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LEE AND THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S, INSIDE!

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The
**HAUNTED
HOUSE!**



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New Series No. 153.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

December 24th, 1932.

THE HAUNTED



CHAPTER 1.

The Snow-bound Christmas Party.

ARCHIBALD WINSTON DEREK GLENTHORNE, elegant in immaculate evening-dress, beamed upon his guests. It was Christmas night, and the drawing-room at Forest House was aglow with electric lights, and the great log fire

was burning merrily. A big radio set was giving forth tuneful dance music.

"Well, I mean to say, everything is cheery and bright, what?" asked Archie happily.

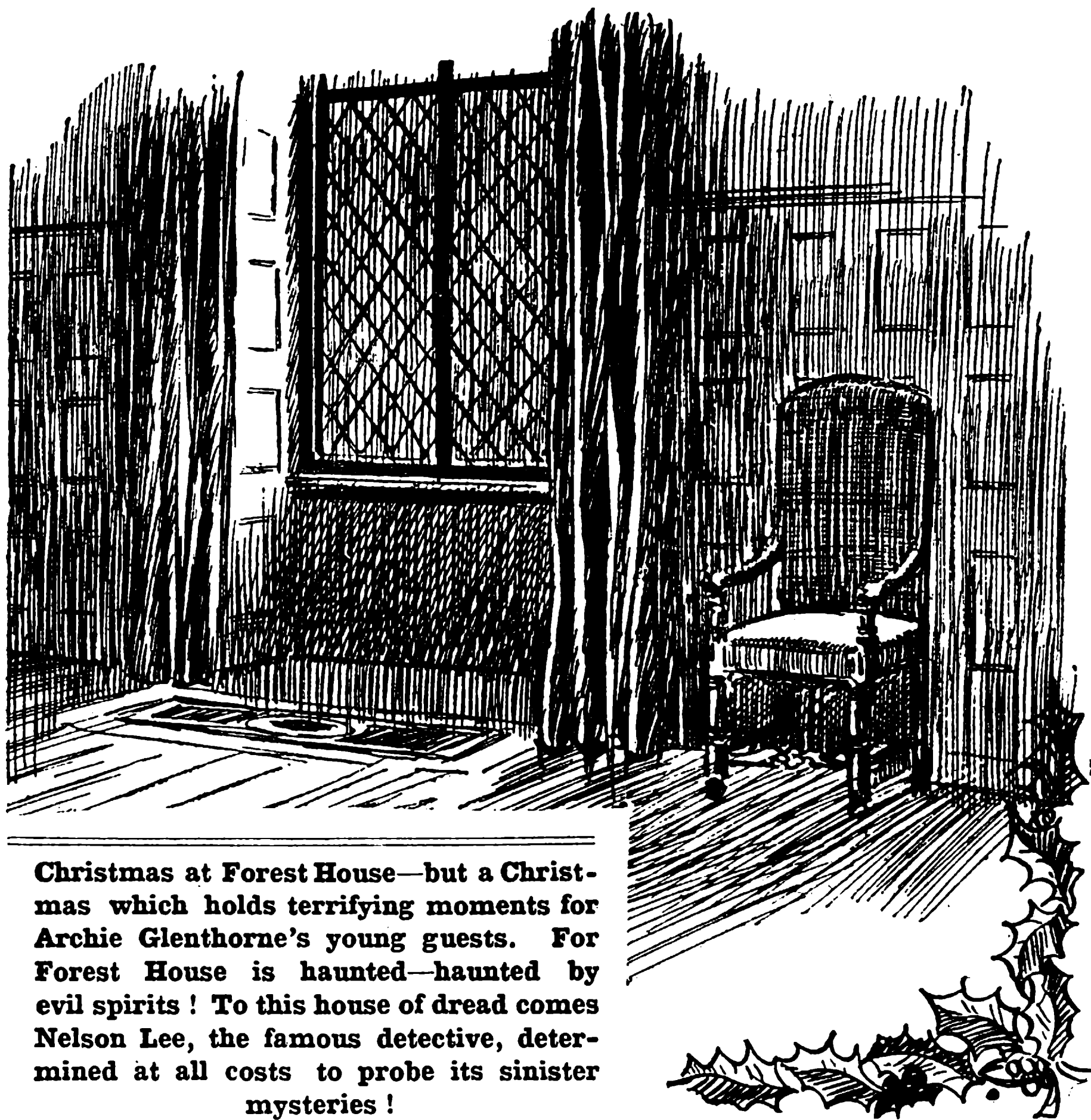
"Rather!" said Handforth. "What about another dance, Irene? This one's a waltz, isn't it?"

Irene Manners smiled, and soon she and the burly Edward Oswald were waltzing round the room with other couples.

—Nelson Lee, Nipper, The Boys Of St. Frank's, And The Girls Of Moor View School!

HOUSE!

By
**EDWY SEARLES
BROOKS**



Christmas at Forest House—but a Christmas which holds terrifying moments for Archie Glenthorne's young guests. For Forest House is haunted—haunted by evil spirits! To this house of dread comes Nelson Lee, the famous detective, determined at all costs to probe its sinister mysteries!

On the face of it the party was happy. Yet there was a certain strained look on most of the faces of these young people. They seemed to be expectant—half-terrified of something grim happening, to wreck the happiness of the party.

All these St. Frank's boys and Moor View girls were not really Archie Glenthorne's guests, but the guests of Lady Eustacia Bowers—Archie's aunt. Forest House was a fine old English mansion in the very heart of the New Forest.

Some of the gaiety usual in Christmas

parties was lacking, no doubt, because the hostess was upstairs, injured; and two of the guests were acting as nurses. Lady Bowers was suffering from a nasty blow on the head, which had caused slight concussion and a lacerated scalp.

It was known to the guests, moreover, that not a single servant remained under this roof. The boys and girls had the entire mansion to themselves—and they would not be dancing and making merry now, only Lady Bowers had expressed a keen wish that they should carry on. She would have

preferred them to leave the house altogether; but since they insisted upon remaining, she wanted them to disregard her own indisposition.

But the strained look on the faces of the guests was not entirely due to these circumstances. There was something else—something far more harrowing.

"Enjoying yourself, Renie?" asked Handforth, as he and his partner danced.

"No!" replied Irene Manners firmly.

"Oh, I say——"

"What's the good of pretending, Ted?" asked the girl, her blue eyes full of concern. "We're keeping up the party, I know, but none of us are enjoying the music or the dancing. All our nerves are on edge—and you know it. Why not be open about it?"

"I suppose you're right," admitted Handforth reluctantly. "Things are queer, aren't they? We don't know what's going to happen next."

Even as he said the words, the dance came to an end; the music had ceased, and there was a brief pause. The radio was silent.

It was during this brief silence that everybody ceased speaking. They did not know why, but when the music stopped, they generally stopped talking, too—and, although they tried to conceal the fact, they were all listening. Listening for—they knew not what. This had happened several times, but another dance had started, and the party had carried on.

But now there were startled expressions, and two of the girls, at least, gave tiny little shrieks of preliminary terror.

"I heard something!" whispered Doris Berkeley.

"It's nothing," said Reggie Pitt, of the St. Frank's Remove. "We're all a bit jumpy, and——"

"Wait a minute!" said Nipper, interrupting. "There's somebody outside—out on the terrace."

Crunch—crunch—crunch!

There came to the ears of the boys and girls the sound of measured footsteps outside the great French windows. The snow out there was frozen, but who could be walking round the house at such an hour—on Christmas night?

"Oh!" murmured Irene, clinging more tightly to Handforth.

Strange things had happened this evening—or the young people would not have been startled by that sound—which, after all, was prosaic enough. But they knew that all the servants had departed, and——

"Look!" cried Violet Watson, her voice rising with shrill alarm.

The curtains were not drawn completely over one of the windows; and for a flash a figure was seen—a white, ghostly figure, flitting outside in the darkness.

"This is madness!" said Nipper sharply.

He ran to the window, flung the curtain aside with a quick movement, and flung open one of the French windows.

"Who are you?" he demanded loudly.

And everybody in the drawing-room remained still, breathless; and every face was alight with horrified expectation.

A shout came from Nipper—and it was a shout of joy and gladness.

"Guv'nor!" he exclaimed.

The man who walked into the drawing-room, his overcoat and hat smothered in snow, was none other than Nelson Lee, the great detective.

He had been smiling at first, but as he saw the expressions on the many faces, a look of wonder came into his eyes, quickly supplemented by concern.

"Well, upon my word!" he exclaimed. "You young people are in a highly nervous condition, aren't you? Did you mistake me for a ghost, or what?"

Two or three of the girls were laughing—and laughing hysterically. The boys ran forward with shouts of welcome. And they were so eager that Nelson Lee knew, at once, that his coming was heralded with as much delight as though he were a deliverer.

"Guv'nor!" said Nipper fervently. "You're the very man we needed—more than any other. Oh, thank goodness you're here!"

"But what on earth is the matter with you all?" asked Nelson Lee. "Why are you so frightened? Surely the crunching of my footsteps did not startle you?"

"Mr. Lee, old thing, you don't know half of it!" said Archie Glenthorne. "Good gad! I'd rather see you than the Prime Minister and all the bally Cabinet!"

"Steady, young 'un!" said Nelson Lee. "Apparently, I have arrived at an interesting moment. Yet you all seemed happy enough when I glanced in through the window. You were dancing to the radio music, and——"

"It was only to keep us level-headed, guv'nor," said Nipper. "We've been having a pretty rotten time this evening. Why didn't you get here before?"

"I should have been here very much earlier, my lad—but the roads are in a dreadful condition," replied Nelson Lee. "There has been so much snow in this part of the country that the trains are running anyhow. So I came by road—and I got along all right until I encountered these New Forest highways. They are little frequented, and the exposed nature of the country has caused many snowdrifts to gather. I was compelled to abandon the car some miles back, and it had taken me nearly a couple of hours to cover three miles."

"Well, thank goodness you're here at last," said Nipper. "Never mind the car—that can be rescued to-morrow, or the next day—or next week. Who cares? The fact that you are here is enough for the moment."

By this time Nelson Lee had shed his overcoat and hat, and the French windows had been closed. The great detective looked round keenly.

"Well, before we go any further you had better explain," he said quietly. "No, not

you, Archie. I think Nipper had better do the talking."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie, backing away. "I'm apt to be somewhat lengthy, and all that sort of thing. Go to it, Nipper. old boy!"

"WELL, as you know, guv'nor, we're all down here as the guests of Lady Bowers—Archie's aunt," said Nipper. "You were invited, too, and mighty glad we are to have you here."

"But why this intense joy at my arrival?" asked Nelson Lee

"For one thing, guv'nor, because you're the only man in the house."

"Among the guests, you mean?"

"No—literally."

"But what of the servants?"

"They've gone!"

"Gone!"

"Bolted!"

"And why did the servants bolt?" asked Nelson Lee, more surprised than ever.

"They all went just as we were sitting down to dinner—turkey and plum pudding," said Nipper, with a grimace. "Things happened. And the servants just went off their heads with panic, and ran out. Everybody—the maidservants, the cooks, chambermaids, the butler, the boots, men-servants—everybody. Goodness knows where they went—they tramped into Fordingbridge, I suppose. At the present moment there's nobody in the house except we guests, you, and Archie's aunt. And she's upstairs, in bed, suffering from a nasty wound on the head."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"And what are these—things that happened?" he asked bluntly.

"Manifestations, sir!" said Handforth breathlessly. "Ghostly happenings! Personally, I'm not satisfied that trickery hasn't been at work——"

"I think you had better let Nipper do the talking, old man," interrupted Lee gently.

"We were sitting in the big dining-room, and everything was very bright and cheery, when the lights suddenly went low," said Nipper. "Then an extraordinary thing happened. The spoons and forks—all the silver, in fact—floated off the table, jingling, and——"

"Floated off the table?" repeated Lee, giving Nipper a hard look.

"Yes, guv'nor."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"But it's true!" went up an eager chorus.

"And then all the silver went shooting across the room, and it crashed against one of the panelled walls, falling in a heap on the floor," said Nipper. "Lady Bowers said that it was a ghostly manifestation. It seems that Forest House has an evil reputation at Christmas. There's no ghost here, that can be seen—but funny things happen. I've sometimes read of houses like it. People who

believe in the occult would say that an elemental is at work."

"Go on!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

"Well, guv'nor, before we could get over that shock, there came the sound of tremendous crashing from the hall," continued Nipper. "We rushed out, and we found a great oak table high in the air; and as we looked at it, it was hurled against the farther wall and smashed to pieces. Then a chair did the same thing. Nobody touched it, yet it rose into the air, and it was smashed. One of the legs broke off, struck the banisters, and hit Lady Bowers on the head, stunning her."

"I see," said Lee slowly. "Then Lady Bowers was hit, more or less, by accident? The chair was not actually flung at her—or at any of you?"

"No, sir; it hit the wall quite a long way from us," replied Nipper. "I hadn't thought of that before. The chair leg only hit Archie's aunt because it glanced off the banisters and was deflected."

"Then this so-called elemental was not really malicious," said Lee, with a touch of dryness in his voice. "In other words, if tricksters were at work—practical jokers, I mean—the accident might have happened by mere chance. I can well understand how you were startled."

"The servants bolted; they were terrified out of their wits," said Nipper. "Well, Archie asked us to stand by him—and we did. That's all."

"But most of us bolted at first," confessed Tommy Watson. "We only came back into the house when we realised that Lady Bowers was injured, and that Archie needed us."

"Has anything happened since then?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Nothing, sir."

"And Lady Bowers?"

"She is much better—the injury isn't serious," replied Nipper. "I don't think there's any real need for a doctor."

"Well, I seem to have arrived at a strange Christmas party," said Nelson Lee, looking round. "Do any of you know if this house has been haunted before? Do you suspect trickery by anybody?"

"Yes, by George!" said Handforth promptly. "We suspect Nerki!"

"Well, really, that's a bit thick, old son," protested Archie. "I mean, there's no absolute evidence. After all, Nerki hasn't been near the place, so far as we know."

"Nerki," repeated Lee thoughtfully. "You mean, of course, Professor Ivan Nerki, the man who has termed himself the Sorcerer of the New Forest?"

"That's him, sir," said Nipper. "He lives only a mile or two away—in an old stone house."

"And what makes you suspect Nerki?" asked Lee, glancing at Handforth.

"Because I believe he's a fraud, sir," said Edward Oswald bluntly. "Archie can tell you more about him than I can."

6 THE MAN WHO DEFIED THE WORLD ! Astounding Story of Modern Pirates.

Nelson Lee turned to Archie.

"This blighter may be genuine, or he may not," said Archie hesitatingly. "It's frightfully difficult to know. But for some months past he has been influencing a pretty foul spell over my aunt. She believes in him implicitly, and allows her whole life to be ruled by what he says."

"You mean, her every action?"

"Literally that, sir," replied Archie in distress. "We haven't discussed the matter much—but it's just as well that it should come out. Aunt Eustacia even refused to let me bring the chappies and the girls here until she had consulted Nerki."

"By the fact that the party is here I imagine Nerki consented?"

"That's just what he didn't do," replied Archie. "You see, the lads were pretty certain that Nerki would put the kybosh on the whole plan—and I was keen upon having the party, so that Aunt Eustacia would be lifted out of the rut. And sundry of the stout-hearted brethren waylaid Nerki in his own house, locked him in the woodshed, and Nipper impersonated the blighter."

"Wasn't that very high-handed, young 'un?" asked Lee severely.

"We thought the situation warranted it, sir," replied Nipper defensively. "We knew that Nerki would spoil everything—and Archie was awfully keen on helping his aunt. And we were certain that Nerki was a fraud. So we grabbed him, and when Lady Bowers consulted him about the proposed party, I did all the talking. She didn't guess a thing—and she believes, even now, that Nerki gave his sanction."

"Did not the man inform Lady Bowers of the trick you had done?"

"He daren't," said Handforth. "A sorcerer, a dabbler in black magic, he couldn't admit that he had been locked in his own woodshed by a crowd of schoolboys."

"We told him to do his worst," explained Nipper. "We seemed to be justified, too, because an extraordinary change came about in Lady Bowers. During the past few days she has looked ten years younger, and she has been serenely happy. Once away from his influence, everything in her life was different. Then this happened. She declares that Nerki was 'protecting' the house, and that for some reason he has withdrawn his protection. But that may be a lot of occult nonsense. Personally, I don't believe in ghosts—and won't until I see one face to face."

"Same here," said Handforth excitedly. "Even now I believe that the rummy happenings in this house are caused by fakery."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Well, we'll see about that," he said quietly. "I think it is about time that a man arrived upon the scene. I shall have to have a quiet talk with Lady Bowers to-morrow. I must get to the bottom of this extraordinary affair. As regards Professor Nerki, I had heard of him, but I know nothing against him. People say that he is a genuine

mystic. Not that that means anything; all of these mystics are genuine until something happens to expose them as frauds."

"Anyhow, if any unauthorised person has been near this house to-night, we shall know in the morning," said Nipper. "Nobody could have approached the place without leaving footprints in the snow—and deep footprints at that."

There was a keen, eager light in the detective's eyes. He had come down here for a brief holiday; he had come, in fact, mainly to please Nipper. And he had walked right into an uncanny mystery. All of his instincts were aroused.

"You young people had better get on with your dancing," he said. "I want to have a look at the dining-room—and the hall. And I would like to examine the silver and the smashed furniture."

"Think you'll get a clue, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"I might," replied Nelson Lee. "But I don't want any of you boys to interrupt your pleasures. Just let me potter about for a time."

He was about to move across to the door when he paused. The radio had been going all this time; and a new fox-trot had commenced only a minute ago. It was playing briskly, but it seemed to Nelson Lee that the strength of the music was becoming less. In fact, it died away even as he paused.

And at the same moment the electric lights of the room became perceptibly dim.

"The lights—the lights!" cried one of the girls, with a little sob of terror. "They're going down—just like they did in the dining-room!"

"And the music is dying away!" exclaimed Travers.

"Nothing in that!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "It is an electric wireless set—fed from the mains. Somebody, or something, is tampering with the current."

The lights were becoming so dim that it was now difficult to see across the room—and the great log fire, astoundingly enough, had died down with the lights. Lee looked at it sharply—in wonder. The flames in the fireplace had lost their brilliance; yet the flames were there just the same.

Thump!

Something soft and huge, it seemed, hurled itself against the door, and everybody in the room stood stock-still, breathless with apprehension.

CHAPTER 2.

The Ghost Voices.

THUMP!

This time the sound was louder and more alarming. Nelson Lee, looking at the door, actually saw the panels bulge. Something enormous, it seemed, was out in the hall, attempting to force the door down by sheer brute strength.

And the effect upon the young guests was terrifying. They pictured some vile, monstrous thing, something shapeless, something from the world of the supernatural. Their imagination boggled at any true picture of the unknown which sought entry.

Some of the girls screamed, and the boys, going to their aid, needed all their pluck to keep a grip on themselves.

"This is absurd!" said Lee angrily.

He took a stride forward, but at that moment there came such a tremendous crash on the door that splinters of wood flew in all directions. The door, in fact, burst into a hundred fragments. And as it did so a chill blast of air swept into the room, and this was peculiar, for the hall was as well heated as the drawing-room.

Nelson Lee leapt into the wrecked doorway, but he could see nothing. The hall was pitchy black.

"Who's there?" he demanded sharply.

As he said the words, the lights in the drawing-room flickered, and then came on with full strength. The lights in the hall did the same. And for a moment everybody was dazzled.

But there was nothing unusual in sight—no monstrous figure, no ghostly presence which could account for the manifestation. Yet only a few seconds had elapsed. It seemed scarcely possible that any trickster could have escaped in the time.

"Keep your heads, youngsters," said Lee briskly, as he ran out into the hall. "And don't come all crowding out. Just a minute!"

He was down on his hands and knees near the floor, which was polished. His electric torch was out, and keenly, eagerly, he was examining the surface. And when he rose to his feet, his eyes were grim.

"Anything, gov'nor?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"I don't know—yet," replied Lee.

He stood, looking round. He saw the wreckage of the table and the chair. He had heard of that episode from the boys. Now there was this burst door. It was an extremely heavy door, and no human being could have smashed it in. It was not merely broken, but shattered into fragments. Something enormously heavy must have been hurled against the door to create that havoc.

"I am beginning to understand your feelings, boys—and you particularly, girls," said the detective. "There is always something exceptionally terrifying in a happening of this kind. There is nothing visible—nothing tangible. But I want you to keep your heads. You cannot get away from this house to-night—so you had better make the best of things."

"Tell us one thing, sir—please!" urged Church. "Do you think all this is being caused by—a ghost?"

"I can only tell you, Church, that I don't believe in ghosts," replied Lee shortly.

"There you are!" said Handforth trium-

phantly. "Mr. Lee means that he's suspicious of trickery."

"Not exactly that, Handforth," corrected Nelson Lee. "I have an open mind. I have never experienced anything ghostly which has not been capable of a material explanation. But I'm not saying that a ghostly manifestation could not occur. But I have yet to be convinced."

"That's good enough for me, lads and lassies!" said Archie. "Mr. Lee knows jolly well that there's some dirty work going on. In fact, filthy work. And, by gad, he's the very man for the job. Let's leave it to him. And we mustn't be scared any more. I mean to say, it's Christmas-time, and we ought to be jolly and gay."

Archie did his best, but it was no use. The guests were very far from jolly. They were in a state of high nervous tension.

Nelson Lee was looking up at two figures which stood on the landing. They were very dainty figures—for they belonged to two of the girls of the party. They had been looking after Lady Bowers—but they had been attracted by the tumultuous crashing.

