

Northern Section

"A Merry Xmas To You All!"

# THE NELSON LEE

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# The ST. FRANK'S REVELS!

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A stunning long complete Christmas yarn introducing the cheery Chums of St. Frank's.





Handforth sat up in bed and looked. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Then : "Great jumping corks !" he gasped. For sitting on the post of his bed was a tiny elf !

A Grand Long Christmas Yarn You'll All Enjoy!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

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

*Christmas Day at Raithmere Castle. Hosts of St. Frank's juniors and Moor View girls having the time of their lives. Everywhere happiness and laughter. And then suddenly a shriek; a terrified shriek—the ghost of Raithmere Castle has manifested itself once more!*

CHAPTER 1.

Fatty Little on the War Path!

**F**ATTY LITTLE, of the Remove at St. Frank's, moved hurriedly along on of the stately upper corridors of Raithmere Castle. There was, indeed, something rather furtive in Fatty's movements—occasioned, no doubt, by a twinge of conscience. For, to tell the truth, Fatty Little had stolen a march on his fellow-guests, and was engaged upon a grub-hunting mission.

It was Christmas morning—clear, crisp, sunny—with frost in the air, and snow on the ground. From behind various closed doors came the sounds of cheery junior voices. Reggie Pitt's guests were getting up, and before long they would be swarming down and partaking of breakfast in the quaint old banquetting-hall of the castle.

But Fatty Little saw no reason why he should wait until then.

On the previous morning he had gone down early—quite by accident—and he had found the sideboard groaning under the weight of a wondrous assortment of good things. So this morning Fatty thought that it would be a bright scheme to get down well before any of the others, so that he could sample those appetising dishes at leisure. Fatty wasn't greedy, but his appetite was akin to a chronic disease.

Now and again the fat junior had been heard to say that he was satisfied, but these occasions were so rare that they were almost regarded by the other fellows as myths and legends.

Now it was Christmas-time, and Fatty, like all the other young people in Raithmere Castle, was a guest of the genial Reggie Pitt. What was more to the point—so far as Fatty was concerned, at all events—was that Pitt was lavishing every luxury upon his guests.



It seemed rather strange that this stately old castle should belong to a mere junior schoolboy, but it was a fact. An eccentric great-uncle of Reggie's had left him the entire property, and it had struck Reggie that it would be a bright idea to spend Christmas at the castle—to have a kind of great house-warming, with a large crowd of St. Frank's fellows to make things hum.

At first it had seemed that the party would be a failure, for, owing to unprecedented snowstorms, the guests had not been able to arrive. Reggie Pitt and Edward Oswald Handforth and Nipper, and one or two other special friends, had spent a night in the castle alone—the servants having deserted. For there had been many queer happenings, and at one time Reggie Pitt had feared that his house-warming would turn out to be a fiasco.

But that was all forgotten now. Nobody ever referred to the fact that Raithmere Castle was supposed to be haunted. It was Christmas-time—this, indeed, was the morning of Christmas Day—and nothing but good cheer and jollity filled the air.

The main party had arrived safely, after an uncomfortable night in a country hotel. Already two very enjoyable days had been spent at the castle—days of tobogganing, skating, snowballing, dancing, games and general fun. All the servants had returned—persuaded by Reggie Pitt and the promise of double wages—and there had been no recurrence of the strange manifestations.

A number of prominent St. Frank's fellows were included in the party—Handforth & Co., of course, and Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson—to say nothing of the redoubtable Willy Handforth of the Third, and his special chums. John Busterfield Boots and Bob Christine of the Fourth were there, too, and so were Fullwood and Harry Gresham, and Duncan, and Archie Glen-thorne. Even William Napoleon Browne, the mighty man of the Fifth, had graced the party with his august presence. Incidentally, Browne was having the time of his life. The fact that Dora Manners was included among the guests had been a great inducement for Browne to accept Pitt's invitation.

A number of the Moor View girls were there, too—Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley and Mary Summers and several more. Altogether, the party was an unqualified success.

But Fatty Little, nevertheless, felt that an early feed—a sort of preliminary snack—would not be out of order. The keen wintry air had given an edge to his appetite. This, of course, was a phenomenon in itself, for Fatty Little's appetite was never anything else but sharp.

Besides, it was Christmas-time, and Fatty always stuck to a settled policy at this period of the year. He remembered all the feeds he had missed during the whole year—or those he imagined he had missed—and his endeavour was to make them good.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he reached the end of the corridor, and stepped out upon the wide, imposing landing. He was practically at the head of the great stairway, with the hall below him. It was a wonderful hall, too, with a great blazing, log fire in the open grate, with gay decorations stretched in festoons across the old roof.

"Good egg!" murmured Fatty, with relief. "I heard old Handy's voice a minute ago, and I thought he was going to barge out. There'll be no chance of a snack if Handy butts in!"

The fat junior prepared to descend the stairs, but at that moment he came to a halt, fascinated. He had just seen something which had stirred him to the very core. He stood at the top of the stairs, gazing—awed and ecstatic.

For there, in the very centre of the great hall, stood a table, and that table was filled—crammed—with tuck of the most alluring kind!



## CHAPTER 2.

### The Mystery of the Vanished Feed.

HERE was something very special about this table of tuck, too.

Fatty Little stood at the top of the wide stairs, staring at it with mingled bewilderment and joy. It seemed too good to be true. Strictly speaking, that table oughtn't to have been there. It didn't belong there—it was out of place. Certainly, Fatty had never seen it before, and had he been a little less eager after the tuck, he might have wondered where on earth it had come from.

For it wasn't an ordinary table. Not at all. It was quite extraordinary—and its contents were even more astounding.

"By crumpets!" murmured Fatty, unconsciously smacking his lips. "I was rather expecting to raid the sideboard in the dining-room—but this takes the giddy biscuit! Good old Reggie! Always springing his surprises on us!"

Never for a moment did Fatty Little take his gaze off that fascinating table. It was a most remarkable piece of furniture, of Oriental design, with gold legs—carved and exquisitely-ornamental legs. The surface—what little of it was visible—was glittering like burnished gold, too. And there, upon this dazzling surface, stood dishes upon dishes of eatables. Some of them were tall and graceful, with twisted stems, and made of gleaming silver: others were of gorgeously coloured glass. They were filled with pine-apples, grapes, bananas, iced cakes, pastries of every conceivable description, and other sweets and delicacies too numerous to mention. There were graceful flower-vases, filled with dazzling blossoms—not that Fatty gave much attention to these—and curious little



Oriental lamps were burning on either corner. Indeed, the whole table and all its contents seemed like some glorious vision from the Arabian nights.

But there it was—solid and real. The little lamps were winking and flickering in the draught, and now and again the flowers would wave gently and gracefully to and fro.

Any ordinary schoolboy would have been dazzled by that sight, and he would have felt his heart beating faster with the sheer joy of it. But to a fellow like Fatty Little it was pure, unadulterated ecstasy. He had got up early for the very purpose of locating some grub, and here, right in the very hall, was a table of tuck that any magician might have conjured up with his magic wand!

Fatty Little did not ask himself any unnecessary questions. This table had no right here—it did not belong to Raithmere Castle at all. Fatty had never even seen it before, and wouldn't have believed that such a table could exist. The centre of the hall was generally clear, for it was a sort of lounge hall, with comfortable settees and armchairs dotted here and there. Most decidedly, that table of tuck ought not to have been there.

But why should Fatty Little bother himself as to the whys and wherefores? Here was a feed—a glorious, unbelievable feed—staring him in the face; nothing else mattered.

The sound of voices from down one of the corridors brought Fatty Little to his senses with a jerk. Unless he looked sharp, a crowd of the other fellows might come down and spoil everything. Of course, this table of tuck was merely one of Reggie Pitt's little surprises—a special sort of event for Christmas morning. Fatty gave a whoop of joy, and bounded down the stairs three at a time.

Reaching the bottom, he ran forward with another chirrup of happiness, his hands outstretched. There was that table, just in front of him—alluring, fascinating. At close quarters it was even more marvellous than ever. It seemed to be made of solid gold—a massive, wondrous affair.

And then it vanished!

As Fatty Little reached out his hand, the whole glorious thing faded. It grew dim and unreal, and then it was no more. Fatty's hand, reaching out, touched nothing but air!

The fat junior, standing there, found himself staring at the floor. He looked bewildered—stupid. His mind failed to grasp the extraordinary nature of this mysterious disappearance.

A second earlier the table had stood before him, piled up with its wonderful dishes. Now

there was nothing to be seen—nothing but the bare centre of the great hall. The table had vanished in a flash!

"Why, what the— Where—where is it?" gasped Fatty, backing away.

He stood there like a dazed thing, his eyes, bulging slightly, expressive of utter mystification.

"But—but it was here!" stammered Fatty. "I—I don't understand! Where has it gone to? Great frying pancakes! What's happened to that table?"

The junior stared round the hall in a dazed fashion. He saw the blazing log fire, with the flames leaping merrily. He saw, further round, the great window, looking out upon the snowswept grounds of the Castle. The sun was shining alluringly out there, and the air was full of frosty invitation. It called to Fatty to come outside into the glorious morning.

But Fatty stood there, in the hall—more startled than he had ever been in his life before. He stood at that spot where the table should have been, and where it wasn't.

And then came the sounds of cheery voices from the upper corridor, accompanied by the tramping of many feet.

## YOU WILL JUMP FOR JOY when you have read the announcement on page 13.



### CHAPTER 3.

#### Not Believed.

LEWIS DWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH came downstairs boisterously, after his usual fashion. The famous leader of Study D at St. Frank's was accompanied by Church and McClure, his faithful henchmen. Harry Gresham and Ralph Leslie Fullwood were just behind, and even Archie Glenthorne had shown some energy this morning, as he was now on view.

"I vote we go out and have a little snowballing before brekker," Handforth was saying. "Nothing like a good old snowball fight to work up an appetite."

"Mine doesn't need working up," said Church.

"Rats!" retorted Handforth, frowning. "It's a very bad thing to eat a heavy meal immediately upon rising. It's unhealthy. People who eat heavy meals in the early morning go pale and thin."

"Like Fatty Little, for example?" suggested McClure politely. "He not only eats his ordinary breakfast, but he gets down before anybody else, and polishes off about fourteen pounds of grub as a preliminary.



I've often noticed how pale and thin he looks!"

"There are exceptions to every rule," said Handforth calmly. "You needn't think you can catch me——"

He broke off, staring at Fatty Little in a rather curious way. They had just got to the bottom of the stairs, and they found that Fatty was looking at them with a light of dazed bewilderment in his eyes. In fact, he looked so strange that they all went up to him to make inquiries.

"I'm glad you've come, you chaps!" panted Fatty, before any of them could speak. I say! Can—can you see a table here?"

"A table?" repeated Harry Gresham, glancing round. "There's one over by the wall——"

"No, no!" broke in Fatty. "Here! Here, in the middle of the hall!"

They all stared at the blank space which Fatty was indicating.

"What's this—a Christmas joke?" asked Handforth tartly. "Because, if so, I don't think much of it! Of course there isn't a table there, you chump!"

"But there is!" insisted Fatty breathlessly. "Or, at least, there was twenty seconds ago! A glorious table—made of solid gold, with piles and piles of tuck on it! A golden table, with ornamental legs, and with coloured glass dishes and silver vases, and——"

"Here, steady!" interrupted Fullwood, grinning. "Draw it mild, Fatty! There's no table here, and there certainly never has been a table like the one you describe!"

"He's trying to pull our legs!" said Duncan.

"I'm not!" said Fatty desperately. "I— I must be dreaming, or something! Not a minute ago there was a table in the middle of the hall, here! I could see it as plainly as I can see you chaps! It stood just here—just in front of me! And when I reached forward, to grab some tuck, the whole thing vanished!"

The other Remove fellows stared at Fatty in wonder. He certainly seemed to be serious enough; and that expression in his eyes was genuinely bewildered. He wasn't just joking. Fantastic as the story sounded, Fatty himself obviously believed it. Handforth was inclined to be stern.

"If you're trying to be funny, James Little, I'd better warn you that we're not having any of it!" he said coldly. "What's all this rot about a gold table? You don't expect us to believe that twaddle, do you?"

Fatty passed a hand over his eyes.

"No, I didn't expect you to believe it!" he muttered dazedly. "But it's true, all the same. Listen, you chaps. I'm serious, remember—absolutely serious! Great frying bloaters! I've never been so staggered in all my life! It was here, you know—here, right in front of me! And then it vanished! It just faded away!"

"Over-eating!" said Reggie Pitt sadly.

The young host had appeared, accompanied by Jack Grey and Nipper; and Pitt was looking rather sorrowful.

"That's what it is," he went on. "Over-eating! Rash youth, let this be a warning to you! I gather that you have been sampling various viands and pasties——"

"I haven't!" roared Fatty. "I haven't had a bite this morning!"

"Then you've been dreaming!" said Handforth flatly. "Come on, you chaps! Why waste our time over this fat lunatic? He's always been mad on grub, and now he's got to the stage when he sees mysterious tables full of tuck!"

"Hold on, Handy," said Nipper, looking at Fatty Little intently. "I don't think he means to be funny. You're really serious, aren't you, Fatty?"

"Yes, of course I am!" panted Fatty Little, still staring at that vacant spot. "Look here, Nipper! You other fellows, too! I was the first out this morning, and I thought I'd come down and—and take a breath of fresh air!"

"To say nothing of taking a snack prior to the fresh air?" murmured Pitt politely.

"Well, I'll admit I was—I was—a bit peckish," said Fatty. "I thought there might be a few biscuits on the sideboard, or something like that. But as soon as I got to the head of the stairs I saw a big table in the middle of the hall. It wasn't an ordinary table—not the kind that we see about the Castle. It was a wonderful affair of gold, with glittering ornaments, and packed with good things. I tell you it was here!" he added tensely, as he saw the sceptical looks on the faces of the others. "It was here! I don't see things that don't exist! I'm not subject to delusions! I came right down-stairs, and the table was standing here, just the same. Yet, when I reached forward for some of that wonderful tuck, the whole thing disappeared!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared with merriment—tickled by the richness of this joke. Fatty had been so hungry that his imagination had run riot, and he had seen a table that had no real existence.

"Poor old porpoise!" grinned Church. "What a shock it must have been when you discovered that you had only got a handful of air!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't you believe me?" roared Fatty indignantly. "Don't you believe that the table was really here?"

"No, we don't!" grinned Harry Gresham.

"But—but——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared again, amused by Fatty's frantic insistence. They regarded the whole thing as a very good joke.

Just then William Napoleon Browne strolled into view, elegant and stately.

"Why this early merriment, brothers?" he inquired. "Kindly allow me to share this hilarious joke."



"It's nothing much, Browne, old man," said Pitt. "Poor old Fatty has been seeing visions!"

"Visions?" repeated Browne. "Surely not! I will grant that ghosts and spectres are allowable in a castle of this age. Indeed, the building would be lacking in common courtesy if it did not provide a traditional phantom. But visions in broad daylight—no! Distinctly, no! It is only too obvious that the spirit of Christmas has got into Brother Little's head—with effervescing effects. A sad case, and liable to complications, but we need not despair. History has shown us that Brother Little not only possesses a constitution of iron, but a digestion like that of an ostrich!"

"Here, I say!" protested Fatty Little indignantly. "What's the idea of comparing me with an ostrich?"

Browne beamed. "I was only comparing your digestive capabilities," he observed. "In appearance, of course, I'm the first to admit that there is not the slightest resemblance. That, indeed, would be a rash statement!"

Fatty Little smiled contentedly. "That's a bit better, Browne," he said.

"Not a bit like an ostrich in appearance," went on Browne imperturbably.

Everybody laughed, and Fatty scowled.



#### CHAPTER 4.

What Irene & Co. Saw!

**F**ATTY LITTLE shook himself indignantly as Browne patted him benevolently on the shoulder.

"I'm not in a mood for any of your rot, Browne!" said the fat junior gruffly. "You're all laughing at me, and you all think I've gone off my chump—but you're wrong! That table was here, and I saw it—and it vanished!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle!" roared Fatty. "But I know what I'm talking about! There's something rummy about this place! It—it must be haunted!"

"Well, if it's only haunted by a table full of tuck, we needn't worry much," chuckled Nipper. "By jingo! There goes the breakfast gong! And here come the girls, too!"

"There is no need to worry, Brother Little," observed Browne, as he gave Fatty another kindly pat.

There were many other chuckles as Irene & Co. tripped downstairs. The girls were looking very charming, and they were enjoying their Christmas holidays with a wholehearted enthusiasm that delighted their host.

"There's no need to doubt the success of the Christmas party now, eh?" remarked Reggie, as he drew Nipper aside. "We thought it was going to be frost at one time, didn't we?"

"It's a huge success, old man," said Nipper. "But I didn't quite like the way Fatty talked of the place being haunted. I was rather hoping that there wouldn't be any reference to such matters."

"Rats!" said Handforth, joining them. "I don't believe in hauntings!" Nipper was looking thoughtful.

