined many of the things. He found it difficult to be sure—now.

After a hearty breakfast, Handforth announced his intention of getting the Morris Minor out, and going for a jaunt.

"Funny weather for motoring, Handy," said Church, staring. "The roads will be a bit tricky, you know."

"Bother the roads!"

"Wouldn't it be better to go for a tramp?"

"Too far."

"Eh? What's too far?"

"Well, you might as well know," growled Handforth. "I thought I'd have a look at Nerki's place by daylight."

"It's not a bad idea," said McClure. "Any special reason, though?"

"Nothing much—only it might be useful, in case we have to go there after dark—when there's no moon," replied Handforth carelessly. "We can sort of get our bearings."

Archie was quite agreeable—mainly because he knew that they would be compelled to pass Forest House on the way. And he had an idea that Handforth and his chums had formed a bad opinion of Lady Bowers' residence. In fact, he was right. Handforth & Co. thought that Forest House was a grim, forbidding house where any kind of a Christmas party would be foredoomed to failure.

Handforth & Co. were pleasantly surprised.

The sun came out during that short motor ride, and when they came within view of Forest House, the sunshine was gleaming down upon the old creeper-covered mansion. And it not only looked picturesque, but homely, inviting. Even with a coating of snow it could be seen that the surrounding parklands were beautifully kept, and the gardens were orderly and extensive.

"Hold on a bit, Handy," said Archie. "See those steep slopes over there—to the left of the house? You could search the whole of England, and you wouldn't find a better spot for tobogganing. I mean to say, if this snow keeps on, we shall have some topping sport during our stay."

"It sounds good," replied Handforth eagerly. "Any ice?"

"Odds questions and inquiries!" exclaimed Archie. "There's a whacking great lake beyond that big clump of trees. Acres and acres of it; and, after a good frost, there'll be the most priceless skating imaginable. Do you think I would have invited the crowd to spend Christmas here if there weren't any amusements?"

They drove on, and Handforth & Co. were feeling a great deal better already.

Only a mile or two down the road, they came within sight of the mystery man's home. So far as Archie knew, it had no name; and, viewed in the full light of day, it had lost all its eeriness, and now looked commonplace.

It was just a squat stone house, ugly in design, built upon the summit of a rising knoll. Round about were untidy clumps of ragged trees and bushes. There appeared to be one or two wooden outhouses in the rear; but there were no gardens, no surrounding hedges, or walls, or fences. The house, apparently, had been built on the open downs.

"Better not get out of the car," said Archie. "I mean, Nerki might be watching."

"What if he is?" asked Handforth. "We've a right to walk about, haven't we?"

"Oh, rather! But I've got to see the blighter to-morrow," explained Archie. "We don't want him to think we're spying on him, or anything like that. We don't want to get his back up."

"Perhaps you're right," agreed Handforth. "In any case, there's nothing to see. Miserable-looking dump, if you ask me."

But while he was speaking he was memorising the lie of the land; he tried to register a mental picture of the stone house and its surroundings. The truth was, an idea had already entered Handforth's mind, and he was determined to do some quiet investigations on his own.

IN the afternoon the party arrived.

All the boys and girls came on the same train, and Archie, beaming and happy, met them. He had made arrangements at the hotel—arrangements which had caused the manager to open his eyes rather wide. Incidentally, Archie's pocket-book had been opened rather wide, too. Not that he cared about that. He always had plenty of money. If it had not been a slack week, the hotel could not have accommodated so many guests.

There were all the cheery members of the "old gang"—such celebrated stalwarts as Nipper himself, glad enough to be with the old crowd for a change; Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Reggie Pitt, Vivian Travers, Fatty Little—and even

Willy Handforth, Chubby Heath, and Juicy Lemon, of the St. Frank's Third Form.

Then there were the girls—Irene Manners, upon whom Handforth was rather sweet; Marjorie Temple, Archie's own particular fancy; and other happy, healthy young ladies numbering a dozen, including Doris Berkeley, Mary Summers, Winnie Pitt, Ena Handforth and Vera Wilkes.

Archie had done the thing thoroughly. He meant the party to be a lively success. With over two dozen lads and lassies romping about Forest House, the old place was certain to ring with laughter and happiness. Aunt Eustacia would find it impossible to combat that healthy, joyous influence.

After the greetings were over, and the whole party had arrived at the hotel, it was found that a splendid meal was prepared. Archie's party had the big dining-room quite to itself.

"Well, this is a ripping idea of yours, Archie, old son," said Nipper, smiling. "But none of us can quite understand why we have come to this hotel—instead of foregathering at your aunt's place. What's the matter? Isn't she ready to receive us yet?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, no," said Archie. "But kindly pile into the fodder and stoke up the inner fires. I'll do a spot of explaining later, after the waiter lads have done their celebrated vanishing act."

"It sounds quite mysterious, Archie," laughed Irene Manners, her blue eyes twinkling.

None of them had the slightest inkling of the real truth—but that came later. Perhaps Archie did not wish to spoil their appetites. At all events, he trotted out the story after all the waiters had retired, and when the party was quite to itself.

The schoolboys and schoolgirls listened curiously at first; then expressions of dismay came upon their faces.

"Let's get this straight, Archie," said Nipper, with a touch of grimness in his tone. "As I understand it, we are to remain here, in this hotel, until to-morrow evening?"

"Absolutely!"

"At seven o'clock you will go along to the house of this mysterious Nerki, and meet your aunt there?"

"That's the idea."

"And if Nerki, who seems to have a great influence over your aunt says that the party can take place, we shall pack up our tents and trek to Forest House?"

"Right on the knocker, old boy!"

"But isn't there a ghastly snag?" asked Nipper. "After what you've told us, it seems pretty certain that Nerki will forbid the party. That means that we shall be stranded."

"Well, you see——"

"Horribly stranded!" put in Travers. "Most of us refused other invitations to come here, and we cancelled all our other arrangements. We shall look awful fools if we have to go back home——"

"We can't do that!"

"It would be too dreadful!"

"Archie, you've tricked us, you bounder!"

"You've brought us down here under false pretences!"

There was quite a commotion, but Archie Glenthorne, instead of being dismayed, waited for the tumult to die down; and the expression on his face was placid and calm and quietly determined.

"Finished?" he asked at last. "Good! Then listen to me! I don't care what Nerki says, this party is going to take place! Good gad! Do you think I'm going to let that blighting chap exercise such a power over Aunt Eustacia? I'm doing this for her own good, don't forget—and I'm relying upon you chappies and girls to help me."

"But Archie, doesn't it place us in an awkward position?" asked Marjorie gently. "I mean, you are taking so much for granted. How can we force ourselves into your aunt's house?"

"I'll do all the forcing, old girl," replied Archie. "Here's the position in a nutshell. If Nerki says O.K., we go along, and everything will be all right. If Nerki says N.G., we'll still go along, and everything will still be all right. We'll invade Forest House, I'll get my aunt alone, and before you know where you are she'll be amongst you giving you a hearty welcome. Leave it to me."

The young guests were somewhat reassured. Not many of them could understand the situation at all; they came to the conclusion that Lady Bowers was a bit "touched." And this was not a happy augury for Christmas.

Nipper was the only one who realised the real difficulties. He was more than a schoolboy; he had met with many startling adventures whilst assisting Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective.

"I'm afraid Archie fails to appreciate the real difficulties," said Nipper later, as he talked to Handforth and Travers and Pitt and one or two of the other fellows in private. "I don't know anything about Professor Ivan Nerki—although I've heard whispers, in London, that he is Society's latest fad. He is reputed to be genuine."

"Most tricksters of his type are supposed to be genuine, until they are tripped up," said Travers wisely.

"That's just it," agreed Nipper. "And people of his sort exercise an amazing, unbelievable influence over their dupes. Lady Bowers is no exception. Plenty of wealthy people allow their lives to be absolutely ruled by these spiritualists and mediums and so-called occult experts. They won't take any action until they have consulted their 'guide.' There's every evidence that Lady Bowers is completely under the spell of Nerki."

"And you think that Nerki will advise her to blot out the party?" asked Handforth.

"I do," said Nipper. "A lively Christmas party won't suit him at all—for people of his kind rely upon loneliness, a mysterious atmo-

sphere, and all that sort of thing. Whether he's a fraud, and after Lady Bowers' money, or whether he's genuine, it makes no difference. He'll look upon this party with disfavour. It's all very well for Archie to talk of invading Forest House, and 'getting round' his aunt. He doesn't realise that Nerki is an obsession with her."

"And are we going to have our Christmas party spoiled by this man?" demanded Handforth truculently. "Archie is relying upon us to help him, and we ought to do something!"

"We can't very well butt in," said Nipper. "Better leave it until to-morrow—until Lady Bowers has had her interview with the mystery man."

But Handforth was of a different opinion.

And, later, when he and Church and McClure went to bed—they shared one room—Handforth revealed the reason for his daylight visit to Nerki's place.

"Don't get undressed, you chaps," he said briskly. "We're going out."

"At this time of night?" asked Church, staring.

"Yes! We're going to call upon Professor Nerki!" said Handforth grimly. "I'm not satisfied with Archie's yarn, and I want to have a look round. I'm suspicious. I'm going to do some quiet investigating, and you chaps are going to help me!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Man Without a Shadow!

CHURCH and McClure were not entirely unprepared. They knew Handforth of old; and they had suspected something earlier in the day, when Handforth had motored into the Forest to look at the mystic's dwelling.

"I don't think we ought," said Church, shaking his head. "If Nerki spots us—and that's more than likely—he'll think that we're spying on him. And that'll put the tin hat on things completely."

"Rats! There's no reason why we should let ourselves be seen," said Handforth.

"But this fellow, Nerki, isn't ordinary," put in McClure. "He's a dabbler in black magic, and——"

"A dabbler in coining, more likely!" broke in Handforth grimly. "Yes, you can stare. I believe this black magic stuff is only a blind. He's a crook of some kind. By George! If we could only unmask him to-night, think what a triumph it would be! Archie's aunt would crumple right up, and she'd have to admit that she'd been fooled."

"But, my dear chap, there's no evidence that Nerki is anything but a sort of spiritualist," said Church. "You can't go butting into a man's house——"

"There's no evidence, because nobody has ever looked for it!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "That's just the trouble! The Forest people look upon Nerki as a wizard, and they accept him at his face value. It's the same with the people who visit him—people like Aunt Eustacia. We've only got to bowl him out in one bit of trickery, and he'll be unmasked."

"Well, we ought to leave it until to-morrow," said Church stubbornly. "Wait until Lady Bowers has had her interview——"

"And then it'll be too late!" said Handforth. "I'm going to-night—and if you fellows are funky, you can stay here, and go to bed! I don't believe in spooks and spirits, anyway."

After that, of course, there was nothing else for it but for Church and McClure to accompany their impetuous leader. They could not let him go on such an adventure by himself. They did not say so, of course, but they would have to look after him."

It was not really late—not yet eleven—and when the three schoolboys slipped out they found the hotel garage still open. And they learned that there would be a man about until after midnight, as some later visitors were expected.

It was a fine moonlight night, with frozen snow on the ground, and a crispness in the air which was invigorating. Handforth said something about going for a short run in the moonlight, and there was nothing unusual in the plan.

"Easy!" said Handforth, when they were well out of the town. "We can be there within ten minutes, park the car half a mile away, and then do the rest on foot. And none of the others know anything about it."

"It's certainly ripping out here, in the moonlight," admitted Church.

They found a handy place where the little Morris Minor could be run off the road and parked behind a clump of trees. Having left the car snug, the three young investigators set off on foot—and they did not use a road It was Handforth's idea to cross diagonally over the wild countryside, thus coming upon Nerki's house from the side.

Even Handforth, who generally took very little notice of scenery, was compelled to stand and stare across the widespread, moonlit countryside.

Not a breath of wind was stirring, and the air was so clear that it was possible to see for a considerable distance in all directions. The moonlight was dazzling in its brilliance, and the carpet of snow lay, for the most part, unbroken in every direction.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" said McClure.

"By George, yes!" replied Handforth. "What rot to suppose that there can be anything ghostly or uncanny about a place like this! It's a scene of peace—and natural glory!"

"Yes, and there's more snow coming," said Church, indicating the sky.

Clouds were appearing; massed banks of them, inky black. They were drifting slowly across the star-spangled heavens, and Handforth nodded.

"Before long those clouds will reach the moon—and they're so black that the moon-

light will be completely blotted out," he said. "Come on! We'd better do our scouting while there's still plenty of light."

"And we mustn't do any talking," said Mac warningly. "In this still air, our voices will carry the dickens of a way."

Their footsteps were silent as they advanced, for the carpet of snow deadened every sound.

Now that it had come to the time for action, Handforth did not know quite what to do. The first thing, however, was to get near the old stone house. There were no walls to climb, and, in fact, no barriers of any kind.

Once they caught a glimpse of the house from between two of the clumps of trees, and the old place was dark and silent. And now that the boys were nearer, they lost some of their former sense of tranquility. A slight wind had sprung up, and it was blowing with a soft, eerie moaning.

"Better not go too close," murmured Church, with a shiver. "I don't like the look of it, Handy. It's—it's so mysterious."

"Rats! Just your imagination," growled Handforth.

But their imagination seemed to play them a queer trick soon afterwards; for they suddenly saw, low down in a hedge bottom, some little moving figures. There was no snow, for that side of the hedge, a mere patch of bushes—had been protected.

"Rabbits!" whispered Handforth.

"They can't be!" said Church, with a queer feeling running down his spine. "Rabbits wouldn't stand there like that—with us in full view. They'd scuttle away. Besides, they seem to be standing upright, on their hind legs, and——"

He broke off, for at that moment the figure had passed from the bottom of the hedgerow to a patch of bright moonlight. And for a second or two they were clearly visible to the startled boys.

Handforth & Co. stood transfixed, in fact—for what they saw bewildered them, amazed them, and left them breathing rapidly.

For those forms were like tiny devils; they were human in shape, and their faces were gnome-like, but repulsive. It was even possible to see the greenish glow in their eyes. Then, with a quick scuttle, they had gone—vanishing through a gap in the hedge. And not a sound of any kind had been made.

Handforth was the first to speak.

"Did—did you chaps see what I saw?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Let's—let's get away from here," muttered Church. "They were gnomes—pixies, or something."

"By George! That's what I thought!" gasped Handforth.

"I saw them, too," said McClure, in a strange voice. "They were alive—anyhow, I'll swear they weren't mechanical figures, or anything like that. I've read that the Forest people say there are gnomes and pixies to be found here at night. Such things are attracted by occult influences, too—and that would account for them being near Nerki's place."