"Did you girls see anything?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Oh!" cried one of them. "Look! Mr. Lee! Thank goodness!"

They came running down, their faces flushed with excitement. They were Mary Summers and Vera Wilkes.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, when did you get here?" cried Vera.

"I haven't been here long—but it seems that I have arrived none too soon," replied Lee. "Did you girls see anything from the landing?"

"No; it was too dark," said Mary. "We heard the noise, and we ran out. But the hall was in complete darkness."

Nelson Lee nodded, and his lips were tight. "Tricksters like darkness!" he said gruffly.

"Don't ghosts, too?" asked Vera.

"If a ghost is genuine, I see no reason why he should not operate in the full light," replied Lee, with a smile. "I am always suspicious of darkness—when something unaccountable happens."

"Look at the fire, sir," said Church, in a queer voice.

Nelson Lee looked at it—and everybody else did, too.

"There's nothing wrong with the fire," said Handforth. "What's the matter with you, fathead?"

"That's just it—there's nothing wrong," replied Church. "It's blazing high, and that fire had been there all the evening. How was it, then, that the hall was in complete darkness? Why didn't the fire cast a glow of some kind?"

"By George, that's rummy!" said Handforth, with a start.

"A screen might have been pulled across it—or some chemical could have been used to completely obliterate the flames, and deaden the glow," said Lee. "I know of such chemicals myself; and once their effect

is gone, the fire blazes up as merrily as before. There is nothing very remarkable in that."

He could see that the young people were still nervous, and he advised them to go back into the drawing-room—where the radio was still sending forth music.

"Try to forget this," said Lee earnestly. "I will admit that it is a very strange happening—but I have received no evidence, so far, that a ghost is at work. Let me do a little prowling."

Two other girls relieved Mary and Vera, but when the party collected together again in the drawing-room, there was no dancing. The boys and girls had thrown all pretence aside now.

Nelson Lee, meanwhile, was "prowling." Nipper had wanted to go with him, but Lee insisted upon being alone. The detective went through the dining-room; he examined the silver, and he examined the broken furniture. Then he went into the servants' quarters, and into all the other apartments. He explored the house, in fact, in almost every corridor. But, so far as he could see, there was nothing to account for the peculiar phenomenon.

He found Nipper in the hall, awaiting him.

"Well, guv'nor?"

"So far, Nipper, I am baffled," confessed the detective. "I don't think I have ever come across a case quite like this before."

"It's the runmiest go!" admitted Nipper. "We don't know what's going to happen next. Everybody is on the jump. And by the way—look at that!"

He indicated the great grandfather's clock—which was ticking solemnly.

"Yes, I see," said Lee. "Twenty minutes to twelve. Not at all late for a Christmas party—but I think I know what you mean, Nipper."

"Well, midnight is supposed to be an uncanny sort of hour, isn't it?" said Nipper. "Not that it makes much difference in this house. Quicer things have been happening ever since about eight."

"All the same, I think the youngsters had better go to their bed-rooms—and be safely in them before midnight," said Nelson Lee. "I will go in the drawing-room and have a few quiet words with them."

"What about you, guv'nor?"

"I shall not go to bed yet," replied Lee. "I want to do some more exploring."

"Let me stay up with you, sir," added Nipper.

"No: you will be of far more use in your bed-room, with some of the other boys," replied Lee. "We don't want any sudden panic in the middle of the night. If tricksters are at work, they will certainly operate again, and do their best to start such a panic."

"No need to put me off, guv'nor," said Nipper. "Do you think there are tricksters?"

"So far, Nipper, I have found absolutely no evidence to support such a theory," replied Nelson Lee. "Neither have I found any evidence to convince me that an 'elemental'

is causing all this disturbance. I don't believe in elementals; I think they are the mere fantasies of a disordered mind. But that's my personal view. I may be wrong. But if we take it as a working hypothesis that some evil-minded person is faking these manifestations, then we can build up some kind of a case."

"How?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"The object, undoubtedly, was to drive all you young people from the house—and that object nearly succeeded at first," replied Lee shrewdly. "It was only the fact that the servants deserted that caused Archie to make up his mind to stand by. And the rest of the guests supported him, in spite of their fears. I don't blame them for their fears. All of you would have been perfectly justified for clearing out. As that first attempt failed, another dodge was tried. But the object is the same—to get everybody out of the house with the sole exception of Lady Bowers."

"And Lady Bowers is more or less under the spell of Nerki," said Nipper.

"But I did not mention Nerki's name," said Lee. "You mustn't take anything for granted, young 'un."

"But he's the man we tricked—and he's the kind of man, I should say, who would be keen enough for revenge," said Nipper. "And there's probably something deeper than that. He's got Lady Bowers like that." And he held out his open hand and closed his fingers. "She's a wealthy woman, guv'nor, and for all we know, he may have been getting lots of money out of her. She wouldn't tell, even if he had."

"Well, we won't discuss the matter any more to-night," said Lee briskly. "Come along. We must get everybody to bed."

He strode into the drawing-room, and he found the boys and girls standing in groups, eagerly talking. Nobody had turned the radio off, but nobody was attending to the music.

"Well, everything seems to be fairly quiet now, so I am going to suggest that you all go to bed," said Lee genially.

There was a silence. The boys and girls looked at one another. They had, in fact, been dreading this moment. The girls were particularly affected—for it would mean that they would have to be separated from the boys. They were scared—and they frankly admitted it.

"Must we go—yet?" asked Irene pleadingly.

"I think it will be better," replied Lee. "It is very unlikely that anything strange will happen in your bed-rooms. But I will tell you this—if it will give you any comfort. I am not going to bed myself; but I will patrol the upper corridors, and if anything unusual happens in any room, I shall be awake, and on hand."

There was an immediate chorus of approval and relief.

"It's a jolly good thing that you came to-night, Mr. Lee!" said Vera Wilkes fervently.

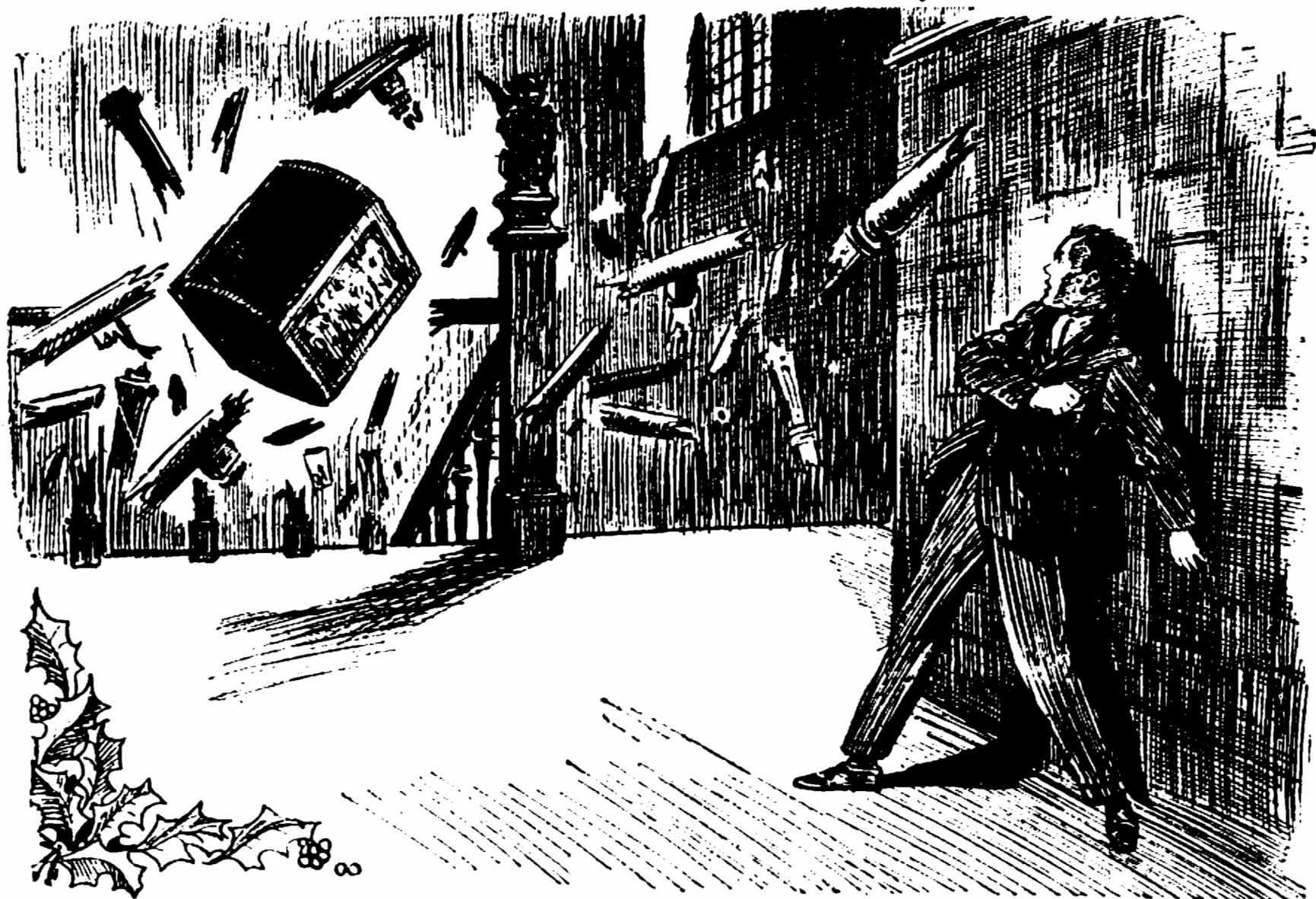
"Rather!" chorused the other girls.

There was no doubt that Nelson Lee's statement had a cheering effect upon everybody in general. The very knowledge that he would be on duty in the upper corridors was comforting.

"Just a minute, sir," said Handforth aggressively. "It's all very well for you to

places—and then, if something rummy happens, one of us can call the others. Then we shall be ready—and perhaps we shall collar the trickster red-handed."

Nelson Lee gave in. He knew very well that if he did not, the boys would only conspire together on their own, and keep watch, anyhow. So, with a feeling of greater confidence, the young guests went up to bed. The girls went first, after bidding good-night to their friends. They were no longer ner-



Pitt, standing horrified in the shadow of the corridor, saw a heavy oak chest shoot suddenly upwards from the hall below, and crash clean through the banisters!

talk about patrolling the upper corridors—but what about us?" . . .

"You'll be in bed—and asleep, I hope," replied Lee.

"Not on your life, sir."

"But, my dear boy—"

"It's not fair that you should be left all alone, to keep watch," continued Handforth. "My wheeze is that we form a kind of guard. Say, half a dozen of us, and we can change the guard at various times during the night."

"Hear hear!" said Nipper. "I second that, Handy!"

"But you are assuming that there is a real danger in this house," smiled Lee. "That's nonsense! What you have to do is to go to bed and forget—"

"Come off it, gov'nor!" interrupted Nipper. "You know jolly well that we can't do that. And you might as well let us chaps take a hand in the watching. It'll be heaps better. We'll station ourselves in different

vous; they felt almost themselves again. It was arranged that Ethel Church and Ena Handforth should go and relieve the other two girls in Lady Bowers' bed-room. For the girls were determined to remain with their hostess throughout the night. Lady Bowers herself did not like being treated as an invalid, but the girls were insistent.

"I feel heaps better now that Mr. Lee is here," said Ena, as she and Ethel went along one of the well-lighted corridors. "I say, what a game! I've never been in such a peculiar house! It's not haunted in the usual way. You never see anything."

"A jolly good thing, too," said Ethel thankfully. "I'm sure I don't want to see any ghosts."

"I'm not sure that it isn't better to see something," said Ena. "It's so—so dreadfully weird to see ordinary things, like forks and spoons and tables and chairs, moving about without anybody touching them."

I once read of a house where everything was smashed up——”

“What—what was that?” broke in Ethel, with a little catch in her voice.

She had halted, and her pretty face had gone deathly pale.

“Here, what’s wrong?” asked Ena bluntly.

“I—I don’t know,” faltered the other girl. “But I heard a voice—right in my ear. It seemed to be whispering——”

“Leave this house while you are safe, foolish maidens!”

Ena jumped. The voice was a mere whisper, yet she heard every word distinctly. The sounds were in mid-air—in the corridor itself; the lights were bright, but the two girls were alone.

“Did—did you hear that?” gasped Ethel falteringly.

“You can hear, but you cannot see,” said the mystery voice. “I am standing near you—between you—but I am an astral spectre, visible only to my own kind. And there are others in this very corridor. They are coming nearer. Foolish maidens! Leave this house while you are still safe!”

Ethel screamed; she could not help it: and Ena, who was the stronger of the two, held on to her tightly.

“Scream—scream!” mocked the invisible voice. “It will do you no good.”

Even as it was saying these words, the voice seemed to dwindle away. And at the same moment Nelson Lee came hurrying forward, accompanied by some of the other boys and girls. They had been attracted by the scream.

“I say, Ethel, is anything wrong?” shouted Church, running up to his sister.

“It sounds awfully silly,” said Ena, “but we heard voices.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lee sharply. “Voices? Where? Did you hear any words?”

Ena gave details of the queer experience; and Ethel, too, by this time, was feeling stronger.

“Very singular!” muttered Lee, as he looked keenly round. “The voices were here, you say? Here, at this very spot? Did they come from either wall, or from the ceiling?”

“They sounded right against our ears,” replied Ena.

Lee examined the walls closely, even tapping them. But, although he found nothing to account for the ghostly phenomenon, he was looking more grim than ever.

“I will stay here for a while,” he said. “I would like that voice to say something to me.”

Everybody caught their breath in, half-expecting that the impish demon which controlled the voice would accept the challenge. But nothing happened.

The girls went to their bed-rooms, and the boys prepared to go to theirs, too. Nelson Lee was not thoroughly satisfied. He knew that Ena Handforth and Ethel Church were steady girls, and not given to fancies. But in their present state of nervous excitement,

it was quite possible that they should have imagined things. Somehow, he didn’t think this was the real explanation. They had heard something.

There came another little commotion just then, but fortunately, it was only slight, and the girls were not attracted from their bed-rooms. Handforth thought he heard something from the hall, and he dashed down in his usual reckless way. Church and McClure and Nipper and one or two others followed him. But when they got into the hall there was nothing to be seen.

“It was only the fire crackling,” growled Nipper. “For goodness’ sake, Handy, don’t get jumpy. Things are bad enough without that.”

“Sorry!” said Handforth. “I believe you’re right about the fire—I noticed a couple of logs turned over on their sides as soon as I came down. They must have fallen—and that was the sound I heard.”

Nelson Lee was on the stairs.

“You’d better switch off those lights, Nipper, before you come up!” he called.

Nipper did so, and then the boys came up the stairs again. It so happened that Handforth was the last—and he was not entirely comfortable about this. He thought he heard a faint sound once, near the floor, and he had an awful feeling that something was following him. But he knew how easy it was to let his imagination run riot. He resolutely refused to look round.

“Buck up, you chaps!” he said impatiently. “Can’t you get upstairs a bit faster?”

He had an irresistible desire to look round then; for, glancing up beyond the other boys who were mounting the stairs, he saw Nelson Lee standing against the top balustrade, and Lee was staring down into the blackness of the hall with a fixed look in his eyes.

As a matter of fact, Lee was staring at the fire, which, a moment before had been plainly visible on the further side of the great hall. It had been glowing warmly, comfortably. But now, as the boys were ascending the stairs, the fire had died down with extraordinary rapidity, until there was nothing but the faintest glow left. And Nelson Lee knew that such a thing could not have happened naturally. He had a feeling that it was a prelude to something more sensational. He expected to hear a sudden tumultuous crashing from the darkness below; and his hand was already on his electric torch, ready to flash it on. His other hand was more grimly occupied, for it gripped an automatic pistol.

“Hi!” yelled Handforth suddenly.

“What the dickens——” gasped Church, spinning round.

He was just in front of Handforth, and that cry was not merely one of startled surprise, but of agony, too. And Church dimly, vaguely, saw the burly junior writhing on the stairs, just below him.

“Help!” shouted Handforth hoarsely. “Oh, my goodness! Something’s got hold of

my ankle! It's dragging me down the stairs——"

He broke off, because at that moment he had seen something just below him. And he was ready to swear that it was a skeleton hand, alone in the darkness. There was no arm—no body—just that bony, grisly hand. It did not glow in a phosphorescent manner, but it was just visible in spite of the darkness.

"Let me come!" rapped out Nelson Lee sharply.

As he spoke he snapped on the electric torch, and the white beam of light shot down upon the staircase. Scarcely a couple of seconds had elapsed since Handforth had yelled. Lee pushed past the other boys, and he was on the scene in a moment. Handforth was sprawling on the stairs, but Lee scarcely gave him a glance. He was directing the light lower—into the black depths of the hall itself. But nothing was revealed in that brilliant beam. There was no hand—no mechanical contrivance, no wire. Lee had been particularly suspicious of the latter.

But he knew how quickly wires could be whipped away—he knew how invisible they were.

"All right, Handy, old man," he said gently. "There's nothing here. Pull yourself together."

Handforth's face was contorted with agony.

"My—my ankle!" he muttered. "It—it gripped me like a vice."

"What did?" asked Church, his voice trembling with agitation.

"I don't know—it felt like a horrible bony hand."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"This is getting too thick!"

"Steady, boys!" said Lee quickly. "You shouldn't say things like that, Handforth. There is really no sense in talking of bony hands. You may have tripped——"

"But I didn't trip!" broke in Handforth indignantly, and recovering some of his composure. "Besides, I spoke of a bony hand because I saw one."

"You saw it!"

"Anyhow, I—I believe I did," said Handforth, startled. "Did I? I only caught a glimpse of it just before you flashed the torch on, sir. It was grabbing at my ankle, sir, and—and——"

"You don't seem very certain, my lad," interrupted Lee. "Let's have a look at your ankle. I might be able to tell something by the appearance of it."

He did not doubt that something had struck Handforth's ankle, and he half expected to see a graze, where a wire might have possibly hooked round Handforth's foot. The burly junior tucked up his trouser-leg, and pulled down his sock.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "Look at that."

Nelson Lee compressed his lips. There were two nasty bruises on the ankle, one on either side. These injuries had not been caused by a trip wire. Something had caught

Handforth by the ankle, and the pressure must have been tremendous to cause those livid bruises.

"H'm! This must be painful, old man!" said Lee gently. "I'm sorry. I did not know that you were so badly hurt."

"It's nothing, sir," growled Handforth. "I'm not worrying about the pain—although it was frightful at the moment. I want to know what grabbed me!"

"It couldn't have been anything real," muttered Church. "Mr. Lee had his light flashed on within a second—and there was nothing. If any fool had been playing tricks, he couldn't have got away in the time."

"But something mechanical, and even resembling a bony hand could have been pushed through these wide banisters," said Nelson Lee shrewdly. "Moreover, it could have been quickly withdrawn—and in the first flash of my torch, I should have seen nothing. Beneath the stairs, here, there is a deep recess, and an active man could easily have slipped away into the shadows long before my light could have reached him. No, boys; there's no evidence of a spirit manifestation here. But, again, there's no evidence of trickery, either. We are still baffled."

"It's just one blighting thing after another," complained Archie helplessly. "I mean to say, what's it going to be next? Good gad! You can't expect us to sleep to-night, Mr. Lee! Frightful things will happen in our bed-rooms next."

"There is no certainty of that—and not much probability of it, either," said Nelson Lee. "If unaccountable things do happen in your bed-rooms, I shall begin to suspect that this house is genuinely haunted."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Why do you say that, sir?"

"Because all manner of tricks could easily have been played in the dining-room and in the hall," replied Nelson Lee. "But tricks necessarily mean preparation—and it is hardly likely that a faker could have prepared his paraphernalia in all the bed-rooms as well as in the hall."

"That's a sound argument, you chaps," said Nipper. "If there's a real ghost in this house, he could operate anywhere. But we don't believe in ghosts, do we? So it stands to reason that the bed-rooms will be safe. Let's all get off there stairs as quickly as we can."

They were not slow to obey; but Nelson Lee went down the stairs, and not only flashed his light round the hall, but switched on the main lights, too. He noted that in the very deep recesses under the staircase there were one or two doors. He did not know whether they led into other parts of the house, or whether they were cupboard doors. He meant to explore later.

For the moment he decided that it would be better for him to go upstairs with the young people.

So the strange evening ended—and as Nelson Lee went upstairs, midnight boomed.

CHAPTER 3.

The Bed Which Rocked.

IT was the "witching hour." But in this strange old house, which seemed to be haunted by a topsy-turvy ghost, nothing happened. Most of the young guests expected another demonstration of some kind—the smashing of more furniture, or the sudden falling of pictures.

But the minutes ticked away, and Forest House remained quiet and peaceful.

"Well, that's a frightful relief," said Archie Glenthorne fervently. "I mean to say, midnight has come and gone, so everything seems to be all serene."

"Ghosts only appear at midnight in stories," said Handforth with a sniff. "It's no good taking anything for granted. We've got to keep watch, as we planned."

"That's the rummy part of it," said Church uneasily.

"What is?"

"Why, when we keep watch we see nothing," replied Church. "We just stand the chance of having furniture chucked at our heads."

It was some little time before all the young guests had settled down in their bed-rooms. There were three main corridors leading off from the great upper landing. The girls were accommodated in their bed-rooms, which opened out from one of these corridors; the boys had their quarters in the opposite corridor; and Lady Bowers' bed-room, and several other bed-rooms—one of which Nelson Lee would occupy—opened out from the third corridor. The servants' bed-rooms were on the floor above, but this floor was now entirely unoccupied.