"Which reminds me," he said in a low voice. "We're not the only ones

who are having some rummy adventures. I had a letter from Tich Harborough this morning—but I'm not saying anything about it to the others."

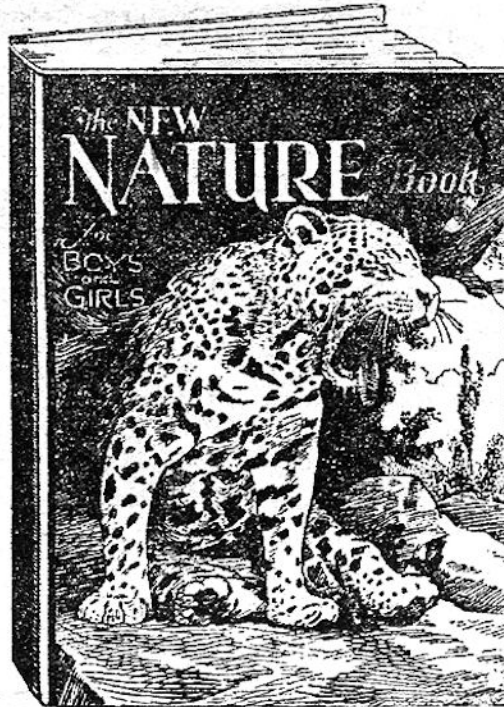
"Bad news?" asked Reggie, with concern.

"No," replied Nipper. "Not exactly bad news. Tich, as you know, is with Corky and the Blues at Bannington Grange."

"Of course we know it!" said Handforth impatiently. "What about 'em?"

Nipper was silent for a moment. He was thinking of that other St. Frank's Christmas party, which mainly consisted of Fourth-Formers. Lionel Corcoran, of the East House—and, incidentally, the owner of the Blue Crusaders Football Club—was holding a house-warming of his own at Bannington

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Grange, an old house he had bought and had converted to make a permanent home for Fatty Fowkes and his celebrated fellow-players of the Blues.

Tich Harborough was the only Removite in that party—but, then, Tich was necessary there, since he was a regular playing member of the famous club; and the Blues were playing some important games over Christmas.

Reggie Pitt and his guests were all sorry that Corky and Tich were absent—and no less sorry that Vivian Travers was unable to be with them. For Travers had gone abroad with his parents for the vacation. Still, they were having a high old time, even without these stalwarts.

"Tich is a bit mysterious in his letter," continued Nipper. "It seems that Fatty Fowkes has been scared out of his wits at the Grange."

"Ghosts?" asked Handforth sceptically.

"All sorts of rummy things have been happening, it seems, although Tich doesn't go into any details," said Nipper. "But the Blues are having a pretty uncomfortable time, and once they nearly got into a hopeless panic. I'm not going to say anything to the others, because there seems to be something funny about the castle, too, and I want to keep their minds off ghosts, and hauntings."

"Good idea, too," nodded Handforth approvingly.

"This business about Fatty—our own Fatty, I mean—is queer, when you come to think of it," continued Nipper, with a frown. "I hope he won't jaw too much."

"But, my dear chap, Fatty was only talking about a mythical tuck table," laughed Reggie, giving Nipper a keen glance. "Hallo! Why this thoughtful frown, O oracle?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was rather wondering about Fatty Little," said Nipper. "He's about the last fellow at St. Frank's I should suspect of having an imagination. He's so solid—so matter of fact. He must have seen something!"

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Reggie, in surprise.

"I don't quite know," replied Nipper. "But Fatty was very positive about that table, wasn't he? And it's such an unusual sort of vision for a chap to see."

Reggie Pitt chuckled.

"If any other fellow had seen it, I might begin to wonder," he said dryly. "But you know what Fatty is—you know that his mind is dwelling on nothing but grub. And it's Christmas morning, you ass! I expect he's been dreaming about tuck all night, and he must have come down only half awake. Come along in to breakfast, and forget all about him!"

And so they went, and were soon laughing merrily round the festive board.

Fatty Little came in for a good deal of chipping, for his story of a magic tuck-table was treated as a great jest. He was laughed at so much, in fact, that he even began to wonder if his senses had played him false. Perhaps he had only imagined the thing,

after all! His common sense, indeed, told him that the table could never have been there. And yet—and yet—The more Fatty thought about it, the more puzzled he became. He could see all that tuck now, piled up in wondrous profusion. He could see the glittering dishes, and the little lamps on the corners of the table. It was all very mysterious—all very perplexing.

However, after breakfast, the other guests gave Fatty a rest. There were more important things to consider. It was Christmas Day, and the sun was shining alluringly. To remain indoors would have been a sin and a shame.

"Well, what's the programme this morning?" asked Handforth, glancing at Reggie Pitt. "You're the host, old man, and it's up to you to make some suggestions."

"Rats!" grinned Reggie. "We'll put it to the vote, and we know what the result will be before we start. Tobogganing down the slopes, eh? Skating on the lake! Winter sports in general."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes, rather! Let's get out!"

"Absolutely," said Archie, nodding. "A dashed priceless scheme, lads and lassies! Girls, kindly trickle away upstairs, and don the winter sports outfits."

"And don't keep us waiting half an hour, sis!" said Handforth, with a straight look at his sister. "Don't forget that we shall be ready in half a jiff!"

"And we'll beat you, too!" retorted Ena promptly. "What do you say, you girls?"

"Rather!" sang out Doris laughingly. "Come on!"

The girls dashed away upstairs, and they fairly flew into their bed-rooms. They weren't going to have the boys saying that they were slow. Irene Manners and Mary Summers and Doris Berkeley were the first out, and they looked very alluring in their furs.

"If we're quick," chuckled Irene, "we shall be outside before the boys!"

They turned down the corridor, towards the big landing. This corridor, as it happened was rather gloomy. It was a long one, with only a small, slit-like window at the end.

"Hurry up!" said Irene briskly.

"Just a minute, Renie," said Mary, with a little catch in her voice. "Who—who's that down there?"

"Eh?" said Irene and Doris. "Down where?"

They turned, rather struck by Mary's tone. Mary was staring in the opposite direction—down the corridor, away from the landing—and as the other two girls looked they caught their breath in, and stood stock still.

For only a little distance away from them an extraordinary figure was standing in the middle of the corridor. In spite of the gloom, the figure could be seen with startling distinctness, which was all the more surprising, because at that particular spot there was no window at all.





"This is prime!" Smacking his lips in anticipation, Fatty Little descended the stairs with a rust and walked towards the table upon which was piled all the wonderful tuck.

The figure was that of a queer old woman, not unlike a witch. She was looking towards the three girls, and even as they stared she raised a bony hand and beckoned to them.

"Whoever can she be?" whispered Irene.

"Goodness knows!" said Doris, frowning. "She doesn't belong to the castle! She's not one of the servants! And just look at that queer hat of hers! And her face, with its hooked nose! And what in the world is she doing here?"

The three girls had no feeling of nervousness. They weren't scared in the slightest degree. They were only curious—only filled with wonder. There was nothing spectral about this old woman—nothing ghostly. Besides, it was barely ten o'clock in the morning, and outside the sun was shining from a cloudless sky. Downstairs, the laughter of many St. Frank's fellows could be heard. It was preposterous to think of ghosts or apparitions.

But this woman was certainly the most extraordinary creature that Irene & Co. had ever seen!

## CHAPTER 5.

### The Strange Old Witch!

**I**RENE shook herself, and glanced quickly at the other two girls. "This is too silly!" she whispered. "I

expect the old woman is one of the villagers—perhaps a relative of one of the maids here. Hadn't we better speak to her—just to be civil? She's looking at us very strangely, you know."

"I don't like it!" murmured Mary. "She's so—so unreal!"

This was true enough. The figure of that old woman was, indeed, unreal—and yet, at the same time, she was so surprisingly obvious. There she stood, every detail of her attire clearly defined. It was this fact that made the girls wonder. Why could they see her so distinctly? It was gloomy in that part of the corridor—and the figure of that old woman ought to have been in shadow. And yet—

"She's moving!" whispered Doris.

It was a fact. And now the girls saw something else—something which made them draw in their breaths. The old woman was more like a witch than ever, with her hooked nose, her queer conical hat, and her ragged cloak, but the most astounding thing of all was the fact that she was sitting astride a twig-broom! A besom—traditional adjunct of all self-respecting witches! The quaint old creature waved her bony hand to the girls, and then skimmed off down the corridor. *Skimmed off!* It was unbelievable—uncanny!

"Look!" panted Irene, pointing.

"Let's—let's run after her!" said Doris, with a strange catch in her voice.

All three girls ran. They weren't frightened, but they were unquestionably startled. For that old woman was a witch, in very



truth. Instead of progressing down the corridor like any ordinary human being, she was riding her twig-broom, skimming over the floor with a superb ease of progress that was bewildering to behold. What was more, the witch made no sound; not the slightest rustle—not the tiniest swish. Her progress was silent, phantom-like.

"It's a trick of some sort!" said Doris. "It must be! It can't be anything else, you girls!"

"Somebody's trying to fool us!" said Irene. "One of the boys, perhaps. That young wretch, Willy! You know what a trickster he is!"

"Look!" breathed Mary. "She's going clean through that open window!"

Fast as the girls ran, the old witch moved at double the speed. By now she had just reached the open window at the end of the corridor. The sun was streaming in, and the figure of the old woman became filmy and unreal as the sunlight struck it. The next moment the witch had vanished—outside. She had gone clean through, into the open air—as though flying.

"She's jumped down!" cried Doris. "And it's twelve or fifteen feet to the ground——"

"Yes, but there's a big snowdrift under the window!" put in Irene. "I saw it this morning. Of course, it's one of the boys playing a practical joke on us! And won't we have a terrible revenge! We'll teach them to——"

She broke off. They had just reached the open window, and were staring out. The morning was perfect, with the sun shining upon the flushed faces of the three girls. Down below, underneath that narrow window, was a stretch of unbroken snow—a great drift. It was piled over the frozen moat, and heaped up against the wall of the castle. From here the girls could see for two or three hundred yards—they could see every detail of the scene. Over in the distance, Willy Handforth and Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were in evidence, throwing snowballs at one another. In no circumstances could Willy be held responsible for the vision that the three girls had just seen.

"Look!" said Irene, in a tense voice.

She was pointing straight down—towards the snow.

"Look at what?" asked Mary. "I can't see anything!"

"Neither can I!" replied Irene. "That's just it! There's nothing to be seen—except the unbroken snow!"

"Unbroken!" whispered Doris. "Oh, my goodness! You—you mean——"

"But—but it's impossible!" said Irene, looking at her two companions with blank bewilderment in her eyes. "Don't you see, Mary? Can't you understand, Doris? I tell you, it's impossible! That old woman jumped out of this window, and yet there aren't any marks in the snow! There's not a footprint—there's not an inch of snow disturbed! Where did she go to?—Where did she land?"

Doris took a deep breath.

"Well, it beats me!" she said frankly. "Great Scott! This is the rummiest thing that's ever happened! It makes me think of that table that Fatty Little saw in the hall before breakfast."

"Why, how do you mean?" asked Mary.

"Well, wasn't Fatty's experience just the same?" said Doris keenly. "He saw a table—and when he went up to it, it wasn't there!"

"Yes, but that was only his imagination——" began Mary.

"Was it?" interrupted the other girl.

"I'm not so sure about that now! We all laughed at poor Fatty, but I believe he did see something. What about the old witch? There are three of us this time—three witnesses! We all saw that old woman, didn't we? We saw her skimming down the corridor on her broom! And she came out of this window, and jumped right out into the sunlight. Now she has gone—vanished—puffed out! Who was she, and where is she now?"

Irene and Mary could find no answers to these questions.

They were all agreed that they had seen the old witch. It wasn't a case of imagination this time. They couldn't all have been suffering from nerves. But what possible explanation could there be? Their common-sense told them that no human being could skim down the corridor on a twig-broom, and then vanish into thin air through the open window.

As for the apparition being a ghost, it was equally ridiculous. It was broad daylight here, and the sun was shining. Besides, the old woman hadn't looked like a ghost at all—she had been solid and real.

What could it mean?



## CHAPTER 6.

### Nipper is Worried!

**T**HE chief emotion of Irene & Co. at the moment was one of tremendous astonishment. They weren't frightened in the least—for there had been nothing to scare them. If they had seen that old witch in a dimly-lighted corridor at midnight, they might have felt nervous. But it was full morning, and the crystal sunshine forbade any morbid thoughts.

"It's so—silly!" said Irene, at length.

"That word just about sums it up," agreed Doris. "It is silly, isn't it? We all saw that old witch, and we all saw her disappear. The question is, who was she and how the dickens did she do that vanishing act?"

Before the others could answer, a hail sounded from down the corridor. They turned, and saw Ena Handforth and Winnie Pitt beckoning to them.

"What are you three doing up there?" called Ena. "We've been ready for hours, you cuckoos! The boys are waiting for us!"



The boys were not only waiting, but they were on the warpath. Handforth and Nipper and several others came thumping up the great staircase, and they now appeared.

"Isn't it about time you girls came along?" asked Handforth tartly. "Do you expect us to wait all the morning?"

"All right!" sang out Irene. "We're coming!"

The three girls ran down the corridor, and joined all the others on the landing.

"Has anything happened?" asked Nipper, looking at Irene & Co.'s flushed faces with sudden interest.

"Yes," said Doris quietly. "Something has happened. We've seen a witch."

"A which?" said Handforth, staring.

"No, not a which—a witch!" said Doris. "A regular old hag of a witch, with conical hat, twig-broom, and everything! She was in this corridor, and she vanished through that window at the end."

"What's this—another joke?" asked Pitt smilingly.

"I suppose it must have been a joke of some kind," said Irene. "But I'm blessed if I can fathom it. Don't laugh, you fellows! We're not trying to spin you a yarn. We saw this old woman, and—"

"Then—then you've seen something, too?" interrupted Fatty Little eagerly. "Nobody will believe me when I talk about that table of tuck, but—"

"Dry up, Fatty!" interrupted Handforth. "We're fed up with your giddy table! You didn't see anything, and you jolly well know it! As for a witch—"

"I know it sounds silly," put in Doris. "I know it sounds unbelievable, too. But, honestly, you chaps, we did see something very rummy. All three of us—so you can't accuse us of imagining the thing. We couldn't all imagine it at once, could we?"

"But what did you see?" asked Nipper curiously.

"I've told you," said Doris. "We saw a witch. Mary caught sight of her first, standing down this corridor. When we looked at her, she beckoned to us."

"Beckoned with a long, bony hand," said Mary, nodding.

"Go on—pile it on!" said Reggie, with a grin.

"But it's true!" protested Doris. "She had bony hands, and a strange, hooked nose. Then suddenly she skimmed off down the corridor on that broom of hers—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Draw it mild, girls!"

"You can't kid us with that yarn, you know!"

"I knew they wouldn't believe it," said Doris calmly. "How can we expect them to? It seems altogether too fantastic."

"But we *did* see her!" urged Irene. "She flew out of the window at the end of the corridor, and when we looked at the snow there wasn't a mark on it!"

"Which isn't surprising—considering that there was no witch at all!" grinned Harry

Gresham. "I say, girls, cheese it! We're not quite so green, you know!"

"The whole place seems to be bewitched!" said Mary. "First Fatty Little sees a table of food, and then it vanishes before his very eyes! Now we've had a similar kind of experience with this old witch. What's the matter with this party?"

"It must be an enchanted castle," chuckled Fullwood. "That's about the truth of it—the castle has been enchanted by a great magician, and unless we're jolly careful we shall find ourselves turned into black swans, or something!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And then we shall have to wait for a fairy princess to come along, and to kill the witch herself we can be disenchanting," grinned Fullwood. "What do you other chaps say?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

They said it with laughter. In fact, they fairly roared. It was impossible for them to credit this fantastic story of a witch. For a moment or two Irene and Mary were inclined to be just a little huffy, but Doris soon put them into a good humour.

"You mustn't be offended, you know," she smiled. "We should laugh just as much if we were in their places. It sounds altogether too thick to be believed. I think, perhaps, we'd better forget all about it."

"Yes, you're right," said Irene, nodding. "It's rather a pity we told these chaps, you know. We might have expected them to yell their silly heads off."

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Handforth. "We're only laughing at the joke, Renie! You can't really mean this about a witch, and—"

"Well, never mind," said Doris briskly. "Let's get out into the sunshine—let's have some tobogganing. We shall soon forget all about the queer old woman."

They all went trooping downstairs, chuckling hugely over this new joke. The only two juniors, perhaps, who did not smile were Nipper and Reggie Pitt. They found themselves together, and they exchanged a wondering glance.

"What do you make of it, old son?" murmured Reggie.

"I'm hanged if I know," said Nipper. "But I don't like the look of it."

"Neither do I," said Pitt. "It's—it's rummy."

"I'm beginning to believe that Fatty did see something," went on Nipper. "And although all these other chaps are laughing, we can't really accuse Irene and Mary and Doris of faking up a yarn. They saw something, that's certain—and it wasn't anything human."