Handforth managed to grip himself.

"Rot!" he said fiercely. "Gnomes and pixies! They only appear in fairy tales! Whoever heard of such piffle?"

But when he moved forward, and examined the hedgerow, he was freshly startled. In one or two places there was a thin film of snow, and footprints could be seen—and they were tiny footprints, almost exactly like those of a human being!

"Look here, you chaps!" said Handforth huskily.

Church and McClure had come up; but just then there was a heavier gust of wind, and an eddy blew down beside the hedge, disturbing the powdery snow. When Handforth looked again, those extraordinary footprints had gone. He wondered if he had really seen them. He could not be certain.

"Anything there?" asked Church softly.

"Jiggered if I know—I thought I saw some miniature footprints," muttered Handforth. "But they're gone now! The moonlight isn't so strong." He looked up, and saw that a film of cloud had covered the face of the moon. "Those black clouds will be coming up soon. We'd better get a move on."

"Yes—let's get back to the car," whispered Church.

"Not likely," said Handforth. "I'm not scared! I don't believe we really saw anything——"

"Look!" broke in McClure. "What's—what's wrong with that dead tree?"

He was pointing, and the others, turning, saw that he was indicating the stump of a dead tree which stood near the path which led up to the front of the house. It was some little distance away, and there were no other trees or bushes near it.

And it had seemed to McClure that the two gnarled branches, which stuck out grotesquely from the short trunk, had moved. The top of the stump, too, was of irregular shape, and there was a kind of great knot there, which somehow resembled a human head. The effect was grotesque.

"It's nothing," said Handforth. "Only a dead stump. Don't get nervy, Mac. You mustn't let your imagination——"

But he broke off, for he was willing to swear that one of the branches was moving slowly

round, and forwards, so that it pointed straight at the three intruders. And at the same time that knobby top moved, and became more like a human head. Eyes came into being, and they glowed with a horrid, greenish light.

"Go!" came a deep voice, so soft, so vague that it seemed to be almost a part of the wind itself.

The boys stood transfixed.

"Did—did you hear anything?" asked Church, nearly choking.

"Get ye from this place of danger!" said the voice. "'Tis folly to stay, for the evil spirits are abroad in the night."

"Run!" gasped Church.

He and McClure turned to bolt; but Handforth grabbed them. He was shaky himself, but he was grimly suspicious of a trick.

"Fatheads!" he hissed. "It's nothing! Do you think I'm fooled?"

And with reckless courage he dashed at the tree. Even as he did so a terrible feeling came over him that he was walking right into an unknown danger.

As he reached the tree he pulled out a powerful electric torch and flashed it full upon the thing. And at the first glance a wave of intense relief swept over him.

For the bright light revealed a dead old tree-stump, with gnarled, broken branches, and with a knobbly top. There were two holes there, which might, by a long stretch of imagination, have been likened to human eyes. But they were just hollows, and when Handforth felt the branches, they were rigid.

"Come here, you chaps!" he said gruffly. "This ought to show you! By George! I never realised what the imagination could do to a chap!"

He was shaken. In the dim moonlight it had seemed that one of those arms had moved—that the very "head" had moved, and that eyes had appeared in those hollows. Yet there was nothing. The tree was commonplace, and, seen by daylight, would not have attracted a second glance.

"My only sainted aunt!" said Church, who was very pale.

"You see?" said Handforth triumphantly.

"It's no good, Handy—you're fooling yourself now," said McClure, whose Scottish head was level enough. "You know as well as I do that the dead branch did move. It pointed at us. And eyes came to life, too."

"But that's rot," protested Handforth. "Look! Can't you see that it's just a dead tree-trunk?"

"Better put that light out," said Church. "We're in full view of the house."

Handforth had not realised this; but when he turned, switching off the light as he did so, he saw that he and his chums were standing on the untidy path which led to the old stone house. A black cloud was just about to pass over the face of the moon. But before it did so, the boys saw something which gave them a fresh shock.

A figure came out of the house—not from the front door, but from the solid wall of the house, where there was no door or window. It seemed to pass straight through the stonework, and it approached them with a lithe, noiseless tread.

It was the figure of an old man with a white beard, and dressed in strange robes. The boys knew on the instant that this newcomer was Professor Ivan Nerki himself. He tallied exactly with Archie Glenthorne's description.

Then the black cloud passed over the face of the moon, and almost total darkness fell. But the figure could still be dimly seen, and it was advancing straight towards the boys.

"Wait!" came Nerki's cold voice. "Do not run until I have spoken with you."

"Who's running?" retorted Handforth boldly.

But he did not feel bold. His chums would have run if Handforth had not been holding them—and they would not have been ashamed. For there was something horribly ghostly about the figure.

"And why are you here?" demanded Nerki sternly.

He had come to within about twelve feet, and then he halted, and now stood, a silent, mysterious figure in the intense gloom.

"We're only having a look round," said Handforth. "I mean, we're not trespassing. This is all public land, isn't it?"

"It is the property of Professor Nerki," said the figure, his voice sounding strangely hollow and unreal. "It is forbidden ground, and foolish mortals, such as yourselves, who trespass upon it are in danger of disturbing the spirits of the night."

"You're Professor Nerki, aren't you?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"Professor Nerki sleep," replied the figure. "I am not Nerki, but Nerki's Astral Self. I am not human, like yourselves, but I warn you to go, ere Nerki awakens. You are unbelievers, and there is a danger that the deadly Elementals will rise up from the earth and drag you down into their domain of terror."

It was not the words so much as the tone of voice which sent chills down the spines of the boys. It was such an unhuman voice.

And then, at that moment, the black cloud passed over the face of the moon, and the "astral" figure stood out boldly.

"Look!" almost screamed Church.

He was pointing—not at Nerki, but at the snow beside him.

"Steady on!" said Handforth, with a gulp. "What's the matter with you, you idiot?"

"The shadow!" stuttered Church. "There—there's no shadow!"

Handforth jumped. He and his chums, of course, were casting intense black shadows on the white snow. But the figure of Nerki cast no shadow at all! It was an extraordinary phenomenon—a thing which scared the boys more than anything that had gone before. It was unnatural—it was weird in the extreme.

For such a thing was impossible. If that figure was a real man, he would cast a shadow, like the boys. Handforth stared fascinatedly, and he could even hear his heart thudding within his breast. Then his eyes were not deceiving him. There was no shadow cast by that grim figure.

And this time Church and McClure bolted. Handforth could not prevent them. They ran like mad, as though demons were at their heels. And Handforth himself, after the first second, felt the same panic sweep over him. He ran, too. And he fancied that from the rear came a low, hideous cackling laugh.

They had reached the road before Handforth partially recovered himself. And it so happened that a motor-car was coming along. The headlights looked friendly and cheerful.

"Hold on!" muttered Handforth.

He stood, with his chums, against a bush. The car passed by, and, within it, some joyous young people were singing Christmas carols. The car swept on, and now Handforth felt himself again.

"I'm going back!" he said fiercely. By George! What fools we were to run! We've been tricked!"

"No, no!" panted Church. "Don't go back, Handy! That awful place——"

But Handforth was running. His dogged stubbornness overcame his fears. But when he reached that spot where the mysterious figure had stood, he received a shock.

"Great Scott!" he muttered, aghast.

For he could see the trampled snow where he and his chums that stood. Beyond there was an unbroken expanse of snow—right to the house wall. There was not a footprint to be seen. Yet Handforth himself had seen Nerki come through the wall of the house, and advance over that snow.

The thing was incredible. That figure had left no footprints! It had cast no shadow. Yet it had spoken; it had told the boys that it was not Nerki himself, but Nerki's astral counterpart!

Edward Oswald Handforth walked back to his chums—and it said much for his courage and his self-control that he did walk. For he had a wild desire to run.

CHAPTER 7.

Nerki's Decree.

"IT didn't happen! It couldn't have happened!" muttered Handforth. "I must have dreamed it."

It was the next morning, and Handforth was sitting up in bed. Church and McClure were both dressing, and they looked far from cheerful.

"It's no good, Handy—you can't fool yourself like that," said Church bluntly. "Something horrible happened last night at Nerki's place. I'm beginning to believe that he's a real sorcerer. Those things couldn't have been worked by trickery. I go cold all over when I think of that figure standing there—and casting no shadow!"

"I'll admit it was rummy," growled Handforth, as he started dressing. "But all sorts

With a crescendo of noise which was terrifyin the table before the horrified ey

of rummy things can be done by clever fakery. I'm not satisfied that Nerki is a genuine sorcerer. Rats! There's no such thing as a sorcerer!"

"Well, Mac and I are going home," said Church.

"Now, look here, we're Archie's guests, and he wants us to help him——"

"That's all very well," interrupted McClure. "Friendship's all right, but I don't see why we should ruin our Christmas vacation just because Archie gets a dotty idea into his head. Anyhow, we'd better not tell any of

the chaps and girls about what happened last night."

"By George, no!" said Handforth, with a start. "They wouldn't believe us. They'd laugh—and say that we had been seeing things."

When they went down they found all the other members of the party in a merry mood. The Christmas spirit was upon them. And Archie had succeeded in convincing them, it seemed, that everything would be all right. Perhaps Nipper had had something to do with it, too, for Nipper had taken Archie's side, and had supported him loyally.

When Church and McClure got the chance, however, they advised Archie to give up the

orks, spoons and silver pots floated swiftly off ristmas party and disappeared!

entire project, and to let the boys and girls go home. They said nothing of what had happened overnight, but Archie could see that they were scarcely themselves.

"My dear old lads, forget it!" said Archie. "I mean to say, Christmas is practically here, and to-night we move into Forest House. And everything will be cheery and bright. Trust me."

And he was so full of good spirits that Church and McClure found it impossible to press their case.

Nipper had a word of good advice for Archie during the day.

"The arrangement, I think, is for you to be at Nerki's house at seven o'clock?" asked Nipper. "You are to meet your aunt there?"

"That's it."

"In other words, Aunt Eustacia will probably be with Nerki for some time before you arrive?"

"Good gad, yes!"

"That's bad," said Nipper. "You mustn't let your aunt talk to Nerki in private—before you arrive."

"How can I prevent it?"

"By going to your aunt's house at about six," replied Nipper shrewdly. "If you get there early, she'll probably take you along with her—so you will be present at the interview from the very start. Anyhow, I think it's worth trying, Archie."

"Oh, rather! Absolutely!" said Archie. "Many thanks, old dear, for the tip. It might make all the difference, what?"

And at six o'clock he presented himself at Forest House, was escorted into his aunt's presence, and she regarded him with some disfavour.

"Thought I'd take advantage of the good old car, aunt, old dear," explained Archie brightly. "I mean, there's no reason why we shouldn't tootle along together. That is, of course, if you have no objection?"

"I should have preferred to see the professor alone; but since you are here, Archie, I will raise no objections," said Lady Bowers. "I am afraid that you are treating this whole matter with a flippancy which——"

"Absolutely not, aunt," interrupted Archie earnestly. "I know how keen you are on this wizard, or whatever he is, and you can absolutely rely upon me to behave myself."

"I am glad of that," said Lady Bowers. "But you must be prepared, Archie, for a disappointment. I have reason to believe that Professor Nerki will advise me against the Christmas party. He has already told me that I must have no disturbances, no noise. And there are certain things, in connection with Forest House, which are unknown to you. But Nerki knows everything. I believe he will advise me to spend Christmas quite alone. But we shall see."

Archie looked at her in a troubled way.

"You're not referring, by any chance, to the—er—haunting?" he asked hesitatingly. "I mean to say, I've heard, once or twice, from here and there, that—that—— Well, to put it bluntly, that the old family pile is apt to have a few ghosts knocking about during the festive season."

"I would prefer not to discuss the matter, Archie," said Lady Bowers quietly.

He gave it up. And now everything depended upon Nerki's verdict. Nerki's decree would decide the fate of the

party. To Archie it seemed fantastic—indeed, idiotic. But he could do nothing but respect his aunt's wishes.

They went by car. The evening was overcast, and snow was falling again—steadily, silently, for there was very little wind. It looked like the beginning of the heaviest fall yet. And Christmas promised to be a genuine, old-fashioned one. The more snow the better—for Archie already had visions of glorious tobogganing and skating.

There were no uncanny effects when they arrived at Nerki's house. A small light was glowing in the porch, and in answer to Lady Bowers' ring, the door was opened by a smallish man dressed in quiet, black clothes. He could not be seen distinctly owing to the gloom—for only a tiny light burned in the lobby.

"My master awaits, my lady!" murmured the servant.

The visitors were ushered across the softly carpeted lobby, down a short corridor, and then into the mysterious black room, where the walls were hung with heavy curtains, and where the domed roof was aglow with the signs of the Zodiac.

"If my lady will please be seated," murmured the servant.

There were two chairs ready, and Lady Bowers and Archie sat down. Archie would had said something, but his aunt placed a warning finger to her lips. Archie was somewhat reassured. This was decidedly better. They had been admitted like decent human beings into a decent home.

And now Archie had one of the minor mysteries explained to him. For he saw that the room was divided by heavy black curtains, which hung right across. They parted silently even as he watched, and, as though by magic, the glowing brazier appeared, and a little table, and beyond the table a chair, in which sat Professor Ivan Nerki.

To anyone who was slightly bewildered it seemed that Professor Nerki and his glowing brazier had appeared from nowhere. But the effect was produced merely by pulling the black curtains aside. The curtains themselves could scarcely be seen, owing to the fact that they merged with the hangings all round the room itself.

"The usual fakery!" Archie told himself. "If these chappies were genuine, why the need for all the trick curtains?"

"Nerki, I am here, and I have brought my nephew with me," said Lady Bowers quietly.

And there was something in her voice which made Archie start. He was pained. Aunt Eustacia was this strange man's slave.

"What is it you would desire me to advise?" asked Nerki, his voice low and impressive. "Your nephew is with you, I see, Lady Bowers. We have met before."

Archie felt that he was being subjected to a close, careful scrutiny. And somehow he felt uncomfortable. The whole affair seemed so outrageous to him. And, of course, it was outrageous. But Lady Bowers had allowed this obsession to obtain such a grip that she saw nothing unusual in the circumstances.

She told Nerki of Archie's wish—of the plan to have a big Christmas party of young people at Forest House. And Nerki listened solemnly, nodding his white head from time to time. Now and again he stirred the charcoal, and the brazier glowed eerily.

"You will wait," he said at length.

And suddenly a crystal, glowing redly and wickedly, appeared from nowhere. Yet there was no mystery about it. A velvet cloth had been pulled aside. Nothing more.