Handforth wanted to be in the first watch, but Nelson Lee would not hear of it. The detective had been downstairs in the hall for some time, but apparently he had discovered nothing of importance.

"You'd better turn in, Handy, old man," said the detective. "With that ankle of yours you can only hobble—and you've had a nasty experience. A few hours' sleep will do you good. You can take your place in one of the other watches."

Handforth grumbled—he always did—but, at heart, he was relieved. His ankle was paining him a good deal. So he and Church and McClure went off to bed.

"Hallo! What's all this!"

Handforth was indignant. For when he and his chums arrived in their bed-room, they found the big four-poster already occupied. Three cheery-looking youngsters were snuggling down with much comfort. They were Willy Handforth, Chubby Heath, and Juicy Lemon—of the Third Form at St. Frank's.

"Come to say good-night, Ted?" asked Willy.

"What are you doing in our bed?" demanded his elder brother.

"You knew what you were doing when you bagged this bed-room for yourselves, you chaps," replied Willy. "Comfy bed, soft

carpet, and a cheerful fire. It'll suit us down to the ground."

"You silly young asses! Come out of it!" roared Handforth.

"Rats! You chaps are going to keep watch, aren't you?" asked Willy. "It'll be our turn to watch later, and——"

"We're coming to bed now—and you kids are clearing out!" interrupted Handforth. "Of all the nerve! Buzz off!"

He bundled them out unceremoniously. It was quite true that this bed-room was, in many respects, better than the others. The fags were obliged to seek fresh quarters. And Handforth & Co., having undressed, tumbled in.

"Not a bad idea of Willy's after all," said Handforth. "He and his chums have warmed the bed nicely. Hallo! Who was last in?"

"I was," said McClure.

"Then why didn't you turn out the light, fathead?"

"Well, I thought, in the circs., we'd better leave it on."

"Then think again," said Handforth gruffly. "Who the dickens can sleep with a light burning? Nothing to be scared of now, Mac. With Mr. Lee about, and guards all over the place, we're as safe as houses, and we can sleep like tops."

But when the light had been extinguished, and only the flickering glow from the fire illuminated the old room, even Handforth felt less confident.

"I don't like these old four-poster beds," said Church. "Plenty of room in them, of course—we could squeeze another two chaps into this bed easily—but they seemed so old-fashioned and—and ghostly."

"Rats!" said Handforth with a yawn. "Go to sleep."

They lay still for some moments, and then suddenly Church sat up with a start.

"What—what was that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Eh? What was that?" growled Handforth, opening his eyes. "I heard nothing."

"My fancy, perhaps, but I thought I felt the bed move," muttered Church.

They all looked round into the shadows, but there was nothing to be seen.

"Imagination, of course," grunted Handforth. "I wish you chaps would go to sleep! How could anything shift this bed? It must weigh half a ton!"

It was not a bad estimate. The old four-poster was, indeed, an immensely massive thing, and two strong men could not have lifted it.

And so, at length, the three youngsters went to sleep—and the room remained peaceful.

"WHAT have you been doing, guv'nor?" asked Nipper curiously.

Nelson Lee had just come upstairs. For some little time he had been busy in the great hall, with all the lights full on. Nipper had seen that the detective had been at work on the doors of the various rooms leading out of the hall.

"I will tell you," said Lee. "But, first of all, bring the others. We don't want any misunderstandings."

The various members of the "watch" were brought on to the landing. The hall below was now pitchy black, except for the cheery glow from the great fireplace.

"Snowing hard outside," remarked Reggie Pitt, as he came up. "I just took a look through one of the windows. We shall be pretty well snowed up by the morning."

"The more snow, the better," said Nipper. "If there are any people playing monkey tricks about the house, they can't approach without leaving a tell-tale trail. They can't get away, either."

"Now listen, boys," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Ghosts, it is said, can pass through locked doors and other obstructions. But human beings—and particularly human beings who are faking occult manifestations—are apt to trip against things which lurk in the dark."

He had lowered his voice to a mere whisper, and the boys wondered.

"We don't know what the trouble is in this house," continued Nelson Lee. "We must keep our minds open, and our heads cool. I have been in the hall, and I have placed invisible threads across every doorway and every window."

"My only hat!" whispered Nipper. "That's a good idea, sir."

"I have sealed these threads very carefully," continued Lee. "A ghost might pass them with ease—but if any human being comes through one of the doorways he will be clever if he avoids the sealed thread."

"What about the corridors leading into the other parts of the house, sir?" asked Pitt.

"I have stretched threads across them, too—about a foot high," replied Nelson Lee. "Nothing can enter that hall below without breaking one of the threads—nothing, that is, material. So if anything strange happens—Well, we'll leave it at that."

"You mean," said Travers slowly, "that if there is any more smashing of furniture, and the threads are still intact, it will prove that the manifestations are caused by a genuine haunting?"

"I did not say that," murmured Nelson Lee. "It will prove that the intruder, whether material or occult, does not enter by any of the known openings, such as doorways or windows. Now, boys, we must get into these corridors—these wide passages which lead off from the landing. I am going to fix other threads at the ends here where the corridors open out."

The threads, quite invisible, were stretched across and sealed into position by Lee. Each corridor was now provided with an effective "barrier." If any unauthorised person attempted to slip past in the darkness, he would inevitably break the thread.

So the guards went on their patrols, watching over the main corridors—but never going upon the landing itself. And somehow the boys felt comforted. Nelson Lee's precautions gave them an added sense of security.

AN hour passed, and one o'clock boomed solemnly from the big grandfather's clock down in the hall. The echoes of the chimes and the one stroke came vibrating into the upper part of the house.

"Well, nothing's happening," murmured Reggie Pitt, as he met Travers.

"Nothing's likely to happen, either," said Travers, yawning. "Upon my Samson, this seems to be a silly game, dear old fellow!"

"Think we all ought to go to bed, then?"

"Why not?" asked Travers. "Nothing is likely to happen in the bed-rooms. In fact, the whole performance is over for to-night, I imagine."

"Well, it's better to be on the safe side," said Pitt thoughtfully.

He passed on, moving towards the main landing. But he did not go too near—for fear of breaking the tell-tale thread. He could see one of the big landing windows from the end of the corridor, and he noted that feeble moonlight was streaming through. The snow, then, had stopped, and the sky had cleared.

"Well, it would be a good thing when the night was over. Everything would seem different in the morning. There would be some first-class tobogganing, too, and—"

Creak!

Reggie Pitt's thoughts were abruptly interrupted. The creak had come from down in the hall—distinctly, clearly. It was like the straining of woodwork, as though the broken table had been lifted, or moved aside. Reggie Pitt's senses were instantly on the alert, and he wondered if he should give the alarm. He knew that the sound had not been caused by a loose board—

Whizz!

Pitt, standing there, and staring uncertainly across the landing, saw something huge shoot upwards from the inky black well of the great hall. For a fraction of a second it was visible in the faint moonlight. Then—

Craaaaaash—thud!

The noise seemed to shake the whole house, and Reggie Pitt leapt back with a shout of alarm. Some big object had smashed its way clean through the heavy oaken banisters which ran all round the top of the landing. Then the thing struck the landing floor and rolled over. Broken fragments of the banisters flew in all directions, and one of them struck Pitt on the shoulder, and he reeled.

"By Samson! What was that?" yelled Vivian Travers, running up out of the darkness of the corridor.

"I—I don't know!" gasped Pitt. "It—it came up from the hall—"

He found it difficult to speak. He had not realised until then what a shock he had had. It was the unexpectedness of the crash more than anything else which had shaken him.

Doors were opening everywhere; voices were sounding. The girls, with wraps flung hastily over their pyjamas, were running out, many of them frightened.

Then the lights of the hall and the landing leapt into life. Everybody blinked. Nelson Lee was leaping downstairs, and shouting at the same time.

"Keep in the corridors, everybody!" he ordered. "Don't break those threads. I'll be with you in a minute."

Nipper, who had been with Lee, stood at the top of the stairs, and a terrible uneasiness assailed him. Lee had gone down into the hall—and somewhere there something lurked—

Nelson Lee was full of suspicion as he went rapidly round the hall. He was ready, too, to fight, should the occasion arise. But there was nothing for him to fight.

The great hall was peaceful and quiet.

The fire had burned so low that only a few embers remained. And when Nelson Lee went round from door to door, he found that all the sealed threads were intact. Not one was broken—or even disturbed. The other threads—which he had placed across the passages—were the same.

It was a bit of a staggerer.

Something had been in the hall, for the heavy object could not have been thrown up upon the landing. But how had that "something" entered and made its exit?

Nelson Lee looked round, and his eyes opened wider. Something was missing. The enormously heavy antique log-box, which had stood near the great fireplace, was no longer there. Nelson Lee had admired that box earlier. It was a thing of exquisite carving, of solid oak, and was hundreds of years old.

"Upon my word!" muttered Lee, more startled than he could say.

He looked up at the great gap in the banisters at the top of the landing; then he hurried upstairs. A quick search proved that the threads had not been broken—with the exception of one. This one had been struck by the falling box.

"Was anybody near when this happened?" asked Lee, looking round.

"I was, sir," replied Reggie Pitt.

"Thank Heaven you were not struck," said Lee. "If this box had hit you, my boy, you would have been killed."

"But how could it have got here, guv'nor?" asked Nipper. "Look at it! It's a bit damaged, but it's still practically whole. No one man could have thrown this thing up from the hall."

The box lay on its side; close by were several logs which had rolled out upon impact. And all round were the fragments of the smashed banisters.

"Well, it's a rum go," said Handforth, scratching his head. "That box must weigh over a hundredweight. A man might have lifted it, but he couldn't have thrown it up here."

"But something threw it!" said Church, with a shiver.

"It—it might be lurking about even now," whispered one of the girls. "Oh, it's a dreadful house! We ought to have left last night!"

She and many of the others were thinking of that extraordinary happening in the drawing-room—when the door had been burst down by an enormous unnameable thing.

Nelson Lee was looking grave—but he was as level-headed as ever.

"We can do nothing to-night," he said, looking round. "I think you had better all go back to your beds—and, if possible, sleep. And in the morning we can make a very thorough examination of the whole house."

"Don't you think we'd better all stay up, Mr. Lee?" asked Mary Summers. "Wouldn't it be better for us to get dressed, and then go down into the drawing-room, with plenty of lights on? We could have the gramophone, and we should all be together—"

"Yes, rather!" said Church eagerly. "Let's do that!"

"But it is not much after one o'clock," protested Nelson Lee. "You boys and girls must get your sleep. Don't worry too much about this. Nothing had happened in any of the bed-rooms; you'll be safe enough there. Far better go back to bed."

In the end he persuaded them, and soon the house was quiet again. Irene Manners and Winnie Pitt had gone into Lady Bowers' room to assure the hostess that there was no need for alarm.

Handforth insisted upon dressing—and he made Church and McClure dress, too.

"We're not going to sleep any more!" he growled. "We'll join the others. The more guards, the better."

And for once Church and McClure did not object. They were not keen on getting back into bed. Church, in particular, was nervous. He felt that there was something "funny" about the bed. But he said nothing, for fear of being ridiculed.

Out in the corridor Handforth soon made his presence known by his voice—which he thoughtlessly refrained from lowering. And one of the first results was the appearance of Willy and his two henchmen.

"Not going back to bed, Ted?" asked Willy briskly.

"No. Church and Mac and I are going to watch."

"Good!" said Willy. "Then we'll bag your bed-room again."

"Now, look here, you young ass—"

"Don't be a dog in the manger, Ted!" said Willy severely. "When you three chaps want to turn in, we'll turn out. It'll be our time for watching then, anyhow."

Handforth could not very well raise any objections, and Willy & Co., triumphant, climbed back into the big four-poster bed. As Willy explained, it was far more comfortable than the bed he had been occupying.

And so, at last, the strange house once again settled down into quietness.

And Nelson Lee, grim and thoughtful, knew that he was up against one of the most baffling problems of his career.



The mighty African found himself picked up in the ghostly embrace of a huge, vague shape and sent crashing to the ground. "N'Kose, my master," shouted Umlosi. "What monstrous evil spirit has got me?"

BOOM—BOOM!

Two o'clock chimed, and Forest House remained undisturbed. The minutes slipped away; the quarter chimed; then the half. The night was slowly slipping away.

Yet the guards were not reassured. The very silence, the absence of any fresh development, was like some brooding menace. The boys had a feeling—which they all shared—that some ghastly thing was waiting beyond them in the darkness, laughing at them, mocking at them—waiting to create further destruction when the impish fancy took it.

In many of the bed-rooms the young people did not sleep.

Some of the girls, reluctant to tell the boys that they were nervous, actually dressed.

"Better be ready for emergencies," said Doris Berkeley. "In a house like this, you never know what's going to happen! We might have to run out into the snow at any minute—and we need to be wearing something heavier than our flimsy nighties and pyjamas."

So they dressed—even to their strong, outdoor shoes. And, having dressed, they made up the fire and sat round in chairs. Curiously enough, the girls in the other bed-rooms did exactly the same—although no word had passed between them. Some of them had

gone back to bed at first, trying to sleep, but they gave it up.

And when they were dressed, and sitting round the fires, they felt so much more secure, so much easier in mind, that most of them soon dozed off in the chairs and slept soundly. So, on the whole, it was a good move.

Some of the boys, in the other corridor, did very much the same thing.

But Willy & Co., the youngest members of the party, slept like tops in the great four-poster bed. Heath and Lemon were not made of the same stuff as Willy; and, but for his leadership, they would have kept awake, nervous and shaky. But Willy scoffed at ghosts, he ridiculed them, and he pointed out that they would be good-for-nothing in the morning unless they had some sleep.

And his influence worked wonders. His chums fell into a healthy slumber—and Willy, finding them asleep, snuggled down and joined them.

It was just after two-thirty when the thing happened.

The house was silent, except for a slight whispering which had arisen. Now and again it rose somewhat, until it moaned and whistled round the old gables. And in the bed-room occupied by Willy & Co. a few faint beams of moonlight were streaming across the floor.

Willy was the first to awaken. He experienced a sensation which was extraordinary like that of a ship in motion. It seemed to him that the great bed was swaying, or rocking.

"You're dreaming!" he muttered impatiently.

He sat up and stared round. He could faintly see Heath and Lemon, asleep beside him. And Willy's heart suddenly raced. For the bed was creaking ominously, as though under a great strain. Willy had all his wits about him now, and he knew that he was awake. The bed was actually rocking! He could see the bottom of it rising up and down.

And yet there was nothing near it. The dim moonlight was sufficient to show Willy the various objects of furniture in the room; and he could distinguish the clear spaces.

Suddenly the bed rocked more violently, the bottom of it was jerked upwards for over a foot, and Willy was pitched backwards.

Crash!

The foot of the bed dropped to the floor with such a tremendous noise that Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon sat up, blinking and gasping.

"What—what was that?" asked Chubby, staring round. "I say! Here, Willy—"

"All right—I'm awake!" snapped Willy. "There's something funny going on! Somebody is monkeying with the bed!"

"Wha-a-a-t!" gurgled Juicy Lemon.

They wanted to leap out, but the bed was now rising up and down alarmingly, and all they could do was to clutch at anything they could lay their hands on.

"Help!" yelled Chubby Heath wildly. "Mr. Lee! Hi, help!"

Willy leaned far over the side of the bed, doubling himself. He jerked at the valance and pulled it aside. He was full of suspicions.

"Crumbs!" he ejaculated, with a gulp.

For as the bed suddenly rocked upwards again, he could see right beneath it. He had a momentary glimpse of the floor. And nothing was there! It had occurred to Willy that the rocking was being caused by some trickster under the bed. But that explanation was obviously wrong.

Footsteps could be heard in the passage—and voices, too. And the great four-poster was still rocking and swaying and heaving.

Then, abruptly, with a loud groaning of strained woodwork, the whole bed was heaved up on its end, and with a thunderous crash it went over. The three occupants were flung in a disordered heap with the bedclothes.

The door burst open, lights flooded on, and Nelson Lee stood there—and close behind him Nipper, Handforth, and some of the other fellows, and their faces were white. Whispering voices sounded in the background, and Irene & Co., attracted by the commotion, pressed nearer.

"What on earth——" began Nelson Lee.

He strode forward. In the brilliant light he could see the overturned bed and the struggling mass of humanity on the floor. Lee and the boys had entered the room just for a second after the crash had occurred; there had certainly been no time for any possible intruder to escape by the window. It was palpably impossible that he could have escaped by the door.

"Help—help!" yelled Lemon, as, in a dire panic, he wrestled with the bedclothes.

"Steady, young 'un!" said Lee, pulling the bedclothes free.

"The ghost—the ghost!" gasped Lemon.

"It—it was here, sir!"

"All right—all right!" said Lee soothingly. "You're safe enough now, Lemon. Pull yourself together, my boy!"

Lemon gulped; and Chubby Heath, who had been nearly as panic-stricken, was equally steadied by Nelson Lee's presence.

"It was awful, sir," muttered Chubby. "The bed was grabbed by some horrid monster——"

"You saw it?" asked Lee sharply.

"Well, sir, I'm not sure——"

"Don't take any notice of him!" interrupted Willy gruffly. "We saw nothing, sir—nothing at all. I was awake first, and I found the bed rocking up and down."

"Oh, my goodness!" came a chorus from the doorway.

"Runny sensation," went on Willy. "Then the bed gave a heave—and there wasn't a soul near it—I'll swear that, sir."

"Might have been somebody underneath——" began Nipper.

"There wasn't—I looked," said Willy. "There was just enough moonlight for me to see that there was no living thing anywhere near the bed. Then it heaved up on its end, and we were chucked in all directions."

"It—it was just as though some unseen thing—some ghostly monstrosity—had grabbed the bed at the foot, and had jerked it," said Chubby Heath, with a shiver. "Oh, my only hat!—I—I'm not going to sleep any more in this beastly house! It's haunted right enough!"

Nelson Lee looked at the bed, and he pursed his lips. That bed was enormously heavy—far beyond the power of any ordinary man to seize it and upset it. And there had been no man in this room, anyhow!

Lee walked across to the windows, and found that they were all securely fastened. He examined the bed, but there was no trickery about it, it was just an ordinary antique bedstead, fitted with a modern spring and mattress.

Another grim manifestation—and no explanation!

Everybody was scared now, and everybody was determined that there should be no more sleep that night.

The horrors of Forest House were getting on their nerves.

CHAPTER 4.

The Apparition.

EVERYBODY had collected in the bedroom, or out in the corridor, near by. In fact, all the occupants of the house, with the single exception of Lady Bowers, crowded there.

Nelson Lee noted that the girls were fully dressed, but he made no comment. He was glad to find that all the young people, after the first excitement, had calmed down. More than anything else, Lee wished to avoid a panic.

"It is very disturbing," he said quietly. "If only we could find some little clue—something which would give us a line to work upon—it would be different. But these singular things keep happening, one after the other. And we cannot account for them."

"This business of the rocking bed is a knock-out," said Handforth, giving his minor a suspicious look. "Are you quite sure, Willy, that you and your pals weren't playing one of your silly tricks?"

Nelson Lee had thought of this explanation, too; but the wild terror of Juicy Lemon and Chubby Heath had been real, and Lee had quickly dismissed the suspicion.

"If you can't say anything more sensible than that, Ted, you'd better dry up!" said Willy tartly.

"Look here——"

"Aren't things bad enough in this house already?" went on Willy warmly. "Do you think I would deliberately play a fool trick, and try to scare people? I can only tell you that the bed started rocking, and then it turned upside down. And nobody was near it—nobody visible, anyway. It's a mystery."

"Let's get downstairs," said somebody. "I believe the house is really haunted. These awful things are happening everywhere."

"Why not collect in the kitchen?" asked one of the girls. "We shall be near the food there, and we can make some hot cocoa or something, and some of us can prepare some sandwiches."

"That's not a bad idea," said Nelson Lee approvingly.

He felt that such a thing would help to steady the nerves of the party. Nelson Lee was thankful that he had come—for he had a feeling that it was his presence that was preventing the young people from open panic. It was a strange situation. He had come down to please Nipper—to join the Christmas party. And he had plunged right into this!

"Well, come on!" he said briskly. "I'll lead the way. It's no good saying that nothing else is likely to happen, because there's no telling——"

He broke off abruptly. He had reached the corridor by now, and was, in fact, leading the party towards the landing. And he was checked by the sound of a sudden laugh—a low, mocking laugh, which came from the landing ahead.

"Who is that?" asked Lee sharply.

The others caught their breath in. Was this to be another ghostly manifestation?

"Look, gov'nor!" muttered Nipper, who was by the detective's side.

Nelson Lee started. A figure was visible on the landing—right in the gap which had been broken by the log-box. It had not been there a second before; and Lee was ready to swear that the figure had not walked along the landing from the staircase. It had suddenly appeared from below, from the black void of the hall.

And even Nelson Lee felt a curious tingling sensation running down his spine. For that figure, visible in the faint moonlight, which streamed upon the landing, was weird enough. It was the figure of an old man in flowing robes, with a white beard, and wearing a quaint, conical hat. In a word, the figure of an old-time astrologer or alchemist.

"It's—it's Nerki!" ejaculated Handforth, with a gulp.

"Keep back, all of you!" said the soft, cultured voice of Professor Ivan Nerki. "It is unsafe for you to approach."

"Leave this to me, boys and girls—please," said Lee earnestly.