"Great Scott!" muttered Reggie. "You mean—a ghost?"

"I'm not quite sure what I do mean," replied Nipper quietly. "But I don't believe in ghosts, Reggie—never did. And ghosts that appear at ten o'clock in the morning are distinctly incredible. All the same, I think we ought to keep our eyes open. There's

something funny going on—something mysterious."

And they were obliged to leave it at that—for the time being, at all events!



## CHAPTER 7.

### The Spirit of Christmas!

"G LORIOUS, isn't it?" asked Doris breathlessly. She had just picked herself up from the snow, and Reggie Pitt was righting the toboggan. Reggie was grinning cheerily, and Doris' eyes were sparkling with healthy enjoyment.

"Hurt?" asked Pitt.

"Of course not, silly!" said the girl. "It was only a small tumble. Besides, having a spill is half the fun!"

The young people were thoroughly enjoying themselves on this bright Christmas morning. There were many fine slopes in the castle grounds, and they now provided excellent toboggan runs. Now and again, of course, there was an upset, and sometimes a collision—it was remarkable how often Edward Oswald Handforth was involved in these!—but these incidents only added to the general enjoyment.

"Come on, Reggie—let's haul her up to the top again and have another go!" said Doris gaily. "How about organising a race? Let's have half a dozen toboggans starting at once, eh? Wouldn't it be fun?"

"Good idea!" said Reggie, nodding. "We'll put it to the others, and—"

He broke off. A slight frown came into his eyes for a moment, but it soon cleared, and he grinned in his usual good-natured fashion. But he was still looking across the snow at a figure which had just approached a group of St. Frank's juniors.

"What's the matter, Reggie?" asked Doris quickly. "Why did you frown just now?"

"Oh, nothing," said Pitt. "I caught sight of Quirke, that's all."

"Quirke?"

"Yes, that fellow who was once at St. Frank's," replied Reggie. "Ezra Quirke, of the East House. Don't you remember?"

"Well, yes, I think I do," replied the girl. "Isn't Quirke a horrid sort of boy?"

"Yes, he's a mysterious beggar, one way and another," replied Reggie. "Goes in for psychic research—occult investigation, and all that sort of piffle. A lot of unhealthy nonsense. If you don't mind, I'd like to go across to him and ask him what he's doing in these grounds."

"I don't mind," replied Doris readily.

They left their toboggan, and walked over the snow. Ezra Quirke was talking to John Busterfield Boots and Bob Christine and Harry Gresham and one or two others. Browne, of the Fifth, had sauntered up, too,

and was listening with an air of solemn concentration.

"I don't want to spoil your enjoyment, of course," Quirke was saying, as Reggie and Doris came up. "But I am just giving you a warning. Take my advice, and leave this castle as you would leave a sinking ship! It is a place of dread—a place of mystery and peril!"

"Rot!" said Boots bluntly.

"I tell you it is dangerous to remain within the walls of Raithmere Castle!" insisted Quirke. "You do not believe it is haunted, eh? But it is haunted! I know—I have had proofs! And the ghost is no mere phantom—a harmless thing that only appears at the hour of midnight. It is a dreadful menace—endangering the lives of all who seek shelter beneath the castle roof!"

"Just a minute, Quirke!" said Reggie Pitt quietly.

Ezra Quirke looked up, his eyes burning strangely. In every way, Quirke was an unusual sort of boy. His face was deathly pale, and mask-like. His figure was slight, his shoulders were rounded. All in all, an unpleasant sort of youngster.

"Good-morning, Pitt!" he said.

"Good-morning!" replied Reggie. "I don't object to you paying me a call, Quirke, but I think it is a bit thick for you to talk to my guests in the way you have been talking."

"I am merely telling them the truth!" said Quirke tensely.

"Brother Reggie, have no fear!" put in Browne kindly. "Do not imagine for one moment that we have heeded the words of this croaker."

"He's been talking a lot of rot!" said Boots aggressively. "Do you think we take any notice of his stories about ghosts? We know what an idiot he is! And it's like his nerve to come here, jawing at us, and giving these idiotic warnings—"

"I mean no harm," interrupted Quirke, backing away. "I am only doing what I deem to be my duty. If there is a tragedy within the walls of Raithmere Castle, remember what I have said! Perhaps you will then realise that my warnings were not untimely—"

"I think that's about enough, Quirke," interrupted Pitt. "I've the reputation of being a good-natured sort of fellow, but there's a limit. I'll ask you not to talk of ghosts, or anything connected with ghosts, again. We are thoroughly enjoying ourselves at the castle, and—"

"By George!" interrupted Handforth, bustling up. "What's Quirke doing here? Croaking again?"

"He's been warning us against the terrible dangers of the castle," said Gresham, with a grin.

"Let me get at him!" roared Handforth. "Let me slosh him in the eye!"

"Steady, old man!" chuckled Pitt. "If Quirke gives me his word that he won't trot out any more of that nonsense, he's welcome to stay."

Ezra Quirke shrugged his shoulders.



## OFF TO AUSTRALIA—NEXT WEEK!

What great excitement prevails when the amazing and glorious news is known. What disappointment, too! For only half the school is going—the Ancient and Modern Houses. The trip will not be in the nature of a holiday. Oh, no! The fellows are going for the benefit of their education, and they've got to work all the time—just as though they were still at St. Frank's.



Australia is their final destination, but on the way the fellows will visit many places of interest—next week, for example, they land in South Africa. Before they get there, however, there is great excitement on board the St. Francis as the ship is known. Edward Oswald Handforth finds himself afflicted with seasickness; then there's a mystery concerning the Remove's new Form-master.

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OUT ON WEDNESDAY

PRICE TWOPENCE

"Very well," he said resignedly. "Since you ignore my warnings, I will say nothing further. It is a waste of breath to speak to you. I have only been doing my best—"

"That's all right," interrupted Pitt. "You've given me your word, Quirke, and it's Christmas-time. We don't want to have any ill-feelings, do we? This is a time of good-will, so you're welcome to join in the jollities this evening, if you like."

"That is very kind of you," said Quirke, with a rather surprised glance at Reggie. "I think I shall avail myself of your generous invitation, Pitt. Thank you."

The spirit of Christmas had prompted Reggie to invite the fellow, and he only grinned, a minute later, when Handforth and Fullwood and one or two others turned upon him indignantly. Quirke had walked off, and was no longer within earshot.

"You silly chump!" said Handforth indignantly. "Do you think we want that spoil-sport with us? He'll ruin everything this evening!"

"It's Christmas-time, old man," said Reggie gently.

"Yes, Reggie is right, Handy," put in Boots. "We don't take any notice of Quirke, anyhow, and on Christmas night we ought to be friendly with everybody. It's a time to bury the hatchet."

The others agreed, so Handforth was effectually squashed. All the same, there were many who were afraid that Ezra Quirke's

presence that evening would cast a gloom over the entire party.

Time, of course, would tell!



### CHAPTER 3.

#### A Time of Good Cheer!

IT was generally voted, by tea-time, that this Christmas Day was one of the happiest and jolliest that Reggie Pitt's guests could ever remember. Far from being depressed by the rumours that the castle was haunted, the boys and girls were highly amused at the very thoughts of it. They were all serenely content, and had spent a day of unadulterated pleasure. Now they were ready for the evening's gaiety.

The Arabian Nights tuck-table and the queer old witch were forgotten. There was no time to think of such things now. Directly after tea, the girls and the St. Frank's fellows would be thinking of getting into their carnival costumes; and all the talk at tea-time was solely confined to the coming carnival ball.

There was to be no dinner that night—not in the ordinary way. Dinner, it was felt, would interfere considerably with the even-

ing's jointy. It would make a big break, and nobody wanted that.

It was far better to have a cold repast set out in the dining-hall—sandwiches, meat patties, and so forth—with an unlimited supply of lemonade, coffee, ice-cream, and so forth. Then, when the guests felt peckish, they could come in and help themselves.

The castle ball-room had been especially decorated for the occasion. There were fairy lights everywhere, and gay decorations festooned the ceiling. A special dance band had been engaged, too. Reggie Pitt's people had given him a free hand, and so he was doing everything possible to make his guests happy.

This particular Christmas party was unusual in one sense. All the members of it were young. There were no grown-ups there whatever—except, of course, for the maids, the footmen, and the other servants. The host and his guests were all schoolboys and school-girls, and so the party was hilariously jolly.

"Ghosts, eh?" grinned Handforth, as he hurried upstairs with Church and McClure to change. "What rot! I've never enjoyed myself so much in all my giddy life!"

"Well, don't talk about ghosts," said Church. "We want to forget those rummy things what happened here the other night."

"What rummy things?" demanded Handforth.

"You know as well as I do," said Church. "We all saw a ghost in the big hall, and we couldn't discover any explanation."

"Rats!" laughed Handforth. "There's been nothing of that kind since, and I'm beginning to believe that we imagined most of it. Anyhow, let's taboo the subject of ghosts altogether. We're going to enjoy ourselves thoroughly this evening, my sons! We're going to have dancing, and parlour games galore. Hunt the thimble, musical chairs, and all the rest of the merry-go-round!"

And later on, when the dancing and games had started, the very suggestion of ghosts certainly did seem ridiculous.

For what with the fairy lights, the gay decorations, and the highly-coloured costumes of the guests, Raithmere Castle became a place of gay laughter and happiness. Outside, the evening was calm and moonlit, with a sharp touch of frost in the air. Indoors, the log fires were blazing, the lights were gleaming, and laughter was the order of the hour.

The strains of the dance band floated out from the ball-room, and quaintly attired figures were to be seen everywhere. There were pierrots, pierrettes, pirates, cavaliers, Geisha girls, and so forth. If Reggie Pitt had had any doubts regarding the success of this Christmas party they were now dispelled. He was glad indeed, that he had suggested this house-warming—this happy gathering under the roof of the quaint old pile that he had recently inherited.

"Everything is going fine, old man," remarked Jack Grey, as he and Reggie strolled into the ball-room. "The chaps are enjoying themselves wonderfully, too."

"I know it," said Reggie, nodding. "My sister and all the other girls are having the time of their lives—so they say. And I believe they mean it."

"Of course they do," laughed Jack. "It was a brain-wave of yours, Keggie, to invite us all here."

Handforth came blundering up—with a clanking and clattering of spurs. Handforth was supposed to be a Roundhead, and he wasn't particularly pleased with his choice of fancy costume. For he was discovering that none of the girls wanted to dance with him.

"Look here, Pitt, what the dickens am I to do?" he demanded indignantly. "Irene won't dance with me, and the other girls only laugh at me when I go near them!"

"Can you wonder at it?" grinned Pitt. "With those whacking great spurs on your boots, I'm not surprised that the girls fight shy of you! You're not famed for your gentleness, old son! Besides, look at your jacket! Look at those leather cuffs on your sleeves!"

"What about 'em?" asked Handforth, staring at his cuffs.

"Well, just think of the fancy costumes of the girls," said Pitt coolly. "Most of them are made of silk, or muslin, or crepe-de-chine, or something flimsy like that. No wonder Irene doesn't want to dance with you! One fox-trot would be just about enough to ruin any silken costume—to say nothing of spoiling the strongest pair of feminine shoes that were ever made!"

Handforth looked rather blank.

"Church and McClure are dressed as pierrots," he grumbled. "They're getting plenty of dances, the bounders! They told me to dress up as a nigger minstrel—but I wouldn't take any notice of them."

"Why not?" asked Grey.

"Because they said it would suit me—they said the black paint would hide up my face!" said Handforth indignantly. "D'you think I was going to stand that sort of rot?"

"Well, I'll tell you what, old son," chuckled Pitt. "There's a spare costume up in my room—a sort of grand vizier affair, all made of silk and stuff. You'll look fine in that, and you're welcome to it, if you like."

"Thanks awfully!" said Handforth. "I'll buzz up and shove it on. Being a Roundhead is all right but I'm not going to be dished out of dancing with Irene!"

And Handforth hurried off, followed by the chuckles of Pitt and Grey and several other juniors.



## CHAPTER 9.

### The Vision on the Lawn!

"H dear! I'm glad there's an interval now," laughed Dora Manners. "It's so dreadfully hot in here!"



"Yes, it is a bit warm," agreed Winnie Pitt. "Supposing we go out on the terrace for a few minutes, Dora?"

"Won't it be too cold?" asked Dora doubtfully. "These costumes aren't particularly thick, you know!"

"That's all right," replied Winnie, with a smile. "We can easily sneak a couple of wraps, and dodge out without being seen. It'll be a relief to get in the cool for a few minutes."

And so the two girls carried out their little plan. The evening was getting advanced now, and there had been a long round of jollity. The dance band was taking a quarter of an hour off, and most of the guests were standing about chatting, or eating ice-creams, or otherwise enjoying themselves.

Dora Manners was rather afraid that Browne would spot her, and prevent her from going out on the terrace with Winnie. Fortunately, Browne was engaged in conversation with two or three of the Remove chaps, and he could not get away. Dora was Irene's cousin, and she was on the permanent staff of St. Frank's—as a nurse in the sanatorium. Dora was a very sweet girl, two or three years older than Irene, and rather shy in disposition. But she was a thorough sport all the same.

Having secured the wraps, Dora and Winnie slipped out through one of the French windows, and they found themselves on the wide terrace overlooking the moat. It was a wonderfully peaceful evening, with the stars shining glitteringly in the hard blue sky.

The moon was appearing, too, over the tree tops in the distance, and there was an atmosphere of perfect peace. Scarcely a breath of wind stirred, and the snow lay thickly in every direction. The moat was frozen and covered with snow, and beyond lay the lawns.

At least, they had been lawns at one time. The castle had been allowed to run to neglect for many years, however, and what should have been lawns were now stretches of level, weed-grown land. But the snow mercifully covered these indications of neglect, and the whole scene was beautiful.

For some moments the two girls stood there without speaking, grateful for the cool air—and well protected from chills by their wraps.

"Isn't it wonderful?" murmured Dora at length.

"Glorious!" replied Winnie, looking up at the stars. "I don't think I've ever known a better winter's night. Just look at the stars, Dora! Aren't they shining magnificently?"

Dora looked up, and then nodded.

Again they stood silent for a few moments, humbled by the majesty of that great, glittering universe overhead. Then suddenly Dora plucked at her companion's sleeve.

"Winnie!" she whispered, a new note in her voice. "What is that over there?"

"Over where?" said Winnie, surprised by the other girl's tone. "What is it, Dora? Why are you pulling at my sleeve—"

"Look!" said Dora breathlessly.

She pointed, and even in that tense moment Winnie could see that her companion's hand was trembling. Dora was pointing over to a level patch of the lawn, about fifteen yards away, where the rising moon was weakly shedding its silvery light upon the snow. Winnie caught her breath in, and took a step nearer to the stone rail of the terrace.

"There's something there!" she murmured. "There's something—moving!"

"That's what I thought!" said Dora. "But what is it? Oh, Winnie, are we dreaming, or what? If you can see them, too, there must be something—Oh, but it's too silly—too fantastic!"

"They're fairies!" said Winnie tensely.

"That's what I thought!" agreed Dora, her voice dropping to the merest whisper. "Oh, Winnie, but it's—it's so extraordinary! I thought I could see fairies, but—but—Oh, I don't know!"

She broke off, quite unable to put her feelings into words. Winnie was in the same fix, and they could only stand there and look at the vision on the lawn. It was too wonderful—too amazing.

Fairies! Fairies, gaily dancing up and down—in the twentieth century! It was fantastic—unreal—stupendous.

A minute or two earlier, there had been nothing on that snow over there. The night was not dark—for the starlight, alone, was sufficient to show up the snow clearly. The moon was shining, too, and the trees in the distance could be clearly seen, casting long mysterious shadows. And behind the two girls, and all along the terrace, were lighted windows from beyond which came the sounds of happy laughter. Indeed, the band was beginning to play again, proving to Dora and Winnie that they were not dreaming. They were wide awake—and this was Christmas night!

Yet there, on the lawn, were fairies!

Instinctively, the two girls clung to one another, and for quite a little while they said nothing. They were watching fascinatedly—without the slightest sensation of fear. There was nothing to be afraid of here—nothing grotesque in this vision. On the contrary, it was beautiful—it was a delight to the eye.

The incongruous nature of the whole affair had gripped the two girls tensely. They could not both be the victims of imagination. That was too unbelievable. They both saw this thing—they both gazed upon that wondrous scene.

Fairies, dancing and prancing—dancing to the tune of a fox-trot played by a twentieth century syncopated orchestra!



## CHAPTER 10.

## The Fairies' Revel!

IT wasn't as if this vision was hazy or indistinct. It wasn't as if the two girls could have any doubts regarding what they saw. No; the fairies seemed so real that the two girls only needed to run forward a little way and they would be amongst them.

But neither Dora nor Winnie moved. They were too awed—to fascinated. Besides, it would seem like an intrusion for them to interrupt that gay revel.

There were about a dozen fairies, altogether—dancing, prancing, whirling round joyously. It was incredible—yet true.

