

ENLARGED CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

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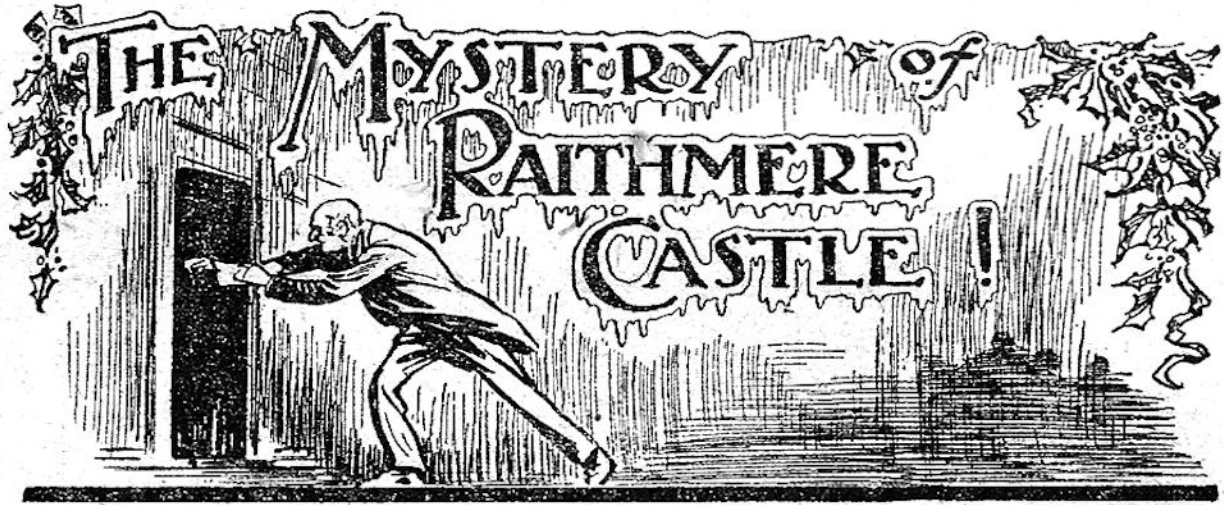


THE **MYSTERY** of **RAITHMERE CASTLE!**

A vivid extra-long complete Christmas yarn featuring the Chums of St. Frank's.



The angry juniors seized hold of Ezra Quirke, swung him through the air, and then let go. Legs spreadeagled, and arms flying, he went sailing towards a deep snowdrift.



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

(Author of the St. Frank's stories now appearing in "The Popular" every Tuesday.)

Apparitions, mysterious tapping noises, weird footsteps, falling pictures, other hair-raising happenings—all these are part of what proves to be the most exciting Christmas Reggie Pitt and his chums of St. Frank's have ever spent.—ED.

CHAPTER 1.

Reggie Pitt's Guests!

"ABOUT time, too!" said Handforth indignantly.

He jumped down to the snow-covered platform, and a crowd of other St. Frank's juniors followed him out of the train. The dusk of the wintry day was deepening, and snow was falling thickly. All day the sky had been overcast, and there had been occasional snow showers, but at about two o'clock the fall had settled itself down to real business. Seldom had the Sussex countryside experienced such a heavy snowfall, and there was not the slightest indication that it would cease.

"Two hours late," said Reggie Pitt, as he looked at his watch. "By Love, you chaps, that's pretty awful, isn't it? We ought to have been here at ten past two, and now it's nearly a quarter past four!"

"Well, it can't be helped," said Nipper philosophically. "And it wouldn't be fair to rail on at the railway company. Every train is packed just now, you know—a day or two before Christmas—and lots of trains are running in duplicate. All the lines are congested to the utmost limit. This snow, coming on the top of all the extra traffic, has just about disorganised the whole giddy system!"

"To say nothing of disorganising our systems," said Pitt, nodding. "We're a meal short, my sons—and a certain vacuum underneath my overcoat is asking in no uncertain voice to be filled."

"Well, we shall soon be having something to eat now," said Jack Grey, with a chuckle. "It's not far to the castle, Reggie, and there's a meal waiting for us. Let's be going."

The juniors ploughed through the snow, and made their way towards the station exit. It was still daylight, but the wintry afternoon was rapidly drawing in. As Nipper had said, there was no sense in getting indignant with the railway authorities. They were

more to be pitied than blamed. Conditions were very bad for them on this snowy day.

Christmas was near—within a day or two, in fact—and Reggie Pitt had come down to Market Donning to spend Christmas under the roof of his castle. His own castle!

Just recently, Reggie Pitt had made the surprising discovery that he had inherited Raithmere Castle—lock, stock and barrel. It was his own property, every stick and stone of it. His great-uncle, a Mr. Roger Merton, had bequeathed the entire castle to Reggie, and, as Reggie's parents were abroad, he had hit upon the bright idea of spending Christmas under that ancient roof. It was to be a house-warming—a merry, jolly, boisterous Christmas party of young people.

Pitt was rather sorry that neither Lionel Corcoran nor the Hon. Tom Silward Harborough could accept his invitations. For, of course, Reggie had asked these two prominent juniors to join the crowd. "Corky" of the Fourth was the youthful owner of the Blue Crusaders Football Club, and, as it happened, he was giving a house-warming of his own.

Just recently Corcoran had purchased an old mansion on the heights overlooking the football enclosure, and, much as he would have liked to accept Reggie's invitation, his place was with the celebrated Fatty Fowkes and all the other redoubtable Blues.

Tich Harborough, although a Removite, was naturally in Corky's own party, for he was a Blue himself, and could not be spared from the team—which had a big programme of Christmas games. Both these cheery juniors would be missed from the big St. Frank's circle—for, although they were only comparative newcomers to the old school, they had made themselves very popular.

Then again, Vivian Travers was missing, and the cool, self-possessed Travers was an asset to any party. However, his parents had gone abroad for Christmas, and Travers was with them.

But Reggie philosophically believed that he and his guests would be able to have plenty of fun and enjoyment in spite of these handicaps.

These juniors on the platform were really the vanguard. They consisted of Pitt himself, Jack Grey, Nipper, Tregellis-West, Watson, Handforth, Church and McClure, and Handforth's minor, Willy. They were the forerunners of the crowd that was to come. As a matter of fact, Pitt had brought them by an early train so that they could see that everything was in perfect order for the main party.

It had been quite a good idea—but as the train was two hours late it would make a good deal of difference, for all the other fellows were due within an hour. They were coming down from London on a train which

should reach Market Donning at about five o'clock.

"There's hardly time for us to get to the castle and back again before the rest show up," said Jack Grey. "Wouldn't it be better for us to wait here, and—"

"My dear chap, you mustn't be an optimist," said Reggie, with a chuckle. "You surely don't think that the next train will arrive on time? As we were two hours late, it's quite likely that this other train will be three hours late. You know what it's like at Christmas time—and this snow is getting worse and worse."

"We'd better make a few inquiries," suggested Nipper, as they arrived at the booking-office.

These inquiries were by no means satisfactory. The station officials would not commit themselves to anything—beyond the one concrete fact that the next train could not possibly arrive before seven o'clock. The chances were that it would be much later. So the juniors had to be content with that.

"It's a pity, of course," said Reggie. "We wanted them to get down here before it was really dark, but as things stand they won't turn up until late in the evening. Well, never mind—no use crying over spilt milk, and it gives us plenty of time to get to the castle and carry out our programme. That's one consolation, anyhow."

The juniors crowded out of the station, stamping their feet to restore their circulations, and they found that the snow was already five or six inches deep.

"We can't really grumble about this weather, you know," said Church, as they ploughed along. "We all wanted snow, didn't we? It's real Christmas weather!"

"Snow's a fine thing—until it begins to create inconvenience," said Reggie, with a laugh. "But when it makes your train late, and when it makes motoring impossible, you're not quite so enthusiastic about it. There was going to be a car to meet us, but I'm not surprised it isn't here. We shall have to walk."

They knew their way to Raithmere Castle, having been there before. They had, in fact, paid a visit to the old place before St. Frank's had broken up for the Christmas holidays, and those fellows who had paid that visit were not likely to forget it. It had been a ghostly, eerie experience.

In their minds, Raithmere Castle was a place of mystery—a place of grim shadows, dank passages and gloomy, panelled walls. They had seen it under the worst possible conditions, while it was utterly empty; they had been there at dusk, without lights—without fires. Certain strange things had happened—uncanny things.

So it was hardly surprising that several of these juniors were looking forward to

their next acquaintance with the castle with a certain amount of foreboding!



CHAPTER 2.

Not the Same Place!

REGGIE PITT, however, had assured his guests that everything would be jolly and bright at Raithmere Castle now. They would laugh at their former gloominess. Reggie further declared they would spend one of the merriest possible Christmases under his hospitable roof.

Without doubt, Reggie had done his utmost.

Well over a week since, he had cabled to his father—who was on holiday abroad with Reggie's mother—and Mr. Pitt had entered wholeheartedly into the scheme. He had sent back all sorts of instructions to various firms, and to his lawyer, Mr. Horace Middleton.

Reggie, in fact, had been given a free hand, and he had taken full advantage of this circumstance. He was doing the thing properly.

The entire staff from his father's London house had been installed in the castle, with the addition of other servants. All sorts of people had been occupying the castle for days past, working their hardest.

The main party, due that evening, would be a big one. It would consist of all the prominent Removites and Fourth-Formers of St. Frank's—including such stalwarts as Archie Glenthorpe, Ralph Leslie Fullwood, Clive Russell, Harry Gresham, Fatty Little, Buster Boots, Bob Christine, and many others. William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth, had promised to be there with Stevens, his staunch pal, and, what was far more interesting, Irene Manners & Co., of the Moor View School, had gladly accepted Reggie's invitation, too. Reggie's sister, Winnie, had guaranteed to bring all the girls along, and at least ten of the young ladies would be there.

"We're going to have a jolly time," declared Reggie, as they all trudged through the snow towards the castle. "Let's hope the train isn't later than eight, that's all. If it is, supper will be so late that the crowd will be practically starving before it gets to the castle."

"It's all very well for you chaps to excuse the railway company—but I don't!" said Edward Oswald Handforth firmly. "The railway companies know that snow is likely in December, don't they? They know that they're going to have lots of extra trains running just before Christmas! So why can't they make proper arrangements? I call it disgusting!"

"Well, never mind, Handy," chuckled Pitt. "Once the rest of the party is here, we shall laugh at the delays."

"What about the ghosts?" asked Willy Handforth. "I hope they haven't all been scared away."

"Dry up about the ghosts!" said Church. "We've come here to enjoy ourselves—not to get the creeps!"

"Rats!" grinned Willy. "It'll be a swindle if we don't see a ghost in the castle. I wasn't with you fellows when you saw the furniture moving, and when you beheld a wonderful spectre on the stairs—"

"That's about enough from you, my lad!" said his major, glaring at him. "I'm not superstitious, or anything like that, but we don't want to be reminded of that affair! Understand? We've come here to spend Christmas in a jolly mood, and the first chap who talks about ghosts will feel the weight of my fist!"

"Hear, hear!" said Nipper heartily. "The whole subject of apparitions is taboo."

"All the same, there were some rumay happenings, weren't there?" asked Willy. "I thought it would rather add to the zest of things if we could have a real ghost on the scene. I mean, what's the good of an old castle if there isn't a phantom knocking about?"

But the other juniors would have none of this ghost talk, and Willy was effectually squashed. This was something of an achievement, for the cheeky leader of the Third needed a good deal of squashing. Perhaps he had failed to resist, however.

"Lights!" said Handforth suddenly, as he pointed. "By George! Lights—by the dozen! Look at 'em!"

"Pretty, aren't they?" said Reggie, halting.

Through the snow, they could see twinkling lights ahead. The juniors were very near to the castle now, and the gloom of night had completely descended. And there, gleaming and winking, were many lights. They were cheerful amidst all that darkness.

Hurrying on, the juniors soon discovered that the castle was glowing in scores of windows. The lights came glittering out upon the snow, and they seemed to be beckoning the juniors on. They were welcoming the guests.

And if the exterior of the castle looked cheery, none of the juniors could find words to express their feelings when they went indoors. They crossed the great drawbridge, the iron-studded doors were flung open by footmen, and Reggie Pitt ushered his guests inside.



"By George!" ejaculated Handforth, in admiration.

"Well, I'm jiggered!"
"I say, this is wonderful!"
"Rather!"

The new arrivals found themselves in the imposing hall of the castle—a vast, lofty place with panelled walls, and with a great oak staircase leading upwards to the high landings.

The juniors remembered the hall as a place of mystery—as a place where they had seen a strange, spectral presence. What a difference now! What a transformation!

The great hall was brilliant with light. Powerful lamps were gleaming in a dozen different places, casting a warm, cheery radiance. An enormous log fire was hissing and crackling in the massive fireplace. Overhead there were festoons of gay decorations—every colour of the rainbow. Soft carpets were on the floor, and holly and mistletoe were bunched round the walls in artistic groups. Seldom had the juniors seen such a cheery joyous-looking place. It breathed of Christmas—it beckoned them, welcoming them with hearty good will!



CHAPTER 3.

The Transformation!

REGGIE PITT smiled benevolently upon his surprised guests.

"I prithee, gentlemen, list ye to your host," he remarked. "Surrender your head-gear and accoutrements to yonder serfs, and collect round ye good old Yule log. Methinks a good warming up would do us mightily well."

"Begad! But this is really frightfully topping, you know," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West admiringly. "It is, really! Congrats, Reggie, old boy! I rather expected the place to be changed, but this is a staggerer."

"By George, rather!" said Handforth. "Instead of an ogre's castle, it becomes a fairy palace."

"And one wave of my trusty wand, fer-
sooth, will produce victuals, and a goodly hot brew," grinned Reggie genially. "In other words, my sons, peel off your giddy overcoats, and we'll trot in to tea!"

"Hear, hear!"

"A jolly good idea, Reggie!"

Their overcoats and mufflers and caps were surrendered to the waiting footmen, who were all smiling widely, in spite of their excellent training. They felt, perhaps, that they could relax in the presence of these schoolboys.

The butler, a staid, portly individual, not unlike a Cabinet Minister, ventured forward with a benevolent, fatherly smile on his ample face.

"Everything is perfectly in order, Master Reggie," he said. "For myself I am very satisfied with the way in which all the work has been accomplished. A very remarkable alteration has been effected during the past few days."

"I can see that, Ward," replied Reggie, nodding. "And I expect I've got to thank you for a good deal of it, eh? Good man! I'm sorry we're late."

"Considerably late, Master Reggie," said Ward. "However, I imagine that you and your young friends lingered on the way from the station, probably lured by the snow."

"Then, all I can say, old son, is that your imagination has run riot, replied Reggie. "We weren't lured by the snow in the slightest degree. But the train was. It finally staggered into Market Donning just over two hours late."

"Ah, one can never be sure of trains at this time of the year, sir," said Ward sentimentously.

"And I understand that the next train won't arrive until about half-past seven or eight," continued Pitt. "I'm afraid that's going to mess up your arrangements, isn't it? You were planning a big feed for half-past six, weren't you?"

"That was the arrangement, Master Reggie."

"Then we shall have to put everything back for two or three hours," replied Reggie. "Not that, it matters much. We fellows can have a good tea now, and we shall have plenty of time to get up an appetite for supper. Lead us to the grub, Ward, and load us swiftly!"

They were escorted into one of the many smaller apartments of the castle. Like the great hall, it was aglow with gleaming lamps, and a great fire was blazing in the open hearth. The panelled walls had lost their gloominess in a perfect riot of gay decoration. It was impossible to feel depressed in this carnival-like atmosphere.

"Just wait until all the rest arrive," said Reggie, as he sat down at the table. "There'll be crowds of us, don't forget—dozens. I tell you, this is going to be one of the jolliest Christmases we ever spent."

"I believe you, old man," said Nipper. "It was a great idea of yours to have this house-warming."

The others were in full and hearty agreement. They enjoyed that tea tremendously. They were ravenously hungry after their journey, and the food was of the best. The castle was so warm, so cheery, so home-like, that long before the meal was over the juniors were feeling in the highest of spirits. To think of ghosts in this place was ludicrous.

Yet Nipper had noticed one or two trifling signs—small in themselves, but nevertheless significant. The other fellows had not been so observant as Nipper. They had not noticed the uneasy looks on the faces of one or two of the servants. Even Ward,

the butler, was not quite at his ease, although it was clear that he was attempting to be so.

Nipper noticed these things, but kept his own council. Perhaps he had been mistaken—and he was certainly not going to say anything to destroy the gaiety of the party.

As soon as tea was over, Pitt led his guests round on a tour of inspection. First of all they went into the banqueting-hall. It was one of the most imposing apartments of the castle. A great chamber with a lofty roof, where the oak beams merged into the blackness overhead. A room of shadows—of mysterious, eerie corners.

At least, it had been formed like everything else. There was a kind of false ceiling of carnival decorations—hanging there in bewildering masses of colour. There were lights in every corner, and as for the great table—well, most of the juniors could only stand and stare at it in wonder at first. It was simply loaded with good things. It groaned under its weight of food. This was the big supper—the royal feed which had been prepared for the main party.