They were ready enough to hang back, for there seemed to be something unnatural—something of the apparition, about the figure of Nerki. Nelson Lee strode forward alone, until he was within a few paces.

"Stay!" commanded the figure. "You will come nearer, my friend, at your peril."

"Who are you, and how did you get into this house?" demanded Nelson Lee grimly.

"I find a difficulty in answering both questions," said the figure. "I only go where my physical self projects me. For I am not physical. To the eye of the normal human being, no doubt, I appear to be material enough; but I am the astral phantasm of Professor Ivan Nerki."

There was a dead silence; the boys found many of the girls clinging to them.

"I see!" said Nelson Lee ominously. "If I were to take my automatic pistol and shoot you through the heart, you would suffer no ill effect?"

The figure of Nerki laughed.

"No harm would come to me; but my material self, which sleeps quietly at home, would undoubtedly awaken with a great pain in the heart. For Nerki sleeps, and I am here to warn you to leave this house. It is the abiding place of a deadly elemental; a semi-materialised phantasm of the dead which can take life, and which can create terrible destruction."

"You seem to know quite a lot," said Lee dryly.

"I know that the presence of unbelievers in this house is dangerous," replied the figure of Nerki. "The life of Lady Bowers is endangered."

"Why should our presence here endanger her life?"

"Because you have aroused the enmity, the fury, of the elemental which haunts the dwell-

ing," replied the other. "Lady Bowers is a believer, and no harm can befall her whilst I grant her my protection. But even I, with all my great knowledge of black magic and sorcery and the occult, can do nothing until Lady Bowers is left in peace and solitude."

"In other words, you would drive us all out?" asked Lee.

"The evil spirit of this house grows angrier and angrier," replied the figure. "So far it has been content to wreak destruction. But it will become more violent. In Nerki's name I am warning you. Go! Everybody—go! Leave as soon as daylight comes, and Lady Eustacia Bowers will no longer be troubled. For the powers of black magic, as exercised by my material self, will protect her from the elemental phantasm."

"It sounds very impressive, my friend," said Lee gruffly. "I am not a ghost-hunter, and in such an investigation as this I may be a mere child. But I know something of the hunting of tricksters—and crooks."

"Yes, by George!" came a shout from Handforth. "You can't fool Mr. Nelson Lee with your fake dodges!"

The figure of Nerki leaned forward, and an evil expression came upon the lined, bearded face.

"You will go!" he said fiercely. "I have been sent to tell you—to warn you—"

"I think I'll have a closer look at you, Professor Nerki!" cut in Lee abruptly.

He leapt forward as he spoke, striding slightly sideways in order to prevent Nerki from running down the stairs. But the figure made no such attempt.

That some mocking laugh came from him, and he took a quick step backwards—a leap, in fact. Backwards he plunged down into the deep well of the hall—down to the hard stone flags of the floor. Even Nelson Lee was momentarily taken aback.

The detective halted. Everybody stood stock still. They all waited, in fact—waited to hear the crashing thud as Nerki struck the floor.

But there was nothing.

There was no sound of Nerki striking that stone floor!

Nelson Lee had leapt to the banister rail by now, and his powerful torchlight was flashing. He was grimly determined to see what had happened. But even as he leaned over the balustrade a choking puff of yellowish vapour rose from the hall below, enveloping him, half-blinding him.

Handforth and Nipper and many of the others had run up, too; they had seen the vapour rising in a cloud as Nerki had fallen. It formed a veritable fog, so that when they stared downwards they could see nothing.

"By Heaven!" muttered Nelson Lee, aghast.

"Sulphur!" gurgled Handforth. "And—and they say that devils leave a trail of sulphur—"

He broke off, his very thoughts too fantastic to continue.

Nelson Lee, with a full knowledge of the cunning tricks which the brain of man can devise, was rushing downstairs. There was something horribly supernatural in this whole business; yet Lee's sound common sense told him that there must be some material explanation. It was incredible that a living man could have leapt backwards from the landing and landed in the hall without making a sound. But that cloud of sulphur smoke aroused Lee's deepest suspicions. It was such an effective trick to blind the light from an electric torch. Yet, on the other hand, it was suggestive of demons, too. Had it been the vapour of an ordinary smoke bomb, Lee would have been convinced. But sulphur— Besides, there had been no report, no sound of anything.

"Stay up there, everybody!" shouted Nelson Lee.

He ran across the hall, and one hand was gripping his automatic pistol. He was ready for real trouble now. But nothing happened. He reached the light switches and he pressed them down.

He was half prepared to find that they would not work. But they did. The full lights of the hall flooded on; and there, hanging in the air near the landing, was the cloud of yellowish sulphur vapour.

The hall itself was quiet, empty.

"This is getting absurd," muttered Lee, almost savagely.

The boys and girls crowded to the balustrade, leaning over. They watched Nelson Lee as he went from door to door, examining the sealed threads. And Lee was just as careful to see that the threads across the passages were not touched.

"Intact—all of them!" they heard him mutter. "This is extraordinary!"

He stood looking round, with a frown on his face. He examined the spot on the floor where Nerki should have struck, after he had leapt backwards. Then the detective walked round the hall, and it was obvious that he was startled.

"It was a ghost—a real ghost!" muttered Church, his voice hoarse. "Oh, why do we keep up this farce? Why are we fooling ourselves?"

"Cheese it, you ass!" said Handforth sharply.

"I'm not going to be quiet any longer!" shouted Church. "I'm only saying what most of you chaps are thinking. Yes, and the girls, too! This house is really haunted!"

There were many who muttered their agreement.

"Nerki was right all along," put in Tommy Watson. "We scoffed at him and called him a fake—but he knew what he was talking about. He warned us not to come to Forest House. Let's all clear out. What does it matter about the snow? We can find shelter somewhere."

"Yes, yes, let's clear out while we're safe!"

There was a rush for the stairs, and the panic seemed to spread. Even Handforth was caught in the terror of it, and a sudden

overwhelming desire to flee from this house possessed him.

Normally, the young people would not have acted in this way. But they were overtired; they had had scarcely any sleep; and the experiences of this night had unnerved them.

"Stop!"

Nelson Lee spoke sternly—sharply. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs, facing the oncoming crowd.

"This won't do," he went on. "I don't blame you for having this touch of hysterics—but you've got to calm down now. Leave Forest House to-morrow if you like—but it would be madness to go out into the snow at this hour. The roads are more or less choked, and you would get lost. Haunting, or no haunting, you must stay here."

His words had the desired effect, and the boys and girls—especially those who had been most panicky—looked rather shamefaced.

"If it wasn't a ghost, sir, how did it get away?" asked Tommy Watson bluntly.

"I don't know."

"How did it land on the hall floor without making any sound?"

"I don't know."

"And what about the bed that turned upside down, sir?"

"I cannot give you the explanation of that, either," replied Lee. "But I will tell you this much. I am convinced that everything has been accomplished by means of ingenious trickery. I will not accept the supernatural explanation."

"But what other explanation is there, sir?" asked Church. "You don't know how the tricks were done—and it seems to me that no living thing could have performed such tricks."

"Have you ever been to an illusionist's show?" asked Nelson Lee somewhat grimly. "Have you ever been, for example, to Maskelyne's?"

"Why, yes, of course, sir," said Church.

"Can you tell me how the illusions were accomplished?" asked Lee. "Can you tell me how a young lady can be placed in a padlocked chest, which is itself suspended on a rope—and within one minute the chest is empty?"

"But—but that's one of the secrets of the conjurers, sir," said Church.

"Exactly!" snapped Lee. "You don't know how it was done, do you? You don't know how any of those brilliant, baffling tricks were done, but you don't come away from Maskelyne's saying that they are dabblers in sorcery, and that they can produce ghosts! No; you are very satisfied because you have had your money's worth, and you enjoy being baffled. If you weren't baffled, the show wouldn't be worth a penny!"

The boys and girls were silent—and strangely calmed.

"We see nothing here of a suspicious nature," went on Lee, indicating the hall with a sweep of his hand. "And we are baffled.

But there is no whit of evidence that there has been any supernatural agency at work. It is my intention to stay here, to probe this mystery—to investigate it until I arrive at the solution. To-morrow you youngsters can go home if you want to—but I shall remain."

"By jingo, and so will I, sir!" shouted Nipper.

"Me, too!" exclaimed Handforth. "I'm not going to bolt!"

"Nobody will bolt, Handforth," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "If some of the others care to cut their visit short, all well and good. But, for the moment, let's think of hot cocoa and sandwiches. Come along—I'll lead the way to the kitchen. We'll close all the doors and light the place as brilliantly as we can, and we shall soon be feeling heaps better."

The famous detective's cheeriness, his personality, soon made an amazing difference. The boys and girls were already affected by Nelson Lee's sound arguments. And hot cocoa and some food made a still greater difference.

Nothing happened in the kitchen—nothing to cause further alarm. Some of the young people started a sort of sing-song, and then the others joined in, and they made themselves thoroughly tired.

Quite a few fell asleep as they sat, and so, in this way, the rest of the night passed.

When dawn came they all looked very much washed out, but with the coming of the daylight, everybody seemed to understand that there could be no more manifestations. Ghosts did not work in daylight—neither did tricksters.

So, at length, everybody went off to bed again—this time to sleep peacefully and soundly.

THERE were two people, at least, who were awake and alert; for the great front door was pulled open, and Nelson Lee and Nipper, in thick boots and heavy overcoats, emerged upon the snow-smothered doorstep.

"I didn't want you to come, young 'un," said Lee. "You ought to be sleeping."

"I've had three hours, sir, and that's plenty," said Nipper. "I'm as keen as mustard to have a look round—with you!"

All the other guests were still sound asleep, and Lee had no intention of disturbing them until twelve o'clock at the earliest. It was very necessary that they should have a good, healthy sleep.

"Boxing Day!" said Nipper with a grin. "Well, it'll be the rummiest Boxing Day I've ever spent! Snowbound in an old mansion in the New Forest, and there's not a servant in the house or within miles. The girls have offered to do the cooking and the table-setting and the washing-up, and all that sort of thing, but I'm not sure how they'll take it now. Last night they decided to rally round Archie and his aunt."

"If they don't rally round Lady Bowers will be left in a very unfortunate position," said Lee. "There's very little chance of getting any servants to-day. But, somehow, Nipper, I think the young ladies will have changed their minds when they get up. I know them pretty well—and they're level-headed and plucky."

The view from the front door was charming—a winter scene such as is pictured on Christmas cards. There had been a great deal of snow during the night—although it had ceased falling about two o'clock, and there had been none since. The snow lay in an unbroken carpet in all directions. Here and there hedges and bushes lifted their summits out of the white blanket. The drive, the terraces, and the lawns were smooth with pure, virgin snow. In places there were small drifts, and over the whole scene there was a complete silence, broken only by the cheerful twittering of some birds in the neighbouring trees.

"Well, it looks jolly enough," said Nipper with a sigh. "Pity everything is so different at night. We ought to be able to get some ripping sport this afternoon—tobogganing down the slopes."

"It will do the young people good," said Lee, nodding. "Plenty of open air sport. It will tire them out. If they decide to remain, I'll have more company here by the evening, too, and we'll take some extra precautions and make some add preparations."

"Well, if anybody came near this house last night—and got away from it—there'll be footprints," said Nipper. "Look at mine! They're six inches deep. There's been a tremendous fall of snow, guv'nor. Even if somebody came at about midnight, before the snow stopped falling, the footprints could not possibly have been smothered in the time."

"If there are any tracks at all, we shall find them," replied Lee. "And I propose now that we make a complete circuit of the house itself. After that, we'll take the out-buildings. Come along. We'll stick to the terrace here—and we'll keep as close to the house as possible."

They made the circuit, and Nelson Lee's eyes were active. He not only explored every foot of the snow, but he looked at the walls, the trees which grew near the house—the base of those same trees. He looked everywhere for some sign of possible intruders.

But he drew a complete blank.

The snow all round Forest House was untouched, unbroken. And one thing became absolutely clear from this early-morning tour.

No human thing had visited the old mansion during the night. There were half-buried footprints leading to the terrace from the drive—but Nelson Lee had made those footprints himself. There were none others.

If the figure of Nerki had been of flesh and blood, then how could he gain admittance into the house—and how had he escaped?

CHAPTER 5.

Nerki's Second Warning

"WHAT about secret passages, guv'nor?" asked Nipper suddenly.

"You seem to be something of a thought-reader," replied Lee, with a smile. "I was just thinking of the same thing—but don't count on it, young 'un. Somehow, I don't think there are any secret passages in this house. It's old, but it's not like an ancient castle. However, we'll come to that later. I intend to measure up all the rooms—the hall, particularly. Before dusk I shall know whether there are any secret passages or not."

"What are we going to do now?"

"I think we'll make for the road, and if it is at all possible, we'll go along to the home of Professor Ivan Nerki," replied Nelson Lee. "You can come with me if you like—"

"I do like, guv'nor," said Nipper promptly.

It was something of a fight to reach the road, for, in places, the snow had drifted very deep. But once on the road itself, the going was easier. And as the pair plunged on, Nelson Lee kept his eyes very wide open. He took stock of the general lie of the land—he noted every turn and twist of the quiet, rural road. There had been no traffic this morning; there was not a footprint or a wheelmark to be seen.

"By Jove, guv'nor, we might be in a wilderness, for all the signs of life we can see," said Nipper, when they had mounted to the top of a wooded rise, and could see beyond. "Look at that scene there! Miles and miles of snow and trees. I never realised that there was such a lonely place as this in the South of England."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"It isn't quite so lonely as it looks," he replied. "There are many isolated cottages and other dwellings by the clumps of trees. In the landscape we are now viewing there must be many families living. Snowbound, most of them, I've no doubt, poor beggars. Let's hope they had plentiful supplies of food in their cupboards. This, I presume, is the home of our mutual friend, Professor Nerki?"

He was indicating a squat, ugly dwelling, which peeped from some trees comparatively near at hand.

"That's the place, sir," said Nipper. "There's no real garden—no hedges round it, or fences, or anything. There's a rough track, leading from the road to the house—but it's all snow-covered now, and I don't even know where it begins."

"The professor believes in his comfort," commented Lee. "The smoke rising from the chimney indicates a cosy fire. Well, we might as well pay a bold visit. I have no doubt that we have already been seen."

As they approached the house, Nelson Lee pretended to lose his bearings now and again. As a matter of fact, he was zig-zagging to

a certain extent, so that he could obtain a view of all the snow-covered ground which surrounded Nerki's house. And Nelson Lee was soon satisfied that the snow was unbroken in every direction. He found no tell-tale trail of footprints. The inhabitants of this house had certainly not left it during the night—unless they had walked over the snow without leaving any tracks. And that was impossible.

Satisfied on this point, Lee approached the front door, and in response to his knock, the door was opened by a quietly-dressed little man of middle age.

"I have no appointment," said Nelson Lee, "but I am wondering if Professor Nerki would be courteous enough to receive me?"

He handed his card to the man, who took it gravely.

"If you will come in and wait, sir, I will take your card to the master," he said. "A rare wintry morning, gentlemen," he added. "An old-fashioned Christmas, and no mistake."

He escorted them across a carpeted lobby into a comfortable waiting-room, where a cheery fire burned. Then he quietly retired, closing the door after him.

"Well, everything is respectable enough —" began Nipper.

But he paused as he saw the quick, warning look in Nelson Lee's eyes. And he immediately understood.

This was the house of Nerki, the Sorcerer!

It was, in fact, the home of a magician, and it was more than likely that the walls of the waiting-room were provided with cunningly hidden spyholes—and even microphones, so that every word spoken in that apparently private room could be overheard.

Nelson Lee had exposed more than one fake spiritualist, and in every case he had found the innocent-looking waiting-rooms of these people to be full of hidden surprises.

"I'm not sure that you ought to be here, Nipper," said Lee, giving the lad a straight look. "After the disgraceful manner in which you and your friends handled Professor Nerki, he is hardly likely to give you a welcome."

Nipper took his cue.

"Well, we thought that Nerki was a fraud —"

"No, no! That won't do!" interrupted Lee sharply. "There has been no whit of evidence that Professor Nerki is a trickster. People say that he is a psychic of amazing brilliance. My own mind is quite open. I cannot help thinking that you and your young friends acted in a very high-handed manner—and I even think that you should apologise to the professor, if he is gracious enough to admit you into his presence."

"I don't see why I should, guv'nor—" began Nipper.

"Then I do," said Lee sharply. "The terrible things which have happened at Forest House are the direct result of your scandalous duping of Lady Bowers. She came here, expecting to interview Professor Nerki.

She interviewed you—you tooled her, tricked her. Upon my word, Nipper. I am almost prepared to believe that the manifestations are the result of your folly. I am not one of those dogmatic people who bluntly declare that ghosts are impossible. I am willing to be convinced."

"All right, sir!" growled Nipper. "No need to rag me any more."

He knew that this conversation was being deliberately "worked" by Lee. And never once did the detective look round the room searchingly or inquisitively. He sat comfortably in his chair, with half-closed eyes, and with a frown of annoyance on his face. And Nipper was thrilled. Perhaps the eyes of a spy were watching them from some hidden crevice; perhaps every word they uttered was being conveyed to the ears of Nerki. Nelson Lee was taking no chances.

And if he and Nipper could be heard, he intended to convey the impression that he was angry with Nipper, and he was, in fact, prepared to accept the view that the manifestations at Forest House had been purely occult.

The door quietly opened, and the manservant appeared.

"My master will receive you, gentlemen," he said quietly.

Lee and Nipper rose to their feet, and followed the man across the carpeted lobby, and into the room which Nipper mentally thought of as "the chamber of horrors." But he was in for a surprise this morning.

The domed roof of the apartment still showed all the signs of the Zodiac; but there were no longer any black curtains hanging from the walls; it was not a room of mystery.

It proved to be, in fact, a very ordinary, comfortable sitting-room tastefully furnished. There was the brazier still, and it was glowing as before. Nerki sat behind it, dressed in a warm dressing-gown and a smoking-cap. The window was curtained—cunningly curtained, as Lee quickly observed. The daylight fell full upon the visitors, while Nerki himself remained with his back to the light, in shadow. It was a favourite dodge of mystery men.

"Be seated, Mr. Lee, I beg of you," said Nerki quietly. "I welcome you into my humble home; but I must be frank and say that I cannot extend the same welcome to your young companion."

"I am sorry if he has annoyed you in any way, professor," said Lee, when he sat down.

"I am not annoyed," replied Nerki, shaking his head. "I am merely saddened. I deeply regret that the lad should have played such a despicable trick. It was, indeed, an outrage. I am not a vindictive man, and I have long since forgiven him. He and his young friends acted foolishly, perhaps, but I do not doubt that they believed they were helping Lady Bowers. But I have reason to think that their efforts have brought much trouble upon her ladyship."

"I am sorry, professor," said Nipper earnestly. "I am beginning to think that

you are right. Awful things have happened at Forest House—things which cannot be explained. I hope you will forgive me for what we did.”

Nerki waved a lean hand.

“Say no more, my boy,” he said kindly. “Your repentance is gratifying to me. I am happy to know that you have been convinced.”

Nipper was not convinced—but he looked it.

Nelson Lee was acting his part, too; he was regarding Nerki without the slightest indication of suspicion. Yet, actually, the detective was giving the mystic a very close and searching scrutiny. And there was not the slightest doubt that this man in the chair was the man who had appeared on the landing of Forest House during the night.

“We have met before, Professor Nerki, I think?” said Lee suddenly.

“You are wrong, sir,” replied the professor. “I have heard of you, yes. Who has not? But until this morning I have not had the pleasure of your acquaintance.”

“Yet we met in Forest House during the night.”

“No; I slept very soundly during the night,” replied Nerki. “I retired at ten o’clock, and did not rise until seven this morning. I believe in the old adage—early to bed and early to rise. Out here in the forest, it suits me.”

He waved a hand towards the window and laughed softly.

“You have seen the snow?” he went on. “Surely, Mr. Lee, you must know that I could not have left this house during the night. I do not claim to be anything but material, although the power of seeing into the astral spaces has been granted me. And if I had left the house my footprints would be plain enough.”

“Then I am quite baffled,” said Lee, shaking his head. “I saw you, or somebody extraordinarily like you, in Forest House during the early hours of the morning. The voice was yours—the figure was yours. It could not have been a ghost. I will admit that my knowledge of the occult is limited, but I have never known that there should be a ghost of a living man.”

Nerki leaned forward.

“It was not a ghost you saw, Mr. Lee,” he replied impressively. “It was the figure of my astral self. During the night I dreamed. Yes, I dreamed vividly. I have been greatly worried concerning Lady Bowers, for I know that there is grave danger at Forest House. And I dreamed that I was in that house, and that I saw the terrible elemental which is haunting the place.”

“I am not doubting your word, Professor

Nerki,” said Lee quietly. “Do not think for a moment that I am questioning your sincerity. But I am convinced, nevertheless, that you are wrong. There is no elemental in Forest House. A trickster, perhaps—a clever man who is faking all manner of occult manifestations. But I do not admit of—”

“You must—you must!” broke in Nerki almost angrily. “In Heaven’s name, Mr. Lee, this thing is serious. I am warning you that Lady Bowers will not be safe until her guests leave. This vile phantasm which haunts the house is angry. It will not be



In spite of their terrifying experiences at the haunted house enjoy themselves in a glorious snowfall, little dreaming what

content with smashing furniture for long. It will take life. There is hideous danger for you, and for everybody else in that house, with the exception of Lady Bowers.”

“That is your opinion, Professor Nerki,” replied Lee. “I have another opinion. And I intend to remain at Forest House until I have probed this mystery to the bottom.”