"Oh, look!" breathed Winnie, at last. "Can you see them, too, Dora? Can you see their lovely wings?"

"Yes!" said Dora, clutching more tightly at Winnie's arm. "And what beautiful wings, too! The moonlight is glinting on them. Look at their gossamer gowns, too! Oh, Winnie, am I dreaming all this?"

"You can't be—because I can see just the same," said Winnie. "Fairies, Dora—real fairies! Oh, dear! What's coming over us?"

Neither of the girls felt the slightest nervousness. They were in no way frightened by what they saw—but they were thrilled and excited.

The fairies appeared to be living creatures—so clearly defined were all the details of their dainty little persons. There was nothing ethereal in their aspect.

Each fairy was about three feet in height—tiny graceful creatures. Their faces were plainly visible to the two girls—laughing faces, with gleaming little teeth, and merry sparkling eyes. Some had dark hair, others chestnut, others the fairest of golden. Their hair was long and it waved in the breeze that was created by their dancing. Not the tiniest detail of the picture was lacking.

"Oh, Dora, what can it mean?" asked Winnie, her voice quivering. "They're fairies—real fairies! There can't be any trickery about it!"

"No, I was thinking the same!" said Dora, nodding. "They're too small—too beautiful! Besides, we can see them so clearly—"

At that moment a voice hailed them from one of the castle windows.

"Dora! Winnie! Are you out there, you two?"

It was the voice of Irene, and it was rather anxious in tone. Dora and Winnie glanced at one another, and the same thought was in both their minds.

"Oh, let's tell the others!" said Dora breathlessly. "Let's run back, and bring them all out! This is too wonderful for us to see just by ourselves!"

"Yes—yes!" said Winnie. "Let's bring them all out!"

With one accord, they turned and ran towards the door which led into the castle. A minute later they were rushing into the ball-room where the band was playing again, and where dancing was in full progress.

"Oh, quick!" cried Winnie. "Come outside, all of you!"

"What the dickens—"

"Steady, Winnie, old girl!" said Reggie, running up to his sister. "What on earth's the matter?"

"Oh, come outside!" repeated Winnie.

She and Dora stood there, their faces flushed, their eyes sparkling. Obviously, something very unusual had happened, for both the girls were looking very excited. They had burst right into the middle of the dance, and the band had automatically stopped—the musicians seeing that something out of the ordinary had taken place.

"What's wrong?" asked Handforth, pushing forward.

"Come outside, all of you!" said Dora. "There's no time to explain now—but you must see something! It's wonderful—glorious!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Fullwood, staring. "What on earth have they seen?"

"Nothing very dreadful, anyhow," said Willy keenly. "They're not scared—they're not frightened."

"We cannot tell," said Ezra Quirke, coming up. "Perhaps they have glimpsed one of the ghosts that lurk near this mysterious old castle—"

"Dry up!" said Fullwood sharply.

"I was only saying—"

"I don't want to hear what you're saying, Quirke!" said Fullwood. "This is no time to talk about ghosts, you idiot!"

"Very well!" said Quirke, his voice strangely subdued.

An echo of the girls' excitement had now spread throughout the entire party, and during the next few moments everybody started crowding out upon the terrace. They did not know what they were going to see—but they felt that it would be something strange. There were all sorts of wild conjectures. A comet, perhaps—a flight of extra-brilliant meteors, possibly. A curious cloud formation—or a house on fire in the distance. Nobody quite knew what to expect.

"I trust, Sister Dora, that nothing has occurred to alarm you in any way?" asked Browne, as he ran beside Dora. "Pray confide in me—"

"Oh, please!" she interrupted. "I'm not alarmed in the least—but you must come out and see—"

She broke off, for they had reached the terrace by this time. The others were





Lying at the foot of the stairs was a huddled figure. The boys and girls rushed up, and they found themselves looking at a queer old man. He was motionless, and on his forehead was an ugly bruise.

standing about, looking at the sky, looking through the trees, and trying to find something which would account for the girls' excitement. Winnie was there, too, and she was pointing over towards that magic spot.

"There!" she was saying. "That's where we saw them! Oh, Dora, they've gone!" she added regretfully. "They've gone!"

"What a shame!" said Dora. "Perhaps the noise frightened them away! They must have heard all the shouting, and—"

"Frightened who away?" asked Handforth, in amazement. "There's nobody there, Dora! There couldn't have been anybody there, either! The snow's unbroken—it hasn't been trodden on!"

"That's quite right!" said Bootz, pointing. "The moonlight is shining right over that snow, and there isn't a mark on it! What do you mean, Winnie?"

Winnie passed a hand over her eyes, and her bewilderment was intense.

"Oh, I don't know!" she said, in a low voice. "But we saw fairies out there!"

"Fairies!" yelled half a dozen voices.

"Yes, fairies!" said Winnie dreamily. "Delightful little fairies, with golden hair—auburn hair—and with wings that reflected every colour of the rainbow! They were dancing and prancing about, and holding a fairy revel!"

Handforth staggered back.

"Oh, corks!" he said blankly. "Fairies! What the dickens shall we be hearing about next?"



## CHAPTER 11.

### The Unbelievers I

"FAIRIES?" said Reggie Pitt curiously.

"Yes," said Winnie. "Fairies, Reg! Quite a number of them, dancing round in a circle, and—"

"Wait a minute!" said Pitt. "You saw a number of fairies dancing round in a circle—on that patch of snow?"

"Yes," put in Dora. "Both Winnie and I saw them. Oh, they were wonderful! I've never seen anything so pretty!"

Everybody stared at that patch of snow, and then many strange glances were cast at the two girls. In the circumstances, nobody could be blamed for looking sceptical.

"But surely, Dora, you don't expect us to believe this?" asked Irene, in astonishment.

"Perhaps it is too strange for you to believe," admitted Dora quietly, "but it's true, all the same. We saw them—didn't we, Winnie?"

"Yes, rather!" said Winnie Pitt. "We saw them for a long time—and I can only think that they were frightened away by all the noise."

"Look here, Win, old girl!" said Reggie, giving his sister a shake. "Wake up!"

"But I am awake, Reg!" protested the girl.

"No, you're not—you're dreaming!" said Pitt, laughing. "At least, you have been dreaming. What the dickens do you mean—fairies? You know as well as I do that fairies don't really exist. They're only—only— Oh, I don't know! But fairies don't exist. And nothing could have been dancing on that snow, either. It's undisturbed—without a mark on it. Do be sensible, Win!"

"Yes, draw it mild!" said Bob Christine.

"Absolutely!" put in Archie. "Dash it, we're ready to believe all sorts of dashed things out of politeness, old girl, but when it comes to a matter of fairies— Well, I mean, what? That is to say, eh? Absolutely! Just a trifle too perpendicular, as it were!"

"Just a bit!" grinned Harry Gresham. "Fairies in these days—fairies dancing about in the snow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose this is a practical joke?" said Handforth, grinning. "You girls just brought us out here for fun, eh? Well, it's a pretty good joke on the whole—because we're all here!"

"But we saw the fairies distinctly—" began Dora.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And while you came indoors to fetch us, they flew away!" chuckled Fullwood. "Well, it's Christmas night, so we'll forgive you!"

Dora turned upon the laughing juniors, and her eyes were indignant.

"Oh, why don't you believe us?" she asked. "I tell you it's true! Both Winnie and I saw them, and we can't have been mistaken. We shouldn't both imagine the same thing at once, should we?"

"It wasn't imagination," said Winnie. "We saw the fairies as clearly as—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cheese it, Win!" said Doris, with a chuckle. "A joke's a joke—but why carry it so far?"

"But it isn't a joke!" insisted Winnie. "Oh, what's the use? You won't believe us if we keep on telling you, will you?"

"Sorry—but I'm afraid we shan't," smiled Nipper, giving Winnie a very curious glance. "Are you sure it wasn't just a queer trick of the moonlight?"

"No, it couldn't have been," said Winnie. "We saw the figures distinctly—we could even see their gleaming teeth, and their merry, sparkling eyes."

"How were they dressed?" asked Nipper.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, it isn't fair to laugh at us like this!" protested Dora, flushing.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to stop them," said Nipper. "After all, Dora, it does sound a bit tall, doesn't it? How were these fairies dressed?" he repeated.

"In silken sort of robes—gossamer things," said Winnie quickly. "The moonlight was

shining on them, and we could see their wings quite clearly. And their faces were flushed with the dancing, and their hair glistened with the moonbeams. Oh, it was wonderful! I wish you'd been out here to see!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fellows and the other girls simply refused to believe that there was anything in the story. It was too fantastic—too tall.

But after a while, one or two became more thoughtful. Irene and Doris and Mary suddenly remembered that old witch they had seen in the corridor, during the morning. After all, that witch was just as inexplicable as these fairies; if one could happen, why not the other?

"I think we must all be bewitched!" said Irene firmly. "That's about the truth of it! There can't be any other explanation! We're all bewitched—we're all enchanted, or something, just like Ralph Fullwood said this morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on—let's go indoors and have some more dancing," said Handforth boisterously. "This joke's gone far enough. We don't want to go round the castle looking for fairies, do we? If you ask me, the whole thing's a fairy tale!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, Reggie, what about it?" said Nipper, as he found himself beside Reggie Pitt when they all went indoors. "Pretty rummy, isn't it?"

"Blessed if I can make head or tail of it!" said Reggie, with a worried frown. "First Fatty Little sees a table of tuck that isn't there—then some of the girls see an old witch floating about on a twig-broom—and now Dora and Winnie see a lot of fairies! It seems to me that we are bewitched!"

"Well, it's better than being haunted," smiled Nipper. "Thank goodness there's nothing horrible in these strange appearances. Dora and Winnie aren't scared in the least—they're only disappointed that we didn't all see the same vision."

"What do you think they *did* see?" asked Reggie. "Moonbeams, or something like that?"

"Hang it all, old man, Dora and Winnie aren't fanciful girls," said Nipper thoughtfully. "They couldn't turn moonbeams into fairies—fairies with wings of gossamer, and with flashing eyes and dazzling teeth. They couldn't imagine all that, you know."

"Then you really think that they saw these fairies?" said Pitt, staring.

"I'm in just the same fix as I was this morning," confessed Nipper. "I'm blessed if I know what to think, old son."

Even Dora and Winnie were now beginning to doubt. Had they really seen those entrancing fairies? Or had their senses deceived them? Had they, by some extraordinary coincidence, suffered from a delusion? Had they both imagined the whole affair?



It was all very strange—all very inexplicable!



## CHAPTER 12.

## Ezra Quirke's Turn!

**D**ORA and Winnie came in for a great deal of unmerciful chipping during the next hour. They were being constantly asked if they had just seen the fairies floating about anywhere. Juniors came up, very grave, and asked for an introduction to the fairy with the auburn hair—or the fairy with the golden hair.

Somebody pointed out that there weren't enough girls to go round—and consequently, in some of the dances, the boys were compelled to have other boys for partners. Why not invite the fairies in, and give them a treat?

So it went on—until Dora and Winnie were sorry that they had ever spoken about what they had seen.

By this time, too, the Christmas party was developing into a very boisterous affair. It was getting to its most enjoyable time, when everybody entered heart and soul into the spirit of the revelry.

The maidservants had been called in—the parlourmaids and the kitchen-girls, the footmen, and all the rest of the domestic staff. They were all invited to join in the fun—and they joined in heartily.

The only guest who took no part in the jollification was Ezra Quirke. That sort of thing did not appeal to him. He stood aloof all the time—watching out of his strange, expressive eyes. More than once Reggie Pitt had laughingly invited him to throw aside this mask of "superiority," and to let himself go.

"I am enjoying myself in my own way, thank you, Pitt," Quirke had replied. "I beg of you to leave me alone. I am grateful for your kindness in inviting me—after all that has happened in the past—but I do not wish to dance. Neither do I desire to join in the noisy games. I am content to watch—to remain in the background."

"Just as you like," said Reggie.

He had grown tired of asking Quirke to join in, and had said no more about it. At the back of his head, Reggie had an idea that Quirke was deliberately holding aloof because he knew that many of the fellows did not like him. If this was the case, it was

rather decent of Quirke to hang back. But Pitt didn't know—and he certainly did not trouble himself to think much. He was the host, and he had his hands full.

Ezra Quirke, for his part, was well content to look on. It may as well be stated at once that Quirke's motive was a purely selfish one. He did not keep out of the games and the dancing because he considered the feelings of Reggie Pitt's guests. He had his own reasons for staying out.

He was in the castle now, a recognised guest, and he was thus permitted to wander where he pleased. Nobody questioned his comings and goings—nobody took the slightest interest in him.

And Quirke was determined to seize this opportunity to have a prowling round the castle. He was interested in the "psychic" possibilities of the old place.

He was filled with fantastic ideas of the occult, and his mind was choked with rubbish concerning spirits and spiritualistic manifestations. In no circumstances would Quirke have remained in the castle alone, although he would not have admitted such to anybody, even himself. But it was different now—with the sound of laughter floating on the air, and with the strains of music everywhere. Quirke now had a false courage,

and he was free to roam where he willed.

A particularly noisy parlour game was in progress in the ball-room. Everybody was participating in it, including all the servants. The echoes of laughter came ringing out to Quirke as he prowled about the great hall. He was quite alone there, and he stood in the centre of the hall—just where Fatty Little had seen that magic table—and he took stock of his surroundings.

The log fire was blazing merrily, and the big dining-room, the door of which stood wide open, was invitingly near by, with all its tables of good things. But even Fatty Little was not in there—for Fatty was in the grip of many other Removites, being blindfolded for the purpose of the game.

Ezra Quirke frowned as he heard an extraordinary roar of laughter.

"It is folly!" he muttered. "It is madness—absolute madness! Sooner or later they will regret this disregard of my warnings! I have told them—I have informed them that Raithmere Castle is haunted by a dreadful elemental. For me there is no danger—since I am a believer. But for them, with their mad scepticism, there is the utmost peril. Well, they will remember my words, afterwards—"

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Quirke broke off in his meditations, and he stood there, staring up the wide staircase. It seemed to him that something was at the top there—on the upper landing. It was rather darkened there, although down here, in the hall itself, the lighting was brilliant.

Quirke stared—his heart throbbing with sudden fear and excitement.

In the presence of others, perhaps, Quirke would have revealed no emotion, but he was alone now, and none could see him. If anything, his face turned a shade paler, and he tried to grip himself.

What was it he could see up there? What was that strange figure—that enormous, towering form?

Then, suddenly, the thing became clear—clear in every detail. Ezra Quirke stood there, held to the spot as though by some magnetic influence. He could not move—he could not utter a sound. His vocal chords were paralysed. He stared—his eyes bulging with fear.

For at the top of the stairs, and in the act of descending, was an ogre!

An ogre!

A tale from the Arabian Nights—a witch—fairies—and now an ogre! It was a staggering development. The thing on the stairs was an enormous creature—between fifteen and twenty feet in height! An ogre of the real fearsome type, as though he had just walked out of the pages of "Jack, the Giant Killer"! An ogre of terrible ferocity—complete with his great studded club, his top-boots, his hideous, uncouth face.

There he came—tramping down the stairs—a vast, terrifying figure of menace!



## CHAPTER 13.

### The Ogre.

**E**ZRA QUIRKE nearly collapsed from sheer terror.

He wanted to scream—he wanted

to run away—but he was held to the floor by some mysterious force. At least, this is what Quirke himself would have said. Actually, Quirke was held there by nothing else but funk. He was so frightened that he was unable to move, and although he tried to cry aloud, the muscles of his throat were temporarily paralysed.

And that Thing continued to walk slowly and deliberately downstairs.

There was nothing spectral about it—nothing ghostly in any way. It was a solid figure, with every detail of his clothing clearly defined. But there was one extraordinary thing which Quirke noticed, even in his present state of terror. At times, the ogre would walk through the air—proving conclusively that he was not a solid thing of flesh and blood, as he appeared to be.

And one thought flew into Ezra Quirke's unhealthy mind. He did not see the figure as an ogre—as a grotesque creature from some fantastic fairy tale. This thing was no ogre to Quirke—but something far, far more deadly.

As the monstrous object came further and further down the stairs, Quirke suddenly regained control of his vocal chords. He sent out a great scream of fear.

"The elemental!" he shrieked. "The elemental! It is loose—it is upon us! The ghost has materialised, and is coming!"

At the same second Quirke twirled on his heel and ran—ran with the speed of a hare. And as he ran he screamed again and again.

The elemental! Quirke, in his terror, accepted this strange figure as a materialised ghost! A dreadful thing that could take life! And although he had professed that he himself was safe from any such monster, he fled. His nerve was not sufficiently strong to face this ordeal.

Shrieking, he ran into the ball-room—among those merry-makers, who were in the midst of their hilarious fun. It was a dramatic interruption.

For Quirke, tearing in, was as pale as a sheet, and his eyes were burning unnaturally with fear and panic.

The fun ceased on the instant, and all eyes were turned upon this panic-stricken boy. A sudden wave of apprehension seemed to sweep through the great ball-room; laughter was cut short, and voices were stilled.