For some minutes Nerki gazed intently into the crystal, bending low over it and murmuring strange, mysterious incantations. At last he looked up; but even now the expression on his face could not be seen, for the brazier stood at his side, and only the faintest glow reached Nerki's features.

"It is well, Lady Bowers," he said softly. "I see much happiness, much joy, in the crystal."

"You think it will be—safe?" asked Lady Bowers.

"Not only safe, but your health will benefit," replied Nerki, in almost a cheerful voice—which gave Archie quite a thrill of pleasure. "Let this party of youth take place! Let Forest House ring with laughter, with happiness! Let there be lights, colour, joy. Let this Christmas, Lady Bowers, be such a Christmas as the old house has never before seen!"

"But this is too wonderful!" exclaimed Aunt Eustacia, gripping one of Archie's hands, and bending forward. "You astound me, Nerki! I had formed the impression that you were opposed to all things worldly."

"I have seen your nephew, and through him I can see his friends," replied Nerki impressively. "They are good friends. They are certain to bring good influences into your home, Lady Bowers. Let them come, that is my advice."

"I shall take your advice, Nerki," said Lady Bowers quietly. "I always take your advice."

"Do not be hindered from giving your guests all the jollity of which your kindly nature is capable," said Nerki. "Let them revel in the snow sports of the park; let them have dancing, music. There shall be games in Forest House this Christmas, and noise and bustle. And you, Lady Bowers, will be a different woman. You must allow no worries to disturb the tranquility of your mind. These are my views."

"And—the haunting?" asked Lady Bowers, after a moment's hesitation.

"I do not know all; I am, I fear, a poor, ignorant thing," replied Nerki. "But with Forest House glowing with lights, with laughter ringing through its rooms and halls, I do not think you need fear the haunting. So return home, dear lady, and let these young people surround you, and let them give you some of their own youth, their own happiness."

"You have pleased me, Nerki," said Lady Bowers. "And I am certain that my nephew is pleased, too."

"What-ho! Oh, rather!" said Archie. "I mean to say, I hardly expected—— That is, I mean——"

"One last word," said Nerki. "I urge you, Lady Bowers, to forget all things occult until after Christmas. Let your mind be tranquil—and all will be well."

He sank back into his chair, and as he did so the crystal vanished, and the invisible curtains were drawn across, so that Nerki himself disappeared, too.

"My lady, you will please come," said a voice.

A servant was bowing at the door, and Lady Bowers, in some surprise, rose to her feet.

"Come, Archie," she said gently.

They went out, and when they were back in the car Archie could see, at the first glance, that his aunt was very different. She seemed slightly bewildered.

"I am glad—very glad," she said more than once. "Nerki has surprised me—and pleased me. I have never known him to be so cheerful."

"One look at Archie's dial, and everything was all serene, what?" beamed Archie. "I mean to say, that's what the old boy said. Dash it, I'm beginning to believe in him!"

"You must believe in him," said Lady Bowers quietly. "Nerki is a wonderful man. He sees things which are denied to you and I" She suddenly smiled. "You must take the car, Archie, and go to Fordingbridge. I think some of your friends are there?"

"They're all there, aunt," said Archie, somewhat sheepishly.

"But, Archie, how is that?"

"Well, you see, I thought everything would be all right, so I got them all together, so to speak, near at hand," explained Archie. "We shall all be along by about nine, I expect. Any chance of a ripping supper, or anything like that?"

"Why, to be sure!" said Lady Bowers. "After what Nerki has said, I must make great preparations. I will have extra servants—yes, and to-morrow I will have electricians in the house, and lights shall be fitted everywhere. Decorations, too. Upon my word, Archie, I am beginning to look forward to this jolly Christmas!"

"That's the spirit!" chortled Archie. "Didn't I say everything would be all serene?"

CHAPTER 8.

Throwing Down the Gauntlet.

AS soon as Lady Bowers' car had gone, Nerki's servant silently closed the front door and glided back to the mysterious room with the domed ceiling.

"They've gone!" he whispered.

The curtains had been drawn back, and Nerki was on his feet now.

"And Lady Bowers?" he asked, in a voice full of suppressed excitement.

"She looked as happy as a schoolgirl," replied the servant.

"Good egg!" said Nerki, with a chuckle. "I thought I had given her the right kind of dope. Reggie, old son, you did your part famously."

"You were too marvellous for words!" said the black-clothed servant.

Nerki removed his conical hat, and then followed a wig, and the white beard. And in the glow of the brazier boyish features were revealed—the features, to be exact, of Nipper!

"Yes," said Nipper, grinning. "I rather fancy we worked it well."

"And even Archie didn't guess anything," chuckled Reggie Pitt. "Just shows you the value of these black curtains and other effects. I even felt a bit creepy myself when I peeped in here and saw you squatting in that chair, with that giddy brazier by your side. No wonder these fakers use such paraphernalia."

The impersonations had been easy enough. Reggie Pitt, in fact, had scarcely worn any disguise at all His black robe, and a few touches of greasepaint on his face to represent the lines of age had been sufficient. And Nipper, posing as Nerki, had had the benefit of the beard and the wig and the robes. He had kept well back, and he had made certain that the brazier was not glowing brightly, and it was some distance from him. The rest had been easy—for, before undertaking this task, he had heard Nerki's voice. And Nipper was excellent at imitating people's voices.

In a strong light, of course, the trick could not have been done; but Nipper had known all along that he would have the advantage of semi-darkness.

"Well, come on, Reggie, we'd better be getting back to the others," said Nipper briskly. "I expect old Nerki is getting fed up, too."

They passed out of the old house by a rear door. And as soon as they had emerged into the snow, a figure came running up.

"They've gone!" came Handforth's voice. "We heard the car. Everything all right?"

"Right as rain!" said Nipper. "Tell you all about it later. The first thing to do, now, is to release Nerki."

"By George! What a wheeze," said Handforth breathlessly. "What a stunt! Of course, I should have thought of it, but——"

"Yes, naturally" murmured Nipper. "But don't let's argue now, Handy, old son."

The idea, of course, had been Nipper's. He had shrewdly seen Archie's precious Christmas party would come an awful cropper unless something drastic was done. And Nerki, undoubtedly, was the vital factor. So the guests had plotted; quite unknown to Archie. Nipper had gathered most of the boys around him and had proposed the plan.

And it had been comparatively easy to call upon Professor Ivan Nerki soon after

six o'clock, and to grab him, bind him up, and lock him in one of the sheds which stood at the rear of the old house. In the course of that raid Nipper had learned that Nerki had a servant—but the servant was away in Southampton, and would not be back until nine o'clock.

Nerki, in fact, had been very dignified, very angry, and at first he had attempted to scare the boys by threatening to call up various evil spirits. During this early scene Nipper had become familiar with Nerki's voice; he had also learned about the servant. After that, the boys had pounced, and Nerki had found himself treated like any other mortal; and, for all his black magic and his sorcery, he had not been able to free himself from some very simply tied ropes.

Nipper went to the shed, the other boys following him. On guard outside were Church and McClure—and Handforth's chums were now looking very different. They had got over their pessimism of the morning. Nipper had saved the situation.

"Nothing's happened," reported Church, with a grin. "The great Nerki hasn't been swallowed up by the earth, and he hasn't flown away, or anything like that. He's still inside."

The door was opened; two candles were burning in that little shed, and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and Vivian Travers were sitting round the prisoner.

Nerki was sitting—very uncomfortably—on two boxes. His hands were tied behind him to a post in the wall. His legs, from the knees downwards, were bound with ropes.

And there was a vast difference in Professor Ivan Nerki.

Without his robes, his false beard, and his white wig, he was revealed in the candlelight as a lean-faced man of about fifty. It was clear that he was boiling with inward fury; yet, somehow, he managed to maintain his dignity, even in these difficult circumstances.

There was something strange about his eyes. Without any make-up he still looked uncanny. His eyes were deeply sunken, and they burned strangely in their hollows.

"Well, Mr. Nerki, if that's your name, we're going to set you free now," said Nipper. "Hope you haven't been too cold."

Nerki said nothing, but he bent his glowing eyes upon Nipper—and there was a light in them which made even Nipper feel uncomfortable.

"You see, we wanted this party at Forest House to be a success," continued Nipper gruffly. "But you needn't worry—I haven't breathed a word to Lady Bowers about what I suspect. She still believes in you. I couldn't tell her the truth without giving myself away. It was necessary to that she should believe that you were talking to her. It will be unpleasant hearing for you to learn that Lady Bowers was completely deceived, and guessed nothing. So even a young chap like myself can do this sort of thing—and get away with it."

"You have tampered with things you do not understand," said Nerki.

"I'm telling you straight, Mr. Nerki," continued Nipper. "I'm snapping my fingers at you—and so are all the rest of us."

"Hear, hear!" murmured the boys.

"We don't believe in your black magic—and you have only succeeded in duping Lady Bowers because she is a woman, and an easy 'subject,'" went on Nipper. "You see, we've got the upper hand. We defy you to tell Lady Bowers of what has happened this evening. You daren't. Because, if you did, you would condemn yourself. What would she say if she knew that your beard was false—that you wore a wig—that you resorted to all manner of 'blacking out' tricks to produce your effects? Her eyes would be a bit opened, wouldn't they? Well, we're not going to tell her the truth; because, if we did, we should betray ourselves. But during this Christmas-time she will recover her normal balance, and then she'll be out of your power for ever."

"What about your black magic now?" asked Handforth, with a sniff. "By George! And I was ready to believe all sorts of things last night."

"What do you mean—last night?" asked Nipper.

"Never mind! I'll tell you later," growled Handforth. "But I was here, and Nerki worked some of his funny stunts—and I was nearly fooled. But where's his sorcery now? If there was anything in it he could have warned Lady Bowers—even though he was bound up and held a prisoner."

By this time Nerki had been freed from the ropes, and the boys were careful to stand well back, half expecting an attack. For they told themselves that Nerki was a cheap trickster—an out-and-out crook. And it was quite likely that, in his rage, he would attempt violence.

But Professor Ivan Nerki did nothing of the kind.

He stood there motionless, as though in a sort of trance—and Nipper was at once suspicious. The man's audacity was astounding. He was trying to fool them, even now.

"Just one last word of warning, Mr. Nerki," said Nipper grimly. "If you tell Lady Bowers anything of what has happened to-night—we'll tell her, too. She'll hear our side of the story, as well as yours. What's more, we'll tell the police."

"I think we ought to tell the police, anyhow," said Handforth.

"No! We've given him a warning, and that ought to be enough," said Nipper. "He won't breathe a word. He daren't. We're only a crowd of schoolboys, but we've unmasked him."

"You think so?" asked Nerki, his voice throbbing.

Yet that voice contained no anger—only a kind of infinite pity

"I am sorry for you," he went on slowly. "For you are tampering with things which are dangerous. You poor, deluded boys! You have done something, this evening, which will recoil upon you with deadly effect. You have aroused the anger of the hideous Earth Elementals. These are the spirits of long dead people. They are not ghosts, as you know them. They are invisible, but they are capable of great destruction. Sometimes their antics are purposeless; they will destroy the contents of a room, and the very room itself. They will strike down an innocent child, and it will be found dead, without apparent cause. But when the Earth Elementals are opposed to a known enemy, they are relentless, and their victims never escape."

"Let's be going," said Nipper bluntly.

"Wait!" said Nerki. "You think, because you have held me, and tied me with ropes, that I am a fraud and a trickster. Yet I am but human. Have I ever claimed to be other than human? I can be bound with ropes like any other man. But you have proved nothing by this outrage. All you have done is to play a scurrilous trick upon a harmless lady. You have virtually invited yourselves to her house—and thereby you are placing her in danger."

The boys were silent.

"You are quite right when you say that I shall not speak to Lady Bowers of this night's unfortunate work," said Nerki. "For she would not believe me if I told her—and it is better that such a disgraceful affair should be hushed up. I bear you no malice, for you are young, you are misguided. I am not even angry. But I pity you from the bottom of my heart."

There was certainly something hypnotic in the professor's eyes, or in his personality. For those boys, who had felt so pleased with themselves not a few minutes ago, now felt strangely guilty

They wondered, indeed, if their trick had been justified. They began to think that it was mean—and the impersonation, which they had planned for Lady Bowers' benefit, was a disgraceful one. The man's very calmness affected the boys.

"I am no trickster—as you will find out," said Nerki. "The powers of sorcery are in my hands. Yet I am helpless in some matters. I bear you no malice, and I will do everything in my power to protect you from the evil spirits which abound in Forest House. Yet I cannot guarantee immunity."

"If you're not a trickster, why do you wear a false beard?" demanded Handforth bluntly.

"In dealing with my clients, I find it necessary to employ a few simple effects," replied Nerki. "I am painfully aware of the fact that I am a man of plain appearance. People expect magicians to look like a magician.. That is my reason for employing the simple devices you have seen—such as my false beard, black curtains, and so forth. But I am warning you," he added, lowering his voice. "The fees I obtain are only sufficient to keep me in simple food, in this humble house of mine. I am not a fortune-seeker, or a swindler. I believe in the occult, and I am in touch with the occult. That you cannot disprove. Go! And may you be satisfied with your cowardly work. I can only pray that Lady Bowers will suffer no ill because of your treachery."

They went away silently. And when, at length, they were clear of Nerki's property, and back on the snow-covered road, they looked at one another uncertainly.

"Not so good!" growled Handforth. "That fellow gives me the creeps!"

"It seems to me, dear old fellows, that we ought to go to Lady Bowers, and spill the whole story," said Travers. "I feel beastly mean about the business."

"So do I," said one of the others.

"We can't enjoy Christmas at Forest House now," added McClure.

Nipper looked at them grimly.

"Well, you are a lot of mugs!" he said.

"Eh?"

"Are you falling for Nerki's bluff?" continued Nipper. "The guv'nor and I, in the past, have had one or two cases connected with fake spiritualism. I know these men! In order to be any success at the game, they have to be cleverer than any actors on the stage. Nerki's a queer blighter—he has rummy looking eyes, and they help him in his work. But he's only an actor—a faker. He's clever, too. Even after we had succeeded, he tried to mess everything up by talking as he did."

"By George! Do you really think so?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"I don't think anything about it—I know it!" replied Nipper. "Now, snap out of it, my lads! We've made everything all right for Archie, and we're going to spend Christmas at Forest House. What's more, it's going to be a happy Christmas. It'll do Lady Bowers the world of good. Archie's idea was the right one—only he left too much to chance. We've made certain of it by doing what we did this evening."