“Then you are as bad as your young friend!” said Nerki harshly. “You are an unbeliever.”

“Yes—and I shall continue to be an unbeliever until I am convinced,” replied Lee. “It seems, that there is no object to be gained by a continuation of this interview. Therefore, Professor Nerki, I will bid you good-morning.”

"Wait!" urged the mystic. "Do you actually know of what happened in that house during the night?"

"I do."

"You know of the smashing of the furniture, and the hurling of the log-box, and of everything else which took place?"

"Yes."

"And you still suspect trickery?"

"I not only suspect trickery, but I am convinced of trickery," replied Lee quietly. "And it would interest me to learn, Professor, how you knew of the exact nature of

"I am appalled," said Nerki. "In face of these convincing happenings, you still disbelieve!"

"I am a practical man, professor—with a practical mind."

"That is just your trouble," replied Nerki. "You speak of tricksters. How could they escape from the house? Did you not look round the house for footprints?"

"Yes."

"And you found some?"

"I found none."

"And what is your theory?"

"Perhaps I have no theory," replied Lee, rising to his feet. "All I have to say to you, Professor Nerki, is this: please do not worry yourself about Lady Bowers any longer. She will be quite safe in my charge. She has many friends at Forest House—friends who will stand by her through the coming night—"

"There you are wrong," broke in Nerki. "The young people are leaving to-day."

"What makes you think that?"

"The events of last night so frightened them—"

"A healthy sleep and some brisk exercise in the wintry sunshine will make a great difference," said Lee gently. "Take it from me, Nerki—they will stay. And if any tricksters come to-night they will find us prepared."

He left abruptly, before Professor Nerki could say anything further. And Nelson Lee made no comment until he and Nipper were well away from the house, and were, in fact, plunging through the snow on the road.

"That was a rummy interview, gav'nor," said Nipper.

"Very."

"Well, what does it mean?"

"My object was to throw down the gauntlet to Nerki," replied Nelson Lee with satisfaction. "I was careful to assure him that I was not questioning his sincerity. But he knew how much to believe that. Did you notice that he was positively alarmed towards the end?"

"Yes, sir—but why?"

"Because he had been congratulating himself upon the success of his methods," replied Lee grimly. "He thought that everybody would take fright to-day. And I showed him that he was wrong—that the party would still be intact to-night. It must be intact, too, Nipper. We are not going to allow Nerki to triumph—to regain his power over Archie's unfortunate aunt."

"Then you think that he's at the bottom of all the queer business?"

"No, I don't think," replied Lee. "I know."

"By Jove! How do you know?"



the St. Frank's juniors and their girl chums managed to at dangers awaited them with the coming of the night!

the manifestations—since you have not left your house during the night?"

Nerki waved an angry hand.

"I can see all!" he replied curtly. "Whilst I slept, my astral self left my body and was projected to Forest House. In that way I know of everything that happened. I know of the bed which rocked; and I know, too, that the three boys in that bed were very near to death. Will you believe it if I tell you that it was I who saved them?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Lee dryly. "The boys shouted for help, and I hurried to their bed-room, with many of the other boys. It was our arrival, I think, which caused the 'ghost' to desist!"

"Because I went to Nerki's house this morning to obtain proof—and I did obtain that proof," replied Lee. "Last night, quite unknown to the excellent professor, I set a trap for him, and he walked into it."

Nipper was bubbling with eagerness.

"But you told me nothing of this, guv'nor!" he protested. "What did you do? I mean, how did you trap him? And what was your proof?"

"I employed an exceedingly simple device," replied the detective. "In addition to placing sealed threads across the doorways in the hall, I sprinkled some tell-tale powder on the paved floor."

"My only hat!"

"That powder was quite invisible—and remains invisible whilst it is dry," continued Lee. "It adheres to anything it touches—as, for example, the soles of a man's shoes. But the slightest contact with dampness, the tell-tale powder leaves a vivid green stain."

"I say, that's clever, sir."

"Not at all—it is a very elementary trick," said Nelson Lee. "I did not care how many of you boys and girls trampled in the powder, for I wasn't trying to trap you, anyway. But if Nerki entered that hall, by any means, he would unquestionably go away with some of the traces of powder on his shoelather. That is the real reason for my visit here this morning."

"But Nerki was wearing slippers," said Nipper. "I particularly noticed them."

"And near the fireplace stood a pair of stout outdoor shoes," went on Lee in a satisfied voice. "It was very obliging of Professor Nerki to leave them there. Really, it was a stroke of luck for me, Nipper. You may not have noticed that I very clumsily tripped over a corner of the rug as I was about to depart, and actually staggered."

"Yes, I saw you do that, sir, but I thought nothing of it."

"But in that second I also 'accidentally' knocked against one of the outdoor shoes and tipped it over," replied Lee dryly. "And I saw the unmistakable green staining on the sole. Very slight, patchy, in fact—but it was sufficient. Nerki was in Forest House during the night—and those shoes prove it."

Nipper was full of wonder.

"Then—then it was all spoo?" he asked breathlessly. "I mean, what Nerki said. About his Astral self and—"

"Astral fiddlesticks!" interrupted Lee impatiently. "I meant Nerki to see that I was in earnest—and I issued a challenge. There ought to be some interesting developments to-night."

"By jingo, rather!" said Nipper. "But I'm all at sixes and sevens even now. How did Nerki get into the house? What about footprints?"

"There might be a secret way in, of which we know nothing," replied Lee. "We're going back now—to make a thorough, extensive search."

"All I can say is—he's a clever magician," said Nipper, almost admiringly. "How did he drop down into the well of the hall with-

out making a sound? And where did he go to?"

"At the present moment those questions are riddles."

"And what about that great log box?" went on Nipper. "We've seen Nerki—he's no Goliath. In fact, I doubt if there is anybody living who could have lifted that box and flung it on to the landing. What you are saying, guv'nor, implies that there must have been two or three men down in the hall in addition to Nerki."

"You had better refrain from further theorising, young 'un," said Lee dryly. "If you don't, you'll find yourself running into all sorts of by-ways which lead nowhere. We don't know how these things were done, but we intend to find out. Furthermore, I believe that we are up against a cunning, clever man—a criminal."

"What! You mean Nerki?"

"Archie Glenthorne is a very shrewd youngster," continued Lee thoughtfully. "His object in bringing you young people down here was to save Lady Bowers. I raise my hat to Archie. He knows that his aunt is immensely rich, and he is fond of her, too. Well, we must rally round Archie, and help him all we can. In a word, Lady Bowers has got to be saved, in spite of herself."

THEY expected to find Forest House as quiet as ever when they arrived. But a surprise awaited them.

Not only were all the young guests up and about, but Lady Eustacia Bowers herself had dressed and had come down, declaring that she was as fit as a fiddle. Most of the girls were busy preparing an impromptu breakfast, but there was no feeling of cheeriness in the air. The brightness of the winter's day had not had the expected effect. Everybody was talking of packing their bags and clearing out.

"But what's the trouble?" asked Nipper with concern, as he and Nelson Lee stood in the great hall, with Handforth and Pitt and Travers and a number of others surrounding them.

"We've had orders to quit, dear old fellows—that's all," said Travers with a shrug.

"Orders to quit?" repeated Leo.

"Absolutely!" said Archie, joining them with a long face. "I'm afraid that Aunt Eustacia has dropped a spanner into the good old works. You see, the girls have been telling her all about what happened in the night."

"Well?" said Lee.

"She was frightfully worried this morning, and she asked the dear young things to spill it—and they spilt it," explained Archie. "And Aunt Eustacia is afraid that there will be murky work to-night, and she has asked everybody to buzz off. Well, I mean, the lads and lassies can't very well stay on after the hostess has given them the boot, can they?"

"Where is Lady Bowers?" asked Lee quietly.

"Obtaining a spot of warmth in the drawing-room," replied Archie. "I've been trying to reason with her, but she won't listen. A strong-minded woman, Aunt Eustacia. I go fairly jellified at the knees when she looks me straight in the eye. A dashed unpleasant sensation, by gad!"

Nelson Lee could understand the change. Naturally, the boys and girls could not think of remaining if their hostess had requested them to leave. There was only one thing to be done—and Nelson Lee did it.

He went into the drawing-room and introduced himself.

"I knew that you were here, Mr. Lee, and I am grateful to you for all you have done," said Lady Bowers, after they had shaken hands. "I do not doubt that your presence saved my young guests from a dangerous panic. But you will see that it is quite impossible for them to remain in this house another night."

"I am afraid I do not agree with you, Lady Bowers," said Lee quietly. "If reasonable precautions are taken, no harm can come to any living person within these walls."

"But you are wrong," said Aunt Eustacia. "The powers of evil are abroad at night. This house is haunted by a destructive presence. Professor Nerki has warned me. I was foolish to allow my nephew to bring his young friends here."

Lee was rather shocked by his hostess' appearance. She was looking haggard and ill. It was not the result of the blow she had received upon her head—for that was quite superficial, and she had practically recovered from the effects of it by now. Her present condition was caused by something else. She was overwrought; she was a prey to nerves. It was clear to the detective that Lady Bowers was completely in the grip of Professor Ivan Nerki—just as Archie had said. So great a hold had the mystic obtained over her that her every thought, her every action, was influenced by him.

"Come, Lady Bowers, you must forget all this occult nonsense," said Lee quietly. "I have been told that at this hour yesterday you looked ten years younger—"

"One moment, sir," broke in Lady Bowers angrily. "How dare you? My beliefs are deep-rooted and sincere. How dare you refer to them as 'nonsense'? I greatly resent—"

"I used the word deliberately," interrupted Lee, setting himself in front of her, and looking straight into her troubled eyes. "You have allowed yourself to become a slave to this cult, Lady Bowers. It is dangerous. And I am going to tell you frankly and straightforwardly that this house is not haunted by any ghost, or, in fact, by anything at all."

"How can you say that, Mr. Lee—after what happened last night?" she asked in amazement.

"I want you to trust me," continued Lee. "I cannot, I am afraid, go into any details. But I know that you are being grievously victimised. I will mention no names—yet. You have requested your young guests to leave. And that, I think, is a mistake. For it is an admission of defeat. Would it not be better to let the boys and girls decide for themselves?"

"They will go, just the same," said Lady Bowers.

"Perhaps—and perhaps not," said Lee. "At least, give them the opportunity of choosing. Let them know that they are welcome to stay if they wish. Do not, I beg of you, turn them from your door."

"Oh, but I had no such thought!" said her ladyship in distress. "It's Christmas-time, and there should be a spirit of goodwill."

"Your request that they should leave is tantamount to an order—and an order they cannot possibly refuse to obey," said Lee. "You have left them no choice."

"But it is for their own good—"

"You really think so?" interrupted Lee. "They will go from this house—and they will know that they have run away. That is not good for the youngsters. Don't you see that they earnestly desire to help you? They came here for that very object, and now you turn them away."

Lee was brilliant. He did not argue, but he slowly but surely brought Lady Bowers round to accept his own viewpoint. More than that. His own confident personality enchanted her; it did much to combat the unhealthy influence of Professor Nerki.

Within half an hour Lady Bowers had lost her haggard expression; she was even laughing with Nelson Lee; and when Archie came into the drawing-room a little later he was utterly startled. He could hardly credit that such a change could have been wrought in so short a space of time.

"Hallo, Archie, my boy," said his aunt, smiling.

"Odds changes and miracles!" gasped Archie. "I mean to say— That is—"

"I sent for you, Archie, because I am feeling in quite a different mood," said his aunt. "Mr. Lee has cheered me up wonderfully."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie heartily. "Mr. Lee is a bit of a magician on his own, you know."

"I want you to tell all your young friends that they are perfectly at liberty to stay on, if they want to," continued Lady Bowers. "The Christmas holidays have only just started, and I should not like them to think that their vacation has been entirely spoiled."

"Good gad; I'll dash about and stop the lads and lassies from packing," said Archie. "This is frightfully good news, auntie, old dear."

He dashed out, but he found that many of the young guests were far from delighted to hear the news. The "order of the boot"

had come to them as a relief. It was a way out. They were not obliged to choose, one way or the other.

And Lady Bowers' change of attitude now left it up to them. They thought of the previous night—and they frankly feared the coming of another night.

Nelson Lee, however, came to the rescue. He assembled all the young guests in the dining-room, and he spoke to them earnestly.

"I am not in a position to give you any explanation of what took place last night," he said. "But I can tell you this much—this house is not haunted. Go if you want to—but if you remain, you need not have any fear of ghosts. I am satisfied that there are no ghosts."

"Then—then how did all those things happen last night, sir?" asked Church.

"They were faked—very cleverly faked."

"By Nerki?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"I cannot tell you that—because I have no proof," replied Lee. "But you need have

no fear of the supernatural. And to-night I shall add further guards on duty. Added precautions will be taken, too. I feel that I am up against a cunning plotter. If you all leave the house, the plotter will have scored a big victory. Indeed, it is quite likely that no further manifestations will occur—and thus I shall be robbed of my chance of trapping the scamp, whoever he is."

"We're not going, Mr. Lee," said Handforth bluntly. "We're all staying. By George, rather! What do you say, you chaps?"

"Of course!" said Church and McClure, without much enthusiasm.

But many of the girls chimed in now—and they were looking relieved and happy. It was a contagious feeling, and it spread. Within five minutes the whole party came to a decision.

It would stay—and see the adventure through.

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CHAPTER 6.

The Death Warning.

THERE was a very different feeling in the old house during luncheon—which the girls had prepared with much enthusiasm.

There had been some tobogganing earlier, and the boys had come in glowing with health. Some of the girls had been joining in the winter sports, too—they took it in turns. Everybody was feeling "Christ-massy."

And during the afternoon they all went out. They tobogganed, they sleighed, they skated; and later in the afternoon they engaged in a boisterous, exhilarating snowfight. Girls versus boys—and the girls nearly won. While it lasted it was a glorious set-to, and they all came in laughing and happy.

And while the house had been empty, Nelson Lee had been very busy.

Armed with a spring tape, he had carefully and methodically gone over the entire house. He had measured the walls of the rooms, the floors, he had been over practically every inch of the hall, and he had penetrated the cellars. There was not a foot of that house which escaped his attention.

And in the end he was forced to one certain conclusion.

There were no secret passages, there were no panels in the hall, which opened out into hidden and long-forgotten chambers.

"But there must be something, guv'nor," said Nipper, who had come home before the others, on purpose to hear Lee's report. "Nerki got into this house somehow, didn't he?"

"It's a poser, young 'un," said Lee thoughtfully. "But you can't get away from measurements. There's not a corner of this house that I have not accounted for. There is no wall thick enough to permit of an inner passage."

"Well, it's a knock-out," said Nipper, scratching his head.

"I have even measured the distance between the ceilings of one floor and the floor-boards of the other," went on Lee. "There is only sufficient room for the ordinary plaster and rafters. I do not mind confessing that I am puzzled—and just a bit worried. There is a secret somewhere, but I have not discovered it."

"What you have done, guv'nor, is to rule out any possibility of a secret passage," said Nipper. "And that's the greatest poser of all. We know that Nerki was in the hall last night, and that he could not have escaped—"

"But you are wrong there," said Lee. "Nerki could easily have escaped—by going down one of the passages into the servants' quarters."

"But you put threads across—and they were unbroken."

"Nerki may have known of them," replied Lee. "Don't forget that he was lurking about somewhere—hidden in the shadows. I

am convinced that he used some cunningly devised instrument to seize Handforth by the ankle as he was ascending the stairs. Nerki could not have escaped by entering any of the closed rooms, for he would have broken the threads. But he could have avoided the threads of the passages, and this is a big house, with many store-cupboards, many rooms which are not even used. Furthermore, Nipper, in an old house like this, you can easily enter one room, and find a communicating door at the back, which leads into an old passage, and brings you out again into the original corridor. Any man with an inward knowledge of the various rooms and passages, could dodge about in the most bewildering fashion, and remain safe practically all the time."

"You mean, the house could be searched, and pronounced empty—and yet Nerki could have been here all the time?"

"Exactly," replied Lee. "It was merely a question of Nerki's agility in dodging. But that doesn't explain how he was at home this morning—and no footprints anywhere in the snow. We're up against a tough problem, and I don't mind telling you, young 'un, that I am as keen as mustard. I am quite anxious for the night to come."

TEA was a jolly meal, and Lady Bowers herself presided. She was a different woman now. Once again, the years had apparently dropped from her. Nelson Lee's influence had worked wonders.

"I have taken the liberty of inviting two old friends of mine to come down," said Lee. "They should be here at any minute—and I think they will prove to be welcome additions to our guards to-night."

"Any friends of yours, Mr. Lee, are welcome here," said Lady Bowers graciously.

"Thank you. I have also fixed up quite a large number of auxiliary electric lights," continued the detective. "I am afraid I have raided your store-rooms rather drastically, Lady Bowers. I have used every spare lamp in the place—and almost every scrap of flex, to say nothing of lamp-holders and switches. For quite a time this afternoon I was quite an electrician."

There was plenty of evidence of the detective's work. Additional electric lights, hanging bare without shades, were apparent in several parts of the hall. They were glowing brilliantly. In the upper corridors, and on the landing, too, extra lights had been placed. But nobody knew where the switches were. Lee had concealed these cunningly—and he, in fact, was the only man who could find them at a second's notice.

"Light is the best of all weapons to be used against the kind of ghosts which haunt this house," continued Lee dryly. "And to-night we'll be brilliant."

From somewhere in the house came the ringing of a bell, and an immediate hush fell. Some of the boys and girls looked startled—for the dusk had already deepened into darkness, and with the coming of the

night nerves were not quite so strong as they had been.

"That's the front-door bell," said Lady Bowers, in some distress. "Dear me! How annoying it is to be without servants. Archie, I wonder if you would mind——"

"Oh, rather!" said Archie.

"It's all right—I'll go," said Lee, stepping to the door. "These are my two friends, I believe."

He closed the door after him, and tea went on. Archie Glenthorne and his young guests were filled with curiosity. Nobody knew who Nelson Lee's expected guests were—but Handforth, at least, suspected that they were a couple of Scotland Yard detectives. No doubt one of them was Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, who was an old friend of Lee's.

A murmur of voices could be heard from the hall; but the young guests were too polite to listen, or to pretend to listen. But they could easily guess that Nelson Lee was giving his friends a brief statement of the facts before bringing them in.

"I think it's rather a pity," Irene Manners was saying to Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple. "Still, I suppose Mr. Lee is right."

"But what is a pity?" asked Marjorie.

"Why, bringing these strangers into the house," murmured Irene. "Don't you think it will spoil our party? We all know one another so well, and I always think it makes a party lose its charm when strangers butt in. Besides, these men have only come down to act as guards during the night."

"Well, let's hope they don't spoil things," said Doris. "Perhaps we can have dancing and games this evening—and the men will be on the watch. It will be rather a comfort, you know—to think of those men patrolling up and down in the hall and on the landing."

"Yes, there's that about it," admitted Irene.

Then the door opened, and Nelson Lee appeared. With him were a smiling, youngish-looking man with a bronzed face of singular charm. The other man was a full-blooded negro of enormous proportions—over six feet in height, broad and brawny, and wearing a lounge suit with obvious discomfort.

And on the instant all those boys and girls leapt to their feet, delighted and amazed.

"Dorrie!" went up a joyous shout.

"Great Scott! And Umlosi, too!" yelled Handforth. "Well, I'm jiggered!"

"Hurrah!"

Lord Dorrimore, the famous sporting peer, grinned cheerily as he advanced into the room.

"Well, we don't seem to be unpopular, anyway," he chuckled. "Jolly glad to see you, boys and girls. I hear there's a spot of excitement down here? As soon as I heard that, I couldn't get here fast enough."

Everybody was wildly excited. Even Nipper had known nothing of this surprise, and he was overjoyed. Lord Dorrimore was, indeed, one of Nelson Lee's oldest friends—and so was the mighty Umlosi, King of Kutaland.

"Wan! I give greeting to all!" said Umlosi, showing his white teeth in a wide smile. "'Tis a joyous occasion to see so many friendly faces."

Lady Bowers was looking uncertain. She had said that she would welcome any of Nelson Lee's friends; but she had certainly not expected to throw her house open to a negro.

However, Nelson Lee quickly explained, and he introduced Umlosi with due pomp. For Umlosi was a very big man in Africa—a man of noble blood.

And suddenly Lady Bowers' face cleared.

"I am more than delighted to have you in my house, Lord Dorrimore—and you, too, King Umlosi," she said. "I was enthralled when I read of your extraordinary experiences in that strange Island of the Sargasso, some months back."

Dorrie looked troubled.

"Adventures of that kind don't come along very often," he said sadly. "By the Lord Harry! Life has been dull since then, fair lady. We learned that there is danger in this house—and that's what seemed so attractive to us, if you will forgive me for my frankness."

The party in general was enormously bucked. The very presence of Dorrie and Umlosi made all the difference. They were such old friends—and such mighty fighters, too. All the boys and girls were feeling as safe as a rock now. With Lee, Dorrie, and Umlosi in charge, what would it matter if the ghosts manifested themselves every five minutes?

"But how did you get in touch with them, guv'nor?" asked Nipper in wonder.

"I knew that Dorrie and Umlosi were in London—and when I saw a mail van passing along the snowy road this morning, I persuaded the driver to take a telegram for me," explained Nelson Lee. "I expect you had some trouble in getting down, Dorrie?"

"Not much," said his lordship. "The roads are pretty good—the main roads, I mean. It's only here, in this quiet part of the country, that the snow is at all troublesome. An', by glory, you are pretty well snowed up here, aren't you?"