"The elemental!" screamed Quirke. "Go—go! Leave this castle—it is haunted! I've seen—"

"Hold on!" shouted Pitt, running forward. "What's the matter with you, Quirke? Pull yourself together, you idiot!"

"It is coming!" babbled Quirke frantically.

"Great Scott!"

"He's gone off his rocker!"

"Absolutely!"

"You can't come here, Quirke, shouting out like this!" said Pitt sharply. "Pull yourself together, you ass! What have you seen? Lend a hand, Nipper! Hold him up!"

Nipper and Handforth and one or two others collected round Quirke, and held him. The boy was trembling in every limb, and he was, indeed, on the point of fainting.

The other juniors, and the girls, were collecting round, most of them wearing startled expressions. The servants held aloof, and were looking considerably frightened.

Just then another sound came from the big hall, unexpectedly, dramatically. It was a scream—a different sort of scream to the one that Ezra Quirke had been making. There was a curiously muffled ring about it, a hint that it had been stifled almost at its inception.

"What is it, Quirke?" asked Nipper, seizing Quirke by the arm and shaking him. "What's wrong?"



"The ghost—the ghost!" panted Quirke, staring madly at the big doorway. "It's coming in here—it will be upon us in a few moments!"

"Don't talk nonsense!" said Handforth gruffly. "We've had enough of you and your rot! If you can't talk sense——"

"It was the elemental, I tell you!" gasped Quirke. "A great, towering monster, fifteen or twenty feet high! It was coming down the stairs—right upon me!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"The idiot must have been dreaming!"

"Of course!"

"I have not been dreaming!" said Quirke fiercely. "I saw it, I tell you! A terrible thing with a face that—that—— But I cannot tell you what its face was like! Oh, why did you not heed my warning? Why did you not leave this accursed place?"

"I would remind you that this 'accursed place' is mine—and I would also remind you that I am your host," said Pitt quietly. "It's hardly the thing, Quirke, to speak in this way——"

"But you don't understand!" interrupted Quirke. "You don't realise your danger! Even now it may be too late for you to escape! There will be death—destruction! When an elemental gets loose, it is a time of tragedy! Run—run! All of you!"

"Thanks all the same, Quirke, but we won't run," said Reggie Pitt. "Don't take any notice of him," he added, looking round at the startled faces. "He's only talking out of the back of his neck! He's had a fright over something, but there's no need for us to get alarmed. You know how steeped he is in this psychic piffle! I don't expect he saw anything on the stairs!"

"I did—I did!" shouted Quirke passionately. "I am not imaginative! I do not see things that have no existence! Stop—stop!" he added, raising his voice, as Handforth and one or two others moved towards the doorway. "Do not go out there! If you value your lives, do not go out!"

There was such a world of terror in Quirke's voice that Handforth and the others hesitated.

"Just a minute, Handy," said Nipper. "Before we do anything else, we'd better get a clear statement from Quirke—and then we can make an investigation. I want him to be a bit more concise about what he saw, so we'll give him a minute to cool down. Afterwards, we'll go out into the hall and make an examination. But keep cool, everybody! That's the main thing!"

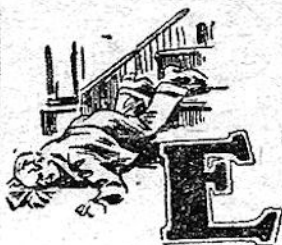
Nipper's words had their effect. In a very short time the guests were looking less scared, and the parlourmaids and the other servants were gradually recovering their own balance.

After all, Ezra Quirke was a queer sort of boy, and it wouldn't do to take too much notice of his fantastic words.

All the same, every member of Reggie Pitt's Christmas party felt vaguely uneasy!

## CHAPTER 14.

## The Figure on the Stairs!



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH plucked impatiently at Quirke's arm.

"Now then, my lad—out with it!" he said grimly. "I don't agree with this delay, but if the others want to hear the full story, you'd better buck up with it! What exactly did you see?"

Ezra Quirke had, by this time, recovered some of his own equanimity. He was able to think more clearly now, and when he remembered that strange apparition on the stairs, it occurred to him, quite unexpectedly, that it had resembled a sort of ogre. The fact that the Thing had not followed him into the ball-room had restored some of his composure.

"I will tell you!" he said tensely. "I was standing in the hall, thinking. I could hear you all in here, laughing and having your games. Then suddenly I saw something at the top of the stairs—something which had not been there a second earlier. It could not have walked there, since there had been no time for that. It just appeared—it came out of the air itself."

"And what was it like?" asked Pitt.

"I can tell you what it *was*—not merely what it was like," replied Quirke impressively. "The Thing I saw was a materialised spirit—a deadly, menacing Presence, and it took the shape of an ogre."

"An ogre!" shouted several of the juniors.

"Yes—an ogre!" insisted Quirke. "You do not believe me, eh? You think I am crazy? But this is the truth! That monstrous creature I saw was an ogre——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was an involuntary burst of laughter. Quirke's assertion that he had seen an ogre brought a good deal of humour into the situation. For it was at once assumed that Quirke had been the victim of his own imagination. A sense of relief swept through his listeners—and relief brought laughter.

"An ogre, eh?" said Handforth sarcastically. "Well, we seem to be getting on! There were fairies about the castle an hour or two ago—and now we have an ogre!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do not laugh!" shouted Quirke fiercely. "You do not realise what folly——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to go into the hall, just to see if anything is really there?" put in Winnie gently.

"Why, sis, you don't really think there's anything in this, do you?" asked Reggie, looking at his sister in astonishment, and

struck by her serious tone. "It's nothing but Quirke's silliness—"

"Just the same as it was my silliness for seeing the fairies?" asked Winnie. "And Dora's silliness, too! But we did see those fairies, Reggie! And if we could see fairies, why couldn't this boy see an ogre?"

"Just the same as some of us saw a witch this morning," put in Irene quickly.

"Oh, help!" said Reggie Pitt, holding a hand to his brow. "This is getting a bit too fantastic! I believe that the castle really is bewitched! Or at least we are!"

"Piffle!" said Handforth firmly. "It's been nothing but imagination, in every case. You can't fool me with that sort of stuff! I haven't seen anything, anyhow! And, what's more, I shan't see anything!"

But Dora Manners and Winnie Pitt were rather inclined to sympathise with Ezra Quirke. They felt, in their hearts, that he really had seen something extraordinary in the hall. For had not they themselves witnessed that fairy revel outside in the grounds. If one impossible thing could happen, there was no limit to the affair.

There was a general move towards the hall, Handforth leading the way. The merry-making was abandoned—or suspended, at least—for there could be no further fun until this fresh mystery had been cleared up. At all events, an investigation was essential.

Handforth, of course, was convinced that Ezra Quirke had seen nothing, and he went out into the hall with the settled idea in his head that nothing unusual would be seen. So Edward Oswald received a bit of a surprise—perhaps a shock. For there, huddled near the foot of the stairs, was a figure.

"Look!" said Church, pointing. "There's something there!"

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly.

"Stand back!" shouted Quirke. "Do not approach—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Nipper. "This is no ogre!"

They hurried up, and then they found themselves staring down upon the figure of a queer old man. He was dressed in old-fashioned clothing, and he was lying there motionless. But he was evidently alive, for he was breathing heavily, and an ugly bruise on his forehead told its own story. He had obviously fallen downstairs, and had hurt himself in the process. This, no doubt, was the explanation of that other strange cry which had come from the hall as Quirke had been fleeing.

The boys and girls stared at one another

in startled amazement. Here was another mystery? Who was this old man? And why was he lying huddled at the foot of the stairs?

"Well I'm blessed!" said Reggie Pitt, as he looked at the old fellow. "It's Mr. Rotherton!"

Pitt was right. The frail figure on the stairs was that of Mr. Julius Rotherton, the hermit of Raithmere Castle!



The dancing was a great success, with everybody supremely dressing up as a swaggering Roundhead, complete in big top and am I to do?" he demanded of the host. "Irene won't dance

## CHAPTER 15.

### The Old Man of the Castle.



**T**HERE was an excited buzz from Reggie Pitt's guests as they gathered round the foot of the stairs.



looking at the unconscious figure of old Mr. Rotherton.

"But who is he?" asked Buster Boots, in surprise.

"Kindly enlighten us, Brother Reggie," said Browne. "I observe that Brother Nipper and yourself have been exchanging meaning glances. I take it that the elderly stranger is not entirely unknown to you—since you

"That's because he lives in a secret suite of rooms," replied Reggie. "A few of us know about him—Nipper and Handforth and the other fellows who were here in advance of the main party. We weren't going to say anything, because we were told by Mr. Rotherton that he did not like company. He's a perfectly harmless old fellow, and at one time he was secretary—or something like that—to my great-uncle. He has lived in Raithmere Castle for years. A hermit, you know."

"Well I'm blessed!" said Fatty Little, scratching his head. "How did he feed?"

"We can't go into long explanations now," interrupted Nipper. "Mr. Rotherton needs attention. I don't think he's badly hurt—only just stunned a bit. Will somebody please fetch some water?"

"Right!" said Doris promptly.

She ran off, accompanied by one or two of the girls, and Nipper proceeded.

"We found Mr. Rotherton quite by chance," he said. "He didn't want anybody to know that he lived here, and we promised to keep his secret. But, of course, it's out now—because you've all seen him. He's a decent old boy, and you needn't be suspicious of him."

"And Quirke mistook this harmless old chap for an ogre!" said Handforth contemptuously. "By George! Doesn't it just show what the imagination can do?"

"Rather!"

"It's not true!" said Quirke, pushing forward. "I did not see this old man! I tell you I saw an ogre on these stairs! I am not a fool—I am not given to imaginative fits! I saw the monstrous thing as plainly as I can see you, Handforth!"

Handforth started.

"Are you calling me a monstrous thing?" he asked darkly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is no need for you to make such suggestions, Handforth," said Quirke. "I'm only trying to explain that I saw the apparition, and I could not possibly mistake a frail old man for a—"

"Just a minute!" interrupted one of the other juniors. "Is there any chance that this Mr. Rotherton has been playing tricks?"

"Tricks?" said Reggie quickly.

"Why not?" said Boots. "Quirke says he saw an ogre, and we come out here and find this old man on the stairs! Doesn't it look as though he were responsible for that ogre? Perhaps he tripped on the stairs, and fell down and gave himself away. Let's look round for the things he used for faking up the ghost."

Nipper, and Reggie Pitt, and one or two



copy—except Edward Oswald Handforth. He had insisted upon boots and extra large spurs. "Look here, Pitt, what the dickens with you, and the other girls only laugh when I go near them!"

apparently know him by the name of Brother Rotherton. We have no desire to be inquisitive, but—"

"I had better explain quickly—if only to stop your long-winded jabber, Browne," interrupted Reggie Pitt. "Mr. Rotherton lives here—in the castle."

"Lives here!" said Irene, with wide eyes.

moments. They remembered how Mr. Julius Rotherton had fixed all sorts of wires in various parts of the castle—in order to produce mysterious manifestations. The old hermit had done all this in order to frighten the schoolboys away, but since they had discovered his secret he had put an end to all that trickery. There was no earthly reason why he should have re-commenced the game.

Before any search could be made, Doris returned with the water, and Mr. Rotherton was carried out into the centre of the hall, and placed upon a lounge. Water was dabbed over his forehead, and some was forced down his throat. The girls had brought some wine, too, and in a very short time the old fellow opened his eyes, and looked round him in a bewildered way.

"It's all right, Mr. Rotherton," said Reggie Pitt quickly. "We'll soon have you on your feet again. I think you fell downstairs, and—"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted the old man. "I tripped—I fell! Where am I now? Who are all these—Ah, yes, of course! A pity—pity! I did not intend this. I did not want myself to be seen."

"But why were you on the main stairs, Mr. Rotherton?" asked Pitt.

"Why?" said the old man. "A whim, my boy—a sudden impulse. I heard your laughter, and I decided to creep down just to have a little peep at you enjoying your revels. It was a foolish notion, perhaps, but I could not resist the impulse. I wanted to see you enjoying yourselves."

"But do you know why you fell downstairs, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Yes," said Mr. Rotherton, his voice becoming strangely husky. "I do remember! Indeed, I am never likely to forget! I was in the upper corridor, and suddenly a scream sounded. I was very startled, as you may imagine—"

"That was Quirke!" said Handforth, nodding.

"I thought, perhaps, that somebody had been injured," continued Mr. Rotherton. "So I came cautiously forward, and then I received a great shock. For there, on the stairs, I saw something—yes, something abnormal and horrific."

"Oh!" went up a murmur from many voices.

"Yes, yes?" said Ezra Quirke quickly. "You saw something, sir? What did you see? Tell us!"

"An ogre, of course!" said Handforth sarcastically.

To his amazement, Mr. Rotherton looked up and gave a quick nod.

"Yes—yes!" he said. "An excellent phrase, my boy! An ogre! The figure I saw on the stairs was indeed akin to an ogre of the traditional type. A monstrous figure—between fifteen and twenty feet in height. He was just passing down into the hall, and I was so amazed—so startled—that I fear I lost my footing and tripped. I tried to save myself, but in vain. I fell headlong—and do not remember much else."

"But you saw the ogre, sir?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"Yes—I saw it distinctly," replied Mr. Rotherton. "What it means, I cannot say—but I am disturbed. It was no human presence—no human form disguised. It was something altogether more terrible."

Reggie Pitt's guests looked at one another uncomfortably—and uneasily. Dramatically, Ezra Quirke's fantastic story had been corroborated!

## CHAPTER 16.

### Handy Wants to Investigate.



# M

R. ROTHERTON was well enough, twenty minutes later, to return to his own secret quarters. Courteously,

and with an old-world grace, he bade his young companions good-night, and went off. Nipper and Handforth and one or two others escorted him right to his secret door, however, and saw him safely "home."

"Well, old man, what do you make of it?" asked Reggie Pitt, as he and Nipper hurried downstairs again with Handforth. "Things are getting pretty queer, aren't they?"

"I'm blessed if I know what to think," replied Nipper. "It's all very puzzling—and all very uncomfortable, too. We didn't believe a word about that ogre of Quirke's—until Mr. Rotherton told us that he had seen the same thing. But how could that apparition have appeared on the stairs?"

"Don't ask me!" said Reggie. "I shall begin to think that the castle is really haunted. And I don't want to think that—because I've never believed in ghosts."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "There aren't any ghosts here. There must be some logical explanation, and if you ask me I think we ought to make a complete investigation. There may be a gang of crooks in the castle—coiners, or something like that. You can never tell—"

"Cheese it, Handy!" protested Pitt. "That's an old tale of yours, and it's a bit moth-eaten. I'm thinking about that old witch that some of the girls saw this morning. And those fairies, too."

"Fairies!" said Handforth tartly. "Draw it mild!"

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"My sister saw those fairies," replied Pitt quietly, "and Winnie isn't the kind of girl to imagine things. Neither is Dora. And they both insist that they saw fairies out here in the snow. Then Quirke comes along and tells us that he saw an ogre on the stairs—and Mr. Rotherton saw the same thing."

Handforth scratched his head.

"Well, it's one of the rummiest goes I can ever remember," he confessed. "We could understand a ghost—at least, it would be something that we've experienced before. But whoever heard of witches and fairies and ogres in these days? It's so—so rummy! I can't make head nor tail of it!"

Neither could any of the others, and when Reggie Pitt went amongst his guests in the ball-room he found that there was an absence of the former hilarity.

Reggie did his best to cheer things up. Further games were suggested, more dancing was proposed, but nobody felt inclined for merrymaking now. The recent events had cast a sort of gloom over the Christmas party. Everybody felt, vaguely, that there was something wrong with Raithmere Castle. It wasn't haunted in the ordinary sense—for nothing had happened to frighten any of the guests.

At the same time, the light-hearted, care-free enjoyment of the evening was no longer possible. After a half-hearted pretence of carrying on, Reggie suggested that bedtime was drawing near, and most of the guests were only too glad to "call it a day."

The fact was, they are all thoroughly disturbed, and although nobody was frightened it was felt that a resumption of the festivities would only be a mockery. Quite apart from this, the hour was late—getting on towards midnight.

It had been originally intended that the jollities should go on until the small hours of the morning, but in the existing circumstances the plan was changed—and it was decided that everybody should go to bed, get a good sleep and be up early on Boxing morning.

So very soon afterwards, the party broke up. The girls went off to their quarters, the boys broke up into various groups, and sought their own bed-rooms.

In one of the rooms, Handforth was obstinate—as usual. He and Church and McClure were getting undressed by the candlelight—and by the flickering gleam from the fire.

"Buck up, Handy," said Church, as he noticed that Handforth was making no attempt to progress with his disrobing. "Mac and I are practically ready for getting into bed. Why don't you hurry up?"

Handforth looked across at his two chums. "I've been thinking—hard!" he said.

"I wondered why you looked so ill," remarked McClure.

"And I've decided to make an investigation," went on Handforth, ignoring

McClure's comment. "Yes, my lads—an investigation! The situation calls for one."

"Look here, Handy," said Church, in alarm. "You don't mean this, do you?"