In the ball-room there was just the same atmosphere of cheeriness. Wherever the juniors went, they could hear the sounds of people. There were many servants in the castle, including a staff of cooks, waiters, and footmen. There were even four or five maids—ladies maids, especially for the benefit of Irene & Co. Nothing had been forgotten for the comfort of the party.



Edward Oswald Handforth was pleased to be candid. "Well, Reggie, old man, I've got to admit that you've given me an eye-opener," he said frankly. "I rather expected the castle to be bright and cheery, but, hang it, this is almost too good to be true! I saw the place as it was, remember—and I can

Now it was trans-



EZRA QUIRKE.

CHAPTER 4.

The Scream in the Corridor!

Edward Oswald Handforth was pleased to be candid. "Well, Reggie, old man, I've got to admit that you've given me an eye-opener," he said frankly. "I rather expected the castle to be bright and cheery, but, hang it, this is almost too good to be true! I saw the place as it was, remember—and I can

hardly believe that it's the same building. Everything is so—so bright and cheery and Christmassy."

"That's how I want it to be," smiled Reggie.

"Rather!" agreed Handforth. "At the same time, all those fatheads who were scared about ghosts and things will wish they hadn't spoken. What utter rot! Just imagine a ghost in a place like this! Might as well expect to see one in the middle of Piccadilly Circus at theatre-time!"

"Well, I don't mind admitting that I'm considerably surprised myself," said Reggie. "I don't think there's any question about the success of our Christmas party, eh? Now

let's go upstairs and inspect the bed-rooms."

"That's not a bad idea," said Tommy Watson. "After all, it's the bed-rooms that count, isn't it?"

"What do you mean—count?" said Handforth.

"Oh, nothing!" replied Watson.

"He means, Handy, that if there is to be any ghostly manifestations, it will come during the night," chuckled Nipper. "So, naturally, the bed-rooms are of importance."

"What piffle!" said Handforth gruffly.

"It's not piffle, either!" retorted Watson. "If these downstairs rooms are all cheery and bright, and the bed-rooms are gloomy, we shan't be able to sleep very peacefully. I mean, the brightness of the ball-room and all this would only seem to aggravate

the gloominess of the bed-rooms. And ghosts are supposed to be seen at night, after bed-time. Not that I'm scared in any way!" he added hastily.

"Not a bit!" said Handforth, with sarcasm. "You're only in a blue funk!"

"I'm not!" roared Tommy.

"Peace, children—peace!" said Reggie Pitt. "What meaneth this unseemly pother? Let's get upstairs, and settle this moot point. Personally, I believe the bed-rooms will prove to be as unghostly as any bed-rooms in the Savoy Hotel! Light, my sons! That's the secret of it all—light and colour. No ghost who has any consideration for his self-respect will venture into a place that is flooded with light and jazzy with colour. In fact, we might say that these old walls are now untroubled by any phantoms."

When they got upstairs they realised, with full force, that Reggie's argument was right. Not a trace of gloom was left in the castle. At least, in this part of the castle—which was, after all, only a small portion of that great old pile. Most of the castle was in a state of ruin, and only the inhabitable wing had been dealt with.

All the bed-rooms were aglow with many lights, and fires were burning in every grate. Anything less eerie could not have been located.

"Well, are you all satisfied?" asked Reggie at length.

"Rather!" said Watson. "I say, won't the other chaps be delighted? Reggie, old man, you've done everything toppingly. You're a sport!"

"Well, let's get downstairs and have a squat round the big log fire in the hall," suggested Pitt. "I can't think of anything more congenial at the moment. And it'll pass the time away before we go to the station to meet the crowd."

The suggestion was adopted heartily they all turned out of the bed-room and made their way towards the landing. But then, just at that moment—while nobody happened to be speaking—a curious, throbbing scream broke out on the air.

All those juniors came to a sudden halt, startled.

That scream had come from an adjoining corridor, and there was something so terrifying in its note—something so suggestive of horror—that the boys caught their breaths in, and felt their hearts thumping madly. They all checked, as though pulled up by an invisible barrier.

"What—what's that?" gasped McClure.

"I don't know!" said Nipper, looking round. "It sounded like one of those maid-servants—"

"By George!" shouted Handforth. "Quick, you fellows!"

A girl, dressed in the neat uniform of a chambermaid, had suddenly come into view round the angle of another passage. She was staggering along in a dazed kind of way, and there was such an expression of terror on her pale, drawn face that the juniors ran towards her. She was a pretty girl—very

dainty, and quite young. It was pitiful to see her in such a state of terror. Her eyes were staring fixedly.

So b b i n g convulsively, she slithered against the wall, and sagged down to the floor before any of the juniors could reach her.

She lay there—still. "She's fainted!" said Nipper. "Don't get the wind up, you

fellows! I don't suppose there's anything in it. Somebody rush and fetch some water—and look sharp about it! Come on, Handy—help me!"

Between them they seized the unfortunate girl, and gently raised her. She was breathing heavily, and she was quite unconscious. There was something very pitiful in the picture of this stricken girl—so pretty, so smart. A minute earlier she had been full of vivacity and smiling life. Now she was lying there, in the arms of these juniors, the victim of some strange, sudden terror!



CHAPTER 5.

What the Chambermaid Saw I

WARD, the butler, came hurrying up with no thought for his dignity.

"What is it, young gentlemen—what is it?" he asked, puffing considerably. "What was that scream just now?"

"Don't alarm yourself, Ward," said Reggie Pitt. "It's only one of the girls. She's fainted. I don't know why—but girls do faint sometimes. A case of imagination, I suppose."

"It's Daisy!" said Ward, as he looked at the pale-faced girl. "I don't like it, Master Reggie. I don't like it at all. Daisy isn't the kind of girl to imagine things. One of the jolliest of them all! It was she, in fact, who scoffed and laughed when the other girls started talking about ghosts. Daisy isn't afraid of anything—never has been! A plucky girl, if ever there was one!"

"Well, we shall soon hear what happened," said Handforth gruffly. "There's no need to make all sorts of guesses. Where's that water? Why the dickens can't somebody fetch some water? Anybody might think we were in the middle of the Sahara!"

"Here we are!" sang out Tommy Watson, as he came running up.

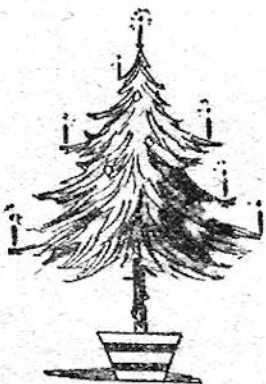
Ward himself now took charge of the operations. He knelt in the corridor, and gently sprinkled water into the fainting girl's face. An elderly woman had come up, too—the housekeeper—and she was assisting. On the landing and in the corridors other servants were gathering, watching from a distance. There was a hush everywhere.

"Now, now, Daisy, my girl," said the housekeeper gently. "You must pull yourself together. What is it?"

"Give her time, Mrs. Walters—give her time," said the butler. "She hasn't come to yet."

Daisy was breathing more easily now, and her eyelids were fluttering.

"That's better," said Mrs. Walters. "Come, Daisy—you'll soon be all right now."



The girl opened her eyes, and stared round in terror.

"Where is he?" she panted in the faintest of whispers. "Oh, where is he?"

"Where's who?" asked the butler.

"The old man—the queer old man in the strange clothes!" said Daisy shakily. "I saw him down the passage—at the end! He was coming towards me!"

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Walters softly. "Daisy, girl, this isn't like you! You didn't see anything—it was only your imagination."

"It wasn't—it wasn't!" panted the girl, her voice rising in fear. "I saw him—just as clearly as I can see you, Mrs. Walters! Yes, and I could see right through him!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Begad!"

"Through him?" repeated the butler uneasily. "Steady, Daisy—steady, my lass! You must have been dreaming."

"Oh, I wasn't, Mr. Ward!" sobbed the girl, clutching at the housekeeper. "I saw him, I tell you! A queer-looking old man—ever so queer! And as I ran away, screaming, he walked right through the wall—just as if the wall wasn't there!"

"Stuff!" said Mrs. Walters sharply. "I wanted to be gentle with you, Daisy, but you're making it very difficult. This is nonsense! Come, come—pull yourself together, you foolish girl! I tell you——"

Daisy managed to get to her feet, and she clung to Mrs. Walters.

"Oh, take me away from here!" she whispered. "Please—please! I can't stand this place another hour, and I shall go mad if I have to remain all night!"

"Take her away, Mrs. Walters," said Ward. "Take her into the kitchen, and put her in front of the fire. Give her a drop of something, if you've got it—just a little tot of brandy is what she needs. Imagination—that's all. I was half-afraid of it. These girls oughtn't to go about the corridors alone."

Daisy was led off by the housekeeper and the other maids. After they had gone Ward turned to the St. Frank's fellows and looked at them significantly.

"That's not the first time, either, Master Reggie," he said.

"What do you mean?" said Pitt.

"Well, maybe it's best not to say too much, sir," replied the butler, "but there's been queer things happening here. One of the other girls said she saw a strange

figure upstairs here. I didn't believe it at the time—I thought it was just fancy, you know. But when another girl sees the same thing, well—Especially Daisy!" he added. "I never thought she'd see anything."

And the butler went off, leaving the juniors to themselves. It was some moments before anybody spoke.

"It's queer," said Nipper at length. "Thundering queer."

"You mean——" began Reggie Pitt.

"It's pretty obvious what I mean, isn't it?" went on Nipper. "We saw that strange old man when we came here before. Don't you remember, you fellows?"

"Rather!" said Watson, with a little shiver. "We saw him in the utter darkness—and we all bunked out of the castle-like the dickens. And the old man went right

through the wall—just as Daisy described. The castle is haunted, Reggie!"

"Oh, rot!" said Reggie Pitt unhappily.

"Well, you can't get away from facts!" said Church. "I say, how rotten! Just as we were thinking that everything was so cheery, too! It's—it's sort of cast a blight on the whole place, hasn't it? What are we going to do now?"

"Nothing—except go downstairs, and squat in front of the log fire, as we originally planned," said Pitt

briskly. "And no more talk about blights, either, my sons!"

They went downstairs—but they were not the same jolly, care-free crowd of schoolboys now!

DO YOU KNOW

that there's a fine long story of NIPPER & CO., of ST. FRANK'S, in this week's issue of The

POPULAR

NOW ON SALE.



CHAPTER 6.

The Menacing Shadow!

UNQUESTIONABLY, the atmosphere of jollity had gone.

As the juniors grouped themselves round the big log fire in the hall, several of them involuntarily glanced over their shoulders. They were looking towards that great staircase, where they had seen the figure of that ghostly old man. Perhaps they expected to see him again, just as Daisy had seen him. Yet it seemed so ridiculous. This hall was flooded with lights. The air was warm and cheery. The great log fire was crackling and blazing merrily.

"Now, you chaps, I don't want to be fatherly, or anything like that," said Reggie, "but we've got to pull ourselves together. For goodness' sake, don't let your imaginations get the better of you."

"Hear, hear!" said Nipper approvingly.

"There's not the slightest evidence that there's anything weird or ghostly about the place," went on Reggie. "Ward speaks pretty highly of Daisy's pluck, but any girl is liable to imagine things. Girls are built differently to us."

"You'd better not let your sister hear you saying that," said Tommy Watson.

"Or my sister, either!" grinned Willy.

"I don't care whether they hear it or not," said Reggie. "Girls don't like to admit that they are more highly strung than boys or men—but human nature is human nature. And facts are facts. This may be an age where girls consider themselves just as capable as men, but, when it comes to a test, they give the show away."

"If it comes to that, lots of fellows would have been scared out of their wits if they had suddenly seen a ghost," said Tommy Watson.

"Perhaps so—but they wouldn't have screamed," argued Reggie. "They wouldn't have fainted, either. That's the point I'm trying to get at. A girl is always more liable to imagine things. So we can take it for granted that Daisy gave way to a fit of imagination in that corridor. It's so easy to see things when you're by yourself, and—"

"Begging your pardon, Master Reggie!" interrupted Ward, the butler.

The juniors turned, and found the portly butler just behind them.

"I'd just like to say, young gentlemen, that things are more serious than they seem," said Ward. "This isn't the first strange thing that's happened. I didn't mean to say anything about it, seeing as you young gentlemen might be affected. But one of my footmen saw a table moving yesterday! Yes, young gents—moving!" added Ward impressively. "Moving without anybody touching it!"

"Like that chair in the banqueting-hall!" said Tommy Watson breathlessly.

"Which chair, sir?" asked Ward.

"Oh, nothing!" said Nipper. "When we inspected the castle a week or two ago, one of the big chairs in the banqueting-hall started capering about on its own. It was a rummy sort of experience, but I'm not satisfied that it was caused by a ghostly influence."

Ward shook his head.

"It's all very well to say that, young gent—but there's rum things happen," he said. "I haven't been superstitious—not until I come to this castle, anyway. I always laughed at ghosts—said they were silly—but, what with one thing and another, I'm beginning

to change my opinion. There's all sorts of queer stories going on in the servants' hall, and this affair of Daisy won't do anything to silence them, either."

"But I thought everything was so jolly and gay?" said Reggie Pitt.

"Well, so it is, sir, in the main," replied Ward. "During the day everything is as right as you'd like, but when it gets near bed-time, and all the lights are put out, there's liable to be a lot of whispered talk. Mrs. Walters has put all the girls together in one big room, and there's a fire in that room all night—and lights burning, too. So there's no reason why they should get scared. Plenty of company for one another, anyway. It's the same with the men. They're sleeping three and four in a room. But, in spite of all this, there's a sort of general uneasiness."

Pitt laughed.

"Oh, cheese it, Ward!" he said scoffingly. "You're not trying to tell me that you grown-ups are scared! It's so—so ridiculous! In any case, it's your duty to put things right."

Ward drew himself up, and looked dignified.

"I hope I know my duty, Master Reggie!" he said stiffly.

"Of course you do," replied Reggie. "But I look to you to put a stop to these foolish rumours. You're in charge here, Ward—you're the boss of all these servants."

"Not according to Mrs. Walters!" said the butler. "She won't let me talk to any of the girls."

"Well, she's wrong," said Reggie. "The butler is always in full charge, and it's your duty, Ward, to tell Mrs. Walters that she's got to kill these rumours. Go and have a talk to her now. Our guests will soon be arguing—lots of them—and it would be pretty awful if they found the household looking scared. Be a sportsman, Ward, and—"

"Very good, Master Reggie," said the butler. "You can rely on me. After all, there's commonsense in what you say, sir. There aren't such things as ghosts—no, and you won't make me believe it, either! A lot of silly talk—a lot of ridiculous imagination! That's all it is! Leave it to me, Master Reggie! I'll see to it!"

The butler went off—thoroughly on his mettle. Reggie's little chat had had due effect. Ward was determined to make his influence felt on the domestic staff.

Things looked a little brighter now.

All the same, none of these juniors could quite forget that expression of horror which had shone out from Daisy's eyes just before she had fallen in a faint. Could that expression have been caused by her own imagination? It hardly seemed likely.

What was the secret of this grim old castle?

CHAPTER 7.

Another Manifestation!

NIPPER glanced at his watch.

"Ten minutes to seven," he said. "Shall we be making a move, you fellows?"

The castle, in fact, would be crowded with noisy schoolboys—and the old walls would echo with the laughter of Irene & Co., too. That would make a big difference. It would be lots better when the main party turned up.

Ward, the butler, felt the same. It was an argument he used with the other servants. He assured them that as soon as these young people came in full force there would be no further sensation of mystery. Once the castle rang with young voices, it would be



A girl dressed in the neat uniform of a chambermaid had suddenly come round the corner. She was staggering along in a dazed kind of way, and there was an expression of terror on her face.

"Might as well," replied Reggie Pitt. "It'll take us half an hour to get to the station through this snow, and it'll be almost half-past seven by the time we arrive."

"All right—let's go," said Handforth, who was ever ready to get into action. "I'll bet the train won't turn up until about half-past nine, but we might as well be at the station. It would look bad if we didn't meet the crowd."

So they prepared to depart. Nobody said anything, but nearly all those fellows were rather eager to go on this journey to the station. It wasn't that they were scared of Raithmere Castle, but they couldn't get rid of that strange, mysterious feeling of eeriness.

It would be very different when all the other fellows arrived.

impossible to feel scared. And such was Ward's eloquence that all the other servants listened to him, and heeded.

"I think everything will be all right, young gentlemen," said the butler, as he came into the hall. "One or two of the maids are just a bit nervous—and we can't blame them after what happened to that silly girl—but they'll be all right later on, when you come back with the other young ladies and gentlemen."

"Expect us when you see us, Ward," said Pitt. "There's no telling how late the train will be. But you'll have supper all ready, won't you?"

"It will be served the instant you return, sir," replied Ward.

"Good!" nodded Reggie. "That's fine! Are you fellows ready now? Come along, then. Quick march! Out into the stilly

night! 'Zounds! But 'tis a night unfit for dogs, methinks!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "The more snow, the better! What's the good of Christmas without snow? By George! We're going to have some ripping times here, I can tell you! We'll have a big snow-fight to-morrow to start with, and——"

"Yes, old man—but we'll leave these discussions until another time," interrupted Reggie gently. "Let's get to the station, and let's prepare our speeches of welcome for the honoured guests."