"'Tis a cold and bleak land," rumbled Umlosi, shaking his head.

Only his great loyalty to his beloved "N'Kose" had brought him on this adventure. For Umlosi was a man of the tropics, and the cold of an English winter got right under his skin.

Archie offered to escort the two new visitors upstairs to the room which had been set apart for their use. Nelson Lee, meanwhile, offered a few words of explanation.

"Lord Dorrimore is like myself, Lady Bowers," he said quietly. "He is a man of material things—and he has a wholesome and wholehearted disbelief in ghosts. No finer man could be found to assist in such a hunt as this. He is as quick as lightning with his fists; he has an eye like a Red Indian's, and the courage of a lion."

"I do not doubt you, Mr. Lee," said Lady Bowers. "But are Lord Dorrimore's qualifications of any use against the danger which threatens this house? Both you and he scoff at the supernatural. I am of a different opinion. We will not quarrel over that—for, after all, we are all entitled to our own opinions. You believe that there is nothing occult in this haunting. I believe otherwise. But you have persuaded me to put the whole matter to the test."

"And it is my object, Lady Bowers, to convince you that your beliefs are false—and dangerous to your very health," said Lee earnestly. "And let me again remind you that you have to thank your nephew for all that is being done. His love for you is genuine, and he honestly desires to rid this house of its evil atmosphere."

"I pray that you will succeed, Mr. Lee, and that you will not have cause to regret your activities," said her ladyship. "It is my personal belief that there is much danger in interfering with psychic phenomena. I am a believer—and I accept what I see unquestioningly."

"In other words, she is an ideal dupe for any cheap faker," murmured Nipper into the ear of Mary Summers. "Amazing isn't it? And there are hundreds of people like her all over the country. If there weren't, the spiritualistic mediums would go out of existence."

Nelson Lee was talking again.

"Umlosi is, as you have seen, a man of tremendous strength," he said. "We have reason to know that there is a force at work in this house which, at present, is unaccountable. We have not fathomed the mystery of how the drawing-room door was burst down—as though by some ton weight. Then there is that incident of the log box. Umlosi possesses the strength of many men, and if, by chance, he should come into contact with this unknown force, there can be little doubt of the result."

"Your negro friend will be crushed," said Lady Bowers simply.

"No; I think otherwise," replied Lee.

"I pray there will be no such encounter," said her ladyship fervently. "Even you, Mr. Lee, cannot speak with any degree of certainty. You refer to a 'force,' and that indicates to me that you are half-prepared to believe in some occult phenomena."

"Oh, no!" said Lee quickly. "I used the term because I do not know what this danger is. But I mean to find out."

THE Christmas spirit returned in earnest that evening.

The girls revelled in the preparation of dinner; they vied with one another to make the dinner a huge success. The boys wanted to help, but they were not allowed within twenty yards of the kitchen. They were "shooed" away unceremoniously, and sternly told to mind their own business.

They were not even allowed to set the table, and they contented themselves with listening to the big wireless, and to patrolling

the upper corridors, with Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Umlosi. A regular plan of defence was mapped out for the night. Nelson Lee was busy with additions to the lights, and he spent a good while, too, in the big dining-room. But he could arrive at no explanation of the "floating" silver.

"Somehow, Dorrie, I don't think any of those manifestations will take place this evening," he said with some regret. "I only wish they would."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because such tricks are comparatively easy to determine," replied Lee. "On that other occasion there were only these boys and girls as the guests—and Lady Bowers, who is a believer. The servants did not count—they could be relied upon to bolt. Perhaps they were bribed to bolt—that's one of the points we shall have to discover later. I can tell you that I am very suspicious about the servants. It was strange that they should leave in a body as they did."

"You think the 'ghost,' then, will wait until the middle of the night, or somethin' like that?" asked his lordship. "He'll wait until everythin' is quiet and dark?"

"There'll be no darkness, if I can help it," replied Lee. "I only wish I could get hold of some definite line of inquiry."

"Well, it's not like you to be baffled," said Dorrie with a grin. "I'll bet you'll soon get on the track."

Dinner was a triumph.

The girls excelled themselves. Lady Bowers was not only surprised, but delighted. The soup was delicious, the fish was cooked to perfection. The turkeys were hot, and the vegetables were prepared by expert hands. The meal, in short, was a triumph.

"Well, really, I shan't be at all anxious to get my staff back," laughed Lady Bowers. "You dear girls are proving yourselves to be of great help. I am only sorry that any guests of mine should be called upon to perform such work. I tremble when I think of the washing-up to be done, and the sweeping, and——"

"Please don't worry at all, Lady Bowers," said Irene brightly. "We girls are revelling in it all. It's so different. Besides, it keeps us busy—and we can't think so much."

"We boys are going to be busy, too," said Handforth stubbornly. "You wouldn't let us help with the cooking, but we're jolly well going to help with the washing-up!"

"Rather!" chorused the others.

Fatty Little was, perhaps, the most disconsolate of all—although he was feeling much better after the meal. He had appointed himself chef-in-chief, but he had been ruthlessly dethroned by the girls. And he had to admit—although he did so grudgingly—that he could not have done better himself.

Clearing away and washing-up was great fun. There never had been a Christmas quite like this! And afterwards, in the drawing-room, merry games were played, and Lady Bowers not only watched, but joined in.

And while the young people enjoyed themselves, Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Umlosi patrolled the landing, the hall, and the corridors.

As Nelson Lee said, if there were real ghosts in this house, they would take no notice of three strong men. But if there were tricksters, it was any odds that there would be no manifestations.

He was right, for the long winter's evening passed without a single uncanny happening.

Forest House, in fact, was a place of light and warmth and laughter and gaiety. The long winter's evening passed joyously, and every member of the party felt glad that he or she had remained. Seldom, indeed, had the boys and girls enjoyed simple Christmas games with such gusto.

Perhaps it was because of the "ghostly" atmosphere they were combating. They felt it was up to them to make merry as hard as they possibly could. And the merrier they made, the less chance for the "spirits" to start any of their monkey tricks.

Nobody voiced these opinions, but they were more or less understood.

Lady Bowers herself had intended to retire quite early; but the gaiety of the party so got into her blood that it was past ten o'clock before she left the youngsters to the dancing, after bidding them a warm "good-night."

"I want you to sleep well, Lady Bowers," said Nelson Lee, as they met on the landing. "Don't worry about your guests. Please retire to your room, and be satisfied that nobody will come to any harm. If you would like two of the girls to bear you company, as they did last night——"

"No, no, of course not!" interrupted her ladyship with a smile. "I was an invalid last night, Mr. Lee. I did not really need them then, but they were so kind that I hadn't the heart to send them away. To-night I would much prefer to be alone."

But having reached the privacy of her bedroom, she sat for some time in a big easy-chair before the fire prior to undressing. She was thoughtful.

In fact, she was beginning to have a vague suspicion that Nelson Lee was right. Her eyes were being opened. Was it possible that Professor Ivan Nerki was nothing but a cheap fraud and an impostor? The thought rather startled the good lady. She had placed such faith in him.

Thinking in this way, a drowsiness overcame Aunt Eustacia. She was feeling wonderfully comforted to-night; and she could not conceal from herself that it was Nelson Lee's presence which so affected her. She felt that the great detective was a tower of strength. She trusted him; she believed in him, although she told herself that she was opposed to his own opinions.

Nerki was losing his grip. His "disciple" was thinking for herself now.

Suddenly Lady Bowers started and opened her eyes. She had heard nothing, but she

fancied that there was a draught coming from the door. She looked round quickly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

For the room was in darkness! She had left a shaded light glowing, and the fire, too, had been quite bright. But now the light was out—and the fire, for some extraordinary reason, although a big fire, was sending forth no glow. It looked dead.

And even as Lady Bowers gazed into the fireplace, the fire itself awoke to life again, the ruddy glow increasing as she watched and the flames licking up comfortingly.

"How strange!" murmured her ladyship.

"The ways of the unknown are always strange," said a quiet, whispering voice.

Aunt Eustacia started round; she was not frightened, but she was bewildered. Standing in the centre of the room, clearly illuminated by the glow of the fire, was Professor Ivan Nerki.

"Professor! How did you get into my bedroom?" asked her ladyship, too surprised to be annoyed. "I do not think I can forgive you for this intrusion. It is an unwarrantable action——"

"The dangers of this house are such that I am justified in being here," said Nerki impressively. "But let me tell you, Lady Bowers, that I am not Nerki in the flesh. I am the astral phantasm of the great mystic. It was his will that I should appear before you, for he has a warning to give you."

"You are not—Nerki?" asked her ladyship, with a little catch in her voice.

"Nerki remains at home—for there is no admittance to this house for a material body," explained the apparition. "Lady Bowers, there is a hideous peril overhanging the foolish young people who make merry below."

And then Lady Bowers remembered. She had locked her door—on the inside. This thing, then, could not be human. But it startled her to realise that the apparition of Nerki could appear before her at any hour of the day or night, wherever she happened to be.

"Let me turn on the light," she said suddenly. "I do not like this gloom, professor."

The figure moved nearer to the fireplace.

"Light is not necessary," came Nerki's voice. "Listen to me, Lady Bowers. All in this house, except you, are unbelievers. They are in danger. Even I, with all my secrets of sorcery, cannot protect them. Send them away, and the haunting will come to an end. You will be secure, and your life shall be tranquil and peaceful. Let these people remain, and I cannot be answerable for consequences."

"The consequences—to me?"

"No, to your guests," said the figure. "For they are your guests, Lady Bowers, and you are responsible for them while they are under your roof. They are foolish—they are irresponsible. Even the man Lee and his adult companions are equally irresponsible. They dabble in something they know nothing of. They play with fire—with death."

To-night, unless all these unbelievers go, one of them will be killed."

"No, no!" exclaimed Lady Bowers in horror. "That cannot be true!"

"I am permitted to see—and I know that the elemental which haunts this house is angry," went on Nerki. "Let these guests go at once, within the hour, and all will be well. Let them remain, and one of them will be killed—and killed horribly. It may be a boy, it may be a girl. He or she will be seized by the elemental and—removed."

"Removed?" whispered Lady Bowers.

"Spirited away—taken bodily to the astral plane and there dealt with by the evil spirits," said Nerki impressively. "Your guest will vanish, never to be seen or heard of again. This, Lady Bowers, I am warning you of. Take heed! Send these foolish people away."

The voice throbbed as the words were spoken, and, suddenly, the fire burned low again. It seemed to Lady Bowers that the figure was dwindling away in front of her eyes—evaporating—perhaps it was an effect brought about by the strange dying of the fire.

"Nerki!" exclaimed her ladyship quickly. "Where are you?"

There was no reply. She started to her feet, intending to go across to the light switch, but even as she was doing so, the light itself came on, and when she looked at the fire, it was burning normally.

The room, except for herself, was empty.

"Can I have been dreaming?" murmured her ladyship, pale to the lips. "Oh, I have never had such an experience as this!"

She went to the door, and she found it locked—just as she had left it. And a quick search of the room, satisfied her that no living thing was within. And now she could not tell whether she had dreamed, or whether the thing had actually happened.

Agitated, she unlocked the door, and went out into the bright corridor. As it happened, Nelson Lee was within sight, and he turned quickly, as he heard the door open.

"Is something wrong, Lady Bowers?" he asked, hurrying up, as he saw the pallor in her face.

She told him—she told him fiercely, breathlessly.

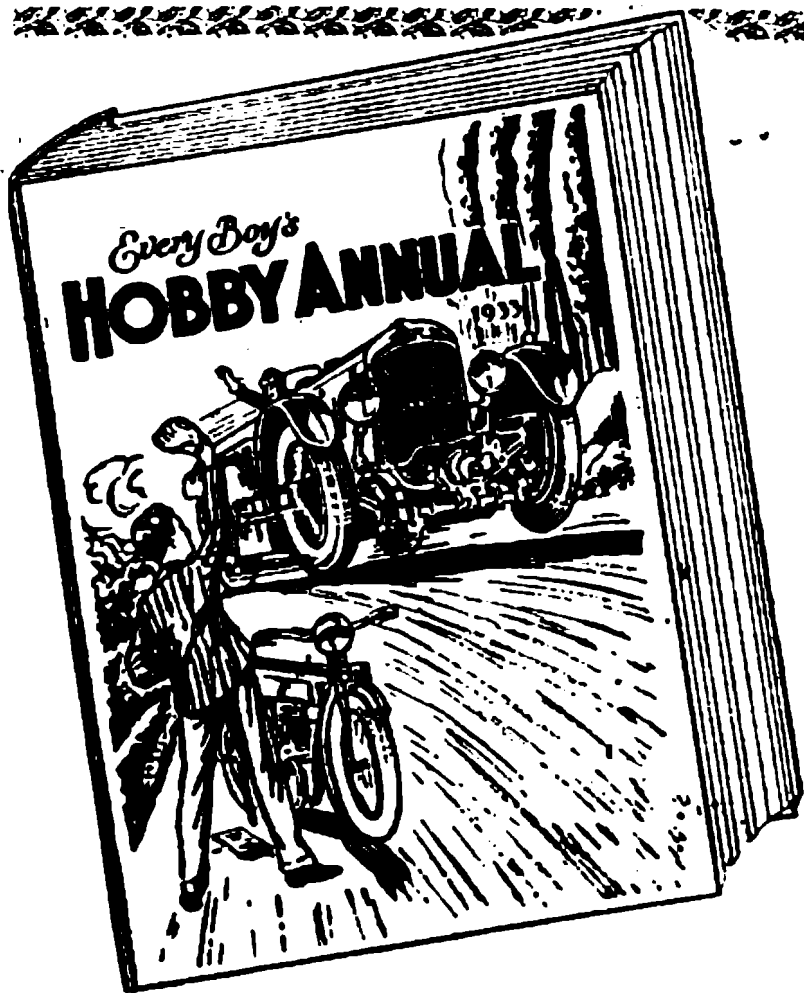
"You must go, Mr. Lee—everybody!" she insisted. "We cannot dare to disobey this warning. If anything should happen to one of those boys or girls, I should die. We can't take the risk!"

"May I look into your bed-room?" asked Lee bluntly.

"Yes, yes, but——"

He did not let her finish. He strode in, and for some time he was busy examining the walls, the flooring, the windows and the fire.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, this is useless!" said Lady Bowers. "Surely you must be convinced—now?"



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Lee got up from the fireplace.

"I am convinced that this fire was affected by some chemical," he replied grimly. "Ghosts don't use chemicals, Lady Bowers. The only point which puzzles me is how Nerki entered, and how he escaped—and yet that can be easily explained, I think," he added suddenly. "What a fool I was to 'fall' for such a simple device."

"But—but I don't understand you, Mr. Lee," said her ladyship, in wonder.

"Ten minutes ago a strange crackling sounded from the rear of the house," explained Lee, his eyes burning. "Fortunately, the boys and girls heard nothing, and they did not come out. Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi and I ran to the back of the house, and we found a good deal of disorder in the kitchen. Some crockery had been broken, and many articles disturbed."

"But surely this proves the presence of a dangerous evil spirit?" asked Lady Bowers.

"It proves one thing—that commotion was caused so that we should be attracted to the domestic quarters," replied Lee. "Meanwhile, Nerki had the hall and the upper corridors quite to himself. He took a big chance—but he succeeded."

"I don't believe it," said Lady Bowers. "You are quite wrong, Mr. Lee. It was not Nerki who came to me, but his disembodied spirit. I ask you, I beg of you, to leave this house, and to take the boys and girls with you."

"And at the risk of offending you, Lady Bowers, I must refuse," said Lee, almost roughly. "It would be a terrible admission of defeat—of failure. No! We stay."

And never had the famous detective been more determined.

CHAPTER 7.

In the First Watch.

NELSON LEE regarded this audacious entry of Professor Nerki as a counter-challenge. At great risk—for he must have realised that he stood a ten-to-one chance of being surprised—Nerki had gone to Lady Bowers' room. He knew that she was the one he could influence—the one he could convince.

He had succeeded. Lady Bowers was almost in a panic, and would have cleared everybody out of the house, leaving herself alone. But Nelson Lee was not "falling" for that play.

"I believe I've offended her ladyship," said the detective, as he told Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi all about it. "But it cannot be helped. Again she had practically ordered us out of the house—but we are staying. For her own sake we are staying."

"I don't like that bit about one of the youngsters bein' killed," said Dorrie, troubled. "Looks as if Nerki means business."

Lee almost laughed.

"I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that Professor Nerki is an exceedingly clever conjurer—a fake wonder worker," he said.

"Lady Bowers is rich, and he has his eye on her bank account. People of his kind are tricky enough, Dorrie, and their words are sometimes terrifying. But they don't take people's lives. That was just one of his dodges to scare her ladyship."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," admitted Dorrie. "He'd draw the line at murder, wouldn't he?"

"My dear man, the very thought is fantastic," said Lee impatiently. "The only person in this house—who is in real danger is—Lady Bowers. Not physical danger, mark you. If Nerki had meant to have anybody, he could have done so long ago. Lady Bowers herself was only injured by accident. Nerki's plan is to scare—to terrify. There is penal servitude awaiting him if he deliberately causes bodily injury to any of his victims. He knows that—and that's why he's careful."

"But surely this blighter can't be workin' this whole stunt alone?" asked Dorrie.

"I don't know," replied Lee. "I hardly think so. Well, we've got to be very much on the alert to-night, old man. I'm glad that you and Umlosi are here. If anything happens, we shall be ready."

Not a word was said to the young guests. They knew nothing of Nerki's mysterious visit—or of the strange happenings in the domestic quarters. They believed that there had been no further manifestations this evening. And so, when bedtime came, they were feeling more or less confident.

"Everything's all right to-night, Mr. Lee," said Irene happily as she bid the detective good-night. "I think we can sleep quite peacefully, don't you?"

"I want you to go to bed—really to bed," said Nelson Lee. "It's no good you girls remaining fully dressed, and taking dozes in chairs. Get completely undressed, and tuck yourself in between the sheets. You can rely upon us to deal with any spook that comes along."

The girls laughingly promised to obey this injunction. But when they got into their own bed-rooms, some of them changed their minds.

"It's all very well for Mr. Lee to be so jolly certain," said Doris. "But supposing something does happen? I vote we keep our things on—and sleep under the eider-downs. Then we shall be ready for an emergency."

"It seems silly," said Irene dubiously. "After all, it doesn't take long to dress, does it?"

"Better be on the safe side," advised Doris.

The truth was, none of them were feeling quite so confident now. Bedtime, somehow, revived that nervous tension of the previous night. It affected the boys just the same. Very few of them got undressed, and into bed.

The bed-room which had been "haunted" the previous night was now locked. Lee had thoroughly examined it, but he had dis-

covered nothing to account for the extraordinary rocking of the bed.

By midnight all was quiet. Some of the boys, particularly Nipper and Handforth, had begged to be allowed to keep watch. But Lee refused—and his refusal was final.

"It's no good, young 'uns," he had said. "That's the very thing the enemy would like. If there is any way of springing a big surprise, the enemy would spring it on some of you boys. So I want you to keep in your bed-rooms. Dorrie and Umlosi and I will patrol the corridors—and we shall be ready for any emergency. To-night we're not going to play into the enemy's hands."

The time slipped by peacefully. Midnight came and went. Nothing happened. The old house remained quiet, undisturbed. It was as Lee had expected. The bright lights, and the steady patrolling of the three determined men rendered any kind of "manifestation" difficult. Nelson Lee wondered, in fact, how Nerki could stage any stunt to-night.

Yet, after what Nerki had said to Lady Bowers, Lee had a shrewd idea that something would happen.

It did. Just after one o'clock had solemnly boomed.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie had met on the landing to compare notes. They were waiting for Umlosi, expecting him to appear from the other main corridor at any moment.

"Nothin' to report, old man," said Dorrie. "Only the usual creakin's and rummy noises of an old country house. Funny how they seem to be exaggerated at night, isn't it?"

"Did you hear anything in particular?" asked Lee.

"Only a sort of creaking from somewhere down the back stairs," replied Dorrie. "I listened for a bit, but I don't think it was anythin'. Old stairs have a way of creakin' by themselves. If I were a nervous chap, I'd have sworn that——"

"Hallo! What's wrong with the lights in that other corridor?" interrupted Lee abruptly.

He had noticed, for the first time, that the electric lights in the farther corridor—the one which Umlosi was patrolling—were out. They could not have been out for more than a few seconds. Then suddenly a strange commotion began. Ominous thumps sounded, and the very floor on which Lee and Dorrie stood seemed to shake. With one accord they moved into that black corridor, and Lee's hand was on his electric-torch.

Umlosi, at the further end of the corridor, had been surprised at the sudden extinguishing of the lights. Moving forward towards the landing, he suddenly halted. For it seemed to him that a great shape barred his way. The reflection of the light from the landing clearly came to him—and this thing was in between. But it was vague, indistinct, mysterious.

"Wau! Who art thou?" demanded Umlosi ominously, as he advanced. "Speak, or thou wilt feel the strength of my great arms!"

He leapt—and it seemed to him that the shape leapt, too. The next moment Umlosi felt himself grappling with something—something huge, something incredibly bulky.

The next moment a terrific struggle was taking place, and the mighty Kutana, for all his enormous strength, found himself picked up like a feather, and the grip upon him was unbelievable.

"N'Kose, my master!" shouted Umlosi. "Wau! What monstrous, evil spirit is this? No man living could have handled me——"

He heard shouts; he was picked up again, and even as Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore ran up, Umlosi was pitched through the air with awful violence. He crashed to the floor with a force which shook the house. He landed, in fact, right at the feet of Nelson Lee and Dorrie, and they stumbled over him before they could stop themselves. They, too, fell, and the electric-torch was jerked from Lee's hand, and it went out.