"Of course I mean it!"

"But you're dotty!" said Church. "How the dickens can you make an investigation—by yourself?"

"I'm not proposing to make an investigation by myself," replied Handforth. "You chaps are coming with me."

"Are we?" said McClure grimly. "That's just where you make a mistake, Handy! We're not going to budge from this bedroom—until daylight!"

Edward Oswald looked at his chums in astonishment.

"My hat!" he said. "You're not afraid, are you? You're not funky?"

"Sorry, old man, but we're not falling into that trap!" said Church, with a grin. "You know jolly well that we're not funky—and we're not asses enough to get indignant because you question our pluck. It's just a matter of common sense. We've come to bed, and we're in this room to sleep. There's no sense in prowling about the castle after all the lights have been put out. If you want to go searching for ogres, you can jolly well go. But we're not having any of it."

"No fear!" said McClure. "We're going to sleep!"

"Why, you—you traitors!" ejaculated Handforth indignantly. "Do you mean to tell me that you refuse to obey my orders?"

McClure yawned.

"Sorry, old man," he said, jumping into bed, "but that's just what we do mean. And you can glare as much as you like—but it won't have any effect!"

"Not the slightest bit!" said Church complacently.



## CHAPTER 17.

### Handforth Sees Things!

**O**CCASIONALLY Church and McClure took a firm stand against the idiosyncrasies of their famous leader. And invariably in such cases he knuckled under. When Church and McClure liked, they could twist Handy round their little fingers, but as a rule they allowed him to harbour the delusion that he was their "boss."

"You're a pair of mutinous rotters!" grumbled Handforth, as he began undressing. "If we weren't Reggie Pitt's guests, and visitors under a friendly roof, I'd biff the pair of you! But I don't want to make a row now, in the middle of the night!"

"That's very thoughtful of you," said Church, yawning. "My hat! Dancing makes a chap tired, doesn't it? I can go to sleep in two ticks! And blow the ghosts!"

"Ghosts!" echoed Handforth gruffly. "There aren't any ghosts! That's why I wanted to make an investigation—to prove that somebody has been up to some trickery! It wouldn't take me long to—"

"Yes, we know, old man," interrupted Mac gently. "But leave it till the morning—when you're fresh. You can't expect to do much successful research work when you're tired. Besides, it's all dark outside in the corridors."

"Perhaps you're right!" admitted Handforth grudgingly. "I've thought of something else, too. If we go prowling about, and the girls hear us, they might get the wind up—they might think that we're ghosts, or something."

Church and McClure grinned joyously. How on earth anybody could mistake Handforth for a ghost was beyond their comprehension. But they made no comment—since they did not want to continue the argument. Indeed, after exchanging a wink, they snuggled down into the bedclothes and breathed heavily—and even began to snore lightly.

It was a hint to Handforth that they were not only ready for bed, but that they were determined to remain in bed.

The chums of Study D were obliged to share a single bed, for there were so many guests under the roof that a certain amount of overcrowding was necessary. Not that the juniors minded this. With talk of ghosts in

the air, the majority of the fellows were only too pleased to have bed companions.

Handforth & Co.'s own particular bed was a huge four-poster—an old-fashioned affair of carved oak. It was plenty big enough for the three of them—or should have been. But Handforth was no ordinary sleeper, and Church had suggested, the previous night, that it would be a good idea to rig up a cast-iron partition between Handforth's part of the bed and the rest of it. For Edward Oswald had a habit of kicking out in his sleep, or punching one of his hands into Church's or McClure's face.

To-night, however, he was pretty quiet. He indulged in none of these practices. But this was because he remained awake.

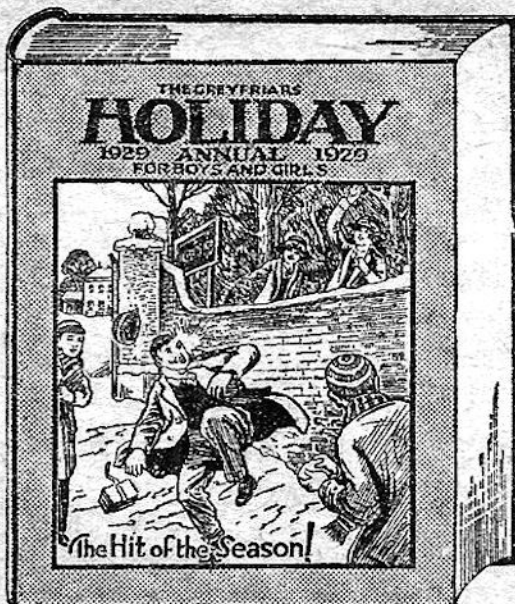
After the candles had been extinguished, and the fire had burned low, Handforth remained awake, with his hands clasped behind his head on the pillow. Church and McClure, beside him, were sound asleep already—no; merely pretending. They had dropped off almost as soon as the candles had been snuffed.

The castle was very quiet.

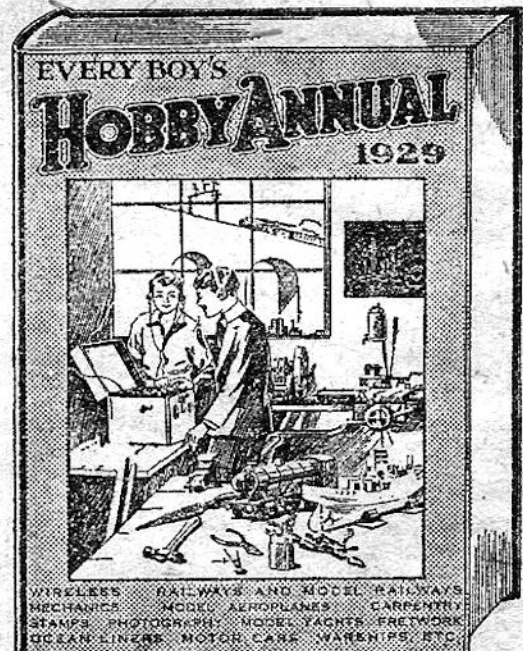
Now and again a quaint little creak would make itself heard—a scuffling under the floorboards, perhaps. But Handforth was not the kind of fellow to get scared by such natural sounds. A rat, possibly—or one of those creaks which are always to be heard in old houses. Outside, the night was perfectly calm, with plenty of moonlight. The rays

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came through the windows and cast pale, silver patches on the floor of the bed-room.

Handforth was thinking about the various queer happenings of the day. He badly wanted to investigate—for he had an idea at the back of his head that Rithmere Castle was in the hands of crooks. Not that there was anything remarkable in this idea of Handforth's. He could generally be trusted to think of something melodramatic and fantastic.

A piece of wood in the fireplace moved suddenly, and Handforth started. He had closed his eyes—and, indeed, he had slept for a few moments. He was very sleepy now—very restless. He was just ready to doze off and to drop into a deep slumber. After all, it was jolly cosy to be in bed, in the warm bed-room. A lot better than prowling about the dark corridors, and—

Then Handforth started. He started violently.

In fact, he sat up and stared. For a few seconds he remained rigid, his gaze fixed upon the bedpost near his feet.

He saw something absolutely unbelievable.

The old bedstead had been converted at some period or other, and the foot was adorned by two carved-oak posts, with flat tops. They were immense posts, too, solid and imposing. The moonlight did not reach as far into the room as this, but Handforth saw something on that bedpost which caused him to blink and rub his eyes.

"Great jumping corks!" he breathed amazedly.

He wasn't frightened in the least—but he was staggered.

For there, squatting on the bedpost, was a tiny elf! A perfectly proportioned little gnome, or mannikin! There it squatted, calmly eyeing Handforth with a reflective sort of air. The little creature was only about six inches high, and he was dressed in green, with sharply-pointed shoes, such as elves generally adopt. He had a queer little cap on his head, too, and his face was perky, with bright little eyes.

As Handforth sat forward, staring blankly at this astonishing vision, the elf rose to his feet and gave one or two capers. Then he made some grimaces at Handforth, and opened his little mouth in elfish laughter.

And poor old Handy was incapable of moving an inch—or of uttering a sound. In that tense minute he began to believe that he was going dotty!



## CHAPTER 18.

Very Extraordinary!

**H**ANDFORTH felt that he was under a spell. He was awake—he was quite convinced that he was awake.

He could hear the fire crackling in a last

endeavour to retain its life. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the moonbeams on the floor. But never for an instant did he take his gaze away from that bedpost. He was watching that queer figure of the elfin, and vaguely, subconsciously, he wondered why he could see the figure so clearly, so distinctly. It ought to have been dark on that bedpost, and yet the little gnome was clearly defined in every single detail of his costume. Every line of his face could be seen, and he was now turning somersaults. And sometimes he appeared to be walking on the very air, without touching the bedpost at all.

But there was not the slightest doubt that he was there. And Handforth was awake—and he could see him. But it was so unbelievable—so fantastic. An elfin here, on the post of Handforth's bed, making faces at him!

"Oh, great Scott!" breathed Handforth hoarsely.

The little elf spread his legs apart, placed his hands upon his hips and leaned back, as if roaring with laughter. Only no sound could be heard from that little mouth. Suddenly Handforth clenched his teeth, and leaned further forward in bed, in order to gain a clearer view.

"Who—who are you?" he demanded tensely. "I—I mean— Oh, my hat! Am I going off my rocker, or what?"

Church stirred, and looked up.

"What are you talking about, Handy?" he asked sleepily. "Why the dickens can't you—"

"Here—quick!" panted Handforth, seizing Church by the shoulder. "Look here, Churchy! Look at this thing! Tell me if I'm seeing double!"

Church sat up, startled by Handforth's tone. Indeed, McClure sat up, too, and they found their leader leaning forward, his gaze concentrated upon the bedpost.

"What's the matter?" asked Church.

"He's gone!" breathed Handforth dazedly. "At least—I say, Church! Can you see anything on that bedpost?" he added, pointing.

Church looked, not without a sudden quiver down his spine.

"On the bedpost?" he repeated shakily. "What—what do you mean, you ass?"

"Can you see something on the top of that bedpost?" repeated Handforth.

"No, I can't," said Church. "Don't be a fathead, Handy! How can I see something there? It's all dark!"

"But not dark enough for us to be deceived by anything," said McClure. "We can just see the outline of the bedpost, and there's nothing there, Handy. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing there!" echoed Handforth, passing a hand over his eyes. "But there is! I saw him just now!"

"Him?" repeated Church.

"Yes—the elfin!"

"The what?" yelled Church and McClure in one voice.

"The elfin—the gnome—the mannikin!" said Handforth. "I saw him plainly! He was squatting on that bedpost, not a minute ago—making faces at me!"

"An elfin?" repeated Church, with a gulp. "Sitting on that bedpost?"

"Yes!"

"You're up the pole!" said McClure bluntly. "You're barmy, Handforth!"

"I tell you I saw him there!" insisted Handforth, leaping out of bed, and running round to the foot. "He was here—sitting right on top of the post!" he added, indicating the spot. "And he turned somersaults, too, and—"

"Cheese it!" said Church impatiently. "What the dickens are you trying to tell us, Handy? I thought you were dotty, but I can understand now. You've been dreaming."

"I haven't!" said Handforth fiercely. "I saw him—"

"Rats!" said McClure. "You're not going to kid us that you saw an elfin or a mannikin. Where do you think we are—in the middle of a fairy book?"

"By Jove!" said Church, with a start. "It's pretty funny, when you come to think of it! The girls saw a witch, didn't they? Then they saw some fairies! And old Quirke saw an ogre—and now Handy's talking about an elf! This must be an enchanted castle, and we're all bewitched!"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Well, I saw that mannikin!" he declared. "I wasn't asleep, and I wasn't dreaming! It's no good you fellows looking at me in that way, either. I heard the fire burning—and I could see the moonlight on the floor. And there was that gnome on the bedpost, grimacing at me. I've never been so surprised in all my giddy life! I thought I was crazy for a minute."

Church suddenly laughed.

"Do be sensible, Handy," he said, with a chuckle. "After all, it's very easy to understand. There's been all this talk of ogres and fairies, and elfins are in the same category, aren't they? It's only natural that you should go to sleep, and dream of such things. And your dream was so vivid that you really thought you saw the creature sitting on the bedpost."

"But I *did* see him!"

"Rot!" said Church. "Use your common sense, old man! You've got plenty of it, although you don't often advertise it. You must see that it's absolutely impossible. You couldn't see an elfin on the bedpost. There aren't such things—except in the pages of 'Grimm's Fairy Tales,' or 'Hans Anderson's Wonder Stories.' Do try to pull yourself together! Elfins—in the age of wireless and cross-Atlantic flights! Come back to bed and go to sleep! You'll roar at yourself in the morning!"

But Edward Oswald Handforth was beginning to dress himself.

"I'm not coming to bed yet!" he said grimly. "You fellows can cackle all you like—but I saw an elfin on that bedpost, and I

believe there are other queer things going on outside in the corridors. Anyhow, I'm going to make a thorough investigation of the castle now! I'm not waiting until the morning!"

"Yes, but look here—"

"You stopped me once, but you're not going to stop me again!" said Handforth. "There's something queer about this place, and I'm not going to have a wink of sleep until I've probed the mystery to the bottom!"

And there was such an air of determination in his voice that Church and McClure did not even attempt to argue. They knew their leader of old!



## CHAPTER 19.

### The Investigation!

"READY?" asked Handforth briskly.

He took it for granted—that his chums were to accompany him. They had slipped into their own clothes by this time, and they were prepared for immediate action. But they thought it unnecessary to inform their leader that this action would probably take the shape of dragging him back into the bed-room by force. They were prepared to humour him for a short time, but there would be a limit.

Indeed, Church made a last effort on the spot.

"Look here, Handy, why not chuck it up," he said earnestly. "All the corridors are dark—"

"I don't care about that!" interrupted Handforth. "I'm going—and you chaps are coming with me!"

"But, you chump—"

"You're not afraid, are you?" demanded Edward Oswald.

"You know we're not!" retorted Church, in exasperation. "But where's the sense of prowling about the castle after everybody has gone to bed? You talk about finding elves or mannikins, but that yarn is too thick for words!"

"I tell you I saw an elfin sitting on my bedpost—"

"You were dreaming, old man," said Church. "There's no other possible explanation. And there's something that you haven't thought about, apparently. But there," he added carelessly, "perhaps you like being a laughing stock?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing," said Church. "But some of the other fellows are bound to come out when they hear us, and they'll want to know what we're doing. Can't you imagine their faces when you tell them that you're searching for elfins and gnomes?"

"They'll yell their heads off!" said McClure. "Why give them the chance, Handy? Come back to bed—and in the morning you'll be ready to laugh at yourself. You know jolly well that you were dreaming,





Crash! Handforth smashed clean through the panelling, and as he did so there came a sudden explosion, and flames and smoke belched out from the aperture.

only you don't want to admit it. You're too jolly obstinate!"

For a moment Handforth hesitated—but only for a moment. Then he remembered that queer little figure that had been squatting on his bedpost. No, it hadn't been a dream—he was positive of that. There was some other explanation, although for the life of him, Handforth could not imagine what it could be. He only knew that he had not dreamed. He had seen something there—something intangible, since it had vanished so strangely.

"No," he said firmly, "we'll hold an investigation. And we'll start by making a thorough search of this bedroom. Perhaps there's something squiffy about it—something faked. Anyhow, we'll make sure."

"Oh, you're hopeless!" groaned Church. "You know jolly well that the bed-room is perfectly normal. Didn't we thoroughly examine it the night before last?"

"We might have missed something," retorted Handforth.

Then and there he lit two or three candles, and moved about the room. He looked into a big recess, and then he examined an old-fashioned cupboard. He even looked under the bed, and searched the flooring and the ceiling, in case there were wires as he explained. But, of course, there was nothing. The bed-room was perfectly innocent of all tricks and devices.

So Handforth softly opened the door, and then ventured out. He glanced up and down the dark corridor and listened. A creak came to his ears. Unmistakably it was the sound

of a moving floorboard. Somebody—or something—was active, only just round the angle of the corridor.

"Hist!" breathed Handforth, holding up his free hand. "Careful, you chaps! There's something round the corner!"

In his usual impulsive way, he bounded forward and was round that angle in less than a second. Church and McClure, after a moment of hesitation, followed. They found their leader standing grimly in the middle of the passage gazing at a slight, crouching form immediately in front of him.

"Ezra Quirke!" muttered Church.

"What did I tell you?" demanded Handforth triumphantly. "Trickery! This—this rotter is responsible!"

"I do not know what you mean," said Quirke, with a catch in his voice. "I have done nothing, Handforth. I was merely on my way to the bath-room to obtain a bottle of water. The chambermaids have forgotten to fill the water-bottle in my bed-room. You may remember that I am not one of the ordinary guests. It was only decided, at the last moment, that I should sleep here to-night. And I am thirsty."

He held up the water-bottle, as though in corroboration of his statement. Quirke was dressed in his pyjamas, with a dressing-gown thrown over them. He was holding a candle in one hand, and the water-bottle in the other. He certainly did not look very formidable, although his mysterious eyes and mask-like face were sufficiently impressive.