They climbed into their overcoats, adjusted their mufflers, and were soon ready for the journey. It was quite impossible for any motor-car to undertake the trip. Many parts of the road were under a foot of snow. In some places the drifts were eighteen inches and two feet deep. There were one or two cars at the castle, but to use them was out of the question.

Not that the juniors minded much. It was rather fun, ploughing their way through the snow; and it would be fun, too, coming back with all the others. There was a note of real Christmas in this sort of thing.

Just as they were preparing to go, one of the footmen came hurrying into the hall, and his face was pale and drawn. He hesitated, and seemed at a loss for a moment or two. Pitt looked at him.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"I—I wanted to speak to Mr. Ward, sir!" said the footman.

"What's happened?" asked Reggie. "What are you looking so white about the gills for?"

"It—it's one of these scullery-maids, sir," said the man huskily. "She's not feeling very well! Says that she heard some peculiar knockings in the wall just now."

"Rubbish!" said Ward, turning to the man. "You go back and tell the girl that she's imagining things."

"But she's very insistent, sir!" said the footman. "She says she heard these knockings—and footsteps, too! Footsteps right in the wall!"

The butler compressed his lips.

"You'd better go, Ward," said Pitt, before the man could speak. "Don't mind about us—we can let ourselves out. You go along to the scullery or the kitchen, or wherever it is, and have a word with this girl. Another case of imagination, I suppose."

"That's it, Master Reggie," agreed the butler gruffly. "I'm getting tired of it. They're all the same—all as frightened as a lot of babies!"

He hurried off with the footman, and the juniors found themselves looking at one another with rather uncertain expressions.

"Well?" said Reggie at length. "We'd better go, hadn't we?"

"I say, it's rummy, isn't it?" said Church. "I mean, all these things happening!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "What has happened? Any girl is liable to imagine that she can hear footsteps and knockings. The servants have been scared about these rumours, and about——"

He broke off, and his gaze became fixed. "Great Scott!" he muttered in bewilderment.

The others spun round and stared at the spot where Handforth had been looking. There was a heavy suit of armour in the far corner of the hall, mounted on a kind of pedestal. It was a wonderful suit of armour, too, gleaming and glittering in a dull kind of way. But the other juniors could see nothing particularly startling about it.

"What's the matter, Handy?" said McClure, staring.

Handforth passed a hand over his eyes.

"Am I dreaming or what?" he asked.

"That suit of armour moved just now!"

"What!"

"It moved, I tell you!" said Edward Oswald.

"Come, come, old man!" said Reggie indulgently. "Are you beginning to imagine things now? I'm surprised at you. A hard-headed, matter-of-fact chap like——"

"But I tell you it did move!" protested Handforth, running across the hall and looking at the suit of armour more closely. "I can't understand it! I happened to glance into that corner, and I saw that suit bend forward—absolutely lean forward—and one of the arms rose up and pointed at me!"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"Draw it mild, Handy!"

The juniors protested in no uncertain voices. This seemed too thick altogether. But Nipper was looking very keen, and he said nothing. He knew Handforth of old, and although Handy was inclined to exaggerate any story, it was not one of his characteristics to "see double." He had definitely stated that that suit of armour had moved, and Nipper believed that Handforth was right. The thing *had* moved!

But how? And by what means?



CHAPTER 8.

Through the Snowstorm I

H

ANDFORTH scratched his head wonderingly.

"Well, it beats me!" he said.

"There's nothing

here—no wires or sticks or levers, or anything! And the suit of armour is as empty as Mac's brainbox!"

"No need to drag me into it!" said McClure tartly.

"There's certainly nobody inside the suit of armour," remarked Nipper, as he examined it. "And there aren't any wires or strings. What's more, the whole thing is set on this pedestal solidly."

"And yet it moved," said Reggie Pitt. "It pointed an accusing finger at Handy."

"I didn't say an accusing finger!" denied Handforth. "Why should it be accusing? I've done nothing, you ass!"

"Just a figure of speech," murmured Reggie.

"I don't believe it!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West stoutly. "I'm most frightfully sorry, Handy, old boy, but I don't believe it. Begad, no! I can only conclude that your imagination ran away with you. The thing's impossible—absolutely impossible! It is, really! Suits of armour can't move without means!"

Pitt glanced round. "Better go easy!" he said in a low voice. "Don't talk so loudly, you fellows. Some of the footmen might hear, and it'll only cause another scare. There's been quite enough of that sort of thing this evening, without any more. Let's get off. It's well after seven."

They went out, with the mystery unexplained. The suit of armour had been examined thoroughly, but nothing had been discovered. There was no indication of trickery. Most of the juniors were quite certain that Handforth had imagined the thing.

Even Handforth himself rather wondered if his eyes hadn't deceived him. It was all very queer. It was particularly puzzling, for that hall was brilliantly illuminated and gay with bright decorations.

That was just it. The bright lights, the blazing fires and the Christmas decorations did not altogether obliterate the eerie atmosphere of Raithmere Castle. When the juniors had first arrived they had felt that all the ghostly atmosphere would now be killed. But such was not the case. In spite of all these preparations, there was something in the very air that caused a feeling of doubt and uneasiness.

It may have been a mere association of ideas. These boys knew that the castle was supposed to be haunted. They had had queer experiences within those walls themselves. The servants were talking about ghosts—were saying that they had seen ghosts. Perhaps all these ideas, put together, were resulting in the general uneasiness. It was, at all events, the most logical explanation.

Once the boys were well clear of the castle grounds they felt much better. It seemed to them that a shadow had been lifted from them. The menace had gone—the hidden horror of the castle was no longer oppressing

them. Certainly it was very strange—very unaccountable.

Any sort of conversation was difficult now. For the snowstorm, if anything, was increasing in violence. It was no longer a quiet downfall—a steady, soft fall of snow. The wind was rising, hooting across the open spaces with icy, cutting force, and with it came loads and loads of snow, drifting into white banks, blinding the juniors as they fought their way on.

They found themselves plugging laboriously through heavy drifts, and now and again a tremendous flurry would come hooting down out of the blackness. At times they were almost compelled to stop, and to gather their strength against the storm's onslaught.

"By Jove!" roared Reggie, as they paused for breath. "It's getting worse and worse!"

"Rather!" bellowed Handforth. "Real Christmas weather, eh?"

"We're all in favour of Christmas weather, Handy, but it's possible to have too much of a good thing," said Nipper. "And this is too much!"

"Eh?" roared Handforth. "What!"

"It doesn't matter!" yelled Nipper.

"What doesn't matter?" demanded Handforth, at the top of his voice.

"Nothing!" bellowed Nipper. "Let's get on. It'll take us an hour to get to the station at this rate!"

They floundered on, and all further attempts at conversation were abandoned. It was practically impossible to speak and to hear in that howling gale.

The snow was coming down in millions of tiny flakes. They were no longer big flakes, floating about in the air. They were like tiny icicles, driven by the wind with overwhelming force.

Once or twice the juniors nearly lost their way. Some of the lanes were so disguised by the snow that it was almost impossible to tell which was the correct way and which the wrong. But at last, much to their relief, they fought their way down into the village of Market Donning. The station was a little further on, and they would soon reach it.

One or two of the little shops were showing gleams of light, but for the most part the village was dead. Not a soul could be seen. Even when they got to the station it was just the same. The booking-office was closed, and only a glimmer from a smoky oil lamp could be seen. The platform was empty, snow-covered and deserted, so the juniors forced their way into the booking-



office and closed the door. They loosened their mufflers and breathed hard.

"Phew! That was a struggle, if you like!" said Handforth, shaking himself like a great dog, and sending a spray of snow in all directions.

"Never mind about the struggle," said Reggie Pitt. "What about the train? By Jove, it's ten minutes past eight!"

"And nobody here—not even a porter," said Watson. "I say, the train couldn't have gone, could it? It hasn't been in, and—"

"No, that's impossible," said Pitt. "We should have met the chaps on the way."

"Besides," added Nipper, "there aren't any footprints outside, and that proves that nobody has been in or out for quite a time."

He walked across to the ticket office and thumped on the little window. There was no response. The station seemed to be absolutely deserted.

This was a fine state of affairs. All those other fellows, and the Moor View girls, had started out from London. That fact was certain. They were on their way now—probably lingering on some siding, waiting for other trains to pass.

Snow was certainly Christmassy in appearance, but it had its drawbacks!



CHAPTER 9.

Startling News!

REGGIE PITT and his companions looked at one another with concern.

"What the dickens shall we do?" asked Watson. "The train hasn't come, and there's nobody here! Anybody might think that this line was obsolete or something!"

"So it is—nearly!" growled Handforth.

"You mustn't forget, old man, that Market Donning is a very small station," said Reggie. "Only the unimportant trains stop here, and until the train has been actually signalled, there's nobody about. I mean, even the stationmaster doesn't trouble to come out of his cosy little cottage."

There was a good deal of truth in this. The train ultimately would probably be signalled from the next station—a telegraph message would come from the signal box, and then the signalman would ring a bell, or something, and the station staff—consisting, probably, of the stationmaster and a clerk—would become active. The indications all went to show that the train was still a long way away.

"Let's go on the platform again," said Handforth, at length. "There might be a porter in one of the sheds, or something. We've got to ask somebody."

So they went out on the wind-swept platform, and stamped up and down to no purpose. Then Nipper noticed that the signal-box was situated at the end of the platform—indeed, adjoining the platform. The light could be seen gleaming through the falling snowflakes.

"Come on!" yelled Nipper, above the howl of the wind. "Let's go to the signal-box and make inquiries. If anybody ought to know where the train is, the signalman should!"

"By jingo, that's a good idea!" said Church.

"Rather!"

"I was just going to suggest the same thing!" declared Handforth.

They chuckled as they trudged along the platform, and at last arrived at the signal-box. Nipper and Reggie Pitt mounted the short steps, and thumped upon the door. It was opened after a moment or two by an elderly signalman. He looked at the juniors suspiciously.

"This ain't allowed, young gents," he said.

"You mustn't come here—"

"That's all right," interrupted Nipper.

"We don't want to come in. We only want to ask about the train from London. It was due nearly three hours ago, wasn't it?"

"Over three hours ago," said the signalman grimly.

"Any signs of her?" asked Reggie.

"To tell ye the truth, young gents, I don't know where I am," said the signalman frankly. "There ain't been a train through for the last ninety minutes, and by rights there should have been three or four! Everything's at sixes and sevens, owing to this 'ere snowstorm. The wust I ever remember, pretty nigh. Ay, it's a wild night, if ever there was one!"

"Yes, but about the train?" asked Nipper.

"When do you expect it will turn up?"

"I couldn't tell ye, sir," replied the signalman, shaking his head. "And it ain't no use your waiting, neither. It might be half-an-hour—and it might be an hour. Then again, there's just a chance that it won't turn up until eleven o'clock—or perhaps midnight!"

"Why not say to-morrow morning, and have done with it?" asked Pitt, with a grin.

The signalman frowned.

"Ah, ye may joke, young gent—but maybe you ain't far wrong!" he said darkly. "Maybe it will be to-morrow morning before the train turns up. It wouldn't be the first time, neither. There's a wild stretch of country six or seven miles up the line—that there Gosford Cutting. Ay, a real deep cutting, that is, and liable to get filled up with snow if the wind's in the right direction."

"You mean the wrong direction," said Handforth.

They went away and returned to the booking-office. It was evidently fruitless to ques-

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(Continued from page 14.)

tion the signalman any further. He was by no means an optimist.

"Midnight!" said Reggie Pitt, with a wry grimace. "I wonder if he meant that, you chaps? It'll be a fine how-do-you-do if we have to stay here until midnight, cooling our heels in this giddy waiting-room!"

"Hadn't we better go back to the castle?" suggested Watson.

"What would be the good?" said Nipper. "When the railway conditions are like this, there's no telling what will happen. Perhaps the signalman will get a message through within ten minutes. You can't tell. The train may be here in half-an-hour—or even sooner. Or perhaps it won't be here until eleven o'clock or midnight. We can only wait—and hope for the best."

"Well said, O chief!" nodded Reggie. "We're here, and here we'll stay—until that train rolls in. By Jove, won't those chaps be tired and crochety? There's nothing worse than a delayed train journey—waiting on sidings, and hanging about hour after hour. They'll begin to wish I'd never asked them to the castle! Even the girls will lose their sunny smiles."

"Well, they can't blame you for anything, Reggie," said Nipper, with a smile. "You're not responsible for the weather, and—"

At this moment the door opened, and a thick individual, wrapped up in a great coat, came bundling through. He emerged from his wrappings, and revealed himself as an elderly man with side-whiskers. He was, in fact, the stationmaster, and he looked at the juniors in some surprise.

"Are you young gentlemen waiting for the London train?" he asked.

"Yes," they answered.

"Then I can save you the trouble," said the stationmaster. "It's no good waiting here. The train isn't coming!"

"What!"

"Not—not coming?" shouted Pitt.

"She's snowed up in the Gosford Cutting," replied the official. "Leastways, she was snowed up, but she managed to back out, and she got to Gosford."

"But isn't she coming through?" asked Nipper. "Do you mean to tell us that the train won't get here at all to-night?"

"That's what I'm just telling ye, young gentlemen," said the stationmaster heavily. "A rare mess-up, ain't it? But there it is—and neither you nor me can make any difference. The train's snowed up, and I'd

advise ye to get off home as quickly as ye can. The night's getting wilder every minute, and—"

"But look here!" interrupted Pitt. "I'm expecting a crowd of friends on the train! We've come here to meet them!"

"Then ye'll be disappointed, young gentlemen," said the stationmaster. "I've already told ye that the train isn't coming. I can't speak no plainer, can I? It's official—we've just had the message through by telegraph. Lucky, too—because as like as not the wires will be down any minute now!"



CHAPTER 10.

Snowed Up!

THERE was something very definite about the stationmaster's pronouncement. It was impossible to disbelieve him. He was, after all, the responsible official, and his word had to be accepted. Besides, the night was so wild that the juniors could readily believe this startling piece of news.

"I was half afraid of it," said Nipper, as he looked at the other juniors. "I'm not altogether surprised, you know. In this terrible storm it's only to be expected that the train would be snowed up."

"But look here," shouted Handforth excitedly, "what about the chaps? What about my sister and all those other girls? Where the dickens are they?"

"At Gosford, I should think," said Church.

"I know that, you chump!" roared Handforth. "But just imagine it! They'll have to be in that rotten train all night, and—"

"I suppose it's certain they started on the train?" asked somebody.

"Of course it's certain," put in Reggie Pitt. "The train left London at the right time—exact to the minute, I expect. There wasn't a delay at that end. You see, it wasn't snowing then—at least, it wasn't snowing heavily. The crowd's on the train all right—and I can just imagine their feelings now, snowed up at a little country town, and forced to spend the night in the train."

The stationmaster shook his head.

"There's no need for you young gents to be alarmed," he said. "It's very awkward for everybody—but it isn't the first time that a train has been snowed up. And if it will give ye any satisfaction, we've had the news that all the passengers are being accommodated in the station hotel."

"Well, that's better, certainly," said Pitt, with relief. "And when will they be able to come on?"

"In the morning, I hope," said the stationmaster. "If the cutting isn't cleared during the night, it'll be a poor look-out for to-morrow's traffic! The whole line will be dis-

organised worse than ever. They're getting big gangs to work at once, and I expect they'll have the line cleared by the morning."

"Then we'd better get back home, and come again to-morrow," said Reggie. "Have you any idea what time this train will get in?"

"If the line's cleared, it'll turn up between seven and eight, I should think," replied the stationmaster. "Mind you, I'm not saying anything definite. But you can be quite sure that that train will be sent on its way the very instant it's possible."

"And you're quite certain it won't come to-night?"

"Quite certain," said the stationmaster. "Now, young gents, if you don't mind, I shall have to turn you out. I've got to lock up."

They were compelled to go out into the station yard, where they stood in a group, under the projecting roof, discussing this unexpected situation.

Reggie Pitt was looking rather concerned. He was worried—and his usual sunny smile had gone.

"It's a nuisance," he said gruffly. "Nothing worse could have happened. With all the servants nervy and jumpy, we needed the rest of the fellows along to make things lively. And now they're not coming!"

"Yes, it's awkward," agreed Nipper. "It means that we shall have to spend the night in the castle on our own—at least, without the other chaps. Well, it's no good grumbling about it. We can't do anything. We can't go up the line and drag the train in by force, can we? We might as well be getting back to the castle."

"Yes, of course," said Handforth. "It doesn't matter much, anyhow. As long as everybody is properly accommodated in an hotel, we needn't worry. I expect they'll be fairly comfortable."

"Let's hope so, anyway," said Nipper. "Blow the snow!"

"It's a beastly nuisance!" growled Handforth. "Who wants snow, anyhow? It's always a bother! It chokes up all the roads, and makes the trains late, and causes floods, and everything else!"

Church grinned.

"Not so long ago, Handy, you were saying how ripping it was to have the snow," he remarked. "Nothing like real snow for Christmas, eh?"