The others felt very much better after that straight talk. They came to the conclusion that Nipper was right.

Professor Ivan Nerki had issued a challenge—and it was up to them to accept it. If they cleared out now, Nerki would be the winner—and he would be laughing up his sleeve!

No, the only thing to do was to go to Forest House, and make the party as jolly as possible.

First of all, however, Archie had to be told. That was very necessary. And when they got back to Fordingbridge, and Archie was there, ready to take them away from

the hotel, he was informed. Needless to say, the elegant junior was thoroughly flabbergasted to hear such a startling piece of news.

"Odds mysteries and puzzles!" he ejaculated. "Do you absolutely mean to say, Nipper, old thing, that it was you all the time?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a bally wonder!" said Archie. "I could have sworn that it was Nerki who was talking to Aunt Eustacia and me. But, really, I must say that you're a brilliant set of laddies! A wonderful idea, what? You've proved that Nerki is a dashed fraud, and you've done it in such a way that Aunt Eustacia doesn't guess a thing. Good gad! Brilliant! And everything in the garden is lovely!"

And off they went to Forest House—intent upon spending a jolly Christmas.

CHAPTER 9.

Christmas at Forest House.

THAT the plotters had been thoroughly justified in their action seemed proved a day or two later, after the Christmas party at Forest House had settled down.

Lady Bowers, her mind set at rest, by the supposed sanction of Professor Nerki, was a delightful hostess. And none of those boys and girls regretted coming. Archie, of course, was the life and soul of the party; he was overjoyed at the brilliant success of his plan.

As he whispered to the guests, Aunt Eustacia was blossoming like a spring flower already.

And this was scarcely an exaggeration. Even in this short space of time Lady Bowers had completely changed. She looked ten years younger; her face, so pallid and lined, took on a new appearance of youth. The laughter and gaiety of the boys and girls had wrought this change. She was benefiting enormously by this healthy, cheery atmosphere.

It was something new in her life—at least, something she had not experienced for years. Archie very discreetly made no mention of Nerki; he knew that his aunt was satisfied in that direction. And Nerki himself, as the boys had prophesied, had made no move.

While the young guests were out revelling in the snow—for there had been a heavy fall—great changes were effected in the house itself. Electricians had been engaged, and scores of extra lights were fitted up—coloured lights, in festoons. The great hall, formerly so gloomy, became a place of light and colour after dark.

There were gay decorations, carnival balloons, holly, mistletoe, and so forth. Aunt Eustacia had entered into the spirit of the thing, and she was stinting no expense in order to make the party a rip-roaring success.

"It's glorious, Archie! We're terribly glad we came!" cried Marjorie Temple, her bright eyes dancing.

"Jolly good!" beamed Archie. "I mean to say, that's the spirit, what?"

Marjorie was not the only one who had made that remark; most of the others, during the day or two before Christmas, expressed their views in a similar fashion. They were all happy, comfortable, and jolly.

Fatty Little declared that the food was "extra"; and he was an expert. In short, Forest House was an ideal residence for such a Christmas party as this. What with the snow, and the tobagganing and the skating, the outdoor sports were of the finest.

And after dark, during the long evenings, there were bright rooms, with great roaring log fires. Aunt Eustacia had purchased one of the finest radio sets, and music was to be heard in those formerly sombre rooms, at all hours of the day.

The servants scarcely knew where they were. Forest House was a changed place. Other servants had been engaged, too. And it seemed that everybody entered into the gaiety of the occasion. Never had there been a happier Christmas party.

Then came Christmas Day itself—a real, old-fashioned Christmas day, frosty, snowy and crisp. And by now Lady Bowers was completely "lifted" out of herself. Archie was overjoyed at the change. It was almost incredible—well-nigh unbelievable. In these few short days his aunt was back where she had been when Archie knew her as a child. And the reason was simple. The influence of the occult, which had been eating into her brain like a disease, was thrown off.

And this was only the beginning! Archie was determined, before the vacation was over, to convince Aunt Eustacia, once and for all, that dabbling in that kind of thing was definitely harmful. But Archie, shrewdly enough, believed in doing the thing gradually.

"Well, aunt, old thing, what about it?" he asked cheerfully, on the evening of Christmas Day. "Wasn't it a priceless idea of mine to bring the lads and lassies to the old homestead?"

"Archie, old top, you're a genius!" laughed Aunt Eustacia, giving her surprised nephew a dig in the ribs. "There! Do you know what you've done to me? You've turned me from a miserable old woman into what you now see before you!"

"Good gad! And what a change!" said Archie. "What a ripping change, Aunt Eustacia! I always said you were a sportsman!"

Just for a moment a shadow came across Lady Bowers' face, but she quickly smiled again.

"Anything wrong, old dear?" asked Archie, quick to see the look.

"No; it's foolish of me," said his aunt. "I am only thinking that it is Christmas evening—and it is said that terrible things happen here on Christmas night."

(*Continued on page* 30.)

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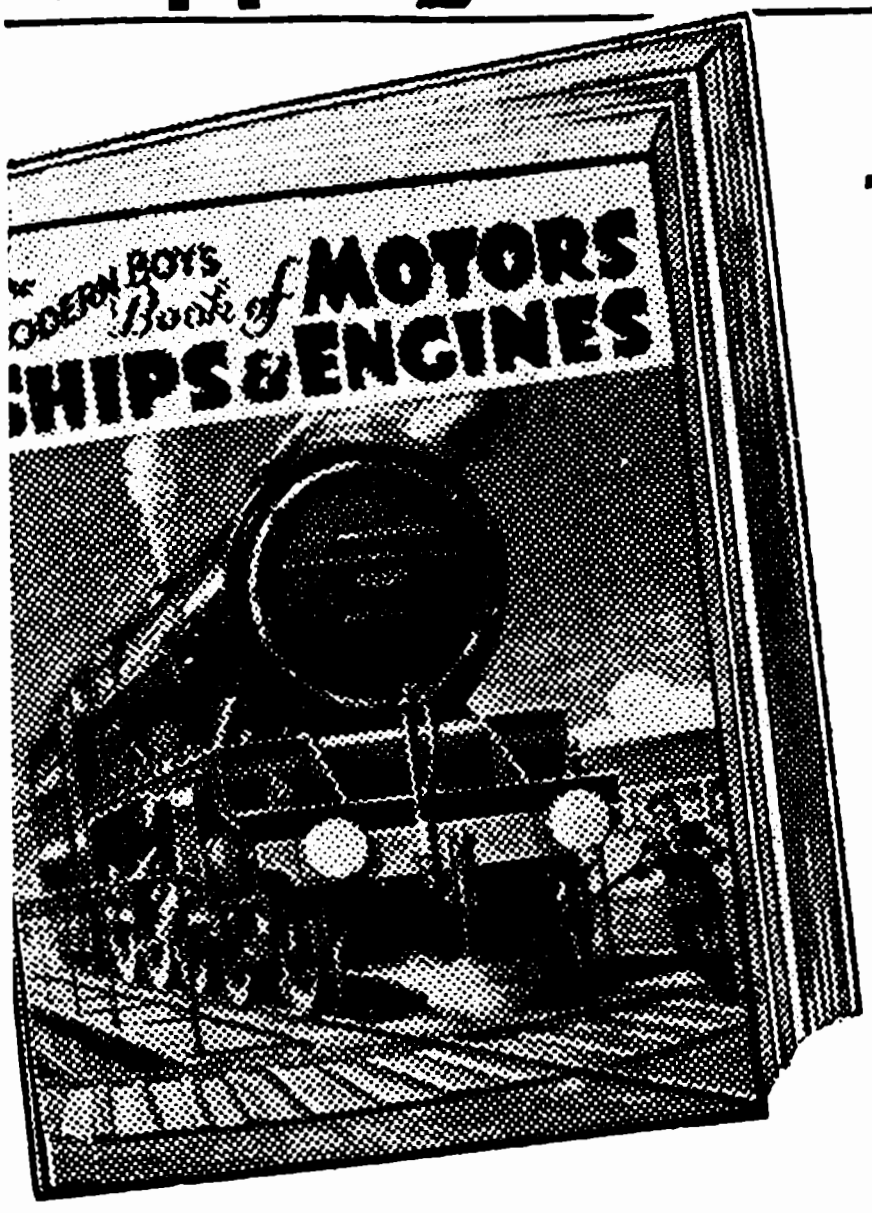

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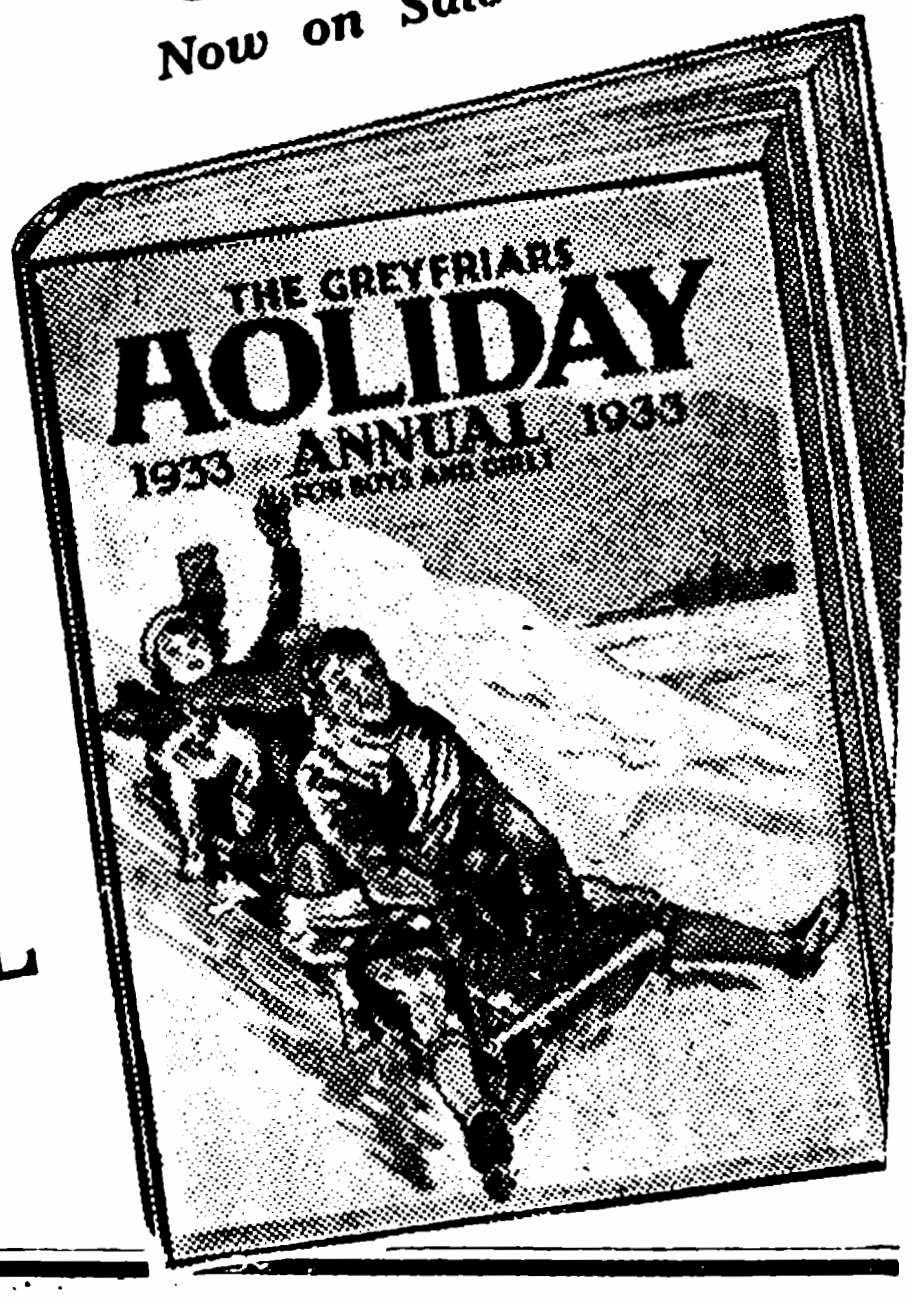


(*Continued from page* 28.)

"But don't you know?" asked Archie, in surprise. "I mean, you've spent other Christmasses here."

"But I have been alone," explained Lady Bowers. "Professor Nerki has explained to me that the house has been immune from the evil manifestations because the Earth Elementals were left in peace."

It was the first mention of Nerki she had made since her guests had arrived; and even the very voicing of his name seemed to bring a dark shadow across her face.

"I say, you know, let's forget it!" said Archie hurriedly. "Nothing will happen."

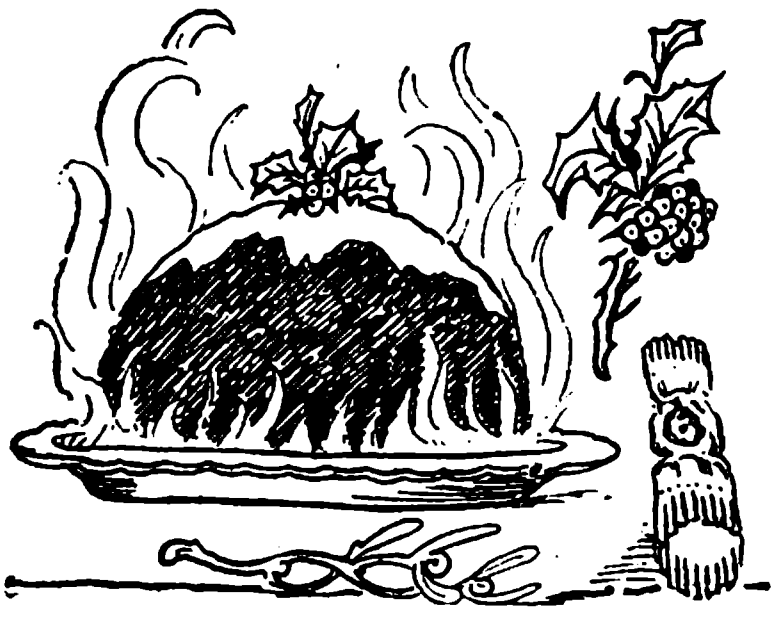
"Of course not," smiled Aunt Eustacia. "Did not Nerki tell me that everything would be all right?"

Archie almost winced. It was Nipper who had told her that. And Archie sometimes wondered how it would be possible for him to acquaint his aunt with the truth. He was just a little startled now, for he had believed that Nerki's influence was rapidly waning. Lady Bowers' words seemed to prove that she still believed in the mystic. Well, it wasn't to be wondered at. His influence had sunk deep. Christmas wasn't over yet by a long way; the party was to stay on until the New Year. By then, Archie told himself, his aunt would be so free of the "spell" that she could be told the truth.