"That's only a blind!" said Handforth gruffly. "We don't forget the way you

tricked us once before, Quirke. That time at St. Frank's when you were in the East House. We don't forget your calm innocence then—and your trickeries and your magic. You're up to the same games, eh? Trying to fool all of us!"

"You are wrong!" said Quirke quietly. "I have taken no part in any trickery, Handforth. Your accusation is entirely unjust. What has happened now?" he added, giving Handforth a curious look. "Have you seen this—this ogre?"

"Blow the ogre!" said Handforth gruffly. "I don't believe you saw an ogre—it was only your imagination!"

"But Mr. Rotherton saw the creature, too," put in Church.

"Well, never mind," said Handforth. "I know jolly well that I saw an elfin sitting at the foot of my bed, and I'm going to—"

"An elfin?" repeated Quirke, staring. "Are you serious, Handforth?"

Edward Oswald looked at the fellow straightly.

"You do it convincingly, Quirke, but I'm not deceived," he said. "You're pretending to be very innocent, aren't you, but I'll bet you know something about that elfin! It was just one of your dodges. How the dickens did you do it?"

Ezra Quirke did not stir, and he revealed no sign of emotion.

"If you are searching for an elfin, I should suggest that you go to the bed-room of your minor," he said, with a touch of humour that none of the St. Frank's fellows would have credited him with. "I certainly know nothing of an elf, or elfin. I really think, Handforth, that you must have been dreaming."

"We told him that long ago!" said McClure wearily.

At that moment, before Handforth could make any reply, a curious sound came from further down the corridor—from the direction of the main hall. Nobody could quite explain what that sound was, but it was mysterious—and suggestive of the Unknown!



ing," said Handforth. "The wind—"

## CHAPTER 20.

## The Frolic of the Elves!

"What was that?" asked Church, in a hushed voice.

"Nothing—only a rat, or a board creaking. Or perhaps it was

"But there isn't any wind," said Quirke, his eyes gleaming strangely. "I do not like this! There may be some danger for us. I have already told you that this castle is in the possession of some materialised spirit. You have laughed at me, but

"Yes, and we're still laughing!" interrupted Handforth

grimly. "Any more of that rot from you, Quirke, and I'll punch you on the nose!"

"But I urge you

"That's enough!" roared Handforth. "I'm fed up with your warnings and your talks about spirits! Go to the dickens! You're

enough to give anybody the pip!"

"Listen!" said McClure, holding up his hand.

For a moment or two they stood there, absolutely silent. They held their breaths—waiting. Again there came a strange sound from the direction of the big hall. A sort of rustling, and now and again a vague suggestion of faint laughter. It was very eerie—very unaccountable.

In the midst of that tense silence a door opened somewhere, and a candle appeared further along the corridor. Behind it was Reggie Pitt.

"Anything wrong out here?" he asked. "No, of course not," said Church. "It's only one of Handy's spasms. He's got a mania for investigating, and we've come along with him just to keep him in order."

## NEXT WEDNESDAY!





"You silly ass!" said Handforth, glaring.

Reggie Pitt came up, and with him were Nipper and Jack Grey and William Napoleon Browne. They were in their dressing-gowns, and they regarded Handforth & Co. and Quirke with frank curiosity.

"I trust, brothers, that nothing is seriously amiss?" asked Browne. "I am aware that this is a house of mysterious hauntings, but I must confess that I have not personally observed anything that could be remotely termed psychical. I think that is the correct word. Brother Quirke?" he added politely.

"Do not make fun of the World Beyond," said Quirke, in a low voice.

"I beg your pardon!" went on Browne. "I can assure you that I had no intention of using a tone of levity. At the same time, I must inform you, Brother Quirke, that I regard your sinister researches with much suspicion."

"Dry up, Browne," said

Handforth impatiently. "I'm out here because I mean to discover the secret of Raithmere Castle! Not ten minutes ago I saw a gnome sitting on the corner of my bed, and—"

"Pray forgive the interruption, Brother Handforth," said Browne, "but did I understand you to say gnome?"

"Yes, you did!"

"In other words, an elfin, I take it?"

"Yes."

"Why, you chump!" said Pitt, grinning. "You don't expect us to believe that story, do you? You must have been dreaming."

"I'm fed up with being told that I was dreaming," put in Handforth thickly. "I've had it rammed down my throat until I'm nearly choked! I saw an elf on my bed—and I wasn't dreaming, either! And just now there was a rummy sound from the direction of the hall. I'm going to find out what it means!"

"Just a minute, old man—" began Church.

"No; I'm going!" said Handforth fiercely.

"I'm not going to stay here to listen to your jeerings!"

And off he went, very indignant. Exactly as Church and McClure had prophesied, the other fellows were laughing at him. But Handforth knew—he positively *knew*—that he had been fully awake when that extraordinary incident occurred in the bed-room.

"We'd better go after him, you chaps," said McClure uneasily. "You know what a ram-headed ass he is. There's no telling where he'll get to unless we keep him in sight!"

"Yes, we'll go," said Nipper promptly.

Handforth was the first to reach the big landing, and his candle was hardly necessary. For the moonlight was streaming in through the long, narrow windows, the wide staircase was clearly visible, and many parts of the hall below, too. The moonlight was now quite strong, and Handforth came to a sudden halt just as he was about to descend the stairs.

"Great Scott!" he gasped.

He stared—in fresh amazement. For he saw something which made him draw his breath in—which caused him to stare unbelievably.

For there, capering up and down the balustrade of the staircase, were several of those queer little elfins! Not one—not two—but many! And

they were indulging in a regular frolic. Handforth stood there, fascinated by this singular sight.

Then suddenly he started, and twirled round. The other juniors were just behind him—and Handforth's one thought at that moment was to convince them that this uncanny thing was really happening. It couldn't be a flight of his own imagination!

"Here!" he said tensely. "Quick, you fellows! Look here! You didn't believe me just now—but come and look at this!"

They arrived at a run, and all came to a halt at the head of the staircase.

Then, for perhaps five seconds, not a single sound was made. Church and McClure and Nipper and he others stood there, bewildered. Nipper was the first to speak.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he murmured.

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"Can you see them, too?" asked Handforth, grasping at Nipper's sleeves.

"Yes, of course," said Nipper.

"What are they?"

"Elves, by the look of them," said Nipper, in a wondering voice. "Gnomes—mannikins—or whatever you like to call them."

"Well, didn't I say so?" asked Handforth triumphantly. "That little chap who appeared on my bedpost must have been one of these—and he's come back to his pals. But how the dickens did they get here? And where did they come from?"

He stared at the little figures in the same dazed way that all the others were staring. Those elves were marvellously distinct, even when they went out of the direct rays of the moonlight. That was the peculiar part of it. The darkness did not seem to effect them in the least. They were even more visible in the shadows than they were in the direct moonbeams. What could be the explanation of this paradox?

"What are they?" whispered Pitt, looking at Nipper. "Are we all dreaming?"

And then Handforth gave a shout, and leapt down the stairs. He was going to examine these gnomes at close quarters!



## CHAPTER 21.

### The Smashed Panel!

**H**ANDFORTH'S action was so quick that the tiny creatures had no chance of getting away. They were still

sliding up and down the balustrade when the leader of Study D tore down the stairs, and his first action was to make a grab at the nearest elfin.

His hand went clean through the little beggar!

Never in all his life had Handforth been so surprised. He had grabbed at that tiny creature, feeling certain that he had got him. But his fingers met nothing but the empty air—and in the same second the other elves seemed to streak backwards in the most extraordinary fashion, becoming vague and elongated in the process. They all vanished, or appeared to vanish, into the oak panelling on the far side of the hall. Handforth stood there, on the stairs, gaping.

"My hand went right through it!" he panted. "Oh, great Scott! Did you fellows see?"

"Yes!" gasped Church. "And they've gone now, Handy! Why didn't you hold that one?"

"I couldn't!" said Handforth. "I tell you, my hand went right through it! I grabbed him, but he wasn't there!"

"They all seemed to vanish into the panelling on the other side of the hall!" said Reggie Pitt, running down the stairs. "Ye

gods and little fishes! Elves—in the twentieth century! And we saw them as clearly as

"I'm not going to be beaten!" roared Handforth. "They escaped through that panel, and I'm going after them! By George! I'll show you whether they can play monkey tricks with me!"

He tore down the remaining stairs, rushed across the hall, and charged full tilt into the oak panelling. He had not really intended to crash so heavily against it, but his foot had caught in a rug, and he was precipitated into the panel with terrific force.

Crash!

Before Handforth could recover from his bewilderment, he found himself smashing clean through the woodwork. It splintered all about him, and the next second there was a sudden burst of fire.

"Look out!" yelled Nipper.

He and the others were close upon Handforth's heels. They arrived just as the livid flames came belching out of the splintered woodwork, and as they backed away there was a kind of explosion—a dull, muffled, puffing sound. A great, acrid cloud of smoke came surging forth from the panel.

A shout of alarm went up—but it came from within that panel! And it was uttered in a strange voice—the voice of somebody who did not belong to Reggie Pitt's Christmas party!

Church and McClure, frantic with anxiety regarding their leader, were pulling at Handforth, and they succeeded in dragging him back. Fortunately Edward Oswald was not hurt much. Only bruised a bit—stunned slightly. But he was recovering with remarkable speed. Choking and gasping, he fell back, held by his chums.

"Quick!" he panted. "There's somebody in there!"

"Those elves!" said Church wildly.

"Blow the elves!" said Handforth. "It's a man—and he's in terrific danger, too! Look at the flames licking up!"

"Fetch some of the fire buckets!" sang out Nipper. "There are several of them at the back of the hall! Come on, Browne—we'll get them!"

"I am here to obey, Brother Nipper!" said Browne promptly.

They dashed off, feeling glad that Pitt had had several fire buckets in readiness. Raithmere Castle was illuminated by a large supply of vapour lamps, and Reggie had thought it necessary to be prepared for any emergency.

While Nipper and Browne hurried to get water, Handforth and the others were gazing in startled consternation at the licking flames beyond that splintered panel! Something was moving in there, too—trying to fight through the dense smoke.

"Come on!" roared Handforth. "We've got to rescue him!"

Before Church and McClure could stop him he plunged through the panel again, and found himself grappling with a man. The stranger was attempting to get free, although his efforts were feeble. It seemed



that he had been dazed and stunned by the explosion, and he was in peril of collapsing there—amidst those flames.

Reggie Pitt and one or two of the others came round helping, and finally the wood-work was torn away ruthlessly. Handforth came out, assisting the stranger, who appeared to be a refined-looking gentleman of perhaps forty-five years of age. He was tall, clean-shaven and well dressed, but other details were difficult to see since he was much blackened, and in one or two places his clothing was smouldering.

"My eyes—my eyes!" he was muttering: "For heaven's sake let me have water! I believe I am blinded!" The explosion—the sudden burst of fire—

"It's all right—we'll soon put you right!" interrupted Handforth. "Quick, you fellows! Carry him across to one of those lounges. Where's a light? Why can't somebody light one of these big lamps? These candles are no good!"

As it happened, Jack Grey was lighting one of the lamps, and the next moment a brilliant illumination flooded the big hall. At the top of the stairs, and on the landings, other guests were collecting. Nearly everybody had been aroused by the noise from the hall. Irene & Co. were in evidence, too—looking very startled and bewildered. They had hastily flung on some wraps, and were determined to join in the "fun." But all was confusion so far—particularly as billowy masses of smoke were coming from a corner in the hall.

The stranger was carried across to the lounge, but only Handforth and one or two of the juniors gave him any attention. The main thing was to put the fire out.

Here was a sensation, indeed! Who could this man be? Why had he been lurking behind that panel? Somehow, the juniors felt that they were now to get at the root of the whole mystery!



## CHAPTER 22.

## A Hint of the Truth!

"FIRE—FIRE!"

One or two of the excited guests had started the cry, and there was every excuse for them, for the hall was filling with smoke, and that corner was lurid with the ever-growing blaze.

"Go easy, you chaps!" shouted Nipper. "There's no need to get into a panic! The fire's nothing. We'll have it out in two minutes! Keep as quiet as you can! We don't want the servants down here in a panic!"

"But the whole castle might be burnt down!" said Fatty Little breathlessly. "And

"Buck up with that water!" called somebody.

Swish—swish!

Two or three pails full of water were flung through the jagged hole in the panel. Clouds of steam rose up, and the flames died down considerably.

"If we make haste we shall soon get it under control," said Nipper, as he seized another pail. "It's only smouldering and bursting into flames at intervals. I don't think the fire's much—just a sort of local affair. That's the style, Reggie—fling it on!"

More steam came flooding out from that secret cavity, and it could soon be seen that there was not the slightest danger of the castle becoming involved. The fire, as Nipper has said, was purely local. Once suppressed, there would be no danger.

"Can we be of any help?" asked Irene, as she ran downstairs, with Doris and one or two of the other girls.

"Yes!" said Handforth promptly. "We want some olive oil, or vaseline, or something—to put on this chap's burns. They're not very serious, but they must be smarting a lot. He's still dazed, and he'll need a lot of attention."

Irene took one glance at the stranger.

His face was certainly blackened, and he was reclining on the lounge, breathing evenly. But it was quite clear that he was still bewildered—partially stunned. The shock of that explosion, although not very great, had been serious enough in the confined space of that little cavity behind the panel; and the stranger must have received the full force of it.

While water was being flung on the smouldering embers of the dying conflagration, Irene and Dora got busy. Dora, of course, assumed complete command. She was a nurse at St. Frank's, and she felt that it was her place to attend to this unfortunate man. And Dora's gentle care soon had a marked effect. Bandages were applied, soothing ointment was placed on the burns, and before long the stranger was sitting up, looking round him in a way that was expressive of untold relief.

"My eyes!" he kept murmuring. "Thank heaven my eyes are saved! I feared that I had been blinded, but I am able to see still!"

At about this same time, Nipper and Reggie Pitt were penetrating into the secret cavity. Nipper had his electric torch going, and the pair found themselves in a strange little closet, cunningly hidden behind the panelling of the hall. Not one of the fellows had had the slightest suspicion that any such secret chamber existed.

The atmosphere was full of the reek of the recent fire, and everything was smothered in water. And there, amid all the debris, was a curious looking machine on a tripod.

recognisable in their charred condition; and a big cylinder, which might have contained gas of some sort.

Nipper picked up the machine, and flashed his light upon it.

"This is a rummy thing to find here, isn't it, Reggie?" he asked, in a low voice. "I rather think I'm beginning to see daylight."

"Well, you might let me have a pen-orth of it," said Reggie Pitt. "For I'm bothered if I can understand anything."

"Don't you see what it is?"

"Looks like a sort of magic lantern or something," said Reggie, examining the twisted wreckage with much curiosity.

"You're not far wrong," said Nipper. "I believe it's a cinematograph projector."

"What?"

"Not an ordinary one, of course," went on Nipper. "This is the rummiest looking projector I've ever seen—and there isn't an ordinary lantern at the back of it, either. It's much smaller than the usual projector—much more compact. But doesn't it suggest anything to you?"

"Great Scott!" panted Pitt. "You—you mean——"

"Why not?" asked Nipper keenly. "Ogres—fairies—imps! Fantastic things to see, Reggie—but not so fantastic when we know that there is a cinematograph projector on the premises."

"But, you ass, no cinematograph projector on earth could have produced such elves as we saw!" protested Reggie. "There wasn't any screen—there wasn't any beam of light—only those elves, capering up and down the balustrade! How could this—this thing have produced such a marvel?"

"I don't know—but I have an idea that the stranger will be able to explain," said Nipper. "Anyhow, let's get outside and see what's going on. There seems to be a bit of a commotion."

They were quite satisfied that the last spark of the fire had been extinguished, and so they joined the others, and they now found that Mr. Rotherton had come down. The kindly old hermit had probably heard the shouts of "fire," and he had thus been lured out of his lair.

"I trust nothing is wrong, young people," he was saying, looking round at the dishevelled boys and girls. "What is the matter here? Perhaps I can be of some assistance?"

"It's all right, sir," said Fullwood. "There was a bit of a fire, but we've put it out by this time. And this gentleman was injured——"

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Rotherton, staring blankly at the bandaged figure on the lounge. "Mr. Roger Morley!"

The stranger nodded.

"At your service, sir," he replied dryly. "A most opportune meeting, Mr. Rotherton!"

## CHAPTER 23.

## Mr. Morley Explains!



**H**ANDFORTH looked from Mr. Rotherton to Mr. Morley, and there was a suspicious expression on his face.

"It seems to me, you chaps, that these two gentlemen can do a lot of explaining, if they have a mind to!" he said grimly. "I thought you told us, Mr. Rotherton, that you knew nothing about the ghosts?"

"My dear boy, I spoke the perfect truth," protested the old hermit, pained. "Do not imagine that I was attempting to deceive you——"

"Well, then, Mr. Morley must know a good deal," said Handforth, turning to the stranger. "Perhaps you'll explain why we've been seeing elves and fairies and ogres and things, sir?"