"Oh, rats!" said Handforth. "We all like snow—but not a giddy deluge of it! Look at it! Coming down worse than ever! Coming down in shoals! Let's be getting back to the castle! If we don't make a start we shall never get there!"

"Terrible tragedy in Sussex village!" said Reggie Pitt impressively. "Group of St. Frank's schoolboys found buried in a snow-drift—lost their way, and perished by the wayside!"

"Fathead!" said Handforth tartly.

They started off, pulling up their overcoat collars and tightening their mufflers. Just as they were turning out of the station yard into the little village street they ran into a slim figure. He seemed to be a schoolboy, too, and he paused and looked at the juniors searchingly.

"Wait!" he said, in a familiar voice.

"Hallo!" said Handforth, peering through the gloom. "Who's this?"

"Quirke, by the sound of that voice," said Nipper. "Our old pal, Ezra Quirke!"

Nipper was right. The boy in front of them was Ezra Quirke—the schoolboy mystic—the fellow who had once been at St. Frank's, and who had been the cause of many strange, mystifying happenings in the East House.

Ezra Quirke was no longer a St. Frank's fellow. He had left the school under a cloud, and he was now living with an aunt of his in this very village of Market Donning. The juniors had met him during their previous visit to the castle, and he had warned them repeatedly of the dangers that existed within those grey old walls.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Quirke is no pal of ours! What's more, I don't want to speak to him!"

But Ezra-Quirke had planted himself in front of the juniors, and he was looking at them with his strange, staring eyes. Quirke's face was as pale as a mask, and his whole expression was ghostly. There was something very strange about this boy—there always had been something strange about him.

"Just one moment, my friends!" he said. "Are you returning to Raithmere Castle to-night?"

"We're just going off now," said Nipper. "Why?"

"Because I want to warn you that this enterprise is foolish," said Quirke, his voice quivering. "Turn back! Do not go near that castle to-night! For if you do, there will be tragic—"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Handforth fiercely. "We had enough of your croaking before, Quirke! We don't want to hear any more of it now!"



CHAPTER 11.

Ezra Quirke's Warning!

EZRA QUIRKE seemed in no way taken aback by Edward Oswald Handforth's plain words.

"I naturally expect you to insult me—to regard my words with scorn," he said, "but I urge you to listen. Why do you persist in this foolishness? Raithmere Castle is a

place of danger—a place of hidden horror! I know this—I am certain of it. For have I not investigated there? Have I not felt the influence of the deadly elemental?"

"The deadly which?" repeated Pitt grimly.

"Perhaps you will not understand the terms," went on Ezra Quirke. "But I am well versed in the occult—and I know of many supernatural happenings. There is a ghost at Raithmere Castle—perhaps several ghosts—but I am referring to the one—to the deadly Thing which is capable of assuming human form! I am not talking idle words, my friends! I am trying to warn you—to save you from your own folly!"

"Dry up!" yelled Handforth.

"This spectral presence is not merely a harmless apparition," continued Quirke emotionally. "It is a danger—a menace. It is capable of bringing death to those who defy it. Have there not been strange manifestations in the castle already? Furniture has been moved—and by no human hands. Are you so blind that you refuse to see the truth? If these things were moved by some occult force, can you not realise that this same force can endanger your lives?"

The juniors were silent—but not because Quirke had impressed them. They were just letting him have his head.

"All those who live in the castle now are in constant peril," continued the strange boy. "They are in everlasting danger."

"I know somebody else who's in peril," said Handforth, "and he's not in Raithmere Castle at all!"

"What do you mean?" asked Quirke.

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Handforth. "You're the chap who's in peril, Quirke. And you're in peril of my fist! Any more of this piffle from you, and you'll get my fist on your nose. I may not be an elemental, but I can do plenty of damage!"

Quirke stepped back hastily.

"I trust, Handforth, that you will not resort to your usual violence," he said. "It is foolish of you to resent my warnings—"

"Then we're all foolish!" interrupted Reggie Pitt. "And I might as well tell you, Quirke, that after Handforth has punched your nose, I shall dot you in the eye! But we'll give you a chance to escape. Clear off now, without giving us any more of your twaddle, and we'll let you off. Is it a bargain?"

Quirke was not to be denied, however.

"Fools—fools!" he said passionately. "Why will you not listen to me?"

Handforth gave a roar.

"Why, you rotter, are you calling me a fool?" he demanded aggressively.

"Yes, I am!" panted Quirke. "You don't know what you are doing! You don't know the terrible danger you are running. Do not go back to Raithmere Castle! Heed the words of one who is versed in these matters! Persist in this folly, and—"

"Grab him!" growled Pitt, losing all patience.

"Hear, hear!"

"Why grab him?" demanded Handforth. "Why not punch him on the nose? I'll do it, and—"

"No, we don't want to hurt the chap," said Nipper. "It would be something akin to cruelty to animals. I think it will meet the demands of the case if we chuck him into the nearest snowdrift. Come on—altogether!"

"Hear, hear!"

And Ezra Quirke, in spite of his alarmed shouts, was seized by the eager and exasperated juniors. They had a double reason for laying violent hands upon him. They felt that he was talking a lot of utter nonsense, but at the same time it was impressive nonsense, and they were not in the mood to listen to these ghostly stories of Raithmere Castle. They wanted to forget that aspect of the place. They only wanted to think of the merry Christmas party that had been planned—and of the jolly times they were to have. All the ghostly atmosphere of the place was to be cast aside. And here was this idiot, reminding them of the strange manifestations that had taken place. It was beyond all endurance.

So, when Ezra Quirke was seized, he was seized forcefully.

"Come along!" roared Church. "Here's a good snowdrift! In with him!"

"Hear, hear!"

"One—two—three—"

"Stop!" shrieked Quirke. "You idiots—you fools! This will do you no good—"

"Yes, but it'll do you good, Quirke!" interrupted Nipper. "It'll cool you off a bit!"

Again Ezra Quirke was swung, and this time he was sent whirling into the air. He rose high, his arms and legs spreadeagled helplessly, and then—

Thud!

Ezra Quirke descended into the snowdrift with a dull, swooshing sound. He vanished right into it, descending deeply. He cut a great cleft in the loose snow, and then the sides caved in on the top of him, and he was completely obliterated. There was not the slightest sign of anybody there.

"Well, I think that'll keep him quiet for a bit," said Handforth aggressively. "Of all the nerve! Warning us about ghosts and things. I'm fed-up with Quirke—and always have been! It's likely we're going to stand his piffle now!"

Nipper could not help thinking that the indignation of these juniors was mainly occasioned by their uneasiness. They all felt that Quirke was right. In their inmost hearts they were scared—and uncertain.

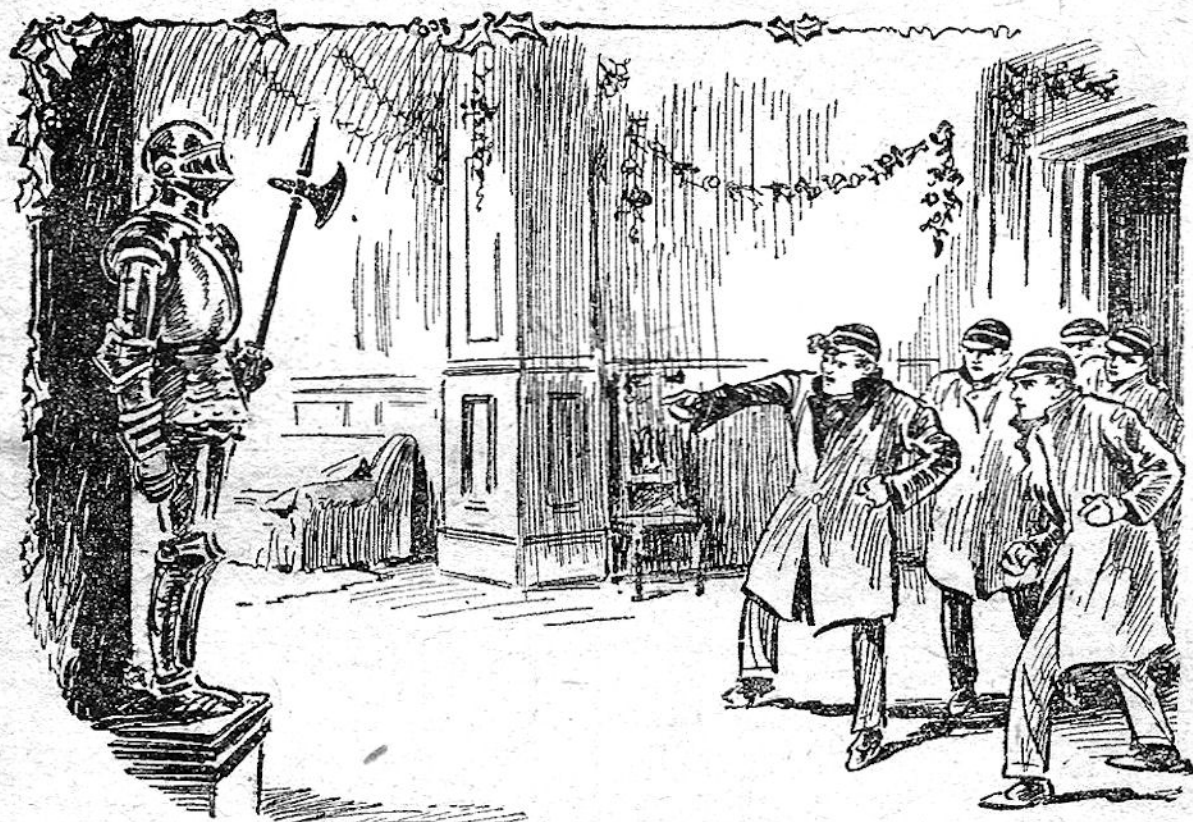
They had a feeling that Raithmere Castle held a grim secret. Yet they were trying to convince themselves that it was all tommy-rot. So, when Ezra Quirke told them of the dangers, they did not relish such news.

The snow heaved and split, and then Ezra Quirke came into view, smothered from head to foot. He floundered out of the drift and staggered away. Not another word did he utter. He vanished in the smother of falling snow, and all the other juniors were rather impressed by this silence on Quirke's part.

now they prepared to depart in the opposite direction.

They were silent as they started off for the castle. Somehow, Ezra Quirke's personality had left a depressing effect behind. The juniors were influenced by him, in some vague sort of way. Nipper found himself walking side by side with Tommy Watson, and all the other fellows were trudging along in pairs, in advance and in the rear.

"Do you think there's anything in what Quirke was saying?" asked Tommy after a while.



"Great Scott!" muttered Handforth. The other juniors turned and stared at the spot where Handy was looking. They saw a heavy suit of armour, mounted on a pedestal. "What's the matter?" asked McClure. "Why, that suit of armour moved just now!" replied Edward Oswald.

Was there anything in what he had been saying? Had they treated him unjustly? Did he know something which was hidden from them?

CHAPTER 12.

Another Startling Discovery!



"WELL, let's be going!" said Reggie Pitt gruffly.

They had watched Quirke disappear, and

"No, of course not," said Nipper.

"I don't like to think it, but he's a rummy sort of chap, and he seems to know," went on Watson. "Supposing there is a ghost in the castle, Nipper?"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said Nipper.

"It may be rot, and it may not," went on Tommy stubbornly. "Just because we don't believe in ghosts, it doesn't mean that there aren't such things. Lots of clever people believe in ghosts."

"Well, they're entitled to their opinions," admitted Nipper. "It's a free country, old man, and we can all have our own views—even if it's unsafe to voice them sometimes."

"I'm beginning to wonder if there's something genuine about spiritualism, and about the—the occult, as Quirke calls it," continued Watson. "Dash it, I'm not an imaginative chap, but I don't get wild ideas into my head over nothing. For example, I wouldn't believe Quirke if it wasn't for the rummy things that have been happening at the castle. But, in a way, Quirke's warnings have been sub-sub— What's the word?"

"Substantiated, eh?"

"Yes, substantiated," said Watson. "Why did Handforth see that suit of armour move?"

"I expect something must have caused it to move," replied Nipper practically.

"Yes, but what?" insisted Tommy. "There weren't any wires or strings; you examined the thing yourself, Nipper. And then what about that chair the other day? You remember—when we first came to the castle. What about that chair? With our own eyes we saw it move across the floor, and then crash over! And there wasn't anything near it at all!"

Nipper grabbed his chum's arm.

"Better not dwell on these things too much, old son," he said gently. "It won't do any good."

But Watson shook himself.

"That's what they all say!" he protested. "Don't think at all—don't use your brain! But that's not good advice, Nipper!"

"I know it isn't—but it's the best advice in the circumstances," replied Nipper. "We've got to go back to the castle to-night, and we're going to sleep there. We don't want to get morbid before we arrive. Just think of the Christmas party, and all the jolly—"

"I'd like to, but I can't," broke in Watson. "It's so—so mysterious. We've been in haunted places before, and there's generally been some sort of explanation. Somebody has been getting up to tricks, and all that sort of thing. But how can that be the case here?"

"Everything's a mystery until it's explained," replied Nipper. "Then, when the explanation comes, you wonder why you were ass enough to be fooled. Think of the illusions you see on the vaudeville stage. They're just the same—marvellously mysterious until you know how it's done, and then you feel foolish because the explanation is so simple."

"It's all very well to talk like that, but I don't mind telling you that I'm pretty uncomfortable about spending the night in the castle," said Watson frankly.

He stared moodily into the darkness ahead, and for a few moments a silence fell between the two juniors. Then Nipper patted Watson on the back sympathetically.

"I can quite understand your feelings," he said.

"At Christmas-time we ought to be happy and jolly," went on Watson. "I don't see how we can be happy and jolly in a place like this old castle of Pitt's. I'm sorry I accepted his invitation. It wouldn't have been so bad if all the other fellows had come—"

"That's not fair," interrupted Nipper. "You can't blame Reggie for that. If the train service had been maintained, the rest of the crowd would have been with us now. It won't make much difference, anyhow. There are two or three days before Christmas, and the party will arrive to-morrow. We shall be as right as rain then."

They had turned out of the country lane, and were now trudging along the windswept drive towards the castle. It was particularly bleak here, with the snow whirling down in the wind. The juniors were compelled to fight almost every inch of the way. The night was so wild, indeed, that they were looking forward with pleasure to the thought of entering that grim old building. In spite of its ghostly atmosphere, it would be better than this bleakness.

Nipper, forcing his way onwards, with his head bent down, suddenly collided with one of the other juniors in front. It was Reggie Pitt, and he had come to a halt.

"Sorry!" said Nipper. "But what was the idea of stopping?"

"There's somebody in front," said Reggie, staring. "Can't you see them? Lots of figures! They're coming towards us, too!"

All the juniors halted. Ahead they could see several dark, ghostly figures approaching. These figures were struggling along, fighting the elements, and there seemed to be a considerable number.

"By George!" roared Handforth. "It's the chaps!"

"What!"

"Yes, and the girls, too!" went on Handforth excitedly. "Can't you see them?"

"By Jove! I believe he's right!" said Pitt. "There are some girls among them, anyhow! You can't mistake—"

"But it can't be our party!" protested Nipper. "They were on that train, and they couldn't be here by any other means."

The juniors ran forward eagerly, and then the truth became apparent. These figures were not those of the missing St. Frank's party and the Moor View girls—but the figures of the domestic staff of Raithmere Castle!

Ward, the butler, was there; so were the footmen, the chefs, the scullerymaids, the chambermaids, the housekeeper—in short, the whole of the domestic staff!

What could it mean?

Why were all these servants coming away from the castle at this time of night—and in such a snowstorm? It was an extraordinary affair, and Reggie Pitt caught his breath in as a suspicion of the truth came to him.



CHAPTER 13.

The Deserters!

HANDFORTH was greatly disappointed. He had taken it for granted that these figures belonged to the missing schoolboy and schoolgirl party. He glared indignantly at Ward as the latter came up, and as the other servants halted some little distance away, in a frightened sort of group.

"It's a swindle!" said Handforth gruffly. "I thought——"

"You shouldn't jump to conclusions, old man," put in Willy. "I could have told you that these people were the servants. I spotted old Ward at once. They've deserted!"

"They've done what?" gasped Handforth.

"Well, Ted, isn't it pretty clear?" asked his minor. "Why are they here, like this, if they haven't bunked from the castle?"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth blankly.

Reggie Pitt was looking at Ward in a very grim manner.

"Well, Ward, what does it mean?" he asked sharply.

"The butler hesitated for a moment.

"I'm sorry, Master Reggie—but we've left," he replied.

"Left? What do you mean—left?"

"I did my best, sir!" pleaded Ward. "I argued with them, but it wasn't any use. They'd set their minds on going, and——"

"Was it necessary for you to come away as well?" asked Pitt. "Couldn't you have stuck to your post, Ward?"

The butler winced slightly.

"I'm very sorry, Master Reggie, but I couldn't stay there," he said in a scared, lowered voice. "I did my best to keep the rest at their jobs, but they wouldn't listen. As for me, I'll accept all responsibility for allowing the staff to leave. If it comes to that, sir, I agree with the others. It's time we did leave!"