It was clear enough to Archie that Nerki had spun that yarn about the Earth Elementals so there should be no party. For Nerki must have known that bright company would undo a great deal of his work.

Archie dismissed the whole subject from his mind, and went upstairs to dress. There was to be a great jollification to-night, after dinner—Christmas games, dancing, and all sorts of happiness.

And, certainly, when the guests sat down in the great dining-hall, they looked happy enough. Lady Bowers, at the head of the great table, was a very picture of contentment. And all round went up the chatter of the boys and girls. It was essentially a young party. There were no grown-ups at all, with the exception of Lady Bowers herself. Nipper was rather disappointed about this, as he had expected Nelson Lee to be down for Christmas. The great detective had promised to come, if possible—and even now he might turn up.



"Now for the good old turkey, to say nothing of the plum-pudding!" said Archie, surveying the guests through his monocle. "How's the appetite, Fatty, old elephant?"

"I don't want to say I'm greedy, but if there's a spare turkey knocking about, pass it over here!" grinned Fatty Little.

Never had the party been so gay as at this moment. Everybody was laughing and talking. The great table, with its snowy-white cloth, was gleaming with silver, and the flowers and the decorations were gloriously colourful in the bright electric lights. It was a typical scene of festive joy.

Then it was, as Christmas dinner was about to be served, that a change came—abruptly, unexpectedly, dramatically.

One or two of the guests noticed that the lights seemed to be less bright; they looked up inquiringly. Others looked, too. Unquestionably, the lights were growing dim—as electric lights grow dim in a picture theatre.

"Hallo! Something wrong with the juice!" said Archie, with concern.

Even as he was speaking a cold, icy blast swept through the dining-hall from end to end. And a silence fell; the laughter ceased abruptly, and the guests looked at one another with sudden inquiry—and even alarm.

But not a window was open—and the doors, at the moment, were closed. The servants looked puzzled. Lady Bowers herself sat in her chair with a strange, fixed expression on her face.

Jingle—jingle—jingle!

"What on earth is that?" asked Handforth, staring down at the table.

For it seemed to him that the silver was jingling. The light was now so dim that the great table could only be seen vaguely.

"Oh, Ted!" whispered Irene, who was sitting next to Handforth. "Look! The forks and spoons!"

She was clinging to his arm, and Handforth's jaw dropped. Was he going mad, or did he see the silver lifting itself from the table under his very eyes, and jingling about as though in the grip of unseen hands?

The thing was impossible—yet it was happening!

The phenomenon developed. All the silverware slowly and mysteriously rose into the air, floating before the eyes of the guests, and it seemed to be joining itself into a stream, and getting higher, and passing away to one corner of the great room.

"The Elementals!" came a husky whisper from Lady Bowers. "Oh, I've been afraid of this! It is the haunting! The unseen Elementals are at work!"

"Good gad!" gasped Archie, starting to his feet.

And then suddenly, with a crescendo of noise which was utterly terrifying, the silverware joined together in a great jangling stream, and it seemed to the guests that the

sound was accompanied by a vague, hideous laughter, which appeared to come from the atmosphere.

Craaaaaaaaash!

With a tremendous noise all the silver went hurtling against one of the panelled walls. The force of the impact was terrific, and many of the forks and spoons bounced away and clattered in all directions. Two maid-servants who were near by screamed in frantic terror, and one of them swooned. Even one or two of the girl guests were on the point of fainting.

And as suddenly as the lights had gone down, they came up again. The icy blast ceased, and the warmth of the air was now extraordinarily noticeable. Lady Bowers stood at the head of table, her face white.

"Look!" ejaculated Handforth.

He pointed to the floor. There was no illusion about it. In the full flood of the lights the silver could be seen there, in a great untidy heap. And on the panelling there were many scratches and dents, showing the tremendous unseen force which had been applied.

What monstrous thing was it which had lifted the silver and sent it hurtling against the panelling? Every one of those guests felt shivery How could that phenomenon have been a trick? In those few moments the gaiety of the Christmas party had gone.

"You can't get away from it!" came a murmur from Tommy Watson. "That was black magic—and no conjurer in the world could have done it."

Lady Bowers was looking sad as she surveyed her young guests.

"That was no conjuring trick," she agreed. "The dreadful haunting of Forest House has commenced I do not know why, but I can only assume that in some way we have displeased Professor Nerki."

"But, aunt!" protested Archie. "What can Professor Nerki know about it?"

"Professor Nerki has been protecting us from the evil spirits," replied Aunt Eustacia. "What we have just seen is a certain proof that the protection has been withdrawn. Heaven alone knows what may happen now!"

Archie did not know what to say. For once his ready resource failed him.

"But you must go—all of you!" went on Lady Bowers, her eyes alight with fear. "There is danger here, and you must not be subjected to it. You must go. Do not bother about packing——"

"But we're not going to desert you like that, Lady Bowers," interrupted Nipper quickly.

"You will not be deserting me," said Aunt Eustacia. "No danger can come to me. I know that this house is haunted—and until now I believed that it was protected. I am safe. But you—— No, no! You must not stay! If anything should happen——"

She broke off, and she was still very white.

Many of those young guests were ready enough to bolt. They were not ashamed to confess it. Most of them had heard, or read, at one time or another, of old country houses which were mysteriously haunted. Not by ghosts which could be seen, but by invisible sources. They had read of furniture being wrecked, and crockery being broken, of destruction being wrought by unseen hands. Many of these phenomena had been caused by tricksters; but some of the cases of "haunting" had never been solved.

There was something more terrible than a visible ghost in such a haunting as this. For it was unseen, it might break out at any moment without warning. There is nothing quite so terrifying as the invisible and the unknown.

"Look here, lads and lassies, we've got to pull ourselves together," said Archie crisply. "I mean to say, everything seems to be all right now, and——"

He was interrupted by a sound of terrible crashing from the hall, and he caught his breath in. One of the servants flung the door open, and ran, shrieking. All was confusion. There nad been no lowering of the lights this time—not in the dining-hall, at all events. But when some of the schoolboys ran out into the hall, they found the lights dim. Even the great log fire was burning mysteriously low, although the logs themselves were ample. It was as though some spell had passed over the fire, causing the flames to lose their luminosity.

"What's happened?" yelled Handforth, dashing out.

He found Nipper by his side—and Archie, too. They were in the forefront of the guests, and they were just in time to see another astounding manifestation. A heavy oaken table, which stood almost in the middle of the hall, was suddenly whisked into the air. Not a human being was standing within yards of it, and it was swaying from side to side, shaking, and even creaking by the very force of the unseen thing which held it.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Nipper huskily.

Suddenly the table was lifted higher, and with a tremendous swinging movement, as though it had been gripped by an invisible giant, it went hurtling across the hall, to dash with tremendous force against the farther wall.

Craaaash!

So terrific was the force of the contact that the table disintegrated, and fell to the floor in fragments.

CHAPTER 10.

The Guests Decide.

IT is no exaggeration to say that all those schoolboys and schoolgirls were stricken dumb with terror during the few moments that followed the smashing of the heavy table.

Most of them had seen this thing with their own eyes, they had seen no hands had touched the table, and that it had been carried high and sent hurtling against the

wall. True, the lights had been so dim that only the mere shadow of the table had been visible. But now, in the same strange way as the dining-room, the lights recovered their full strength. And there lay the fragments of the table, and that corner of the hall was a mass of debris.

"Oh, what shall we do?" cried one of the girls. "Where can we go?"

"Steady, everybody!" said Nipper, getting a grip on himself with difficulty. "I'm not satisfied——"

"Please, please!" begged Lady Bowers. "Do not waste time, my dear young people! You must fly from this ill-omened house!"

"But, aunt, we can't do that," protested Archie. "We're not going to leave you in the lurch——"

"Oh, my boy, don't you understand?" exclaimed Lady Bowers. "I am safe. It is you I fear for! You must go—just as you are! Do not even bother about your wraps or your coats! Run—run!"

If anything were needed to create panic among the guests, Lady Bowers' attitude supplied that need. Most of the youngsters were ready enough to bolt. Yet her ladyship was in no panic herself, and was not desirous of creating one amongst her guests.

Her concern was for their safety. Nipper knew in a flash that the good lady believed implicitly in the haunting. And she had a dread that when the next manifestation came some of the young people would be injured, or perhaps killed. It was for their own sakes that she was urging them to run.

Even in the midst of this tumult screams and shouts could be heard coming from the domestic quarters. The servants were in a far greater panic than the guests.

"Let's get out of here!" muttered Church. "Come on, everybody! Lady Bowers is right!"

"Look!" cried Doris, her voice rising to a little shriek.

A heavy chair on the other side of the hall had risen into the air; it was banging itself noisily against the wall. A hush fell. The lights became dim as though by magic. Then the chair dashed itself away from the wall and went whizzing through the air, to crash with shattering force against a great picture.

The picture itself fell, and one leg of the chair, breaking away from the framework, struck the staircase, glanced off, and shot diagonally through the air.

Archie heard a slight moan from his aunt, and when he spun round he saw Lady Bowers sinking to the floor. It was at the same moment that some of the young guests made a rush for the front door. One of them managed to get it open, and then the exodus began. They all went running out into the black night.

"I say, hold on!" shouted Archie. "Odds deserters and runaways! Aunt Eustacia has fainted!"

Marjorie heard the words, and she ran across, and, terrified as she was, she bent down to Lady Bowers' side.

"Thanks most frightfully," muttered Archie, joining her.

Nipper was already there, and now he looked up sharply. The lights were once again full, and, magically enough, the log fire was burning clearly—with a sort of super-brilliance.

"Your aunt hasn't fainted, Archie," said Nipper. "The leg of that chair hit her—and there's a nasty wound on the side of her head."

"Good gad!" exclaimed Archie, horrified.

He bent closer. Aunt Eustacia was as white as a sheet. Blood was streaming from an ugly gash just above her left temple. The skin was badly cut, and the blow had been sufficient to cause unconsciousness.

"I don't think it's serious," said Nipper. "The skull isn't fractured—it's only a bad knock, Archie. But your aunt must be put to bed at once."

"Oh, absolutely!" said Archie. "What about sounding the good old S.O.S.? Where are the dashed servants? Rally them up, somebody, for goodness' sake!"

"Yes—fetch some of the maids!" said Nipper. "Handy, old man, round them up, will you? Forget all about this haunting."

Handforth was off like the wind. Only a few of the guests were in the hall now; the others had given way to that dread panic, and were outside, in the snow. But the coldness of the air, and the darkness, had done much to restore them. Now they were uncertain, and they stood out in the night, shivering, watching the glow from the great front door, expecting, every moment, to hear further sounds of destruction.

Handforth came running back after a while, and the expression was eloquent of alarm.

"They've gone!" he panted.

"Gone! The servants?"

"Every one of them!" said Handforth breathlessly. "I found the back door standing wide open, and when I looked out I heard the servants running away, and some of them were being carried. Two of the maids were screaming like mad."

"Panic!" said Nipper grimly. "They've all bolted—they've deserted us. Well, you can't blame them."

"And I looked in the scullery, too," went on Handforth. "There's a terrific pile of crockery on the floor—all smashed up."

"Let's—let's get out!" muttered Watson.

"You don't mean that, Tommy, old man," said Nipper quietly. "How can we get out now?"

"Odds impossibilities!" exclaimed Archie. "You're right, laddie! We can't go. Poor old Aunt Eustacia is knocked out, the servants have gone, and, ghost or no ghost, I'm staying!"

"We shall need some of the girls, too!" said Nipper quickly. "Lady Bowers must be carried upstairs, and she must be put to bed."

"Absolutely!" said Archie, looking round. "Now then, everybody! It's Christmas night,

and things have gone frightfully wrong. But you're not going to desert me, are you?"

There was a silence. Archie stood boldly, fearlessly. He didn't care a jot, then, for all the hauntings in the world. He knew that his aunt was left helpless—and she was laid low.

"I'm calling for volunteers," said Archie deliberately. "There's not a servant in the house, and if we all bolt, Aunt Eustacia will be left helpless—just when she needs care and attention. Good gad! You're not going to walk out on me?"

"Not likely!" said Nipper. "I'm staying, Archie."

"Me, too!" said Handforth quickly. "And you can count on Church and McClure," he added, looking round. "By George! Where are they?"

"They—they ran out, with the others," said Watson. "But I'm staying, Archie. Count on me."

It was rather wonderful.

Most of those boys and girls were terrified—and nobody could blame them for that. For the things which had been happening were unaccountable, inexplicable. The youngsters were brave enough in ordinary circumstances; but the bravest of people lose their heads when they are suddenly brought up against the supernatural. And it really seemed that Forest House was the scene of a terrible and dangerous haunting.

Handforth was out on the steps by now, and, in the light cast from the door, and the windows, he could see the group of boys and girls. And they, by now, had partially recovered.

"Well, what are you going to do?" demanded Handforth truculently. "Are you going to bolt—desert? Are you going to be like the servants?"

"Have the servants run away?" asked somebody.

"All of them—they've cleared right out," said Handforth. "And Lady Bowers is injured. Come on! We need all the help we can get!"

They approached, feeling strangely ashamed of themselves.

"It's Christmas night, and there's no earthly chance of getting substitute servants," continued Handforth. "And after the stories the other servants will take away with them nobody will take on a job in this house. Archie's aunt is in a bad way, and we've got to stand by her. We've got to stand by Archie, too."

Without a word, the boys and girls ran back into the hall. They overcame their horror, their reluctance. There was work for them to do—and they courageously came up to the scratch.

No other manifestations had occurred, and the lights were now burning steadily, brightly. It seemed, indeed, that the old house was to be quiet for the rest of the evening.

Somebody shut the front door, and all those young guests stood there, in the hall, looking pale, but resolute.

"Listen, everybody," said Nipper. "We're up against it. The least we can do is to remain here to-night. Outside, it is snowing thickly, and I doubt if the roads are passable. Even if we could get to a doctor, the doctor might not be able to come. We're shut off here, in the New Forest, in this old house. Whether it's haunted or not doesn't matter. Are we going to stay willingly, or——"

"Yes, yes!"

"We're all staying, Nipper!"

"Rather!"

"Then let us divide ourselves up," said Nipper. "Some of you girls are needed as nurses—others can take charge of the kitchens. You chaps can help a lot, too. We can all do something."