"What, in Heaven's name, is happening here?" gasped Dorrie in the darkness.

Lee was on his feet now. He regained possession of the torch, but the bulb was broken—the filament shattered.

"Umlosi!" shouted Lee urgently.

A groan answered him; and then came Nipper and Handforth and many of the others, and they brought electric torches with them. Behind crowded the girls—and they were glad that they had remained fully dressed, for they felt that they would be required, at any moment, to flee the premises.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" ejaculated Dorrie, aghast.

The lights had revealed Umlosi; and the mighty Kutana was sprawling on his back, blood oozing from his mouth, where his lip had been cut. And an examination caused Nelson Lee to look wonderingly at Lord Dorrimore. Umlosi's shoulders, and his arms, were smothered with terrible bruises. He had been in the grip of something so strong that even he had been unable to defend himself.

And, for the first time, Lord Dorrimore felt—and looked—uncertain.

"This is ugly, Lee," he muttered. "I've never met a man yet who could stand up to Umlosi. An' look at him! What horrible thing could have done this? Glory be! I've never believed in ghosts, but——"

"Don't believe in them now!" interrupted Nelson Lee softly. "I don't know how Umlosi came by these injuries, but I am certain that he was attacked by something material. Look here."

He ran down the passage, and his torch-light revealed the torn ends of an electric wire. He had fixed that wire up himself, and here was an explanation of the corridor's darkness.

"It's a wonder the fuse didn't go," said Lee. "Ghosts don't tear electric wires in half, Dorrie."

"Guv'nor!" sang out Nipper. "Umlosi is coming round."

And when Umlosi sat up his eyes were full of fear—and Lee had never seen fear in those eyes before.

"Wau! 'Twas an evil spirit, Umtagati!" muttered the Kutana chief. "I, who am afraid of no man, am afraid now. The thing which attacked me was not of this world, but of another."

It was such a phenomenon to see Umlosi scared that everybody watched in astonishment.

"What did you see?" asked Lee.

"That I cannot say, Umtagati," replied Umlosi. "'Twas a mere shape—and yet shapeless. And when it seized me, its grip was like that of a forest gorilla. Yet it was no gorilla, for it was clothed, and its hands were smooth."

"Clothed?" broke in Lee sharply. "That's something, anyhow! You are sure, Umlosi?"

But when Umlosi was questioned further, his recollection of the encounter was vague,

landing—and then a startling discovery was made.

"Where's Irene?" asked Doris in alarm. "Renie!"

Others took up the cry, but Irene Manners was not there—neither did she reply.

"She was here a minute ago!" said Doris. "She hadn't any shoes on, and she said something about running back to the bedroom—"

"Let me pass!" broke in Lee roughly.

He raced down the corridor. He arrived at the bed-room which Irene Manners had been using. Unceremoniously he burst in. The girl was not there, and when he called he received no reply.

"Her shoes have gone!" cried Doris, who had run in with Marjorie after the detective. "So she came here and got them, and she must have been coming back—"

"It was foolish for her to go off like that alone!" said Lee almost angrily. "The very thing that I have been trying to avoid has



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unsatisfactory. He could give no straightforward account of what had taken place. He had attacked the mysterious thing confidently—only to find that he was the weaker of the two. It had all happened within a few seconds. He had been literally swept off his feet, battered about, and treated as though he were a mere weakling, and the experience had robbed the great Umlosi of all his confidence. He really believed that he had been attacked by a ghost.

"Well, we haven't got any further, it seems," said Lee with regret. "It is a thousand pities that you and I, Dorrie, did not get a glimpse of Umlosi's assailant. I can't imagine how it got into this corridor—"

He broke off, for suddenly, from some distance, sounded a scream.

"What was that?" came Handforth's inquiry. "It sounded like one of the girls—"

"Hush!" warned Lee.

But the sound was not repeated. There was a general move towards the well-lighted

happened. One of you youngsters went off alone—and that was the very thing the enemy was waiting for."

And Nelson Lee remembered Nerki's warning to Lady Bowers. One of the guests would be seized—and spirited away! In spite of all the precautions, Irene Manners was the victim. She had gone!

And although a search was instituted at once, and the whole house was searched from top to bottom, the girl could not be found.

She had gone—vanished as though into thin air.

They even got lanterns, went outside into the snow, and searched in the grounds, but it was useless. In some extraordinary way the girl had been seized and carried off.

Nelson Lee was in a dangerous mood now—and all those other guests of Forest House were really scared. Handforth, indeed, was frantic—for Irene was his particular chum.

It was a grim, exciting Christmas, indeed! And the greatest excitement of all was yet to come!

THE END.

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COCK O' THE WALK!



Edward Oswald Handforth, the new shipper of the Remove, is on the warpath. He has just been the victim of a plot by Reggie Pitt & Co., to force him to resign the captaincy—a plot which has nearly succeeded. And now he hands out vengeance in the shape of thick ears and black eyes!

The Iron Rule!

YES, I think we can safely leave the rest to Ted!" smiled Irene Manners. "if you'll come over to tea to-morrow, we can introduce you to Dora in the right way. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Handforth. "By George, you're all bricks!"

They went out, laughing merrily, and Handforth turned to his chums, the light of battle blazing in his eyes more fiercely than ever.

"Resign, eh?" he said dangerously. "We'll see!"

Church and McClure had forgotten their desire to see their leader deposed. The revelation of the plot had bound them to him more tightly, and they were glad to see him so robust again.

"Let the beggars catch it hot, Handy!" urged Church.

"Show 'em who's top dog!" said McClure angrily.

Handforth grinned with fierce anticipation.

"I'm going to enjoy this!" he said, in a low voice. "I don't need medicine—I don't

need a rest! I've a good mind to spank a few of 'em! Exercise is the only thing I want, by George! And I'm going to get plenty of it during the next five minutes, or my name isn't Handforth!"

He made for the Common-room with ominous, purposeful strides.

HE'S a long time coming," said Reggie Pitt anxiously.

"It's all right, we know Handy," grinned Jack Grey. "Perhaps Church and McClure have had to prop him up to take a rest. When Handy thinks he's ill, he does it thoroughly. Mind over matter!"

But Reggie was looking worried.

"You're sure he was coming?" he asked, turning to Owen major.

"Certain," said Owen major. "He was crawling down the passage like an old crock of ninety. I expect he's paused to have a breath of fresh air——"

"Look out!" murmured Fullwood. "Foot-steps! Don't forget to look correctly grave. We can do all the laughing afterwards."

And the Remove grinned, and waited.

The door broke open with a terrific crash.

The patient entered—not crawling, but after the fashion of a tornado. It was not the weak, haggard Handy of ten minutes ago, but the aggressive Edward Oswald Handforth of old.

"You spoofing rotter!" he roared, in a voice like thunder.

"Great Scott!"

"He's recovered!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Alas!" sighed Reggie Pitt. "All my work for nothing!" He took a deep breath. "Who's done this dirty work? Who's betrayed us?"

"He's as bad as ever!"

"Look out, there!"

"Steady, Handy, you ass!"

But the captain of the Remove had no intention of being steady. He had paused for one moment only, and then he had sailed into the Remove with the force and devastating effect of a cyclone.

Crash! Biff! Crash!

Those fellows who could not dodge out of the way went down like ninepins. Handforth wasn't arguing. He wasn't asking any questions. He was simply intent upon smashing the Remove to smithereens—and letting the Remove see, once and for all, that he was the supreme chief.

"Hold him!"

"Grab the silly fathead!"

But Handforth wasn't easy to grab. If the Remove had attempted to squash him, it could have done so with comparative ease, but none of the fellows were exactly anxious to slaughter him on the spot. He wouldn't be inclined to resign if they set upon him in that fashion.

In fact, he didn't look much like resigning in any case!

The Remove was dismayed. Something had happened. They didn't know what, but the cat was out of the bag, and the elaborate jape had failed. And Handforth, instead of being weak and frail, was more aggressive than ever. It was a dreadful shock to the plotters.

And they had been so certain, too. After Reggie Pitt's good work, it was pretty hard lines.

"I'll show you!" roared Handforth, as he lashed out right and left. "So you'd show fight, would you, Thomas Burton? Take that, you son of a windjammer! I'll show you who's boss of the Remove!"

"Hold on, Handy!" gasped Pitt. "Quick, you chaps—hold him! If this goes on, we shall have a dozen prefects here, and the whole Form will be gated! We can't let this row develop!"

Pitt, Fullwood, Russell, De Valerie, and a number of others hauled Handforth back by sheer force and held him helpless. And this was the fellow who had been poisoned at tea-time.

"Lemme go!" stormed Edward Oswald. "You insubordinate rotters! I'm skipper, and I'm not going to be defied——"

"Promise you won't lash out again," said Fullwood.

"I won't!"

"All right—we'll sit on your head until you do!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Over with him!"

Handforth, realising that he had no chance against so many, suddenly changed his mind. After all, he had done a lot of damage, and his knuckles were aching. And he had shown them that he was in deadly earnest.

"All right!" he snapped. "I promise!"

He was released, and he looked round the room grimly. The juniors were picking themselves up, dazed and dizzy. Others were still strewn about.

"You blessed trickster!" said Handforth, glaring at Pitt.

"Yes, and I succeeded, too!" grinned Pitt. "Who split on us? What an ass I was not to take you to the Common-room while you were in the right humour, Handy! This is what comes of cowardice! I was afraid of meeting a master—and now it's all up!"

"Of course it isn't!" said Fullwood.

"Handy has come here to resign!"

"Yes! Resign—you dangerous rotter!"

"Resign—resign!"

"We want a Form skipper—not a human traction-engine!"

Handforth faced the shouting crowd with scorn.

"You tried to trick me into chucking up the captaincy, and you've failed!" he said curtly. "Well, I shall remember this! And I'm going to maintain my iron rule more strictly than ever! Resign, eh? By George, I'll show you whether I'm going to resign or not!"

"It's your duty!" said Fullwood hotly.

"We've failed, but that doesn't alter the fact that we're fed up with you! Yes, all of us—fed up to the neck! And the sooner you know it, the better! Why can't you obey the unwritten laws of the school?"

"What unwritten laws?" asked Handforth.

"I've never seen them!"

"How the dickens can you see them if they're unwritten?" demanded Fullwood, with a snort. "But you know as well as I do that a Form captain is supposed to resign if he is bluntly told by a big majority that he isn't wanted. It's the only thing he can do."

"We're not talking about suppositions!" retorted Handforth. "This is an exceptional case. You only elected me by a jape—and you tried to make me resign by a jape! Well, I'm sticking in power! And the more you oppose me, the more I'll make you sit up!"

"But—but you obstinate fathead, look at the harm you've done already!" shouted Watson. "You've got the whole Form in a state of revolt and chaos——"

"Good!"

"You've done nothing but mess up everything you've touched——"

"Fine!"

"You've made us quarrel with the River House chaps——"

"Splendid!"

"You—you rotter!" roared Watson. "There's no end to your blunders! And all this within a few days! What's going to happen if you're allowed to stick in power? Life isn't worth living!"

"Resign, Handy, you pig-headed bounder!"

"Let's have some peace!"

Handforth took no notice of these continued shouts. He was feeling triumphant. By the narrowest possible chance, he had saved himself from being the laughing-stock of the school. The fellows wouldn't dare to speak about their jape now, because they had failed. He—Handforth—was the victor in this affair. And his determination to stick in the captaincy was stronger than it had ever been before.

"I'm not going to say much more," he said sternly. "But I'm giving you fair warning. If I hear any more treason, I'll act!"

"Treason!" groaned De Valerie, in despair. "He still thinks he's a king!"

"Yes, treason!" thundered Handforth. "If I hear any more of it, I'll wipe up the floor with the rotter who utters it! I'm going now, and you'd better not let me hear any noise from this room! If I do, I'll come back and turn you all into mincemeat!"

He drew himself up, and marched out with dignity and triumph. And the Remove was so utterly dished that nobody had the heart to do much shouting. So Handforth's autocratic order was unconsciously obeyed.

"Well, we're in just exactly the same spot as we were," said Fullwood dolefully.

"Are we?" asked Reggie Pitt. "I've got an idea——"

"We've had your ideas!"

"Forget 'em, Reggie!"

"I like that!" snorted Pitt indignantly. "There was nothing wrong with that scheme of mine, and I worked it well, too! But this is different! Somehow, I've got a feeling in my bones that we shall be able to cast our fetters pretty soon. A little diplomacy—a little tact—and we'll win!"

But Pitt wouldn't explain his new idea just yet. One thing was certain, however, Edward Oswald Handforth was still captain; he was still the autocrat of the Remove!

The Business Man of the Remove.

HAROLD DOYLE, of the Remove, shot through the doorway like an avalanche, crashed against the wall on the other side of the passage, and subsided into a limp heap. The door slammed, and the human debris moaned.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Bob Christine, staring.

Bob Christine was a Fourth Former, and he belonged to the Modern House. He had

just come over to have an interview with the Junior captain, concerning his place in the team.

Afternoon lessons were over, and the Ancient House was fairly quiet, for most of the fellows were taking advantage of the waning daylight. The October evenings were drawing in rather rapidly.

"Trouble?" asked Bob Christine, as he assisted the dazed Removeite to arise. "My hat! You're in a bit of a mess, Doyle!"

Doyle, of the West House, swayed dizzily.

"I've just seen the captain!" he murmured in a dreamy voice.

"What?"

"About my place in the eleven!" said Doyle thickly.

Bob Christine started.

"You've just seen Handforth—about your place in the eleven?" he repeated. "And is this what happens if you just go and ask him a simple question like that?"

Doyle gradually recovered. He tenderly rubbed his chin, felt his left ear, and then secured his collar, which had sprung off its stud.

"He's hopeless!" he said fiercely. "He's worse than ever—and we're not going to stand him! I've always played in the eleven, haven't I? I've always been in the team, haven't I? And now, because this—this raving maniac gets into power, I'm biffed out!"

"Yes," nodded Bob, "I noticed that."

"I mean biffed out of the team!" roared Doyle. "Mind you, I didn't argue with him. I just wanted to know what the idea was. And what do you think he did?"

"Well, there's not much guesswork about it, is there?" said Bob soothingly.

"He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, opened the door, and biffed me out! Not a word of explanation—not a syllable of satisfaction!"

"Tough luck!" said Christine sympathetically.

"Is that chap a captain, or is he a prize-fighter?" roared Doyle. "I can tell you, Christine, we're just sick of him! We've had more than we can stand! He's getting worse, day after day—and there's no hope in sight!"

"They say that Dick Hamilton might come back this week—sooner than the fellows first thought," said Bob. "There's nothing to worry about——"

"You're not in the Remove!" interrupted Doyle bitterly. "You don't have to stand the awful torture. We thought we'd got rid of him the other day, but he dished us, the bounder! He's still skipper, and he means to carry on until the end of term. We shall all be dead by then!"

"But Dick Hamilton is your proper captain."

"Of course he is!" snorted Doyle. "But what the dickens does Handforth care? He says he was elected by the Form, and he's got Mr. Crowell's consent, and he's not going to resign for a dozen Dick Hamiltons! And that's the worst of it—we can't eject him

from the captaincy by force, we can't make him resign by trickery, and we can't do anything! He's making our lives a misery!"

Bob Christine grinned.

"Draw it mild!" he said, with a chuckle. "It's not so bad as all that. Handforth's all right so long as you understand him. I'm going in there now, to have a word with him about my place in the forward line."

"Good!" said Doyle. "I'll pick you up."

"Pick me up?"

"After your remains are chucked out," explained Doyle, with a certain gloomy satisfaction. "One good turn deserves another, you know."

"You silly ass!" growled Bob. "He wouldn't dare to lay his fingers on me! I'm not in the Remove, thank goodness!"

"But he's Junior skipper, and you're going to see him about footer!"

"That's all right—don't worry about my safety!" said Bob gruffly. "I'm not afraid of—Hullo! What the—"

The door opened again, and Dick Goodwin sailed out in an inverted attitude. The door slammed, and Goodwin sat up with a bleary expression on his face.

"But be reasonable, Handy!" he said unsteadily.

"My only hat!" gasped Bob Christine, staring.

"Don't take any notice of this," said Doyle. "We have these little affairs every day. I'm waiting to see you go in—and I'm curious to know how you'll look when you come out!"

Bob strove hard to conceal his uneasiness.

"Is he always like this?" he asked carelessly.

"Generally!" said Doyle, with a sniff. "But he's been getting worse lately. More violent, you know."

"More violent?" asked Christine.

"Oh, much!" said Doyle. "He used to give you a chance to say what you came for, but he doesn't now. He just gives you one look, and sashes out."

"One look?" asked Bob, with a weak smile.

"That's all," replied Doyle gloomily. "Then you don't remember anything until you pick yourself up outside. Look at Goodwin! The poor chap's knocked half silly. And I'll bet he didn't do anything to deserve it."

Dick Goodwin was just picking himself up and clawing at the wall to steady himself. Bob Christine braced himself, and assumed an air of dignity. He couldn't very well back out of the thing, with these two Removites looking on! They would only jump to a wrong conclusion if he suddenly remembered an important engagement elsewhere.

The door in front of him belonged to a room at the end of the Remove passage. It wasn't a study. It wasn't a box-room. Nobody knew exactly what the room was. It had always been empty and neglected. But now there was a great square of cardboard tacked on the door, informing all and

sundry that the apartment was the Captain's Office, and that there was strictly No Admittance except on Business.

"By gum!" mumbled Dick Goodwin, as he looked at the other two juniors through a kind of haze. "Anybody seen my teeth knocking about?"

"Teeth?" repeated Bob, aghast.

"I've lost about a dozen," moaned Dick. "That's how it feels, anyhow. Eh, lad, Handy's a champion with his right! He didn't give me a chance to say much. And I only wanted to ask him about the House match."

"There you are!" said Doyle indignantly.

Bob Christine squared his shoulders, and hammered on the door. He wasn't going to be afraid of this blustering fathead! If Handy attempted to biff him, he'd be jolly sorry for himself! Bob was no mean boxer, and he had the advantage of being prepared.

All the same, it was rather a shock to him. He and all the other Fourth-Formers had known for weeks past that Edward Oswald Handforth was the captain of the Remove—elected for a joke. But Mr. Crowell, the Form-master, had failed to see the point of it, and had insisted upon Handforth being retained. Since then the mighty leader of Study D had employed all his well-known aggressive methods to enforce his ideas upon the Remove. He appeared to think that a Form captain was a supreme dictator, and that his word was law. He had ruled with an iron hand, and the Remove was getting rather fed-up with him. Everything had gone wrong since Handforth had come into power. There was no peace for anybody. There was no certainty about football matches, the River House School was out of bounds in consequence of a free fight, and there were scores of other complaints—all due to Handforth's mistaken policy of violence.

At first, he had been accepted as a joke. Then the juniors had rebelled against him, only to make him worse than ever. The Remove didn't know how to handle him, or this story would have been very different. The more opposition that Handforth encountered, the more aggressive became his attitude. And as he had received nothing else but opposition since he had taken the reins, his aggressiveness was now at its height.

"The Remove doesn't want me!" he had snapped. "All right! They've got me, and I'll jolly well show them who's the boss! They've tried to trick me into resigning, they've tried to make me look silly, and they've failed! Well, I'm going to rule the Remove with an iron rod!"

And, what was more, he was doing it! Such fellows as Reggie Pitt and Ralph Leslie Fullwood and De Valerie and Tregellis-West had given him up as a bad job. But the rank and file still resented him—and quite unconsciously made him worse,

"Afraid to go in?" asked Doyle sarcastically.

Bob Christine started. He had been so deep in thought that he had forgotten his surroundings for a moment.

"No, I'm not afraid to go in!" he retorted.

He now dimly remembered that a cheery voice had invited him to enter. He opened the door of the Captain's office, and walked in. Then he paused, opening his eyes rather wide.

"Name, please!" said the cheery voice. "And business!"

Bob Christine was too surprised to reply for a moment. It was impossible to advance far into the room, because a barrier extended from wall to wall. It was a roughly constructed affair, the carpentry being of a primitive order; in fact, the barrier was made of broomsticks and trellis-work.

Behind this stood a small table, immediately facing the door, and at the small table sat a small youth, also immediately facing the door. And the small youth was Willy Handforth.

"What's this?" asked Bob Christine blankly.

"What's what?"

"All this—this idiotic rot?" said Bob, indicating the barrier, and the general effect.

"Better go easy!" murmured Willy warningly. "The boss is just behind the screen. He's hard at work, planning out his next big campaign. I'm the office-boy. I shouldn't advise you to ask for an interview now."

"Office-boy?" said Bob, in amazement.

"Well, that's what he calls me," explained Willy, grinning. "This is his business sanctum—and he believes in running everything in the orthodox manner. This barrier, for example. Nobody's allowed into the inner office without express permission."

"Well I'm jiggered!"

"I'm here to ask callers for their names, and to make them state their business," proceeded Willy coolly. "Let's go ahead. Mr. Christine wants to see Mr. Handforth about his—Mr. Christine's—place in the forthcoming match against Bannington Grammar School. How's that?"

"You silly young fathead!" said Mr. Christine, turning red.

"Well, am I right?"

"As a matter of fact, you are."

"I shall have to turn this mind reading to account, one of these days," said Willy, with a grin. "Why waste such a gift?"

A kind of snort came from somewhere farther in the room.

"That's the chief!" murmured Willy. "That's a sign that he doesn't like being disturbed. I'll go and see if you've got a chance."