Pitt took a deep breath, and looked at Ward rather sorrowfully.

"I'm disappointed in you, Ward, my son," he said. "I thought better of you. All the years you've been in my father's service—all the years you've known the family—and now you're a deserter. I don't think my father will be very pleased with you over this affair."

"I can't help it, Master Reggie—and if your father dismisses me, I shall have to accept it," replied Ward huskily. "But—but that ghost was seen again! Ay, and not seen by one of the frightened maids, but by me, and two of the footmen."

"You saw a ghost?"

"We did, Master Reggie!" insisted Ward, eager in his own defence. "There it was, going down the stairs—a queer old man with old-fashioned sort of clothing on. And he walked right through one of the walls, too—without making a sound. Mrs. Potters saw it, and one or two of the girls, too. We happened to be in the hall, talking—discussing everything. And then that—that apparition appeared!"

The butler spoke in a husky voice, and he glanced uneasily over his shoulder.

"And you all got the wind up and ran out, eh?" asked Pitt gruffly.

"We didn't run out, sir," protested Ward. "Some of the girls were hysterical, and I couldn't do anything with them. Everybody caught the fever, and I don't mind admitting that I was a bit upset myself. If you want to know the truth, Master Reggie, I wouldn't go back to the castle again—no, even if you offered me a hundred pounds!"

Ward had come out with the truth now, and he spoke defiantly.

"Supposing I offered you ten pounds?" said Pitt dryly. "Ten pounds in cash—now?"

"No, sir—I wouldn't do it!" said the butler. "I meant what I said just now. That old castle is haunted. I'm not a man who believes in ghosts much, but I've seen this thing. Yes, and there's something in the very atmosphere of the castle that gets right into your bones. I don't like it, Master Reggie, and I can't stay there any longer. We're all going into the village to get rooms in one of the hotels."

"And what about us?" demanded Handforth.

"You'd better come back with us, too, young gentlemen!" urged the butler. "Don't go back to the castle to-night. Don't!"

"Why, dash you, you're as bad as that idiot, Quirke!" roared Handforth. "For two pins we'll chuck you in a snowdrift, too!"

"There's no need to get violent, young gentlemen," said the butler, with dignity. "We're not going back to the castle, and if we all get dismissed over it—well, I dare say we shall be able to get other situations. But it wouldn't be fair if we was sacked. What with the girls hysterical, and them queer things going on, it isn't surprising that we——"

"That's all right," interrupted Reggie Pitt. "I don't suppose you'll get the sack, Ward. There's



a good deal to be said for you, especially as all the other servants demanded an immediate departure. Well, you've left the castle without a soul there, eh?"

"Yes, sir," muttered Ward.

"There's nobody left?" asked Reggie. "Not one of you?"

"Not one of us, sir—we're all here."

"All right, you'd better carry on," said Pitt, standing aside. "I don't want to keep you in the castle if you don't want to be there. That's all right, Ward. You needn't say any more. If you've decided to desert, there's nothing more to be said."

The butler was very uncomfortable.

"I wish you'd look at it in the right light, Master Reggie," he said earnestly. "That castle isn't a fit place for we human beings to be in. It's haunted, sir—it's haunted!" he repeated impressively. "And if you young gents go back there to-night, I wouldn't be answerable for what might happen. It's foolish, sir, rank foolishness, sir. Why not come with us—"

"No," interrupted Pitt. "Just because the servants have shown the white feather, I'm not going to show it. And I don't think any of these other fellows will desert me. We've made up our minds to spend Christmas at Raithmere Castle, and nothing is going to stop us. That's my last word. I only hope that these chaps will back me up!"

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth promptly.

"Count on us, Reggie," nodded Willy. "We'll stand by you to the bitter end. As for the ghosts—we'll laugh at 'em. Rats to the ghosts! I don't believe there are any, anyhow!"

Ward, knowing that he could do nothing further, shrugged his shoulders and walked on. Probably the man felt he cut a very insignificant figure.

Here were these schoolboys, prepared to spend the night in the castle—alone—while these men were running aw. from it like a crowd of frightened children. It was small wonder that the other servants made no comment as they walked on, and as they wended their way towards the village of Market Donning.

They vanished amid the smother of snow, and the little group of schoolboys was left to itself.

He was a very different Reggie now. Gone was his jocular, his cheery lightness of tone. There was something very strong about Reggie at this moment.

"Well?" repeated Handforth. "There's not much to say, is there?"

"It depends upon you fellows," replied Pitt. "You know the position, don't you?"

They gathered round, pressing closely so that they could hear him against the howling of the wind.

"You know the position," went on Pitt. "Everything seems to have gone wrong this evening. First of all the main party has been snowed up at Gosford, and can't get to us. In the circumstances, it may be all to the good, because it would have been pretty rotten if they had arrived to find all the servants missing."

"Yes, particularly with the girls in the crowd," said Nipper. "It's just as well that they have been delayed."

"And now the servants have bolted," continued Reggie steadily. "That's the long and short of it, you fellows. They've bolted, bunked, with their tails between their legs. What are we going to do now?"

"Why, go to the castle and go to bed!" said Handforth promptly.

"My idea, exactly," agreed Nipper.

"Thanks, you chaps," said Pitt quietly. "I was hoping that you would all agree to that plan. Are we going to give in? By Jove! Are we going to admit ourselves scared and funky?"

"We're not funky," muttered Church, "but—but—"

"But what?" demanded Handforth.

"Oh, hang it, I mean!" said Church. "With no servants there, and—and—"

He broke off, unable to put his thoughts into words.

"I know exactly what you feel," said Reggie. "And anybody here is perfectly at liberty to go into the village and get digs at one of the hotels. I'm not asking any of you to come with me to the castle. It's up to you entirely."

"Are you going to the castle, in spite of everything?" asked Watson.

"Yes, I am," replied Reggie. "I'm not going to show the white feather."

"Well, of course, we're all coming with you," said Willy, without a second's delay. "All of us. There aren't going to be any deserters in these ranks."

"No fear!" agreed Sir Montie. "Rely on us, dear old boy. We're with you right through!"

"Hear, hear!"

Since Reggie Pitt had put it in that way there was absolutely no backing out. He had left it to them—to leave him in the lurch or to carry on with him. It was obviously impossible to do anything else but carry on.

"We've just got to sleep in the castle to-night," said Nipper. "Imagine the triumph of Quirke if he got to hear that

CHAPTER 14.

Carrying On!

AS the last figure vanished into the smother, Pitt turned and looked grimly at his companions.

"Well?" he said. "What about it?"

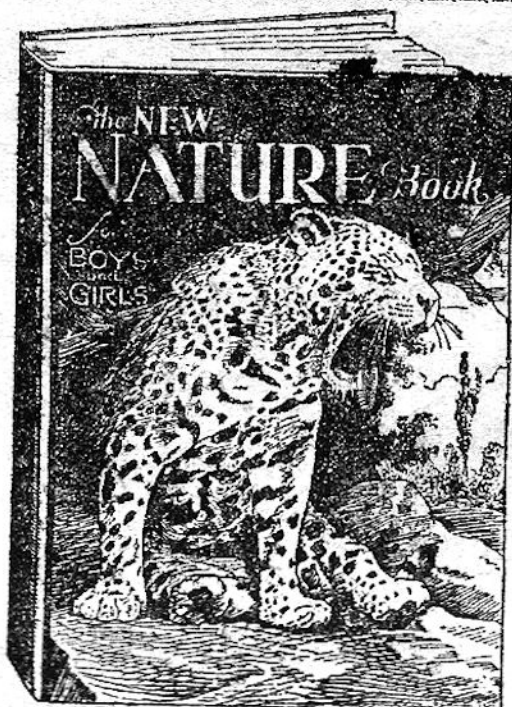


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we were sleeping in one of the village inns. How he would crow!"

"He'll never get the chance," growled Handforth. "We're going to the castle. We'll sleep there, just as we arranged."

Reggie Pitt recovered his usual light-heartedness.

"Bravely said, my good knights," he observed genially. "Stout words! Are we frightened of moving chairs and spectral apparitions? Never let it be said! And just think of our triumph to-morrow when all the others turn up! Just think of the confusion of Ward and the other servants when they hear that we've stuck it out. There's another point, too, which I don't think you've quite realised."

"What is it?" asked McClure.

"Why, the servants are bound to come back to-morrow—if we sleep in the castle to-night," replied Reggie shrewdly. "After we've given them such a lesson, they'll feel heartily ashamed of themselves. They'll come back of their own accord—without even being asked. But if we went to the village, too, it would be a very different matter. We want to set these frightened domestics an example."

There was a great deal of truth in Reggie Pitt's words, and the others could see the point of his argument. This was a sort of test case. If the schoolboys triumphed—just this handful of them—the servants wouldn't have the face to keep up this paltry desertion. On the morrow they would return, sheepish and ashamed.

So the boys, heartened by these conclusions, faced the storm once more and trudged on their way to the castle.

"Of course, this makes a difference," said Reggie, as they neared the snow-covered moat. "I mean, it may not be necessary for us to sleep in the ordinary bed-rooms. As there aren't any servants, and we're such a small party, it might be a good wheeze to pile up the log fire in the hall, and to draw some big chairs round the blaze. That'll be rather cheery, eh?"

"Yes, rather!" said one or two of the others. "That's a great scheme!"

"Rot!" said Handforth firmly. "Why should we sleep in the hall when there are proper beds for us? I vote that we go to bed in the ordinary way—and snap our fingers at these ghostly manifestations. As a matter of fact, I've a good mind to make some inquiries. I believe there's trickery at work, and I want to make some investigations."

"Ahem!" coughed Reggie. "We'll see about that later, Handy. By the way, are you fellows hungry? I don't mind admitting that I'm ravenous. And when I think of that groaning table in the banqueting hall— Oh, boy!"

"Can't you keep to English?" demanded Handforth aggressively. "Why bring in those American expressions?"

"Sorry!" said Pitt, grinning.

Feeling much better in spirits, and full of determination that nothing should drive them out of the castle, the little party trudged on, and finally arrived at the moat. They

crossed the main drawbridge, mounted the snow-covered steps, and found the main door unfastened—just as the servants had left it. They all went in, where the lights were glowing, and where the log fires were crackling.

Somehow the old place seemed very cheery now—after the wildness of the night without. It was a haven for them—a warm, comfortable place of refuge.

But at the back of their minds all these juniors were wondering what kind of a night they would spend. Would it be peaceful—or would it be filled with unknown horrors?

CHAPTER 15.

The Feeling in the Air!

REGGIE PITT clapped his hands boisterously and rubbed them together.

“Well, here we are—all together!” he said genially. “Merry and bright, eh? Ready for supper! Lead me to it!”

Somehow the others did not respond to his mood. One or two, indeed, started slightly—as though alarmed at Pitt’s boisterous manner. They themselves had been speaking in low voices—quite unconsciously. It seemed that Reggie was awakening the very echoes by his loud tones.

And it must be admitted that Pitt was exhibiting a false cheeriness. He did not feel anything like so happy as he pretended. There was something about Raithmere Castle which gripped him, which held him strangely; and this same sensation had affected the rest. Even Nipper was touchy and nervy. Any unusual sound made him turn round, his eyes starting.

Perhaps it was because the juniors knew that they were alone in this vast old place. Only a section of it was habitable, but there were wings and corridors and endless sections that were half ruinous. The very antiquity of the castle was sobering, too. It was hundreds of years old—and its associations were strange and mysterious.

It was the home of the Mertons—and the juniors had heard that many Mertons had died violently and strangely within these walls. Even the last owner—Reggie’s great-uncle—had suffered a terrible stroke here, and had never been able to live in the place afterwards.

These schoolboys were fully determined to carry out their plan. There was nothing else for it. Never could they show the white feather, as the domestic staff had done. Such a thought was out of the question. The servants might desert the castle, but not the guests. It was their duty to stand by Reggie Pitt, and see him through.

But there was a curious atmosphere about the castle now—and it was even more noticeable than it had been previously. When they had arrived in the early evening, happy and jolly, they had felt that the castle was a cheery sort of place. The decorations were so bright, the lights so friendly, and the log fires so grateful. Now it was all different—and there was an air of depression everywhere.

There was, of course, a perfectly logical explanation of this.

Quite apart from the fact that the boys knew that they were alone, there was a difference in the actual surroundings. All the fires were going out for want of fuel. In the great hall, in the lofty dining-room, and in the bed-rooms—the fires were petering out. They had been neglected, and there is nothing more depressing than a dying fire. It was the same with the lamps. Most of them were turned low, and some, indeed, were out.

There was no gas or electricity supply at the castle, but large numbers of special lamps had been brought here for the housewarming. They were good lamps, too—casting brilliant lights. Most of them were of the petrol type, using incandescent mantles and requiring air pressure. In most of them the air pressure was dying down owing to neglect by the servants. It was very depressing to see these lights failing.

Outside the wind was howling with a ferocity that forced itself upon the schoolboys. They could hear the gale shrieking round the angles of the building, and the howl and hoot of it as it tore against the buttresses. In spite of themselves, the juniors felt nervous.

“Let’s go in to supper!” said Handforth briskly. “Come on, you chaps. This way!”

He led the way into the banqueting hall, and the others readily followed. But somehow they weren’t feeling quite so hungry now.

Handforth marched in, and then suddenly checked. Church, who was by his side, gave a gasp and stared.

“What was that?” he panted.

“Eh?” ejaculated Handforth. “There’s—there’s nothing there!”

“I know there isn’t,” said Church. “But—but I thought—”

They broke off, and the other juniors came in, looking somewhat pale.

“What is it?” asked Nipper. “Did you see anything? More moving furniture?”

“No,” said Handforth, with a grunt. “Just our imagination, I suppose. But it seemed to me that there was a figure over in the other corner of the room—it looked like an old man, bent and wizened.”

“That’s right!” said Church eagerly. “I saw him, too.”

“Oh, my goodness!” murmured Watson.

“But he’s not there now!” said Handforth, striding forward. “Look! There’s



not a sign! That part of the room is empty, and there's not even a scrap of furniture there where anybody could hide."

This was true enough, and after a brief search the juniors sat down at the table. It was noticed that none of them sat with his back to that particular corner where the mysterious figure had been seen. Scarcely anything was said about the incident. If Handforth alone had seen the figure, the other fellows would have laughed. But two juniors had seen something, and they couldn't both have been in error.

The feeling of depression increased. Nobody wanted any food. There was no hot coffee; there was nothing except the cold viands which were displayed on the table. And all the members of the party were there, pretending to be cheerful—and yet feeling unutterably gloomy.

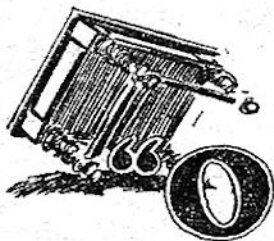
They were a mere handful compared to the big crowd that ought to have been there. It was a sad time for the unfortunate Reggie Pitt.

He had meant this party to be so different! There were to be dozens of them—all jolly, happy and laughing. There were to be servants flitting about, and the whole castle would have been alive with jollity. What a difference now!

Silence everywhere—except for the booming of the wind outside. Dying fires—lamps that were failing. No servants to wait upon them—nothing but depression and gloom.

And the night was before them. The witching hour of twelve was close at hand, and they would soon be obliged to go upstairs to bed. Certainly it was a caricature of what the party should have been.

How could they eat in these circumstances? How could they continue all this pretence of cheeriness? It was far better frankly to admit that they were all feeling scared—that they were all affected by the strange atmosphere of mystery that surrounded them!



CHAPTER 16.

Off to Bed!

"Of course, if you fellows—"

Reggie Pitt broke off, and the others looked at him inquiringly.

"Yes?" said Jack Grey. "Go on!"

"It doesn't matter!" said Reggie uncomfortably.

As a matter of fact, Pitt was feeling just a little bit guilty. There was no leaving the castle now. The night was altogether too wild, too rough. And it seemed to Pitt that he had forced these juniors here, perhaps against their better judgment.

He had told them that he was going to spend the night in the castle; he had also said that he did not want to influence them in any way, but, after all, this decision was tantamount to compelling them. Not one of them could have deserted him at such an hour.

Reggie was feeling that he ought to have led the way himself—that his duty would have been to go back to the village and seek accommodation there.

"I know exactly what you're thinking, old man," smiled Nipper. "You're rather sorry you came, eh?"

"Not sorry," replied Pitt, "but—but— Well, it's rather thick on the rest of you chaps."

"What do you mean—thick?" said Handforth.

"Well, it's not much good talking now," replied Pitt gruffly. "I oughtn't to have come here after the servants deserted. The most sensible thing would have been to get room in the village somewhere. Then the party would have been all complete to-morrow."

"That's all piffle!" said Handforth, glaring. "We're not a lot of frightened babies. We don't mind being here to-night. All the better, in fact. We'll have a chance to investigate the mystery."

"That's one way of looking at it, of course," said Nipper. "And there is a mystery about this place, too. I'm pretty certain that the manifestations have not been caused by spooks."

Pitt looked at him eagerly.

"Do you really mean, Nipper, that you suspect a deliberate fake?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," replied Nipper promptly.