There was a general chorus of agreement; and then, without further ado, half a dozen of the fellows gently lifted Lady Bowers, and she was carried upstairs to her own bedroom. Irene and Marjorie and some of the other girls had flown up first, and had made everything ready. The boys then retired, and they collected together in the hall, and most of them were alert. They were ready to listen at the slightest hint of any unusual sound.

"Well, what about Christmas dinner?" asked Fatty Little. "We haven't even had a bite yet!"

"We'll have dinner, old man," said Nipper. "We're not going to be dished out of our turkey and plum-pudding—ghosts or no ghosts! You had better be chief cook, Fatty."

"Good enough!" said Fatty Little. "Where's the kitchen?"

"Two or three of you others had better constitute yourselves Fatty's assistants," continued Nipper. "And when the girls come down, we'll carry on with the dinner. Some of you had better go along to the dining-hall and collect up all that silver, and set the table again."

But volunteers for this job were few. Handforth led the way, at last, and he grabbed a handful of the silver and looked at it with a glare.

"Rummiest thing I've ever known!" he said. "It's just ordinary silver, as far as I can see. How the dickens did it lift itself off the table and throw itself at the wall? Look at this spoon! Nearly bent double!"

They did not like handling the silver—for they had a dread feeling that it would suddenly jump out of their hands. But they managed to set the table again, and as there was no recurrence of the extraordinary happenings, confidence was somewhat restored.

But it was a strange household now.

Christmas, which had promised to be so jolly, had dramatically changed to a night of fear. Not many of the young guests cared to think of bed-time. The very idea of sleeping in this house—now—scared them afresh. There was no telling what dread manifestations would occur.

Archie was hovering about upstairs, in the wide corridor. He was thinking of his aunt,

of Nerki, and of the warning Nerki had given. There was something mightily queer about all this!

Was it possible that Nerki was a real "seer," and that, by some occult power, he had known of the haunting? Or was he an out-and-out trickster? If the latter were true there was just a possibility that he had engineered these occurrences—— But how? So far as Archie knew there wasn't a magician in the world who could have performed the magic which he and his guests had seen.

His thoughts were interrupted by the opening of his aunt's door. Marjorie came softly out.

"How is she, old girl?" asked Archie, running up.

"She has recovered consciousness, and I don't think the wound on her head is serious," whispered Marjorie. "She wants you, Archie. We had to tell her of what we are doing, and she insists upon seeing you."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie helplessly.

He entered the bed-room, and he found Lady Bowers lying in bed, and a little colour had returned to her cheeks. Her head was expertly bound—for most of the Moor View girls had a good knowledge of first aid.

"I say, aunt, this is a bit frightful," said Archie. "I mean to say, you being whacked like that!"

"I am thankful it was I—and not one of my guests," said Lady Bowers. "Now, Archie, listen to me——"

"But I want you to listen to me, you know," said Archie. "We've got to fetch a doctor, and——"

"No, no, I don't need a doctor," said Aunt Eustacia. "It is only a scalp wound—and a bad bump. I shall be a lot better to-morrow. I want you all to go. At once. Oh, Archie, don't think that I don't appreciate what you are doing. I think you are all very brave, and very good. But you must go now."

"And leave you alone in the house?" asked Archie. "Nothing doing!"

"But I am safe—the Elementals will not interfere with me," said the good lady. "That is what you do not understand, my boy."

"No, aunt, you can't bluff me with that sort of talk!" said Archie firmly. "The Elementals can't hurt you, eh? What about that whack on your head? You were the very one to get hurt—and the rest of us aren't even scratched! So that argument of yours doesn't hold water."

Lady Bowers had nothing to say.

"You are in bed, and you can't do anything," went on Archie triumphantly. "Two of the girls will remain here all night—watching over you, as nurses. The rest of us are going to have our Christmas dinner. We're not going to be dished out of it by a lot of unhealthy ghosts! All the servants have bunked, so we're staying. And that, Aunt Eustacia, is that!"

"If you must stay, you must—for I am helpless to prevent you," said Lady Bowers. "But I am afraid, Archie. You do not know half the horrors of this house——"

"If it's all the same to you, aunt, old thing, we'd rather not hear them," said Archie hurriedly. "Perhaps we shall discover a few later on—but we'll like 'em a lot better if they come as surprises. All we want you to do is to go to sleep.'

He escaped somehow—but he was triumphant. And the first person he met outside in the corridor was Nipper. There was something in Nipper's expression which caught Archie's attention at once. Nipper was looking alert, even excited.

"By Jove! I wish the guv'nor had come!" he said impulsively. "It may not be too late, even now. Perhaps he'll turn up—even to-night."

"Why do you say that, old boy?" asked Archie.

"Because I believe there's trickery at work," said Nipper, lowering his voice. "I haven't said anything to the others yet—but I'm going to. I've been having a look at that smashed furniture, Archie."

"Good gad! What have you discovered?"

"Nothing—for certain," replied Nipper. "But I have found a few mysterious holes in the furniture—and there's just a chance that there might have been wires fixed to it. When the furniture was whirled about, the wires were withdrawn, with the fastenings."

"But that doesn't account for the bally silver," said Archie doubtfully.

"No; but the silver might have been yanked into the air by some other mechanical means," said Nipper. "Anyhow, I'm not satisfied. "This may be a genuine haunting—I'm open-minded—but, on the other hand, it may be a lot of trickery. And we're staying."

Archie felt much better after that little chat with Nipper. Later, during the delayed dinner, which turned out to be an excellent one, after all, Nipper mentioned his suspicions to the guests in general.

But most of them believed he was only saying it to comfort them—and they did not take much notice. They were all expecting further dreadful things to happen.

They were in this snowbound old mansion in the heart of the New Forest, and there was a mystery here which caused their hearts to thud with a very real terror.

But they were plucky; they were standing by Archie Glenthorne and his aunt; and they were determined to unravel the great mystery.

THE END.

What will be the result of the boys' and girls' plucky decision to stay on at Forest House? That there will be further ghostly manifestations from the "Elementals" is pretty certain—but in what shape and form? Don't miss next week's thrill-packed story entitled: The Haunted House!"

Christmas Greetings From The Editor And Mr. E. S. Brooks!

Mr. E. S. Brooks sends Christmas Greetings to all his Chums.

Letters to the Editor should be addressed to NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

Here's a greeting to all readers of my stories from China to Peru, from Iceland to South Africa, from New Zealand to Canada, taking Australia on the way, from Land's End to John O' Groats, and from Donegal to County Cork. Here's wishing you a Happy and Jolly Christmas in these hard times, with a hope that 1933 will see the beginning of renewed prosperity to our fine Old Country, and to all those who live within its rugged shores.

I'm still very much attached to the Good Old Paper, and have thoroughly enjoyed writing my stories during the past year as much as ever. I think I have given most readers just what they want in the Christmas series—quite like old times, eh?

I want to take this opportunity of thanking all manner of loyal readers of varied ages, of both sexes, in all corners of the world, for their friendly and encouraging letters—letters which I treasure, and which make me realise that the world, as somebody once said before, I believe, is quite a small place.

Certain of you old-timers have been writing to me for years, and I could mention a dozen names right off which are practically at my fingertips as I hold my pen; but I don't think I'll mention any names, in case the rest of you think you've been forgotten. But this Christmas I am thinking of cheery chums in Australia and Canada, in British Guiana, and, of course, in every part of our own islands. Perhaps, with the Old Paper containing these Christmas stories of mine, you will think of me, too.

Good luck to you all; good health, too; and once again wishing you the ever-old wish—a Happy Christmas and Prosperous New Year.

The Editor's Turn.

Now that Mr. Brooks has had his word, it is my turn to wish all the readers of the NELSON LEE a Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year.

During the past year we have spent many enjoyable hours reading the Old Paper. I hope we shall continue to derive similar enjoyment from the NELSON LEE in the year to come. It won't be my fault if we don't.

By the time you reach this page you will have finished reading our long complete Christmas story. Good, isn't it? I thought it would go down well with you chaps. But next week's story, which continues the strange adventures of Archie's Christmas guests at Forest House is even better—you can take my word for that! All manner of strange and terrifying adventures come their way, and it is fortunate for them that Nelson Lee, the famous detective turns up.

I won't spoil the story by telling you any more now, save that you will enjoy it as you have never enjoyed a story before.

Before I finish I must give you this piece of news. Mr. Brooks, is, at the moment, engaged upon another sparkling series of stories, featuring Nelson Lee, Nipper and the St. Frank's boys, which will appear in the NELSON LEE in the New Year. That's something to look forward to, eh?

To conclude—again best wishes for Christmas and the New Year, from

YOUR EDITOR.

READERS' PRIZE JOKES

"Hallo, hallo!" shouted the fireman, answering the frantic telephone summons. "Who is it?"

"I wish to say my front garden——"

"This is the FIRE station you've got!"

"Yes. I know. My front garden runs alongside Byson's house, and only to-day I sprinkled some new grass seed on my lawn ——"

"This ain't the gardener's!" roared the fireman.

"I know, I know; but what I want to say is that my garden is my particular pride——"

"What's that got to do with us?"

"Oh, well, the Byson's asked me to tell you that their house is on fire, so don't let your firemen trample——"

(*C. Wand*, 94, *The Avenue, Brondesbury Park, Willesden, N.W.6.—A pocket wallet.*)

Miff: "I've had this car for years, and never had a wreck yet."

Biff: "You mean you've had this wreck for years, and never had a car yet."

(*E. Midgley*, 15, *Stapleton's Road, Shirley, Christchurch, New Zealand.—A grand prize.*)

"Were you pleased with the new school, little boy?" inquired an interested lady.

"No!" said Johnny. "They made me wash my face, and when I got home my dog bit me because he didn't know me."

(*K. J. King*, 60, *Marlboro' Road, Derby.—A penknife.*)

A Rollicking Long Story Of The Popular Chums Of St. Frank's!

COCK O' THE WALK!

Edward Oswald Handforth is elected skipper of the Lower School. But he makes such a hash of things that the juniors are soon in revolt against him. Reggie Pitt concocts a plan to force Handforth to resign by appearing in the guise of Miss Dora Manners, the pretty cousin of Irene Manners, of Moor View School, and tricking Handforth to resign. Handforth falls for the bait, or so it appears to everybody.

The Victim!

"I WAS expecting you, you know," said Handforth, much to Pitt's astonishment. "You're Dora Manners, aren't you?"

Reggie covered his surprise with a clever little laugh of musical delight.

"Oh!" he murmured. "How did you know?"

"Why, Irene rang me up not long ago and told me about you," replied Handforth. "You'll come in, won't you? I ought to escort you back to the Moor View School, but I'd rather like you to see my study first."

Again Handforth was working directly in the enemy's interests. For if he had carried out Irene's expressed wishes, he would have tried to take Reggie Pitt straight off.

As for Reggie, his momentaary fear had vanished. The fact that Irene had rung Handforth up made things better, for he now had an identity. Handforth had mistaken him for Dora, so he would remain Dora.

And he had already planned to beg of Handforth to show him his study—hardly expecting that Handforth would play up to him so admirably.

"I'm not sure I ought to come in!" said Pitt softly. "And can you spare the time?"

"Of course," said Handforth. "I've got heaps of time."

"How wonderful!" said Reggie coyly. "I heard that you were the captain of the Form and that you were always so busy that you couldn't spare a minute for anybody. It must be dreadful having all the cares of the Form on your shoulders. But they're so big, aren't they? And you're so strong—and handsome," he added naively.

"Oh, I say!" murmured Handforth.

By George, he wasn't so sure that Dora wasn't even better than Irene! At least, she seemed to get hold of a chap's character so well! He led Pitt towards Study D in an ecstasy of satisfaction.

They went in, and Reggie took great care to remain where the full light did not fall upon him. And he kept his head partly down, too.

"Not a bad little room," said Handforth.

"Of course, Church and McClure mess it up a good bit, but it's no good trying to make them tidy——"

"Oh!" said Pitt, his voice soft and full of deep concern. "You're not well! Oh, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Not—not well!" said Handforth. "I feel all right, you know. At least—— Well, I suppose I am a bit seedy, but it's nothing."

"Nothing!" echoed Reggie, horrified. "What was it I heard about you? That you were injured in a fight this afternoon? That some rough boys set upon you brutally and cruelly——"

"That's not exactly true!" interrupted Handforth hastily. "Somebody must have told you wrong, Miss—Miss Dora. I had a bit of a scrap, but I'm not blaming anybody——"

"But you're looking so pale—so haggard!" whispered Reggie. "Oh, please sit down—please lie on the couch, and be completely rested. I can see how you must have suffered. You ought to be in bed. You're too ill to be up like this. But that's how all these strong, powerful men go on. They never realise the danger."

"Danger!" repeated Handforth, with a start.

"I do hope you won't suddenly collapse," said Pitt, shaking his head, and looking at Handforth with an expression of acute worry. "Please, please do as I ask, and lie down! Can't you see that I am qualified to know what is best? Oh, let me nurse you! Wouldn't it be wonderful?"

Handforth sat down on the couch, his heart beating rapidly. Somehow, he felt rather bad again. And, after all, it would be rather ripping to be nursed by Irene's pretty cousin!

Deeper and deeper went Handforth into the meshes!

The Closing of the Net.

WITH Handforth sprawling on the couch, and with the growing conviction that he was thoroughly unwell, he was now practically at Reggie Pitt's mercy. Handy had fallen completely under the spell of his visitor's charm—and, when Reggie liked, he could be remarkably fascinating.

He sat with his back to the electric light, so that his face was in shadow. From Handforth's position, his visitor's face and head were in a kind of halo, and he could just see the pretty face, and the soft curls, falling over the ears. And Reggie was looking at him, too, with anxiety in those dark, expressive eyes of his. With their prepared lashes, they now looked uncannily feminine.

"You must give up all idea of moving again to-night," said Reggie softly. "I didn't realise how unwell you were——"

"Oh, but I've got to take you to the Moor View School!" said Handforth, sitting up with a start. "I told Irene——"

"You mustn't, Ted!" interrupted Reggie. "You don't mind me calling you Ted, do you— I think it's such a wonderful name, and it seems to fit you so beautifully."

"I say!" murmured Handforth huskily.

"Are you sure that your duties are not too hard for you?" went on Reggie, his voice quivering with anxiety. "It is so very easy to overdo it! And the duties of a Form captain are so exacting, aren't they? You'll let me guide you, won't you?"

"Well, I'd like to, but I'm not ill!" said Handforth uncomfortably. "There's nothing the matter with me, Miss Dora. I've only had a nasty biff, you know. And then there was that stuff I had for tea. Some squiffy meat paste that McClure gave me. I've had rummy pains ever since then. Not that I'm really ill!" he repeated firmly. "Let's be going——"

"No!" said Reggie quickly. "Please, please!"