Willy got up from his chair and walked across the room to a big screen near the window. He tapped upon the end flap, and swung it open like a door.

"Gentleman to see you, chief!" he announced solemnly.

Handforth's Latest!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, the captain of the Remove and the skipper of the St. Frank's junior eleven, swung round in his swivel chair and looked at his minor with dignified concentration.

"A gentleman?" he repeated curtly.

"Mr. Bob Christine!" said Willy.

"He's not a gentleman!" snapped Handforth. "He's one of those fatheaded Fourth-Formers! Tell him to go and eat coke! What's his business?"

"He's come about the footer——"

"Oh, has he?" roared Handforth, in exasperation. "That's about the sixth idiot who's bothered me within the last half-hour! You can go and tell him that he's got ten seconds to clear out of this office!"

Handforth swung himself round again, and seized the pen. His swivel chair was a homemade one, and it was rather inclined to creak. The table was strewn with papers and writing-blocks and bottles of ink. Most of this paraphernalia was there for the sake of effect—for a Form captain's duties were by no means so exacting as Handforth fooled himself into believing. But he regarded his office as a highly important one. He was the leader of the Form—the big noise of the Remove. While the Form chief the former statement, they were in full agreement with the latter.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to have a word with Christine?" asked Willy. "He's a member of the regular team, you know——"

"There's no regular team until I've selected it!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "Obey my orders, my lad, or get the sack! I've engaged you as office-boy—not as adviser!"

"Oh, all right, chief," said Willy. "Have your own way—but you're a silly fathead, all the same!"

He went back into the other part of the room, and found Bob Christine glaring.

"I'm to tell you——" began Willy.

"Do you think I didn't hear, you silly young duffer?" demanded Bob. "What's the idea of all this crazy nonsense? Handy, you chump! Why don't you come out here and act like a real skipper, and not like a lunatic? I want to know if I'm going to play in Saturday's match?"

"You can go and boil yourself!" roared Handforth, from behind the screen.

"You exasperating cackoo!" snorted Christine. "I've been invited out for the afternoon, and I want to know whether I can accept the invite or not. If I write, accepting it, you'll shove my name on the list—and if I refuse I shall probably be left out! I know your funny little ways. So I'm not taking any chances. Am I playing, or am I not? That's all I want to know."

It was, after all, a perfectly reasonable question, and one that any footballer had the right to ask his captain. Bob Christine wasn't arguing, or making a fuss. He just wanted to make his plans in advance.

But Handforth was offended by his tone. "I don't allow people to come in here, asking me silly questions!" he said, appearing from behind the screen, and pushing back his sleeves. "I'm a peaceful chap, and I don't mind answering a civil question. But you just called me a chump. You called me a cuckoo. You compared me to a lunatic. And I've got one word to say to you—outside!"

"You've got a word to say to me outside?"

"I'm saying it here!" roared Handforth. "Buzz off!"

"But, confound you——"

"Get out of this office!"

"I'm hanged if I will!" shouted Bob furiously. "I've got to write to my uncle by this evening's post, and I want to know——"

"Up with 'em!" interrupted Handforth briskly.

"What the dickens—— Hi! Steady——" Biff!

Bob Christine staggered back, and Willy deftly opened the wicket gate in the barrier. And as Bob continued to reel backwards, Willy opened the door. Bob sagged out into the passage, and sat down with a thud.

"Smart work!" said Willy, as he closed the door.

His major took a deep breath.

"I don't like doing this sort of thing, but duty is duty!" he said grimly. "If anybody comes here and talks to me with respect, I'll give them a civil answer. But I'm not going to be insulted in my own office! I'm not going to be called names! There's only one way to tame the Remove, and that is to keep biffing the chaps until they realise where they stand!"

"That's just the trouble," said Willy. "After you've biffed 'em they don't stand."

"I don't want any funny remarks from you, my lad!"

"No, chief!" said Willy solemnly.

"Get back to your table!"

"Yes, chief!"

"And not so much cheek!"

"No, chief!" said Willy calmly.

Edward Oswald gave him a queer look, and his fists instinctively closed, but he held himself in check and walked back to his own inner sanctum. He was rather pleased with this office of his. He had planned it on the style of real City office—although it had a suspiciously close resemblance to those offices one sees in an American film. But it pleased Handforth. He was exclusively private behind his screen, his office-boy was in attendance, and the rabble was held in check by the wooden barrier.

Outside, Bob Christine was slowly massaging his nose.

"The—the violent rotter!" he breathed.

"He didn't give me a chance! He didn't—— What are you grinning at, Doyle?" he added coldly.

"That nose of yours will be a picture in about an hour!" said Doyle, with a joyous

note in his voice which struck Bob as the essence of callousness.

"I'm going to make a fuss about this!" said the Fourth Former hotly. "You Remove chaps can put up with Handy's lunacy if you like, but the Fourth won't. Not likely! The Fourth's been insulted—and the Fourth will have revenge!"

"Do you happen to be the entire Fourth?" asked Doyle hotly. "Besides, what's the good of talking rot? Handforth doesn't make any distinctions. He'd biff out a prefect as soon as look at him!"

Reggie Pitt came up with a brisk stride.

"Hallo! Somebody been fighting?" he asked cheerily. "Haven't I often warned you against this unfortunate tendency to quarrel? You shouldn't let your tempers get the better of you——"

"You funny ass!" snapped Bob. "Handy's done this!"

"All of it!" asked Reggie, looking at the trio.

"Yes, confound him!"

"Then he's done well!" said Pitt, with a grin. "He's done you all a bit of no good, by the look of things. In one of his little moods, eh? Oh, well, life's full of these surprises. We shall have to try our luck."

"Are you going in there?" asked Christine, with sudden hope.

"That's what I came for, anyhow," nodded Reggie.

"Good man!" said Doyle. "We'll be ready for you."

Reggie nodded, and passed into the great man's office. He closed the door, and took in the scene at a glance. He grinned with appreciation.

"Name, please!" said Willy.

"All complete, eh?" said Pitt, with a chuckle. "No admittance beyond the barrier, I suppose? Tell his lordship that a humble slave awaits without—a miserable cur who would have converse with his nibs."

Willy grinned, went to the screen, and gave the message verbatim. Handforth appeared, and regarded the visitor with a severe glance.

"Greeting. O Rajah!" said Reggie, salaaming low. "I just came along to speak about Saturday's team——"

"Oh, did you?" said Handforth ominously.

"There's such a lot of talk going round that I thought I'd pop in," went on Reggie, nodding. "The fellows seem to think you're going to make a mess of things. But you're the captain, and I'm a firm believer in letting the captain choose his own men without any interference. I thought you'd like to know that I shall be available, if you want me. Or, if you don't want me, I shan't raise Cain. You're skipper, and your word is final."

"Oh!" said Handforth, nodding. "Good man!"

"If you like any hints from a humble disciple——"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I haven't quite decided about the team yet," confessed Handforth. "I thought about making some experiments, but I'm not so sure. You're in

the eleven, anyhow. If I want some advice, I'll pop over to the West House later on, and perhaps we can have a jaw about it."

"Any old time," said Reggie, nodding. "You'll find me about."

"Thanks, old man," said Handforth.

Reggie nodded again and strolled out. He closed the door softly, and Doyle and Christine and Goodwin regarded him with acute indignation.

"What's the idea of this?" demanded Bob Christine hotly.

"What's the idea of what?"

"Coming out without a black eye?"

"My dear old chap, it's easy!" smiled Pitt gently. "Handy is one of the mildest fellows in the world—if you only know how to treat him. I went into that room with a certain object—and I've come out with the exact knowledge I require. It's just a question of tact."

He strolled off, leaving the trio staring after him blankly.

Willy Gets the Sack.

"**C**LEVER chap, Reggie!" said Willy thoughtfully.

"Eh?"

"I'm saying that Reggie's a clever chap," repeated Willy. "He only wanted to know just the same as the other chaps, and he went out in one whole piece. You treated him like a long-lost brother."

Handforth started.

"You—you mean he was kidding me?" he asked, staring.

"He wasn't exactly kidding you, but he knows how to get on your right side, just the same as I do," explained Willy. "It's a mystery to me why these other chaps don't jump to it. It's the easiest thing in the world. And yet they keep to the same old tactics, and they never learn!"

"The easiest thing in the world!" repeated Handforth darkly.

"Oh, come off it!" grinned Willy. "My hat! I'm your brother, and I ought to know, oughtn't I? What's going to happen to me if I call you a pig-headed chump, and an obstinate donkey?"

"I'll smash you to atoms!" roared Handforth.

"Then I won't call you either of 'em," said Willy calmly. "You see, Ted, that's just the point. These other chaps won't keep their thoughts to themselves."

For once Handforth was rather swift.

"Oh!" he snapped. "So you think I'm a pig-headed chump, do you?"

"My dear old Ted!" protested Willy.

"You think I'm an obstinate donkey, eh?" insisted his major.

"Why jump to such rash conclusions?" asked Willy, pained.

"All right, my lad—I'll show you whether I can be subjected to this sort of thing from my own office-boy!" shouted Edward Oswald.

"You've got the sack! Understand? You're sacked from this minute!"

Willy glanced at his watch.

"A minute earlier than I expected, but that's all to the good," he said. "It'll give those chums of mine a bit more time to prepare tea. I've got to go along to the shop and buy the tuck. We've planned a special feed this evening, as a matter of fact."

"In that case, you're not sacked!" said his major calmly.

"Rats! You can't sack a chap, and then engage him in the next second," said Willy, with a trace of anxiety. "I'm fed-up with this job, anyhow. You're too conceited, Ted. You expect me to 'Chief' you every minute, and bow and scrape as though you were a Chinese mandarin! You're a good sort, on the whole, but your head's too large for your hat!"

Handforth flushed deeply and pointed to the door.

"That's done it!" he roared. "You're dismissed!"

"Good man!" said Willy. "Is this final?"

"Absolutely!"

"All right, then—ten bob!"

"What?"

"Ten bob!" said Willy calmly, holding out his hand.

"You—you— Ten bob!" gasped Handforth. "Great corks! Have you got the nerve to stand there and ask me for ten bob?"

"No, of course not," said Willy. "I'm not asking—I'm demanding it as a right. Don't keep me messing about, Ted."

"A right?" breathed his major thickly.

"What else do you call it?" asked Willy indignantly. "Didn't you engage me as office-boy for ten bob a week?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then why argue?" asked Willy. "Ten bob!"

"But, you young sweep, you haven't been here more than half an hour!" bellowed Handforth. "D'you think I'm going to pay you ten bob for half an hour?"

Willy sighed.

"I wouldn't have thought it," he said sadly. "My own brother, too! Making a contract, and then tearing it up as though it were a scrap of paper!"

"A—a contract?" said his major with a start.

"Everybody knows that if an employee's sacked without notice, he's got to have his week's wages," explained Willy patiently. "Surely you know the law on that point, Ted? You haven't given me notice, so buck up with that ten bob, and don't quibble! A contract's a contract. Am I to go out and tell everybody that you've broken your word?"

Handforth was so speechless that he just stood there opening his mouth and closing it again. Then he dragged out a ten-shilling note and pushed it into his minor's hand. He pointed to the door with a quivering finger.

"Go!" he muttered hoarsely.

Willy nodded.

"Good old Ted!" he said with approval.

"Didn't I say that I knew exactly how to wangle you? Oh, I nearly forgot!"

He reached down and picked up a piece of cardboard near his table. Then he went to the door, opened it, and pinned the card on the outside.

"What's that?" demanded Handforth quickly.

"I thought you'd appreciate it," said Willy coolly.

He strolled off down the passage, whistling, and Handforth stared at the card, which bore the legend, in bold letters:

"OFFICE-BOY WANTED."

"Well I'm jiggered!" gasped Handforth with a deep breath. "He had it all ready, too! He knew I was going to give him the sack. In fact, by George, the young burglar had it all prepared in advance!"

Willy met Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon in the lobby, and they were both looking rather anxious. They rushed at their leader as he came up.

"On time to the minute," said Willy, grinning.

"Have you got it?" they demanded.

"Got what?"

"Why, that ten bob!"

"My poor fatheads, what did you think I accepted the job as office-boy for?" asked Willy tartly. "It was as easy as shelling peas! Ted said he wanted an office-boy, so I meekly agreed. I told you I should be out in half an hour, didn't I? Well, during the last minute I checked him, and I got the sack. Could anything be easier?"

"And he actually paid up?" asked Juicy, awed.

"He couldn't do anything else—an employer has got to give a week's wages in lieu of notice," grinned Willy blandly. "That's where I had him on toast, although he didn't see it until it was too late. Come on! Let's go and raid Mother Hake's tea supplies. Did you order the pies and things?"

"We didn't like to," admitted Chubby Heath. "We thought we'd better wait until you came along with the cash."

Willy shook his head.

"When will you chaps learn to have faith in me?" he asked bitterly. "Didn't I promise to bring the money? Don't I always make Ted shell out if I want him to? There's no cleverness in it."

"You're right!" agreed Chubby. "It's a gift!"

Church and McClure, of the Remove, came in, and Church gave the fags a suspicious glance.

"I thought you were on duty in the office?" he asked.

"I am sacked," explained Willy. "Ted will probably get one of you chaps to act as office-boy now. Poor old scouts! You have my sympathy! What a hard, drab life you must lead!"

The fags passed out, chuckling, and Church and McClure glared after them.

"I knew the young beggar was up to one of his dodges," said McClure, frowning. "I warned Handy, too, but he wouldn't take any notice. Well, anyhow, it's tea-time—so let's hope he'll be in a softened mood. I'll get busy on these kippers. You take him the parcel."

"Don't be mean," said Church. "Come along and support me."

Handforth's chums went along to the office and entered. Their leader was pacing up and down behind the barrier, with a flushed, excited look on his face, and a wild expression in his eyes. Church and McClure had often noticed these symptoms immediately after Willy had "touched" his major.

"It's the last time!" said Handforth, pausing and glaring. "The young bounder got me in a trap. I had to pay him up, or be pestered with him for a whole week. But if he comes near me again——"

He broke off, and eyed his faithful chums.

"Been to the village?" he asked keenly.

"Yes, rather," said McClure. "We've got some lovely kippers——"

"Kippers?" roared Handforth. "What about that typewriter? How can you expect a Form captain to conduct his office properly if he hasn't got a typewriter? Where is it? I suppose you've left it in the study?"

"No, it's here," said Church, putting his parcel on the table.

It wasn't a big parcel, although it was certainly rather weighty. The juniors had picked it up at the post-office—where parcels were often collected of an evening in preference to awaiting the morning delivery. Handforth looked at it with scorn.

"You hopeless asses!" he said. "That's not the typewriter. I expect they've sent the tools and oil-can and things. The giddy slow-coaches! And here am I, absolutely helpless without that machine!"

Church and McClure said nothing. They had their own ideas regarding Handforth's helplessness. They also had their own ideas about that parcel. But what was the good of saying anything? Their leader would only jump down their throats!

So they waited with interest while Handforth ripped off the wrapping.

The Wonderful Typewriter.

"WELL, I'm jiggered!"

Handforth was startled. The typewriter was there, sure enough, but it wasn't exactly what he had pictured in his mind. The machine was quite a small one, and not at all conventional. There was a kind of round plate on the top, with a nickel-plated finger-grip in the middle. The whole machine was only four or five inches high, and although it was brand-new and nicely produced, it did not seem to please its new owner at all.

"What—what's this thing?" he asked indignantly.

(Continued on page 44).

Greetings From Your Editor!

MY DEAR CHUMS
—Only one more editorial chat to write to you in the year 1932, for in a fortnight's time we shall be heralding a new year—1933. Gee, how the time has flown—it's simply amazing! Still, we have managed to get quite a lot into 1932. The

Nelson Lee, for instance, has been carrying on from triumph to triumph, sticking close to our tradition of always supplying the best fiction.

Taking a quick review of the issues for the past twelve months, we have had no cause for complaints. Mr. E. S. Brooks has put in some very excellent work, and I know he will continue to do the same in the New Year. He is certainly making a good start with another new series of stories which will appear in the early January issues.

Our detective-thrillers have met with a great reception, and more of these will be published next year. So, on the whole, we can congratulate ourselves on what has been done, and promise ourselves an even greater success in 1933.

There is one item of news I simply must tell you now; This concerns a great new War story which I have had written specially for the Nelson Lee, and which will be starting very shortly. This story deals with a very little-known service—the Secret Service—whose members are men of cast iron nerve and pluck. Stories of their great heroism and self-sacrifice during the world War of 1914-18 are not often told, but the subject offers wonderful scope. Our long story of the British Secret Service of the Great War will cause a sensation. It is the finest War story yet told, and you will be reading it very soon now. Tell all your pals, and look out for further announcements next week.

THERE is still time for you to obtain the best Annuals on the market if you buy now and buy only any of the following books:

"The HOLIDAY Annual," price 6/-.

"The POPULAR BOOK OF BOYS' STORIES," price 2/6.

"The HOBBY Annual," price 6/-.

"The MODERN BOY'S Annual," price 6/-.

"The New ZOO Annual," price 6/-.

and

"Every Boys' Book of MOTORS, SHIPS and ENGINES," price 7/6.



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

READERS' PRIZE JOKES

"I hear Smith has given up his business."

"Why, I was told everything went like clock-work."

"So it did; first of all the business gave too much tick, then it began to get run down, and

now—well, they've had to wind it up!"
(*F. Turbotton, 500a, Leeds Road, Bradford.—A penknife.*)

Passenger (after first night on board ship): "I say, where have my clothes gone?"

Steward: "Where did you put them?"

Passenger: "In that little cupboard over there."

Steward: "Sir, that's not a cupboard—that's a porthole!"

(*A. Remington, 12, Shandon Road, Phibsboro', Dublin.—A grand prize.*)

A coloured fruit-grower in America called at a store and asked for credit.

"But, Sam," said the grocer, "haven't you just sold your peaches?"

"Yes, sah," was the answer; "but de ducks all got it."

"The ducks all got it?" repeated the store-keeper.

"Yes, sah. I shipped dem down to the city, and dey 'deducks' for freight, 'deducks' for hauling, 'deducks' for commission, and 'deducks' for insurance! De ducks, sah, all et up them peaches!"

(*D. Loun, 14, Cudmore Avenue, Monreith, South Australia.—A grand prize.*)

Boarder (angrily): "I protest! I have been in this place a week, and I haven't seen a bit of soap with which to wash my face!"

Landlady: "Well, you've got a tongue, haven't you?"

Boarder: "Yes; but do you think I'm a cat?"

(*"Reader," 31, Prince Alfred's Road, Port Elizabeth, South Africa.—A grand prize.*)

PEN PALS.

P. Young, 9, Wrayburn Street, Edge Hill, Liverpool, wants Liverpool readers to join the Halcyon Rambling Club. Ages 18-26.

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G. White, 18, South End Close, Hampstead, London, N.W.3, wants to get in touch with a cigarette card club.

COCK O' THE WALK!

(Continued from page 42.)

"Looks like your new typewriter, old man," said Church.

"They must have made a mistake!" snapped Handforth. "This isn't like the one they've got in the Senior Day-room."

McClure sighed.

"What do you expect for your money?" he asked tartly.

"A typewriter!"

"Well, you've got one."

"But it looks more like a—a— Well, I'm blessed if I know what it does look like!" snapped Handforth. "Anyhow, it's not like that machine in the Senior Day-room, and I've been swindled!"

"The machine in the Senior Day-room is a Remington," explained Church gently.

"This one is a Cresto. You can't expect a jigger like a Remington or an Underwood or a Par-Loek for thirty bob!"

"Why can't I?" demand Handforth.

"Oh, well, you can if you like, of course!" said Church obligingly. "There's no harm in expecting. But these typewriter people are a bit unreasonable, you know. Even for an important form-captain they won't send out a twenty-five quid machine for thirty bob! A short-sighted policy, but there you are!"

Handforth started.

"You mean that those other machines cost twenty-five quid?" he asked.

"Something like that."

"H'm! Then perhaps this one isn't so bad," said Handforth, fingering the thing gingerly. "After all, thirty bob isn't much of a price, so we mustn't expect too much. But it's a typewriter, and they guarantee that

it'll do any typewriting you like. I wish you luck with it, Mac, old man."

"Eh?" said McClure.

"You'd better start practising at once."

"Who—me?" said McClure.

"Yes, you fathead!"

"What for?"

"Because you're going to do all my typewriting!"

"Am I?" asked Mac in surprise.

"Haven't I just said you are?" roared Handforth, glaring.

"It's just one of your little mistakes, old son," said McClure gently. "I've never touched a typewriter in my life. I'm not ambitious. And I wouldn't deprive you of the pleasure for worlds. In fact, I couldn't wangle the thing, anyhow. It's yours, Handy—so you've got to operate it."

"You—you silly ass!" growled Handforth. "Who ever heard of a boss using his own typewriter? You've got to sit in this office, and type out all my minutes and things. All my agendas. Team lists, and notices."

"Oh, well, if you insist—"

"Of course I insist!"

"In that case, I'll get busy," said McClure briskly. "Only I must say it's a bit of a come-down for you, Handy. It's your typewriter, and you're the skipper. Think of the honour of owning a typewriter, and making all the other chaps jealous. You ought to be proud of that machine. You ought to refuse to let anybody else lay a finger on it."

Handforth hesitated.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," he said. "All right, I'll get down to it right away, and the Removers can now look out for themselves. They've got in me a live-wire skipper—and I'm going to lead them whether they like it or not!"

(You will find further chapters of this fine school story in next week's issue. . . . Don't miss them.)

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