"Then I take back what I just said," remarked Reggie. "It's a good thing we're here, and we'll steel ourselves against the coming horrors of the night and go to bed. Are there any objections?"

"You don't think it would be better to sit round the log fire in the hall?" asked Jack Grey.

"Somehow, I'm not keen on the hall," replied Reggie. "Don't forget that ghost on the stairs—"

"By jingo, yes!" said Tommy Watson, with a start. "That's where we saw the ghost, wasn't it? We'd better not stay in the hall. It'll be a lot better if we go upstairs and get into one of the big bed-rooms. I vote that we all sleep together, eh?"

"It's a good idea, but it'll be rather difficult to carry out," replied Reggie. "There aren't sufficient beds in one room, and there's no earthly reason why we should all huddle together like that. Cheer up, my sons, and keep smiling. To-morrow everything will be all serene. We shall have the servants back, and all the other guests will be on the spot, too. So there's nothing to worry about. Trust your Uncle Reggie, and—"

Crash!

"Wha-what was that?" stammered Church, starting up in his chair.

"Goodness knows!" said Reggie, looking round into the hall. "Something must have fallen over. That noise came from the staircase, didn't it?"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"There's—there's something out there!"

"That's right, be scared of the wind!" said Handforth tartly. "You know what a gale there is to-night. I expect something has blown over, that's all."

"But there aren't any windows open," protested McClure. "You know that, Handy!"

"Then one of the windows must have come unfastened," replied Handforth stubbornly. "You fellows immediately jump to the conclusion that there's a ghost out there; I don't. I don't believe in ghosts. Never have believed in 'em—never will. And that's final!"

"Nothing like being blunt, old man," grinned Reggie Pitt. "Well, I think we'd better pop out into the hall and see if there's anything amiss. Perhaps one of the logs fell off the fire. No need to make a mystery out of nothing, anyhow."

They all crowded out, rather glad to get out of the dining-room. They weren't hungry, and they didn't want any food. All they wanted was to get to some place where there were none of these ghostly influences, but it hardly seemed likely that they would find such a haven to-night. Every section of the castle was subject to the uncanny influence of the place.

Emerging into the hall, they immediately saw a quaintly-carved table lying on its side. It was a solid table, too, and could not be blown over. Besides, there was no draught from anywhere. The table just stood there, looking very forlorn and sorrowful.

"That's rummy!" said Nipper, frowning. "I wonder who tipped that over?"

"Look!" gasped Watson, pointing.

They stood there, staring. The table was slowly rising. Not a soul was near it—not a junior was within three yards—but that table was rising from the floor. With a sudden jerk it righted itself and stood in its original position.

Nipper gave a sudden yell.

"Wires!" he shouted, leaping forward.

"What!" roared Handforth. "Do you mean that—"

"I saw them glinting!" shouted Nipper. "Wires, by Jove! Didn't I tell you that the whole thing was a fake? Quick!"

The juniors rushed at the table, and then Nipper looked up with a rather blank expression on his face. There were no wires to be seen.

"There aren't any wires here!" said Watson breathlessly. "You were wrong, Nipper."



"I can't understand it!" said Nipper, compressing his lips. "I can swear that I saw a wire, and yet— No, there's nothing here. There's not even a hook or a concealed crevice or anything. Well, I'm hanged!"

And Nipper scratched his head in wonder. "All the same, if you saw a wire it must have been a wire," argued Handforth. "I didn't see it myself, but I can't see everything. Besides, how the dickens could the table move like that of its own accord? There must have been a wire!"

"I—I wish we hadn't come here!" panted Church. "These things are getting on my nerves, Reggie! This beastly old castle of yours is enough to turn anybody dotty!"

Reggie Pitt looked distressed.

"I know it," he admitted. "But don't be too hard on me, you chaps. I thought it would be rather good, you know. Something unusual, something thrilling. Besides, it seemed such a weak thing to do, to back



CHAPTER 17.

The Ghostly Footsteps!

UT who are 'they,' Handy?" asked Church.

"They?" repeated Handforth.

"You said that they couldn't fool you—" "I don't know who 'they' are," interrupted Handforth. "How should I know? You'd better ask Pitt!"

"That won't be any good," said Reggie. "I haven't the faintest idea as to who could indulge in trickery at this place. There seems to be no reason for it—no purpose to be gained."

"I'll tell you what, though," said Handforth, with gleaming eyes. "I've had an idea at the back of my mind for days. This old castle was deserted for years, wasn't it? Nobody ever came near it, eh?"

"That's true enough," said Pitt.

"And then you suddenly had it left to you as a legacy," went on Handforth. "You came here, and then arranged this Christmas party. I shouldn't be at all surprised if we haven't hit upon a gang."

"A what?" said Nipper.

"A gang of coiners," said Handforth impressively. "They've been using this old castle as a headquarters, and ever since we arrived they've been doing their utmost to drive us away. Down in the vaults they've got their coining apparatus, and—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

For the first time the others burst into a roar of laughter, and it was a welcome sound.

"Yes, you can cackle!" roared Handforth, glaring. "But it's a fine idea—"

"Thanks, we will cackle!" grinned Reggie. "It's done us a lot of good, too, old man. Just

what we needed!"

"You grinning ass—"

"I seem to have heard that coiners' yarn before," went on Pitt reminiscently. "In fact, unless I'm mistaken, it's figured in plenty of cheap detective stories. A mysterious old house, somebody comes into it unexpectedly, surprises a gang of coiners or counterfeiters, and then they try to scare him out. My dear old Handy, it's as old as the hills!"

"If this castle were just an ordinary house, there might be something in Handy's

The hideous apparition suddenly took a step off the balustrade and stood in mid-air. "Oh, my hat!" gasped Handforth.



out and to follow the example of the servants. It was absolutely up to us to come here and spend the night. And if I've dragged you chaps into it—"

"Dry up!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "We all came here of our own free will, and we're going to stop here, too. There's a mystery about this castle, and it's not a supernatural mystery, either. We're going to find out the truth. We're going to investigate until we get to the root of the matter. They can't fool me with their faked ghosts! No giddy fear!"

theory," said Nipper. "If, for example, it were situated in a London back street, or in the suburbs of a big town. But here, right out in the open, there's not a single chance that that story of yours will hold water, Handy. Coiners don't choose spots like this; it's too risky. There's too much chance of them being seen, coming to and fro. In a village like Market Donning any stranger is instantly seen, and his appearance is commented upon. No, old man, it won't wash."

But Handforth was not to be denied.

"Well, anyhow, there are some fakery at work," he declared stubbornly. "This table was turned over by trickery—and it was righted again by trickery. You can't spoof me! Why, you even saw some wires, Nipper!"

"I thought I did," admitted Nipper. "But there aren't any wires, so that rather makes it appear that I imagined it."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "You're not the kind of chap to imagine things. Besides, can't wires be pulled away?"

"That's just what I was thinking, as a matter of fact," said Nipper. "However, this is no time for investigating, Handy. We'd better leave it till to-morrow. The lamps are going out, and the fire is dead, and bed seems to be the best place for us. I vote that we all go upstairs and turn in."

"Hear, hear!" said Reggie. "The night's getting wilder, and it's close upon twelve. Time we were between the sheets."

"Twelve!" murmured Watson, with a little gulp.

"Dry up, ass!" grunted Handforth. "You're as nervous as Fatty Fowkes, of the Crusaders! By George, it's a good thing he's not here to-night!"

They all tried to tell themselves that midnight was no different to any other hour, but they couldn't help feeling that midnight might bring some further manifestation. It was the traditional hour for ghostly appearances. However, there had never been any hint that the bed-rooms were haunted, so there was a little relief in that thought.

"On second thoughts, perhaps, we'd better use one bed-room," said Reggie Pitt, as they prepared to go upstairs. "There's one big room with three double beds in it. We can all squash in, can't we?"

"Rather!" said the others.

"It'll be company for us all—and while we're together, we can't very well be scared," went on Reggie. "As for these lamps, we'll

leave them burning. They'll soon go out of their own accord. Come on, let's make a move."

The others were very relieved to hear this decision. It would be a lot better for them to sleep in one room. Then, if anything happened, they would be together—company for one another.

So they went upstairs—wondering, vaguely, if they would see that strange apparition again. What if it appeared now—on the stairs, while they were actually ascending? What would they do? This thought was in most of their minds.

But they need not have worried, for no such apparition appeared. They found themselves on the upper landing, and they moved along towards one of the specially prepared bed-rooms. They were soon inside, and a general breath of relief went up when Reggie closed the door, and turned the key in the lock.

"Not that it'll be much good against ghosts," he said lightly. "According to all I've heard about these old phantoms, they get through a keyhole or under a crack of the door. Locks don't keep them away."

"Oh, dry up!" said Jack Grey. "No need to be funny about it, Reggie."

"Perhaps we'd better not get undressed?" suggested Church, as he looked round the room with a wary eye. "Look! The fire's nearly out, and this lamp doesn't seem to be any too good."

"Of course we'll get undressed," said Handforth, giving Church a cold glance. "I'm surprised at you, Churchy! Do you mean to say that you'd get into bed with all your clothes on? Only tramps do that sort of thing!"

"Yes, but things are different to-night," protested Church. "If there's any sudden alarm, we shall be ready to dash out. We don't want to be caught unawares, and—"

"Listen!" broke in Watson suddenly. "What—what was that?"

"What was what?" asked all the others in one voice.

"Didn't you hear—footsteps?" panted Tommy Watson.

"No, I didn't!" said Handforth. "Of all the silly chumps—"

"We'd better listen, just to make sure!" interrupted Nipper.

They became silent, and held their breaths. For a moment or two nothing could be heard except the buffeting of the wind outside, and then, surely enough, came the sound of footsteps.

Peculiar, deliberate footsteps!

Somebody seemed to be walking along the corridor—just outside! And he was making no attempt to disguise the sound of his movements. There was nothing stealthy about that tread—nothing secretive. The footsteps came slowly and clearly, in a measured stride. What could it mean? Who was out there? These boys had the castle to themselves—and

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they knew well enough that all the servants had gone. Who was out there—in the corridor?

CHAPTER 18.

The Phantom of Raithmere Castle!



N

IPPER was the first to move.

"This is silly!" he said impatiently.

"There must be somebody in the place. It's the only possible explanation."

He turned to the door and wrenched it open. Then, with one bound, he was outside. Next moment he checked himself and started back.

"What—what have you seen!" panted Tommy Watson.

"Nothing!" said Nipper. "How can you expect me to see anything in the pitch darkness? There's not a light here! Every lamp has gone out!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The juniors fell back from the doorway, half expecting to see some ghostly object. And they were all amazed by the darkness. Only a few minutes ago they had come along that corridor, and there had been plenty of lights then. Reggie Pitt had purposely left them burning. Now all was darkness!

Every light had gone out—and yet it was impossible to believe that they could have died out on their own accord. How had they been extinguished?

"Just a minute!" said Nipper. "Anybody coming with me?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Church.

"I want to go out into this corridor, and close the door," replied Nipper. "Either that, or we'll put the light out in here—"

"No, don't do that!" shouted two or three of the others.

Handforth volunteered to go out, and a moment later the pair went into the corridor, and Nipper closed the door. They found themselves in utter blackness. At least, it seemed so for the first moment or two. Then, when they grew accustomed to the gloom, they could tell that the moonlight was percolating through the windows at the end of the corridor. It seemed that the snowstorm had abated. For it was real moonshine—not a diffused light. The clouds had evidently cleared from the sky, and the moon was shining down clearly.

"There's nothing here," muttered Nipper. "So what caused those footsteps? By Jove! There's something fishy about all that! I'm not satisfied that—"

"Look!" broke in Handforth.

He pointed, and they both saw a figure moving at the end of the corridor—just visible in

the moonlight; and, unmistakably, the creak of a loose board came to their ears.

"Ghosts don't make boards creak!" said Nipper curtly. "Come on—let's collar him! Let's make an end to this silly mystery!"

They tore down the corridor at full speed, but when they reached the end there was no figure to be seen. Nothing—nothing but a long vista of passageway, clearly illuminated by moonlight.

"Well, it beats me!" said Nipper, scratching his head. "We saw that figure, didn't we, Handy? And he couldn't have had time to escape! That's the rummy part about it! The only explanation is a secret panel!"

"By George!" said Handforth. "You—you mean—"

"I mean that this old castle is probably honeycombed with secret passages and tunnels," replied Nipper. "You know what these places are like. In fact, you tumbled headlong into a secret passage yourself—the other day. Don't you remember? When we first came here to explore the place."

"Of course I remember," said Handforth. "But that wasn't in this wing at all. We were downstairs, then—and I tumbled down some old stairs."

"I know, but that doesn't alter the fact that the castle is probably honeycombed with passages," said Nipper. "If there was a secret panel downstairs, why shouldn't there be one up here? I was as keen as mustard to come here on this visit, so that I could thoroughly explore the place."

"Same here," agreed Handy. "Why not start now?"

"Well, old man, it's hardly the time," replied Nipper. "My idea was to do it in the daylight—and with lots of other fellows with us. We'll leave it till to-morrow."

The bed-room opened, far down the corridor, and one or two figures could be seen.

"Are you chaps all right?" sang out Reggie Pitt.

"Yes, of course," said Handforth. "We're coming back."

He and Nipper joined the others, and all sorts of questions were hurled at them.

"We saw somebody down the end of the corridor," explained Nipper, "but when we got there the figure had gone."

"Great Scott!"

"But don't get thinking that it was a ghost," went on Nipper. "I believe it was a man—some fellow who is deliberately trying to frighten us out. There's something in that idea of Handy's, after all—that coiners' den scheme. Of course, I don't believe in the coiners—that's all imaginative nonsense—but there's certainly somebody here."

"Well, we'd better get back into the bed-room, and see if we can't get some sleep," said Pitt. "I'm fed-up with all this mystery. Either that, or we'll make a thorough

investigation. It's going to be one or the other."

"I rather think we ought to sleep," said Nipper. "There'll be plenty of time for investigating to-morrow—in the daylight."

They went back into the bed-room and closed the door—relocking it. Hardly had they done so, however, when those footsteps sounded again—just as deliberate and just as clearly. And now there was another sound.

Tap, tap, tap!

A peculiar tapping came from the other side of the room! The juniors turned, staring, and as they did so a picture came thudding down from the wall. It crashed to the floor, and the glass broke into a hundred fragments.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Watson, jumping.

Once again Nipper flung open the door, but there was nothing to be seen. He closed it, and put his back against it.

"The best thing we can do is to go to bed," he growled. "Let's ignore this confounded trickster! Let's show him that he's not frightening us! If we keep dodging out and rushing after him he'll only believe that

we're scared out of our wits. Let's ignore him altogether."

"That's a good idea," said Pitt. "I second it. Passed unanimously—"

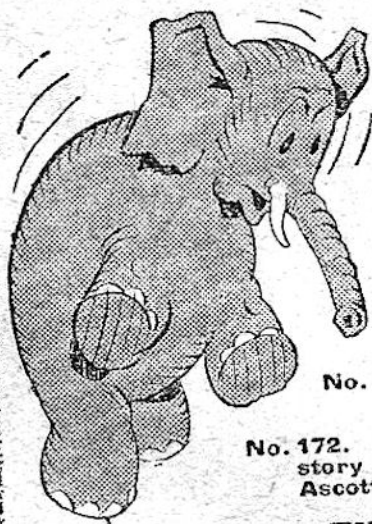
"No, it isn't!" said Handforth. "I don't agree to it, for one! I don't see why we should let this rotter do just as he likes with us. There ought to be a thorough investigation now. Why wait until to-morrow? That's all rot! I've brought an electric-torch with me, and—"

He broke off, feeling in his pockets.

"That's rummy!" he went on, frowning. "I don't seem to have it now! I must have left it behind, after all!"

"That's nothing new for you, old son!" smiled Nipper. "Well, what's it to be? Shall we let the ghosts carry on their midnight revels without interruption, or shall we go and look for them?"

It was a question that could not be answered immediately. The juniors hardly knew what to do. They felt, in a vague sort of way, that they were being duped, and yet they weren't certain of this. Was it trickery—or was there a real ghost? The mystery of



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the whole affair had gripped them, and they did not know what to do for the best.

And while they were indecisive, those footsteps sounded again. Slow, deliberate footsteps. They were just outside the door—passing—continuing onwards!

CHAPTER 19.

The Hovering Horror!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH gave a roar.

"I'm fed-up!" he shouted. "There's

something out there—somebody playing tricks with us! Come on—all of you! We're bound to spot him if we rush out."

He tore the door open, and Nipper and Pitt and Willy followed him. The others, hardly liking to remain behind, came also. They all sped out into the corridor, but there was now no trace of the intruder. The footsteps had ceased, and there was nothing to be heard except the buffeting of the wind.

"Which way were those footsteps going?" asked Handforth, turning.

"They seemed to be making for the big landing—the main staircase," said Nipper. "When they passed before they were going the other way, but this time—"

"Just what I thought, too," said Handforth. "Come on—we'll soon find him!"

They hurried along towards the big staircase, but just before they reached it, with Handforth in advance, they checked. And Handforth felt something dry in his throat. He wanted to speak, but could not do so. He was staring—staring unbelievably.

For there was something crouching on the balustrade of the staircase.