This piece of information was an unexpected gift.

"Now I can understand it!" said Reggie, shaking his head. "Under no circumstances must you move. And you mustn't do any work—you mustn't think of working. You ought to relieve yourself of all responsibilities at once. Oh, won't you be guided by me? Don't you see my uniform? Won't you, please?"

His voice was so pleading, that Handforth fairly melted.

"Yes, of course!" he said huskily. "If—if you really think so——"

"It's so important!" went on Reggie, seizing the advantage. "How dreadful it would be if you collapsed. Imagine the horror of St. Frank's if you overworked yourself, and had to be taken away to a nursing home."

"Nursing home!" repeated Handforth faintly.

"Don't you realise the danger?" asked Pitt, his voice more concerned than ever. "You are big and strong, and you grapple with these captaincy duties so bravely that you don't appreciate the peril."

"My hat!" breathed Handforth.

"You are in pain even now," declared Reggie. "Tell me the truth, Ted! Please be quite frank. You're in pain, aren't you?"

"Yes!" admitted Handforth truthfully.

"I knew it!" said his visitor, with a shake of fluffy curls. "Do you think I can't see the haggard lines?"

"The haggard lines!" panted Handforth.

"The careworn expression, and the bloodshot eyes!" went on Pitt tensely. "What is going to happen if you keep on? The strongest men collapse if they don't heed the warning in time! In your determination to carry on with your duties, you are prepared to sacrifice your own health!"

"Great corks!" murmured Handforth, aghast. "You—you think I—I might crumple up, or something?"

"Crumple up!" said Pitt. "What would all your friends say if you were carried away in an ambulance? A day longer, perhaps—with your stern will, perhaps even a week.

And then, suddenly, without any warning—— Oh, Ted! You won't let it come to that, will you?"

Handforth, spoofed completely, was feeling dreadful. His real pain was supplemented by an imaginary assortment of ills. She ought to know! Wasn't she a nurse? And wasn't she Irene's cousin?

"You—you think I ought to ease up a bit?" he asked hoarsely.

"It'll be no good at all if you only ease up," replied Pitt, his voice soft and thrilling. "You must stop altogether. Oh, I know how terrible it will be for the Form—how dreadfully it will miss you! But won't they be willing to make a little sacrifice for your sake?"

"They're a hard lot to deal with!" said Handforth dubiously.

"But if you resign, they——"

"Resign!" said Handforth thickly. "No! No, I can't do that! They've been trying to make me—— I—I mean——"

"They've been trying to make you promise to stick to your duties?" asked Pitt softly. "I don't wonder at it! How proud they must be of you! But please, please let me advise you. Even the strongest brains are liable to crack under such terrible stress!"

"Crack!" gasped Handforth.

"And once they crack, what remains?" asked Pitt, his voice trembling with emotion. "What remains? The asylum!"

"Oh, crumbs!" moaned Handforth.

"And then, dreary years with other lunatics," said Pitt, pressing his advantage. "Oh, Ted, you mustn't let it come to that! You must act now! You must be brave and strong!"

"But you just told me to——"

"Ah, don't you realise that in order to be cured, you must be strong-willed and resolute?" asked Reggie. "You are weak now, and think how the whole Remove will rejoice if you show the bold spirit of self-sacrifice, and resign the captaincy!"

"They'll rejoice all right!" admitted Handforth. "But—but I don't think they're quite the chaps you believe——"

"We mustn't talk about them—we must talk about you!" interrupted Pitt hastily. "Look at you now! A wreck of your real self! And what happens to wreckage if it is not towed into harbour?"

"Wreckage!" said Handforth, looking down at himself in horror.

"If it isn't towed into harbour, and cared for, and repaired—built up strongly again—it drifts and drifts," said Reggie impressively. "It drifts into the shoals, and crashes upon the rocks, and becomes destroyed. Please, Ted! For my sake! For Irene's sake! For the sake of the whole Remove!"

"You—you really think it would be best?" asked Handforth, a sudden light coming into his eyes.

"Oh, I know it—I know it!" murmured Pitt, bending over him, so that his nostrils were filled with the fragrance of parma violet—borrowed for the occasion from Mrs. Beverley Stokes' supply. "Won't you promise me, Ted? Must I ask you in vain?"

Handforth's brain was reeling slightly.

"But—but they'll chip me!" he breathed feebly, in a last struggle.

"Oh, they won't be so cold and cruel!" said Pitt, his voice full of scorn. "They wouldn't be so cold and callous. When I thing of that brain of yours—when I think of the possibility that it might suddenly snap!" He covered his face with his hands. "And Irene?" he whispered. "Don't you think that she cares? Don't you think that she is worried over your terrible cares as captain? Oh, Ted, I want you to promise!"

Handforth's last atom of strength vanished.

"All right!" he muttered. "After all, it's not worth it! They don't appreciate me—it'll serve 'em right to leave 'em in the lurch!"

"Do people ever appreciate true value?" asked Pitt bitterly.

"I'll dish them all by resigning!" said Handforth, with sudden emphasis. "That'll teach them a lesson they'll never forget! I'll go to the Common-room and tell them!"

"Oh, how good you are!" murmured Pitt. "No, no!" he added, in alarm. "You mustn't move yet! You mustn't dream of disturbing yourself! Wait at least five minutes, so that you can compose your shattered nerves."

"Yes, I suppose I'd better!" said Handforth faintly.

"I will go back to Irene, and gladden her with this wonderful piece of news," continued Reggie, tiptoeing softly to the door. "You will promise me that you will go to the Common-room in five minutes?"

"Yes, I promise!" murmured Handforth, in a listless voice.

"Thank you, Ted—thank you so much!" said Pitt happily.

He slipped out of the study, and those last few words of his had come from his very heart. Never had he said anything truer!

In three seconds he had nipped into the next study, which was normally occupied by Tregellis-West and Watson. But now there were about half a dozen fellows there, all eager and anxious.

"Well?" went up a breathless chorus.

"He's resigning!" whispered Pitt. "It worked like a dream!"

"Great Scott!" breathed Fullwood. "He's promised?"

"Absolutely!" grinned Reggie. "I'll tell you all about it later—he's coming to the Common-room with the great news in five minutes, so we shall have to get a hustle on."

Everything was ready, and in a very brief space of time, Pitt had shed his feminine attire, and he became himself again. But very little was said there, since Handforth might hear the talk through the wall, and become suspicious.

Swiftly, they all sped to the Common-room.

"It's worked—it's worked!" shouted Jack Grey excitedly. "Reggie's done the trick, and Handforth's going to resign."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Reggie!"

"By jingo, he's a magician!"

"If you'll make less noise, and talk sense, we shall all be pleased!" said Reggie Pitt tartly. "Handy hasn't resigned yet, so don't cackle before the egg's laid!"

"There's Many A Slip 'Twixt The Cup And The Lip, as Billy Nation might put it," grinned Fullwood.

"I'm glad you realise it," said Reggie. "So don't make too much noise—don't give him any warning. But as soon as he has officially resigned, we shall be safe. We've just got to wait now."

And the Remove waited, expectant and happily excited.

Explanations Needed!

IRENE MANNERS tossed her pretty curls.

"Oh, it's too bad!" she said indignantly. "The tea's getting stewed, and the toast will soon be hard, and boiled eggs are never much good if they've left until they're lukewarm!"

"It's just like Ted!" said Doris Berkeley. "This is what comes of leaving things to him! Did he say he'd bring Dora straight along?"

"Of course, he did!" said Irene. "I don't believe it's his fault at all!"

"You wouldn't!" laughed Winnie Pitt.

They were in Irene's study, and all the preparations for tea had been completed. But Dora had not returned, and there was no sign of Handforth. And they had been expected a full quarter of an hour since.

The girls naturally assumed that Dora had been delayed.

"I warned him, too," said Irene, with a frown. "I particularly asked him to take care of Dora as soon as she arrived. Perhaps she was delayed in the village——"

"Here they come!" cried Mary suddenly.

Steps had sounded in the passage, but before anybody could open the door, it flew back, and a dishevelled figure entered. All the girls stared, horrified, and cried out with alarm.

"Dora!" exclaimed Irene, in a strange voice.

Dora had entered, and had slammed the door behind her. She now stood with her back to it. There was a hunted look in her eyes. She was untidy. her hat had gone, and her smart uniform was sadly soiled

"Thank goodness!" she panted. "I got in without being spotted!"

"But what's happened?" shouted all the girls in one voice.

"Oh, it was dreadful!" said Dora weakly.

She sank into a chair, and Doris quickly poured out a cup of tea, and made her sip some, and she gradually recovered. The other girls crowded round her, amazed and mystified.

"I—I got lost!" said Dora, at last. "There was somebody coming along the lane, so I dodged through a gap and ran. Then I got into a kind of wood, or something, and I must have gone wrong in the dusk, because I came out on the road miles away. I've been all this time getting back!"

"But where's Ted?" asked Irene blankly.

Dora looked at the girls with flashing eyes.

"Don't mention that terrible boy to me!" she said huskily. "Oh, what a cad!"

"Dora!" cried Irene.

"It's true!" insisted Dora. "He's either mad, or he's a hooligan! A tramp would have treated me better than he did! Savages of the jungle would have shown me more respect! Oh, Renie, I've had a perfectly terrible time!"

She leaned back for a moment, and then rose to her feet.

"I must go and change!" she said hurriedly.

"Yes, but——"

"I must!" she insisted. "Just look at me!"

She hurried upstairs, and all the other girls hurried up with her. They couldn't wait until she had changed before hearing her story. And so, in Dora's bed-room, she told them the extraordinary tale.

"He insulted me every minute!" she concluded indignantly. "From first to last, he was a perfect beast! He barked at me, and he demanded to know my name as though I were a common little urchin, and he told me not to tell fibs, and—and—— Oh, I can't remember half of it!"

"And Ted did this?" asked Irene incredulously. "Dora, I can't believe it! Are you sure it was Ted?"

"Of course, I'm sure——"

"It might have been that cad, Forrest," went on Irene quickly. "Perhaps he was posing as Ted! It's just the kind of caddish thing he would do. What was he like?"

Dora gave such an accurate description that Irene sighed.

"That's Ted, all right!" she admitted. "There aren't two boys at St. Frank's like that. But I can't understand it, Dora! Ted's always so gallant."

"Gallant!" said Dora bitterly. "He's a—

a brute! I hadn't been there three minutes before he tried to pull my hat off, and he disbelieved everything I told him—he even said I was talking bunkum! And he threatened to black my eyes, and punch me on the ears!"

"It—it sounds impossible!" said Doris soberly. "We know that Ted is a rough and ready sort of chap, and he's always a gentleman!"

"A gentleman!" cried Dora. "I tell you he's a cad! Oh, I go all hot and cold when I think of it!"

"What did he do?" they asked breathlessly.

"He took up a jam-tart and flung it into my face!" said Dora, her voice low with anger. "Renie, are you serious when you tell me that you're friendly with this terrible boy?"

While the other girls talked with wild excitement, Irene remained cool.

"We're going to St. Frank's!" she said grimly.

"I wouldn't go there again if you paid me a million pounds!" said Dora.

"You'll go again for nothing!" declared Irene. "There's something wrong, Dora. All this is too ridiculous!"

"But—but don't you believe me?" asked Dora, aghast.

"You silly, I believe everything," replied Irene. "But, at the same time, it's too ridiculous for words! There must be some awful mistake about it. You say that you went to St. Frank's first—before going to the village?"

"I haven't been to the village at all!"

"And you went straight to St. Frank's from here?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, there's proof of it!" said Irene triumphantly.

"Proof of what?"

"Proof that there's something wrong," nodded Irene. "When I rang Ted up, you must have left by then—and he didn't seem to know anything of your having been there, and he promised to meet you, and bring you here, so you can see that there's something very peculiar about it. We've just got to go to St. Frank's, to straighten it out."

"I agree," said Doris, nodding. "We can't leave a thing like this as it stands, you girls. And we all know that Handforth wouldn't act like that if he was sane."

And Dora, under the pressure of her companions—and with the knowledge that she would be provided with a strong escort—agreed to go back.

And in the meantime, another step in the sequence of events was taking place at St. Frank's. Church and McClure had got back with the medicine, and they hurried into the Ancient House in a rather peevish frame of mind.

"Goodness knows what's been happening while we've been away," Church was saying. "These chemists ought to be boiled! Fancy keeping us waiting all that time while they made this up!"

He was holding a bottle, and he eyed it aggressively.

"They always play those tricks," said McClure. "I suppose they shove the stuff in a bottle in two ticks, and then keep you waiting for half an hour to make you think it's a marvellous concoction. Besides, they can charge more if they keep you waiting!"

They hastened to study D, and softly entered.

Handforth was stretched on the couch, his eyes were closed, and there was an expression of contentment on his rugged features. As a matter of fact, he was on the point of going off to the Common-room to make his vital announcement, and he had come to the conclusion that the charming Dora was right. The Remove wasn't worth bothering about! And if there was any risk of brain cracking, or his general health petering out——

"Hallo!" he murmured, opening his eyes. "Back, then?"

"Yes," said Church, eyeing his leader cautiously. "How do you feel, Handy? Pains any worse? Any more symptoms?"

"I'm ill!" said Handforth sadly. "I'm a broken man!"

"Well, take some of this medicine——"

"I'm going to resign the captaincy," said Handforth steadily.

It was only by the merest fluke that Church saved the medicine from crashing to the floor.

"You're going to resign?" he gasped, with mingled amazement and joy.

"Yes, Dora pointed out that it was my duty."

"Dora?" said McClure, with a start.

"Irene's cousin," murmured Edward Oswald dreamily.

"But—but——"

Church and McClure exchanged amazed glances.

"But we warned you, Handy!" breathed Church. "We told you there was a spoof ——"

"Oh, that?" said Handforth, with a faint grin. "You don't suppose I was fooled, do you? I soon sent the fathead off about his business! The real Dora came to see me, and she's persuaded me to resign. She thinks it's better. And she's right. So I'm just going off to the Common-room to announce it."

"Oh!" said Church and McClure.

Any other words were beyond them. They were deeply suspicious. They felt that strange things had been happening during their absence. But Handforth was going to resign! He had made up his mind!

Outwardly, Church and McClure were grave—inwardly, they were joyful!

The Magical Elixir!

HANDFORTH was still looking rather dreamy.

"Yes," he said, "I'm going to resign—and dish everybody! They'll appreciate me after I'm out of the captaincy.