Mr. Morley nodded.

"I feel, young 'un, that an explanation from me is very necessary," he said smoothly. "Yes, I will clear up this little mystery. And I can only express my regret if I have frightened any of you——"

"No, no!" went up a general shout. "We weren't frightened!"

"I rather thought not!" chuckled Mr. Morley. "But you must confess that you were puzzled, eh?"

"But what does it all mean, sir?" asked Reggie Pitt. "This is my castle, you know, and I feel that——"

"You feel that I have had an infernal impudence, of course," interrupted Mr. Morley. "Well, to be perfectly frank, I am guilty of a very serious piece of trickery. When I assure you that I had no evil motives—no malicious designs—I feel sure that you will listen to my story with patience."

"Just a minute, sir," said Nipper. "Do you think that you are well enough to speak now? Wouldn't it be better to wait until the morning?"

"No fear!" said Handforth. "We want to hear all about it now!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We can't wait until the morning!"

"Not likely!"

Mr. Roger Morley glanced up at Dora.

"We will leave it to the nurse," he said, giving her a whimsical smile. "If the nurse permits me to speak, I will do so now. By the way, I have omitted to express my gratitude to this charming young lady for her wonderful——"

"Please, Mr. Morley," said Dora quickly. "You have nothing to thank me for—nothing at all! And if you want to speak about anything, there is no reason why you shouldn't. Your injuries are only slight."

"I knew it," said Mr. Morley, nodding. "I even feel inclined to have a cigarette—if



the ladies will permit. I have been barred from smoking for two or three days, and the self-denial has been a great trial."

Mr. Morley lit a cigarette, and his audience gathered round, eager to hear what he had to say. There was something about him that the fellows and the girls rather liked. He was so frankly decent. There was nothing of the scoundrel about this man who had been discovered lurking behind a panel.

"It is all rubbish!" growled Mr. Rotherton. "I can well understand why you are here, Morley! And I might as well tell you at once that I have no intention of succumbing to your ridiculous urgings—"

"One moment, sir—if you please," said Mr. Morley. "Please remember that these boys and girls are all in the dark, and if you don't mind, I would like to tell them the story from the very start. Afterwards, I shall appreciate a brief interview with you."

"You may have the interview—but my mind is made up!" said Mr. Rotherton grimly. "Once and for all, Mr. Morley, I must tell you that I will have nothing to do with this proposition of yours. I do not want wealth; I do not want business worries. I am astounded that you should pester me so!"

A note of warmth had come into the old man's voice, and he was looking at Mr. Morley rather indignantly. All the others were puzzled and bewildered. They could not understand what this meant.

But Mr. Roger Morley soon enlightened them.

"Well, to let the cat out of the bag straight away, I'll admit that I'm responsible for all the strange things that have been appearing in the castle of late," he said amiably. "I produced the ghostly old man who was seen here several days before Christmas. I also produced the fairies, and the ogre, and everything else."

"But how, sir?" asked Fullwood. "How on earth did you do it?"

"I'd better explain that I am the managing director of the Morley Stereoscopic Projector Company, Limited," went on Mr. Morley coolly. "Doesn't that give you a hint?"

"Stereoscopic Projector Company!" murmured Browne. "Brothers, why did we not think of this? Let us hide our heads!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I don't know what Mr. Morley is getting at even now!"

"And yet it is very simple," said Mr. Morley. "And here's the story. About a year ago I was unfortunate enough to meet with a motoring accident just outside the village of Market Donning—which, as you know, is close here. The steering gear of my car went wrong, and I was pitched over the hedge, and I received a number of nasty injuries, including a badly gashed scalp.

"Somehow or other, I wandered close to the castle, and, in my dazed condition and weak from loss of blood, I stumbled into the moat. Our good friend, Mr. Rotherton, saw me from one of the castle windows, and he

took me into the castle, and even into his own private quarters."

"I feared, at the time, that Mr. Morley was dying," said the old hermit. "Humanity demanded that I should do everything possible to aid him."

"And so, quite accidentally, I discovered Mr. Rotherton's secret," went on the stranger. "I knew that Mr. Rotherton was living in the castle, unknown to a soul. He begged me to keep his little secret—a perfectly innocent secret, as you all know—and, of course, I complied. In fact, Mr. Rotherton and myself became very friendly. He even showed me his simple little inventions. At least, he called them simple—but I was of a very different opinion."

Mr. Morley suddenly became eager, and he looked at the boys and girls with a keen light in his eyes.

"I am an expert on everything connected with lenses and stereoscopic projection," he continued. "Well, you can imagine my astonishment when I discovered that Mr. Rotherton had produced a stereoscopic lens for his paltry little magic lantern that fairly took my breath away."

"The thing was only a toy—a mere trifle," said Mr. Rotherton gruffly.

"I'd rather believe Mr. Morley, sir," said Nipper. "We saw some of your inventions when we were in your apartment—and they struck us as being pretty wonderful."

"I saw at once that Mr. Rotherton had a fortune in his hands," continued Mr. Morley. "He had invented the thing here, in his spare time. It has been his habit to while away a few of the dark hours by showing magic lantern slides—and with that stereoscopic apparatus the effect was too wonderful for words. I was enthusiastic, and I offered Mr. Rotherton a very large sum of money down, and a guaranteed percentage on all profits, if he would only allow me to handle his lens commercially. But he refused to listen to me."

"And I still refuse," said Mr. Rotherton firmly.

"I hope not, sir—I do hope not!" said the other, bending forward. "Have I not given you sufficient proof of the wonderful possibilities of your invention?"



## CHAPTER 24.

All Serene!

**M**R. JULIUS ROTHERTON shook his head. "I do not wish to be disturbed," he said grumblingly. "I do not want my peace to be ruined. I am contented here, in Raithmere Castle, and—"

"Your peace will not be disturbed in the slightest degree, sir," said Mr. Morley. "But let us discuss this afterwards. I want to ex-

friends." He turned to his listeners. "Well, boys and girls, it was like this," he continued. "I couldn't get Mr. Rotherton to budge. He wouldn't even listen to me—and I was almost in despair. But I did persuade him to let me have one of his lenses, so that I could experiment with it. He trusted me—and that fact, alone, made it imperative that I should keep faith with him.

"Well, for nearly a year I have been making experiments, and I have at last produced a cinematograph projector which will revolutionise the entire industry. It is a combination of my own inventions and Mr. Rotherton's marvellous stereoscopic lens. My method is quite simple, although so staggeringly effective. I use, in combination, this special lens and a new beamless projector."

"Beamless, sir?" said Nipper.

"Yes," replied Mr. Morley. "Something of the sort was publicly shown a few years ago, in London—but it was not a great commercial success. But I venture to predict that mine will be the wonder of the age."

"I'll bet it will, sir," said Handforth feelingly. "I nearly had a fit when I saw that elf sitting on the bedpost!"

Mr. Morley chuckled.

"My process is very simple," he explained. "The beamless projector requires no screen whatever, and as the lens fixed to the machine is stereoscopic, the picture—I use the word 'picture' for want of a better one—is projected on to the air itself. All objects shown by my machine appear to be solid, and I can project them anywhere I please. I can also make them any size I please, according to the film that has been taken. Trick photography is also possible. There is no limit to what this projector of mine can accomplish."

"But even now, sir, I don't quite understand," said Reggie Pitt. "Why did you produce these elves and things, without anybody knowing you were here?"

"There are many secret passages and panels in this old castle," replied Mr. Morley. "It may interest you to know that I have several of my projectors placed in various hidden spots. There was this one here—behind the panel in the hall. There is another on the upper landing, and still another at a window of a locked apartment, directed down upon the terrace. All these projectors are concealed, and I have been able to reach them by means of the secret passages."

"Oh!" exclaimed Irene suddenly. "You've even got your projectors in the bed-rooms, then?"

"Only in one bed-room, my dear young lady," replied Mr. Morley quickly. "And I knew that that bed-room was occupied by our young impulsive friend, Handforth. I felt that it would be safe to play one of my tricks upon him, and so I chose the elf for his particular benefit."

"But I didn't see any giddy projector, sir—or hear anything, either," said Handforth.

"No, because the projector was hidden behind the wall," said Mr. Morley. "And my machine is perfectly noiseless."

"But why did you do all this?" asked Nipper.

"Because I wanted to convince Mr. Rotherton—this obstinate old customer—that his invention is worth thousands of pounds," said Mr. Morley, glaring at the old hermit. "He would not listen to reason, and so I wanted to show him. It was my last hope—my final throw of the dice."

"And it has failed," said Mr. Rotherton gruffly.

"I came here only a few days ago—fully prepared," continued Mr. Morley. "I saw Mr. Rotherton, and he again refused me. He was worried because all you boys and girls were in the place. I understood, then, that he wanted to keep the castle to himself, and so I thought I would help him. I had an idea that it might make him change his mind. I tried to scare you away, at first with my spectres and phantoms. Then, when I found that you wouldn't be scared away, I played a few tricks of my own—in keeping with the spirit of Christmas. I had the films in my stock—films of ogres and such-like creatures—and so I prepared a few surprises. I hope you will all forgive me for this practical joke."

"Why, of course we forgive you, sir," said Reggie Pitt. "And you are welcome to stay in Raithmere Castle as long as you please."

"That's very decent of you, my boy," said Mr. Morley. "I am very grateful."

"And I understand, Mr. Rotherton, that you desire to remain here, undisturbed?" went on Pitt, turning to the old hermit.

"That is correct," said Mr. Rotherton.

"Then I will only permit you to remain, sir, on condition that you enter into a business agreement with Mr. Morley," said Reggie calmly. "How's that? These stereoscopic films are so marvellous that we can't allow them to be wasted. Think of the possibilities of this machine in conjunction with the new talking films! Why, the British film industry will beat the world with 'talkies' if this new invention is brought into general use!"

"You are right," said Mr. Morley quickly. "If I can obtain Mr. Rotherton's consent to commercialise his invention, the British film industry will receive the greatest boom it has ever had."

And so, much to his dismay, Mr. Julius Rotherton was compelled to enter into the agreement—to the delight of everybody. Mr. Morley was particularly overjoyed, and about the only fellow under the roof of Raithmere Castle who felt thoroughly small was Ezra Quirke. He was the laughing-stock of everybody—for his talk about elementals and ghosts had proved to be unfounded.

And so the Christmas party continued, with good cheer all round. And Reggie Pitt's guests knew that they weren't bewitched, after all!

*(That's the end of that series, chums. Don't forget to write and tell your Editor what you think of it. And don't forget, either, that next week Nipper & Co. are starting out for Australia!)*



# BETWEEN OURSELVES



E. S. BROOKS.



RITA McENTEGGART.

*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.*

Thanks for your second photo—Dora Cantor (Krugersdorp)—but I'm afraid it won't do very well for publication on this page—and I really *would* like to see you appearing here. But in both your snaps you are looking extraordinarily serious. Can't you manage to let me have a smile? Or, at least, please send me a photo where the sun does not cause so many shadows. Forget those exams, for a bit, and smile when you next face the camera. And do try to get a bigger photograph. A snap is quite all right providing it's chiefly you, and not all background. I am very interested in your monthly letters, and I hope you will continue them. It is not only a pleasure to scan your exquisite handwriting (you must get full marks for this, I'm sure), but you generally tell me quite a lot of interesting things.

\* \* \*

Some of you other readers may think that there's a trace of favouritism now and again in my replies. It may even occur to you that I reply to more girls than boys. But, really, there's no favouritism at all. I always pick out the most interesting and best written letters, and put them aside for replies. And then I generally find that I can only answer a comparatively small proportion of these. Some of you may write to me every week with clockwork regularity for months, and only get a reply once in a blue moon. Somebody else might write to me for the first time, and get an answer immediately. It all depends upon the letters themselves. They are all of interest to me, but unless they contain something of interest to the general readers I don't feel justified in giving them space on this page. Now and again I send an answer through the post, but only when I feel urged to do so by the general merit of any particular letter which I am unable to deal with in the ordinary way on this page.

\* \* \*

No: you needn't trouble to send me a painting of your birds' eggs—Ida Locke (Liss). I am quite sure I couldn't identify

them, as you suggest. Besides, how can I tell that you would paint them in the right colours? With regard to your foreign stamps, I expect there are plenty of readers who would be glad of them, particularly as you say you want to give them away. If you want me to, I will publish your full name and address. Or, of course, you can join the St. Frank's League, and have an announcement put in the Wanted Column.

\* \* \*

Your wish regarding Ezra Quirke is now granted—Jack Fairhall (Melbourne). Hundreds of other readers have made a similar request. And Quirke, in consequence, had reappeared in the Christmas stories now running. I should like to thank you heartily for all the trouble you have taken in sending me so many newspaper cuttings. They have proved of very great interest to me, and I want you to know that I appreciate them very much.

\* \* \*

I nearly forgot your smiling face at the top of this page—Rita McEnteggart (Kells, Co. Meath). I hope it *will* come out smiling, because your snapshot is a very small one, and I'm a wee bit doubtful about it. But I've got so many hundreds of snapshots that I want to publish that I'm using yours as a test case. You don't mind, Rita, do you?

\* \* \*

Are you so well known in Nottingham—Frank Sims—that if I write to you by post, and address my letter "Frank Sims, Nottingham," it will reach you? You sent me your photo, and want mine in exchange. But you have omitted to give me your address. So I'm waiting until I hear from you again.



# Our Weekly Pow-Wow!

By  
The Editor.

Your Editor welcomes letters from all his readers: send him one now. Address it to: The Editor, "Nelson Lee School Story Library," Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

## Brain Waves for Christmas!

THERE are many ways of spending Christmas, and perhaps some energetic fellows may like to follow the example of a stout-hearted individual at Southsea who has collected a few real brain teasers to amuse himself and his friends at this festive season. One of them is the following; and it's a real teaser, too. Try it on your friends, and I'm ready to wager that not many of them will be able to puzzle it out. The problem is to supply the missing letters in the following apparent jumble, so that it reads sense.

Whtmrsludsoedlyswr?  
Whtdyssdrksdysthtwrlrm?  
Ls!sknyskthndfr,  
Llsh!lcllwrhrssndhrm.  
WhycllsbHdstlktkthghstlyrt  
Llglntctts—grndndmnlpyprt?

The answer is:

What mars a land so sadly as a war?

What days as dark as days that war alarm?  
Alas! ask many; ask at hand, afar,

All shall call war a harass and a harm.  
Why call, as ballads talk, that ghastly art  
All gallant acts—a grand and manly part?

## A BLACK AND WHITE PUZZLE!

AND then, having got your friend dithering with the above teaser, try this one on him—the Sailors Don't Care Puzzle. Dirty work, this! A ship from the West Indies got wrecked and the skipper and 30 men escaped in a boat. Fifteen of the sailors were white, and the other 15 black as hats. The rations ran low, and to save the situation the captain said 15 of the men must go overboard. Hard cheese, this, especially for the blacks, for they were selected. But the captain liked to seem fair, so he lined up his men in such a way that by counting out 15 men and throwing overboard every tenth man he would get rid of all the black ones.

He first placed 2 of his white sailors in the boat, then one black one; next, 3 more

whites; now, 5 blacks, followed with 2 whites and these with 2 blacks; he next seated 4 more whites, then 1 black, again 1 white, came 3 more blacks, 1 white, 2 blacks, 2 whites, and finally 1 black, thus making a total of 30 men. The likelihood is the blacks would have seen the catch long before the schemer got through his calculation.

There is another devious trick which calls for notice. It concerns a market gardener who was bitten with a notion for planting 10 apple-trees so that there would be 5 rows

## ATHLETES TRAIN ON IT.



There is half a cup  
of English full cream  
milk in every

**CADBURY  
BIG MILK  
BAR 2<sup>D</sup>**



## OUR WEEKLY POW-WOW!

(Continued from previous page.)

of trees, each of which would have 4 trees in a straight line. He got away with it, but though a fellow with a kink of this sort may amuse one in holiday-time, it is impossible not to feel a bit impatient with anyone who insists on puzzling the world at large—like the inkeeper with his 6 bed-rooms and his 7 lodgers, each of whom insisted on a separate apartment.

### CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Thomas C. Mercer, 1, Sweden Grove, Waterloo, Liverpool, wants to hear from Ken Petre, St. Lambert, Canada; H. McFarlane, Australia; and Solomon Arkin, Cape Town.

Arthur Lomquist, 28, Murphy Street, Richmond, S.E.1, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wants to hear from readers in U.S.A. and Pacific Islands; also from F. Bellward, Walworth, London.

Miss Eileen McHenry, Broughane Street, Ballymena, Ireland, wishes to hear from girl readers aged about 14.

Patrick Minton, 2a, Chesham Place, Brighton, would like to hear from reader keen on cricket. All letters answered.

H. Clark, Beauville, Edentown, Carlisle, wishes to hear from readers.

Misses Winifred Doyce and Florence White, 8, Saxon Road, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, wish to correspond with girl readers about gymnastics, sport, and amateur acting.

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