What was it? And how could they see it? For the great hall was in complete darkness. The moon had gone in now, and the gloom was so intense that even the stairs could not be seen. Yet that object on the balustrade was clearly visible—uncannily, horribly visible. There it squatted, a monstrous thing of horrific aspect.

This was no ordinary ghost—no figure of an old-time warrior, or the quaintly-gowned spectre of a fourteenth century lady. It was something far more terrible.

A sort of creature—a caricature of Pan. The upper part of the thing appeared to be like that of a man, except for large masses of fur over its shoulders and chest, while the rear limbs were hooped—like those of a bullock! And there it squatted, its hideous face grinning and mouthing. There were little horns on the head, and they jogged up and down as the thing moved its head.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Handforth at last.

The juniors all stood there, rooted to the spot. They could not move—they could only stare at this spectral presence. For what else could it be? If it were real, how could it assume that form? If it were real, how could it be visible? There were no lights anywhere—no glimmering of any kind—and yet this thing could be clearly seen in every detail. There it squatted, as though unconscious of the juniors' presence.

Suddenly it stood up—stood up on that balustrade, balancing itself with the utmost ease. But this was not all. The thing took a step off the balustrade and trod in mid-air; stood in mid-air!

Then, after a moment or two, the apparition walked forward—through the air, as though it were pacing on solid ground.

It turned after a moment, and looked straight at the schoolboys—looked at them with a face that turned their blood to water. Then, giving a wild leap into the air, the creature leapt at the wall—and went through the wall. The most astounding part of the whole affair was that for a brief second or two the spectre could be seen inside the wall—as though the wall itself were transparent. Then it faded and grew dim.

Nipper felt a cold perspiration on his brow.

His mind was in a whirl. He was suspicious of trickery, but how could that thing have been created by trickery. A man, dressed up as a ghost—yes! Nipper could understand that sort of thing. But he knew very well that no man could have hovered there in mid-air. No living thing could have gone into that wall! It was altogether unaccountable—amazingly mysterious.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Watson frantically.

"Yes—let's go!" said Church.

"Steady—steady!" muttered Reggie Pitt. "I don't mind admitting I'm scared on my own account, but we needn't get into a panic—"

"The place is haunted!" shouted McClure. "We'd better go! What does it matter about the snow? What does it matter about the storm? It's not too late, even now, to get back to the village, and to find rooms! It'll be better than staying here like this! We can't sleep in this place—we can't—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Nipper. "Pull yourself together, you ass! There's no need to get so frightened."

"But what was it?" shouted Watson. "I don't mind anything that I can understand! I shouldn't be scared if we were suddenly fighting against a crowd of hooligans! But this—this thing is too much! And those footsteps, too! Who made those footsteps?"

Nipper could see that some of the fellows were ready to give way to panic. He did not altogether blame them. What they had seen had been sufficient to test the strongest nerves. It would have been different if there had been some possible explanation, but here



there was none. Nipper had had experience of many fake ghosts. He had seen apparitions that had been prepared by means of luminous paint. He had seen filmy things that floated in the air, operated by rods, or wires.

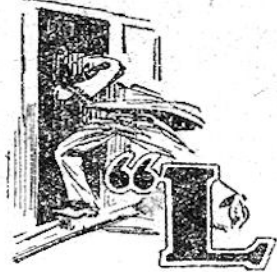
But these explanations did not apply now.

That creature could not have been a man dressed up in luminous clothing. It could not have been a filmy thing, operated by wires. For it had seemed solid—absolutely tangible. That was the extraordinary part of it. Most ghosts were vague and dim and uncertain in appearance, but this one was not like that. The juniors had seen every detail—every hair of the head, every button on the strange clothing, every tuft of fur. All these things had been visible, although there was no light on the scene! That was the staggering, unaccountable part of it all.

For that creature had been visible in the darkness. How? If it was a fake, how could this miraculous thing have been accomplished? It seemed only too certain that there had been no fakery. The thing was indeed a spectral presence—a thing of the other world—

Nipper pulled himself up with a jerk.

That sort of thing wouldn't do! He mustn't allow his thoughts to run into such channels. Never for a moment would he admit that he had seen a genuine spirit manifestation. No, there was some explanation of this—and Nipper was determined that he would find it out. He wasn't going to be beaten—neither was he going to become the prey of his own imagination. Above all, he must keep a level head.



CHAPTER 20.

Something Tangible at Last!

LET'S get back into the bed-room!" said Nipper.

He turned and hurried along the wide

corridor. The others followed him without a word. Their thoughts were too wild—too disturbed. Speech was out of the question just then.

They reached the bed-room, and Nipper closed the door. At that very moment there came a kind of gasp from without—a loud, horrified cry—and those footsteps sounded again, heavy and hurried.

Nipper, with a gulp, put his hand on the door-knob.

"Don't!" gasped Watson. "Don't open the door again!"

"Nonsense!" said Nipper sharply.

He tore the door open, and then he caught a glimpse of something as it ran by; the figure of an old man—bent and crouching—whose footsteps were heavy and by no means

ghost-like. In a flash he had vanished down into the darkness of the corridor.

"Hi!" shouted Nipper. "Who are you? Come back here! Who are you, I say?"

But there was no reply, only the sound of those receding footsteps.

"Quick!" roared Nipper. "Come on! This is no ghost, you chaps! After him!"

"Rather!" bellowed Handforth.

The juniors ran down the corridor at full speed, freshly excited by this new experience. Nipper and Handforth were the first to rush round the corner, and they were just in time to see the figure of the old man vanishing into the very wall. The moonlight was streaming in just there, and they could see him as he disappeared. But when they rushed up there was nothing but blankness. The bare wall—without an alcove, or even a recess.

Nipper was looking very grim now.

"O-ho!" he muttered. "So that's the way it's done, is it? No wonder we didn't see the fellow when we came here a little while ago, Handy!"

"What—what do you mean?" panted Handforth.

"Why, there's a panel here—a secret panel!" said Nipper keenly. "Don't you understand? I'm not confusing this old man with that strange apparition we saw in the hall. That thing seemed to fade into the solid wall. But there's panelling here—and I'm always suspicious of panelling. We know the exact spot where the old man vanished, and we ought to be able to locate it within a few minutes. This is the panel—this very one!"

He brought out his own electric torch and flashed it on.

The other juniors collected round, excited and breathless. So many things had happened in such a short time that they could hardly think clearly. Their wits were scattered.

But Nipper, at least, had formed a certain theory.

He believed that this old man was responsible for the footsteps, for the falling pictures, and for the other unaccountable manifestations. Then the old man had probably seen that strange apparition, and had himself been frightened. So he had run back to his lair, heedless of the juniors he had been attempting to frighten. That seemed to be a logical hypothesis, and Nipper was determined to put his theory to the test.

"There's nothing there, you ass!" said Jack Grey. "Did you see the old man actually vanish into this wall?"

"Yes, of course we did," said Handforth.

"But it's a solid wall!" protested Grey. "There's a brickwork behind here! It must have been a ghost—just like that one we saw in the hall!"

"We'll soon see about that," said Nipper grimly.

He thumped upon the panel with all his strength, creating a terrific din.

"Open this panel!" he shouted. "If you don't open it, we'll smash it down!"

But there was no reply.

"That's the idea," said Handforth, breathing hard. "We'll smash it down! Why trouble to find any secret catch? It doesn't matter if we smash the panel. You don't mind, do you, Reggie?"

"Not a bit," said Pitt. "Go ahead! More power to your elbow!"

charge. Not that he cared. After the first moment he forgot all about the pain.

"Where's your light, Nipper?" he panted. "By George! The panel's split from top to bottom! One more charge, and we'll be through!"

"Great Scott!"

"Look! It's split right enough!"

It was Nipper who charged this time; there was another splintering crash, and now the panelling fell away, broken and shattered. The juniors clutched at the



Nipper tore the door open and was just in time to catch a glimpse of something as it ran by—the figure of an old man!

"The figure we saw vanishing in this wall was a real man," declared Nipper. "Hang it, I can't be fooled like that! He was a real man, I tell you, and he's probably listening to every word we're saying now. Stand back, you chaps! I'm going to charge this panel!"

"No fear!" said Handforth. "I'm bigger—and stronger! I'll do it!"

He went across to the other side of the corridor, gathered himself up, and then charged at the panel full tilt. There was a splintering, thudding crash. Handforth reeled back, with his face screwed up. He had hurt himself considerably by that

jagged edges, and pulled them away by force. Bit by bit the panel was torn out—and there were shouts of excitement when it was seen that a great cavity yawned beyond. Nipper's theory, so far, was proving to be correct. It was not a solid wall behind here!

"Hold on a minute!" said Nipper breathlessly.

He sniffed the air keenly. A peculiar stuffy odour was coming from that aperture. It was almost impossible to distinguish what the odour actually was, but it vaguely reminded Nipper of food—and stale tobacco, perhaps. There was nothing dank about it. It was the kind of smell that one would

expect to emanate from a place that was constantly inhabited.

"Who's there?" shouted Nipper, flashing his light into the cavity. "You'd better come out—before we drag you out!"

They all held their breath—but there was no response.

"Come on!" said Nipper. "We're not going to be done now. But be careful, you chaps—he may be dangerous. He may fight."

"Let him!" roared Handforth. "I'll go in first!"

Nipper was already in, however, and he was making his way along a narrow tunnel. In less than a minute he came upon a stout door; it was fitted with an ordinary conventional brass door-knob.

"Steady, now!" muttered Nipper. "Be ready for the scrap!"

He placed his hand upon the door-knob and turned it. Rather to his surprise, the door gave under his pressure, and with a sudden movement he flung the portal wide open. The light from his electric torch flashed swiftly to and fro.

It revealed a curious kind of living-room—a homely, cosy apartment, with a fire merrily blazing in a small grate. There was a shaded oil-lamp upon the table, and over in the far corner, near the fireplace, was the old man!

"Well, my young gentlemen, you have found me," he said, in a harsh, quivering voice. "I am beaten—I surrender!"

They were surprised—amazed—but at the same time they were relieved. This was no ghost—no spectral presence. It was an old man, quaint and harmless. Immediately all that ghostly atmosphere seemed to fade away into thin air.

The juniors had come crowding in, and now they occupied the end of this cosy little room. They looked round them wonderingly.

The room was quite a perfect little living-room—with many book-shelves, and with a little corner where cooking arrangements

evidently existed. There was a door, farther in, and it stood half ajar—revealing the corner of a bedstead. Quite a little flat, as it were.

"Why do you come to me like this?" asked the old man, his voice unsteady, and quivering with sudden animosity. "Why do you pester me?"

"I like that!"

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



said Handforth. "You're the one who's been pestering us! Trying to scare us out—"

"Yes—yes!" interrupted the old man passionately. "That is true! I admit it! I did my utmost to frighten you away, to prevent you entering this castle, but my

efforts were useless. You have discovered me!"

"I would like to point out that this castle is my property," said Reggie Pitt quietly.

"It was left to me by my uncle—"

"I know—I know!" interrupted the old man. "Do you think I have no ears? I was alert on the first occasion when you came. I heard much of your conversation. I know that this castle belongs to you—lock, stock and barrel. And, then and there, I decided to frighten you away. Why do you want to come here? Why do you want to disturb my peace? For years and years I have enjoyed this peace tranquilly, without any fear of being turned away. But now it is over—now you are face to face with me. Very well—I surrender, as I said before. I am no fighter. I cannot resist such methods as you have adopted."

CHAPTER 21.

The Secret of the Hidden Room!

FOR a moment none of the juniors spoke.

Their first emotion was one of overwhelming relief.



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"Just a minute, Mr.—Mr.—" began Pitt.

"My name is Rotherton," said the strange old man. "Julius Rotherton. But what is that name to you?"

"I only want to say, Mr. Rotherton, that it would have been better if you had acted in a straightforward way," said Reggie Pitt quietly. "Why do you talk about being turned out? I am the new owner of this castle, and if you have a legitimate reason for remaining here, I'm not the kind of fellow to turn you out."

The strange man looked at Reggie with wide eyes.

"You won't turn me out?" he repeated dazedly.

"Not if you are here honestly—not if you are harmless," replied Pitt. "But if you are indulging in any criminal practices—"

"No, no, no!"

broke in Mr. Julius Rotherton. "That is not true. There is no more peaceful creature on this earth than I. I wish to harm no man. All I desire is to be left in peace. And it was my fear that I should be turned out, that I should be compelled to leave these old walls—"

"Then, Mr. Rotherton, you made a mistake," said Pitt. "But don't you think it would be better if you gave us some sort of explanation? You have been treating us very strangely since we arrived here. I'd planned for a big party for this Christmas, and many of my friends are here—many others are coming. I have a big staff of servants, but they have been driven away. I can only conclude that you have frightened them by your trickery and your fakes. Is that quite playing the game? Don't you think you have a good deal to explain?"

The old man came forward.

"Pray be seated, young gentlemen," he said quietly. "I can see that I have been wrong, gravely wrong. I can only crave your forgiveness. I can only trust that you

will listen to the eccentric pleas of a peaceful old man."

The juniors sat down and looked at Mr. Rotherton curiously. They were by no means alarmed. This queer old customer was evidently harmless. Indeed, Handforth could have knocked him over with one push. He seemed so frail, so pitifully slight.

"I am frightened," he confessed in a quavering voice. "I realise that I have acted very wrongly, and it is now too late. I should have approached you openly in the

first place, and craved your indulgence. As it is now, what can I expect but harshness and anger?"

"We're not angry yet," said Pitt. "Please explain things, Mr. Rotherton."

The old man sighed.

"And yet there is very little to explain," he said.

"For many years I have lived in the castle, undisturbed. Yes, I have occupied these curious hidden rooms. At one time of day, many centuries ago, I believe they were occupied by a person of royal blood.

A hidden suite, self-contained in every particular, and unsuspected by any ordinary dwellers in the castle. Beyond, I have a bed-room, yes, and a workshop. It has been my habit for years

to potter about with my little experiments."

"Have you always lived here, sir?" asked Handforth.

"Always," replied Mr. Rotherton. "At least, when I say always, I mean I have been here since I was a child. It may interest you to know, young sir, that I was your great-uncle's trusted servant," he went on, looking at Pitt. "Mr. Roger Merton was a good man, a fine gentleman, but when he left the castle I could not bring myself to go with him. I could live nowhere else but within these walls. I am part of them, and the thought of being taken away terrified me. When Mr. Merton left, after his greivous seizure, I remained behind."

"Did Mr. Merton know that you were here, then?" asked Pitt.

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"It was Mr. Merton's wish that I should remain," said the old man. "I was here in the capacity of—caretaker, shall we say? It was Mr. Merton's whim that I should stay behind, to look after the old castle. And I did not demur, since it was what I should have wished myself. But I fear that Mr. Merton forgot all about me. Not that I was sorry. I have been happy during these years—peaceful and happy."

The old man bent his head and sighed again. There was something so sorrowful about him that Reggie Pitt could not find it in his heart to be angry.

The old man shook his head and made no comment. It was becoming clear to the juniors that he was very strange. He wasn't mad, but his eccentricities were very close to crankiness. He was a hermit, and he did not like to live amongst others. He did not even want anybody to know his habitations or to come near him.

"But what of these strange things that have been happening here?" asked Reggie pointedly. "Don't you think you owe us an explanation, Mr. Rotherton?"

"I do," said the old man penitently. "I certainly do. And you shall have that explanation. Many weeks ago I heard that a schoolboy had inherited Mr. Merton's castle, and that news filled me with dismay—with misgiving. I heard it in one of the shops where I do some of my purchases. Then when you boys came to the castle some little time ago I knew that it was true. I heard you talking, and I knew that you, young man, were the new owner," he added, looking at Reggie. "And I knew that you were preparing to hold a big party in this castle. My great fear, my overwhelming horror, was that you would discover my presence."

"Why was that an overwhelming horror?"

"Because I feared that you would turn me out," said the old eccentric, "and that would have killed me. It will kill me now. Don't turn me out, young sir!" he added pleadingly. "I will not disturb you here. I will not cause any—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Rotherton," interrupted Reggie quietly. "Let's hear the rest of the explanations, if you don't mind. We're rather anxious to know if you are responsible for the moving furniture and the falling pictures and all the rest of it."

Mr. Rotherton had the decency to flush and to look ashamed of himself.

"I must confess my guilt," he said huskily. "I am indeed responsible."

"But how did you work all those tricks?" asked Nipper curiously.

"I am by way of being mechanical," said Mr. Rotherton. "Did I not mention that I have a little workshop? I spend most of my hours tinkering with little trifles that do not matter to anybody in the world but myself. If you glance round this room you will notice various mechanical devices. They are of my own invention, although, of course, they are quite trivial and valueless."

The juniors were not inclined to agree. The lamp, for example, was a most ingenious example. It was a lamp unlike any other they had ever seen. It burned with a clear flame, and yet there was no chimney to it. There were all kinds of devices—little cooking arrangements and other things which caught the eye. But there was no time to examine these now.

CHAPTER 22.

The Truth!



MR. JULIUS ROTHERTON looked up at last.

"Please let me apologise," he said gracefully. "I fear that I am boring you."