But what's the good of going on at the expense of my health? What's the good of wrecking my life for the sake of these thankless beggars?"

"Not a bit!" said Church stoutly. "They don't deserve it!"

"They never did!" snorted McClure. "All your work—all your boundless energy—wasted on the Remove! It'll be a lot better to let them get along without you, old man."

"Yes, Dora convinced me on that point," said Handforth. "A jolly ripping girl, my lads! How can she help being, seeing that she's Irene's cousin?"

"No, of course not," agreed Church. "And she came to see you?"

"Yes—she's only been gone a minute or two," said Handforth carelessly. "It's a funny thing you didn't meet her. A jolly nice girl—a regular ripper. All over sympathy, and full of concern. Different from you chaps!"

"Well, I like that!" said McClure indignantly. "After we've been messing about at the chemist's for half an hour or more! You look pretty groggy, old man. You'd better take a dose of this physic."

Handforth raised a feeble hand.

"I don't want any physic!" he retorted.

"Don't want it?"

"No!"

"After we've specially got it for you?"

"No!"

"But, look here——"

"I only want rest!" said Handforth huskily. "That's what Dora told me—and she's right. I've been overworking myself—I've been straining my brain. And if I don't stop, I shall go cracked!"

"Yes, you'd better be careful," admitted McClure. "It wouldn't take much!"

"What do you mean—it wouldn't take much!"

"In your present state, I mean!" said Mac hastily.

"By George, I admit it!" murmured Handforth. "Yes, I'm a broken man!"

"Then have a go at this physic—it'll mend you!" said Church temptingly.

"Take the beastly stuff away," commanded the leader of Study D. "I'm going straight to the Common-room, and—— Hi! What are you doing with that bottle, Church?" he added curtly.

Church had just slung it into the waste paper-basket.

"The stuff's no good to Mac and I!" he said tartly. "We haven't got ptomaine poisoning?"

Handforth had a sudden spasm, and winced.

"My hat! I'd forgotten that!" he said weakly. "Here, gimme a dose! Perhaps I'd better have some, after all! Did the chemist tell you that this is especially for ptomaine poisoning?"

"We explained your symptoms, and he gave us this," replied Church.

Handforth took the bottle, and uncorked it. He sniffed.

"H'm! Smells pretty beastly!" he said. "But I'll chance it!"

He took a long swig, deeming it quite unnecessary to ascertain the correct dose. Then he spluttered, gasped, and tears started to his eyes. He opened his mouth, and took in a huge breath.

"Phew!" he breathed. "My hat! It's jolly powerful!"

He set the bottle down, and gulped. Then he seized the milk jug, and swallowed its contents.

"I can feel the giddy stuff working its way right down!" he said, holding his waistcoat. "Crumbs! Talk about elixir! By George! I'm a new man already! I'm repaired!"

"You mustn't be too sure!"

"Who ought to know whether I'm repaired or not, Walter Church!" demanded Handforth aggressively. "That chemist deserves a medal! My tummy feels hot and robust again! In fact, I'm not so jolly sure that I need to resign now! Why should I resign if I'm well?"

Church wondered what freak of madness had possessed him. Why hadn't he thrown that bottle into the fire, instead of into the waste paper-basket? The prospect of Handforth resigning had been so alluring that Church and McClure had enjoyed a brief spell of supreme happiness. And now it was to be shattered!

"But, Handy, you can't expect to be cured in one minute!" urged McClure. "It's only a false alarm, I expect. It's rest you want—you said it yourself. Dora says that you've got to resign, so you've got to!"

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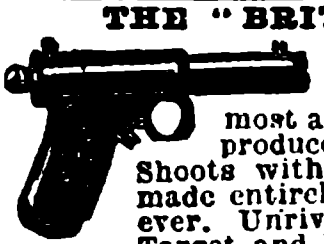

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Handforth glared at them.

"Do you want me to resign?" he demanded.

"Well, I mean—— That is—— Duty, you know!" said Church feebly.

"That's settled it!" declared Handforth. "I'm feeling so much better that I've changed my mind! Resign, eh? Huh! Not likely! That medicine's put me right, and I'm as fit as a fiddle! In fact, I'll take another dose, just to make sure."

But Church was staring at the bottle in horror.

"Great guns!" he gasped. "Look—look there!"

"Look what it says on the label!" panted Church. "'Not to be taken'!"

"'For external use only'!" shouted McClure, aghast.

"What?" hooted Handforth wildly.

He grabbed the bottle, and the fatal words were there, sure enough! And he had swallowed about a quarter of it!

"We told the chemist you'd had a biff in the tummy, so he probably made up an embrocation!" said Church desperately. "No wonder the stuff was strong! That is awful, Handy—it's serious——"

"I'm in awful agony!" moaned Handforth, collapsing into a chair.

His chums flashed a glance at one another. Here was a chance! And they proceeded to point out that he was looking awful, that he couldn't possibly dream of changing his mind about resigning. For the sake of his health, it was necessary to spare himself from all troubles and worries.

"What a life!" muttered Handforth dismally. "First you try to poison me with potted meat, and then you try to kill me with this awful stuff! And you call yourselves my pals!"

"It's all right—we don't bear you malice," said Church. "They're waiting for you in the Common-room, or somewhere, I expect. Don't forget what you promised Dora."

"You've got to resign, and climb slowly back to health!" said McClure. "Come on, old chap, we'll help you along."

And, seizing his arms, they led him firmly out of the study. They weren't particularly worried about the medicine. If it was only embrocation it wouldn't do much damage, even if it had been taken internally. Besides, after that potted meat, it was obvious that Handforth could swallow anything.

He was a forlorn figure as he went down the corridor, staggering along between his chums.

"Yes, I'll resign!" he said, in a hollow voice. "It's the only way! I'll be strong—I'll be stern—and leave the giddy Form to fend for itself!"

Within twelve seconds these words were being repeated in the Common-room—a scout, secreted in the lobby, having heard the joyful pronouncement. And the Remove, which had begun to grow a little anxious at the delay, gave a great sigh of relief, and waited.

Handforth was coming—and once he had officially resigned, the tension would be over. The Remove had already planned that it would give one big yell, and then blandly acquaint him with the facts. Having resigned, he couldn't back out—for when a Form skipper at St. Frank's officially resigned, he could only regain the captaincy by being re-elected. That was an unwritten law. And Handforth had about as much chance of being re-elected as a snowstorm on the Equator!

He could rave, and he could roar, but it wouldn't make any difference. All the Form needed was that resignation—and it was on its way!

But as Handforth & Co. entered the lobby from the Remove passage, the main doorway became filled with girlish figures.

Irene & Co. had arrived—on business!

Something Like an Eye-opener!

IRENE MANNERS was the first in, and she gave a hail.

"Oh, good!" she exclaimed. "Ted's here!"

Handforth came to a halt, and his weakness dropped from him like a cloak. In fact, his weakness had been performing this trick, on and off, throughout the evening.

"Oh, my hat!" he ejaculated. "Leggo my arms, you fatheads!" he added fiercely. "Hallo, Irene! Hallo, you girls! Didn't expect you——"

"Is this the boy?" asked Irene steadily.

Her cousin, who had been pushed forward by the others, recoiled.

"Yes!" she said hotly.

Handforth was looking at her with indignant amazement.

"You here again?" he said warmly. "Look here, Irene, you mustn't let that chap fool you! I kicked him out once——"

"There you are!" cried Dora. "He's admitted it!"

"But he called you a 'chap'!" ejaculated Irene in amazement. "And he said 'him'! Ted, what are you talking about?"

Handforth gave a snort.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said. "Fancy you being deceived! Girls, too! All you girls being spoofed by one of our chaps in disguise!"

The Moor View girls were frankly stupefied.

"Say that again!" said Doris steadily. "I'm not sure whether I heard it right. One of your chaps in disguise? Are you trying to tell us that she's not a girl?"

"Of course he's not a girl!" laughed Handforth.

"He's not!" breathed Irene. "But—but ——"

"Well, I should have thought that girls ought to know their own giddy sex!" said Handforth tartly. "This is one of our chaps! He came to my study about an hour ago and tried to kid me that he was your cousin! I told him a few things, chucked a jam tart——"

Church and McClure reeled.

"Handy!" they gurgled, in horror.

Irene's face had cleared.

"I knew there would be an explanation," she said happily. "I knew Ted wouldn't deliberately act like that, Dora. Don't you understand? He thought you were just trying to fool him—he thought you were a boy dressed up as a girl!"

"Oh, he can't be such a fool as that!" said Dora, her incredulity making her forget that Handforth could hear. "Still, it explains——"

Handforth was standing there, his jaw slowly gaping.

"Ted, let me introduce my cousin, Dora," said Irene sweetly. "I think you must have made a mistake. She is a girl—really and truly!"

"I tell you it's one of our——" Handforth paused, and something in his head seemed to burst. He stood there, his face flushing until it was fiery red. His eyes were wide open, and his expression was one of untold dismay.

"She's a real girl?" he blurted out.

"I've always thought so!" said Dora gently.

"But—but——" Handforth broke off, clutched at his hair, and gulped. "But—but I thought—— Oh, help! And I spoke to her——"

Again he paused, unable to continue.

He was picturing that earlier meeting. The things he had said—the way he had clutched at her hair! No wonder her wig hadn't come off! The way he had flung that jam tart——

Handforth closed his eyes to shut out the dreadful sight. And he had done this—he had acted in this way—to a real girl! To Irene's cousin! He trembled from head to foot as the full enormity of his ghastly blunder came home to him. He looked round in an agony of despair. Many times he had felt that he would like the ground to open up and swallow him, but just now he wanted to get right off on to another planet!

"How could you have made such a mistake?" asked Irene softly.

She was genuinely sorry for her boy-chum. His distress was so acute—his agony so apparent— that all the girls were ready to forgive him on the spot. Even Dora, who had suffered the humiliation, melted. One look at him was enough to convince her that he was thunderstruck.

"I—I think perhaps it was our fault," faltered Church. "We'd just told him that the chaps were getting up a spoof against him—that somebody was dressing up as a girl in a nurse's uniform, and then your cousin came in."

"We thought she looked rather marvellous for a fake!" breathed McClure. "And I'm afraid we were awfully rude, too! I say, we're sorry——"

"I never dreamed!" panted Handforth. "I just took it for granted that—that you—— Oh, what the dickens shall I do?"

"So these fellows told you that a fake girl was coming, dressed up as a nurse?" asked Irene. "And then Dora blew in?"

"Yes," muttered Handforth hoarsely.

"Oh, well, in that case you've had a certain amount of excuse," said Doris. "But you must have been a bit blind, Ted! How could any chap disguise himself so cleverly as that? You see, Dora, the poor old scout made a ghastly mistake, and thought you were a boy!"

"I'm not sure that it's much of a compliment!" said Dora stiffly.

"Oh, I don't know what the dickens to say!" groaned Handforth, with misery. "I'm terribly sorry—I apologise like the dickens! But that doesn't do much good, does it? And the way I mauled you about—— And that jam tart! Oh, I say, you'll never forgive me! I don't deserve to be forgiven!" he added fiercely. "I bet you'll never speak to me again, Irene!"

He turned away, utterly crestfallen, and now his face had gone pale with mortification. His mind couldn't grasp the full truth. It was altogether too appalling.

"That's all right!" said Dora, going forward, and smiling at him. "Of course I forgive you."

"You do?" panted Handforth amazedly.

"Yes!"

"After—after all I did?"

"But you didn't do it knowingly," said Dora gently. "Please don't look so upset. This has explained everything, and I'm not a bit cross. Let's forget all about it!"

"Good old Dora!" murmured Irene. "Ted's one of the best when you know him—but he's so jolly impulsive!"

"And he's got such a habit of blundering!" chuckled Dora.

Handforth was slowly recovering.

"I apologise——" he began.

"No, I've forgotten all about it," laughed Dora. "In fact, now that I come to think of it, it was really funny! No wonder you treated me so roughly! Oh, girls, what a scream!"

"Poor old Ted!" chuckled Irene. "Never mind—it's all over now!"

"I don't deserve it!" muttered Handforth miserably.

Church tugged at his sleeve.

"I can't understand it, Handy!" he whispered. "Didn't you tell us that Dora had been in Study D, and that she had persuaded you to resign?"

Handforth looked at him dully.

"Dora?" he said, a dawning of the full truth flickering in his mind.

And then, abruptly, he gave a wild whoop, and leapt up towards the ceiling. The girls were so surprised that they backed away.

"I've been spoofed!" hooted Handforth wildly.

"That's what I thought!" nodded Church. "You took the real girl for the fake, and you took the fake girl for the real one! You've been pretty busy, Handy!"

"And this is what happens when we leave him!" said McClure indignantly.

"That—that second one was the trickster!" said Handforth, his voice unsteady with emotion. "It was one of the chaps! And—and I swallowed his yarn whole! I—I believed—— Yes, by George, and I promised to resign!"

He looked round with a fierce light in his eyes. His jaw was projected, and there was battle in every inch of him. But he didn't forget the girls. His full strength had returned—his eyes were opened, and he knew exactly what to do.

"Thank goodness you came in just now!" he said fervently. "Another minute, I should have been in the Common-room, and I should have resigned! It's the one piece of luck I've had this evening!"

"But I don't understand," said Irene curiously.

"It's a plot," said Handforth tensely. "It's all a plot to make me resign from the captaincy. Don't you see? It nearly succeeded, too, and they're waiting for me to go in and fall into their hands!"

"Oh, you won't let them triumph, will you?" asked Dora.

"No jolly fear!" vowed Handforth. "Thanks awfully for being so jolly decent about it all! I want you to excuse me now! I've got some important work to do—good-bye!"

(***Further chapters of this Rollicking long School story are included in next week's fine issue of the Nelson Lee.***)

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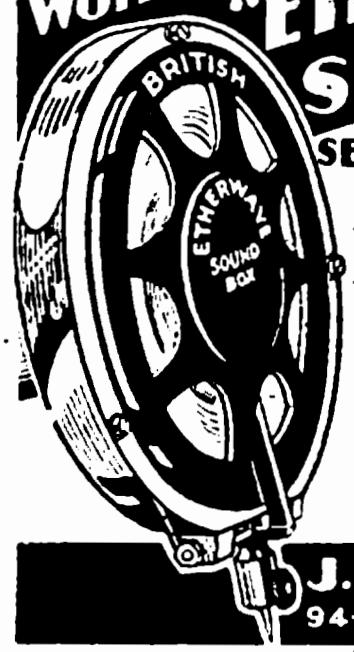

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