"No, no, please go on," said two or three of the juniors.

"When I say that I was Mr. Roger Merton's servant let me explain that I acted as a kind of private secretary," said the old eccentric. "I think the world has forgotten me long since. Many of Mr. Merton's old retainers knew that I had stayed here, but they probably believed that I left. At all events, the castle has been neglected for many years. I expected Mr. Merton to return, but such was not the case. He never came."

"Didn't you ever go out yourself?" asked Pitt. "Doesn't anybody in the village know that you live here?"

"Not a soul!" replied Mr. Rotherton. "I did not want them to know. I adopted every kind of subterfuge in order to keep it secret."

"But why?"

"Because I like peace; there is nothing I love better than solitude," continued the old man. "Far down in the castle there is an old tunnel—one that leads for miles under the countryside. It has been my habit to venture forth by that means, and to walk along another highway into a local town. Nobody questioned me there; nobody cared whence I came or where I went. And here in the castle, and in Market Donning, there is nobody who knows of my existence."

"Well, I don't pretend to understand why you should want all this secrecy, but perhaps you know best," said Pitt. "I expect it's what one gets used to."

"When I knew definitely that you were coming, I decided to perform one or two harmless little tricks to frighten you," said the hermit. "Let me plead at once that I believed you would leave the castle within the first hour or so. Never did it occur to me that you would persist, that you would have the bravery to come again, and even to arrange for a house-party here. It was that which filled me with such dismay, and I redoubled my efforts."

"But how did you perform those stunts?" asked Handforth bluntly. "That table that fell over and came back to its original position? And the picture that fell from its hook and—"

"They were all very simple little tricks," said Mr. Rotherton dryly. "When you hear my explanation you will smile at me. Wires were the medium in nearly every case."

"There you are!" said Watson. "You said you saw a wire, didn't you, Nipper?"

"I thought I saw it," replied Nipper.

"But why weren't the wires on the table and things when we got to them?" asked Pitt.

"I rather fancy that I was quite ingenious," said Mr. Rotherton. "I fixed my wires through tiny holes in the flooring, holes so small that you could not possibly detect them unless you were definitely searching for such apertures. At odd moments I seized my chance, and I fixed my wires to the table legs and to the chairs. By giving a pull at the right moment the table or the chair would heave up. Then one swift tug and the wires had gone—vanished. There was nothing to show you how the furniture had moved."

"But where did you operate these wires?" asked Nipper. "That's what I can't understand."

"There are many secret passages behind these ancient walls," replied the hermit. "There is one in the banqueting hall, another on the staircase. Indeed, the whole place is honeycombed with such passages. It was not difficult for me to arrange my wires and to listen and to watch. Later, if you like, I will show you these passages, and will let you see the workings of my pitiful little devices."

CHAPTER 23.

Reggie Pitt's Decision !

IT was impossible to be angry with the strange old fellow.

Clearly, he had acted so queerly because he thought that his peace of years was to be rudely shattered. He thought

that by adopting these simple tricks the juniors would be frightened away—that they would go for good, and never disturb him again. But, of course, he had been wrong. He had misjudged the mettle of these St. Frank's fellows.

As for Reggie Pitt, he was genuinely sorry for the old boy. There was not the slightest question of anything dishonest. Mr. Rotherton had only acted in a very eccentric fashion. Pitt did not see the necessity of turning him out. He was so harmless—so timid—so pathetic a figure.

"I'm sorry you didn't come out openly, Mr. Rotherton," said Pitt quietly. "It's a pity you didn't come to me on that first day and tell me of your quarters here. We should have been awfully interested."

"I feared that you would order me out," said Mr. Rotherton. "How was I to know that you were such generous young gentlemen? Many would have resented my presence. Many would have packed me off, bag and baggage. You must realise that some people would not care to have a strange old creature like me on their premises. And I wanted to be on the safe side."

"There is, of course, a great deal in that," admitted Reggie. "But I'm not a hard sort of chap, Mr. Rotherton. I'm only a school-boy, if it comes to that—and I shan't want to live in this old castle for years—if ever. My only object in holding this Christmas party was to have a sort of house-warming to celebrate the legacy. It would have been much better if you had left us in peace. As it is, you've caused all my servants to desert me, and—"

"I am deeply sorry—I am grieved!" said the old man gravely. "In my selfishness, I have committed a grave offence. I cannot expect you to forgive me for this, and now I must accept whatever decision you care to make."

"Well, I've made my decision already," said Reggie Pitt. "If it will give you any satisfaction, sir, I would like to tell you that you are perfectly welcome to live here as long as you please."

Mr. Rotherton started to his feet, and he looked at Pitt with wild, eager eyes.

"Do you—you mean that?" he panted.

"Of course I do," said Reggie.

"After—after the harm I have done you?" ejaculated the old fellow.

"Well, the harm doesn't amount to much," smiled Pitt. "You scared the servants away—but they're only in the village, and they'll come back to-morrow. I don't mind telling you that I'm enormously relieved, Mr. Rotherton. As soon as the servants hear that somebody has been playing tricks, they'll come back at once. But don't worry—I shall not say anything about you. We'll keep your secret for you. We won't let any of the servants, or any of the villagers, know that



you are living here. If you want to keep this secret, we have no desire to divulge it."

"You are good—very, very good," muttered the hermit brokenly.

All the other juniors felt that Reggie Pitt was acting in the right way. Unquestionably, the old man was harmless; and if it pleased him to live in this strange way, why should they interfere?

"There's no thought of turning you out, sir," went on Reggie. "If you had explained everything to me in the first place, I should have been only too glad to give you full permission to stay on indefinitely."

"I was mad, I think!" said Mr. Rotherton in a husky voice. "I should have known human nature better. But there, I have lived so long by myself that my mind has become warped. I do not know much of my fellow creatures. I hope that you will forgive me, my boy."

He broke off with a kind of gulp, and Reggie Pitt rose to his feet, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. This old man's expressions of guilt were very embarrassing. Reggie decided that it would be a good idea for all the juniors to go to bed. A good deal of the mystery was explained, anyhow, and there was no reason for them to be scared any longer.

"Well, you chaps, suppose we go, eh?" said Reggie, as he glanced at the others. "It's after midnight—high time we were in bed. And don't forget—not a word about Mr. Rotherton. I want you all to promise that you'll keep this secret for him."

"We promise, of course!" chorused the others.

"You are very good, my boys—very generous!" said the old hermit.

"Well, come on!" went on Reggie briskly. "We'll just trot back, and—"

"Half a minute!" interrupted Handforth. "There's something I want to ask, Mr. Rotherton. There's something that's puzzling me pretty badly. I was expecting some sort of explanation, but it hasn't come."

He turned to the old man.

"You've explained about the chairs and the pictures and all that, sir," he said, "but what about the ghost?"

"The ghost?" repeated Mr. Rotherton, changing colour.

"I suppose you mean the footsteps, Handy?" asked Church.

"The footsteps were caused by me," replied the hermit. "It was I who passed your door in the darkness—I who extinguished the lamps, so that you would not be able to see me. I thought I had explained—"

"Yes, yes—I understand all that, sir," interrupted Handforth. "But what about the ghost? What about that awful thing we saw on the staircase?"

"Yes, by jingo!" said Watson. "How did you manage to work that, Mr. Rotherton?"

The old man had turned almost grey.

"I did not work it!" he said hoarsely.

"It was the sight of that sudden apparition which caused me to cry out—which led you to follow me to my hiding-place? No, boys, I know nothing of that extraordinary phantom! Indeed, I was terrified by it—utterly terrified!"

And there was something in his tone which made the juniors look at him with a fresh sensation of apprehension!



CHAPTER 24.

The Unexplained Mystery!

REGGIE PITT and his guests looked at the queer old man with surprise and uncertainty. There was a frightened look in his eyes now—a strange, hunted expression.

"Yes," he muttered, "I saw that dreadful thing! Unexpectedly—dramatically I saw it! My boys, I was shaken—so terribly shaken, in fact, that I lost my nerve."

They stared at him harder than ever.

"But weren't you responsible for it, sir?" asked Handforth blankly.

"I?" said Mr. Rotherton, with a start. "I responsible for that monstrous thing? No, no, no! I know nothing whatever about it!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Then the mystery isn't explained, after all!"

"Begad!"

"I will confess to the tricks with the furniture, and to the tapping and the footsteps—but of that ghost I know nothing!" said Mr. Rotherton earnestly. "Boys—boys! Don't you believe me? Don't you accept my word?"

"Yes, sir—of course," replied Nipper. "We can see that you are as puzzled as we. We are quite satisfied that you did not produce that apparition. But don't you know anything about it?"

"Nothing—nothing whatever!"

"Have you ever seen it before, sir?" asked Reggie.

"Never!"

"Have you never seen any ghost?"

"I have never seen any ghost of any kind within these walls," replied the old man.

"Ghosts? I do not believe in ghosts! I may be eccentric, I may be strange in my manners, but I am not out of my reason! I do not believe in these nonsensical stories of ghostly apparitions. Otherwise, do you think I would live in this old castle, where there are supposed to be many such ghosts?"

"That reminds me," said Reggie. "Lots of the village people have said that ghosts have been seen here. Perhaps one or two of them have caught sight of you, Mr. Rotherton, at various times."

"It is quite possible," admitted the hermit. "I will even confess that I have deliberately shown myself on moonlight nights—on purpose to create the impression that the castle was haunted. My object was to keep the villagers away."

Reggie grinned. "Well, it was certainly a good idea," he said. "Nobody in Market Donning would come within a mile of the castle after dark, and precious few of them would come near the place in the daylight."

"But about this ghost," said Handforth. "Mr. Rotherton didn't produce it, and he doesn't know anything about it. Well, I'm jiggered! What does it mean, you chaps?"

"It's no good asking us," replied Reggie. "We've solved one mystery, but the other remains as great a puzzle as ever."

"It was a shock to me when I saw that strange creature," said Mr. Rotherton soberly. "I thought, for a moment, that I was out of my senses. But you tell me you have seen this thing, too?"

"Yes, sir—all of us."

"Then it is unaccountable—it is astounding," said the old man. "What can it mean? How can that thing have come there? There is nobody else in the castle—there is no other trickster. I know—I have lived here for years. I am the sole occupant."

"Well, we'll go, sir," said Pitt briskly. "If you don't know anything about that ghost, then there is no object in us remaining. I expect it's long past your bedtime already, eh? All right, we'll buzz off and leave you in peace."

"You are very good, my boys—too good!" muttered Mr. Rotherton.

They went out, and Pitt paused for a minute when they got to the outer panel.

"We shall have to repair this in the morning," he said thoughtfully. "All the other chaps are coming to-morrow, you know—and we mustn't leave a clue like this. It wouldn't be fair to the old boy inside. We'll put another panel in, and fake it up so that nothing can be seen."

"All right—but let's do that in the daylight," said Church. "I say, what about that ghost? It was a shock to me when I heard that Mr. Rotherton didn't know anything about it. By Jupiter! This old castle of yours, Pitt, is full of mysteries!"

And so they went to bed—still puzzled. If the truth must be told, they were very uneasy, too—just a wee bit scared. They wondered if that ghost would appear again. If it could go through the wall of the hall, why should it not appear in their very bedroom? Everyone of those juniors had the same thought in his mind as he undressed.

The discovery of the old hermit had brought a great deal of relief, but yet—That phantom! That extraordinary, unaccountable apparition! Never had the juniors seen anything like it. Never had they dreamed it possible that such a creature could exist.

What was the meaning of it? What was the explanation?

Reggie Pitt yawned as he prepared to extinguish the lamp.

"Ready, you fellows?" he asked sleepily. "Yes—but you needn't put the light out!" said Jack Grey. "We're not nervous, but—" "Exactly!" grinned Reggie. "Perhaps you're right, old man!"

He went to the window, and looked out. A great vista of snow-covered land met his gaze. The moon was now shining brilliantly. The wind had gone down a great deal during the past hour, and the night was clear and bright.

"It's glorious now," said Reggie. "Every prospect of a fine day to-morrow. That train will steam in sure enough in the morning, and then all the other fellows will arrive. Yo ho for a Merry Christmas!"

But the others did not echo his enthusiasm. They were not thinking of the main guests who would be arriving on the morrow, or of the fact that it would soon be Christmas time—with all its jollity and gaiety—they were thinking of that unexplained mystery.

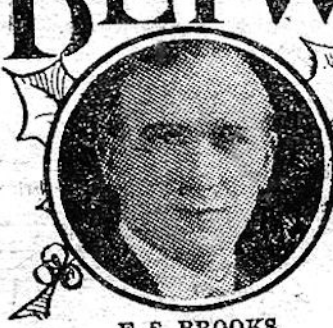
None could guess what would happen during Christmas time under the roof of Raithmere Castle. Would they be able to get to the bottom of that strange secret? Would they be able to explain the appearance of that fearsome ghost?

One by one, the juniors dropped off to sleep—thoroughly weary after their excitements and escapades. Soon they were all slumbering.

One thing was very certain—Christmas at Raithmere would be filled with excitement and adventure!



BETWEEN OURSELVES



E. S. BROOKS.



FRED GRIFFIN.

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed: EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE SCHOOL STORY LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

HERE'S wishing a Merry Christmas to All Our Readers! Although I shan't be with you, I shall be thinking of the tens of thousands of merry parties, in all parts of the world. And I hope a few of you, at least, will have time enough to think of me for a minute or two. I don't suppose any of you will have such an exciting Christmas party as Reggie Pitt and his guests in this week's yarn; but I rather hope that some of you who have no Christmas party, will find a certain amount of consolation in the reading of my Christmas tale.

You have brought before me—P. Saunders (Chiswick, W.4)—a matter which I think will interest the majority of our readers. Therefore I have pleasure in quoting, as requested, the signed message which you enclosed:

"SPORTS FELLOWSHIP FORMATION.

This new association for fellowship and service is launched with great hopes by its founders and with manys blessings from leading sportsmen and sportswomen and social workers.

"We shall work and raise funds for many good causes in which sportsfolk are interested: for indoor and outdoor recreation, for sports training for boys and girls, for health bodies and hospitals, and for social service bodies, especially those working for the children.

"We are sending our appeal to every sports official, every prominent player, and every sports writer or sports pressman in the country.

"(Signed) A. E. R. GILLIGAN
(President),
W. W. WAKEFIELD
(Chairman of Council)."

and from Mr. W. W. Wakefield, the well-known Rugger player, to readers of THE NELSON LEE SCHOOL STORY LIBRARY. Anyone wishing to join must send 5/-, or, if you are under 18, 1/-, to P. Saunders, at The Sports Fellowship office, 201a, High Holborn, London, W.C.1. They want THE NELSON LEE SCHOOL STORY LIBRARY to be represented in the formation.

As I have had your permission—Fred Griffin (Sneinton)—to publish your photo, it appears this week at the top of the page. You say you want the St. Frank's boys to tour round England next summer, eh? Well, at present, they're booked to go on a tour somewhere else, and you'll hear all about it next week. But this desire of yours is quite an old one, mooted by many readers. I've had an idea in my head for a long time on this subject, and here's a chance for me to put it to the general readers.

How about a series featuring the School Train? That is to say, St. Frank's aboard a special railway train, with different coaches for the various Forms, eating and sleeping accommodation, and so forth—the whole train to travel over the various lines of Great Britain, visiting all the prominent cities and towns. How would you like the St. Frank's School Train to visit *your* town? Is this a good idea, or is it a dud?

The above message is from Mr. A. E. R. Gilligan, former captain of English cricket,

YOUR EDITOR'S XMAS CHAT!

Everybody's Christmas!

In wishing all my thousands of chums all over the world the best of times this festive season, and a right down good New Year, there comes the reflection of the vast varieties of ways of spending Christmas. For if you live in the tropics there is no getting up an appetite for a Christmas dinner with a bout of tobogganing or a round of merry revels on the ice. It would be a splendid thing to have a real look round the world at this time, and see what other folks are doing about their Christmas.

One would spot the cheery Nelson-Leites all over the world—basking in India, eating refreshing Christmas ices in Africa, or taking their ease on verandas in Australia, with a handy swat to keep the flies from worrying overmuch. There would be a glimpse of the frozen north, with the red sun blinking

over the whiteness for a terribly short spell in the middle of an extremely short day. You have only got to glance at our correspondence column—which I hope to get in more frequently in 1929—to realise that the N.L. goes everywhere and is read by all. And so good luck, and then more good luck all round, to all my friends, far and wide and near at home!

I hope you get all the presents you've been expecting. I hope, too, that you have plenty of turkey and Christmas pudding, and all the other good things which are knocking around at this time of year. In other words, may you have the happiest and jolliest Christmas yet!

An Xmas Gift for Mother!

Have you bought a present for your mother or your sister, yet? If you haven't, how's this for a suggestion? They're pretty sure to like chocolates, so why not buy them a box of Cadbury's chocolates? They're really delicious, and are packed in extremely attractive boxes that cannot fail to delight those to whom they're given. There are many new assortments this year from which to make your choice.

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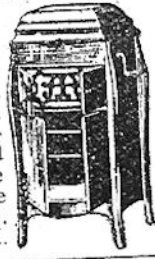
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