

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS NUMBER! SEVEN SPLENDID STORIES!

THE BOYS FRIEND

20



FRANK RICHARDS' CHRISTMAS

By Martin Clifford

A MAGNIFICENT STORY
DEALING WITH THE FAMOUS
AUTHOR'S SCHOOL DAYS

JIMMY SILVER'S GUEST!

A Magnificent Long Complete Story of Jimmy Silver & Co., the Chums of Rookwood School.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

The 1st Chapter. Just Like Jimmy!

"Christmas," said Jimmy Silver oracularly, "comes but once a year!"
"Go hon!" remarked Lovell.
"What a brain!" said Raby admiringly. "Did you work that out in your head, Jimmy? What a corker you ought to be at maths and things!"

And Newcome chuckled.
"Christmas," repeated the captain of the Rookwood Fourth calmly, "comes but once a year. Ergo—that's Latin—ergo, meaning therefore—at Christmas-time a chap ought to forgive his enemies, if he's got any, and spread round his kindness and goodwill!"

"If he's got any."
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Jimmy warmly. "The fact is—"
"Oh, I know!" said Lovell. "You're going to jaw us. Put it off till I've fetched Lattrey's ear with a snowball. He's just within range."

There had been a fall of snow, and the old quadrangle at Rookwood School glimmered with white. There was snow on the old walls, on the old red roofs, and on the leafless branches of the beeches which were almost as ancient as Rookwood.

Arthur Edward Lovell stooped to gather up snow.

Lattrey of the Fourth, the most unpopular fellow at Rookwood, had just come along, "mooching" moodily in the quadrangle with his hands driven deep into his coat-pockets.

He did not glance towards the Fistical Four.

The outcast of Rookwood seemed to be buried in deep and gloomy thought, and he did not even notice the quartette of cheery juniors.

Naturally, as soon as he saw Lattrey, Lovell's impulse was to snowball him. So he gathered up snow.

Jimmy Silver frowned.

"Hold on, Lovell!" he said.
"Hold on, Lovell!" he said.
Lovell went on gathering snow, and kneading it into a specially compact snowball. That shot was going to be a success.

"The fact is, I was just thinking about Lattrey," said Jimmy Silver hastily. "That's why I was saying—"

Lovell chuckled as he kneaded his snowball.

"Oh, I guessed that!" he said. "It's just like you, Jimmy. Lattrey is a sneak, a cad, a waster, a gambling blackguard and not much better than a thief—if any better! All Rookwood's down on him, and he's sent to Coventry. He would have been kicked out of the school—we know the Head intended it, but Lattrey's pater got over him somehow. And, therefore—"

"Ergo!" grinned Raby.

"Ergo," said Lovell. "Ergo, as he's all that, and more, you want to forgive him because it's Christmas-time and take him to your waistcoat and weep over him. And we're not going to let you. You thumping idiot, only a few weeks back he nearly got you flogged with one of his dirty tricks."

"I—I know!"

"He ought to be sacked, and you know it! It's a mystery why the Head let him stay."

"Yes. But—"
"Bother your butts; don't begin butting me!" said Lovell crossly. "I'm going to biff him on his flap."

"Look here—"
Lovell's arm went up, and the snowball flew with deadly aim. Jimmy Silver jumped between.

Biff!

It was Jimmy who got the snowball. He had not exactly intended that; he had only meant to stop the shot. He stopped it with his nose, as it happened, and roared, and sat down in the snow.

There was another roar from his chums.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat! Groogh!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lattrey looked round as he heard the roar, scowled, and stalked away. Lovell had no time for a second shot. Jimmy Silver staggered to his feet,



"Somebody's coming," said Algy, as he heard footsteps outside. The next moment Jimmy Silver strode into the room. "Oh! Jimmy!" gasped the youngster.

gasping. That shot, at such close range, had fairly bowled him over, and it hurt him. He glared at his hilarious chums.

"You thundering idiots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look at my nose!"

"What a colour!" chortled Lovell.

"Serve you right! What did you get in the way for? That toad's sneaked off now!"

"You asked for it, Jimmy!"

grinned Newcome. "You fairly requested it! I say, let's go after Lattrey, and roll him in the snow."

"Good egg!"

"Hold on!" shouted Jimmy Silver.

"Look here, listen to me!"

"Bow-wow!"

"Do listen," urged Jimmy, dabbing away the powdered snow from his face. "You're coming home with me for Christmas, Lovell. I wish you other two were."

"So do I," said Raby. "But the pater wants me at home, and it's only fair for Newcome to come with me."

"Yes, some paters have queer tastes."

"Why, you ass—"

"But never mind that. You're coming with me, Lovell. My young cousin from High Coombe will be home—young Algy."

"I'm looking forward to making the acquaintance of Algernon," said Lovell solemnly. "I'm sure I shall enjoy the society of a Third Form fag from High Coombe, wherever that may be."

"Fathead!"

"If you've finished, Jimmy, we'll trail down the Lattrey-bird, and give him his roll."

"I'm not finished, ass! Look here, Lovell, suppose we take Lattrey home with us for Christmas?"

"What!" yelled Lovell.

"We'll ask him—"

"Ask the Kaiser!" gasped Lovell.

"Why, I'd rather have the Crown Prince of Prussia with me on a holiday. Lattrey! My hat! A fellow nobody will speak to at his own school!"

"You're potty, Jimmy, old chap," said Raby. "Draw it mild!"

Jimmy Silver wrinkled his brows. He had expected opposition.

Lattrey was a rascal of the first water, there was no getting out of that. He had shown the cloven foot in almost every possible way.

Even unscrupulous fellows like Peele and Gower wanted to have nothing to do with Mark Lattrey.

The wretched junior had found the way of the transgressor very hard.

As it happened, his father, the head of an inquiry agency in London, was away on professional business, and Lattrey was not going home for the holidays. It was rather a dismal prospect to spend the Christmas vacation in the deserted school.

Lattrey had relations certainly, but it appeared that they did not yearn for his society.

No Rookwood fellow thought of asking him home. Most of them would sooner have asked a Prussian Hun.

Jimmy Silver's special weakness was touched.

If ever a fellow deserved to be down on his luck, it was Lattrey of the Fourth, but a fellow who was down on his luck always had easy access to Jimmy Silver's tender heart. And the influence of Christmas counted for something.

But the proposition was "too thick." His chums were grimly disapproving. Lovell gave a most emphatic snort of disgust.

"I—I'd like to ask him," faltered Jimmy. "Christmas, you know—peace on earth, goodwill to men—and—"

"You can ask him," said Lovell grimly.

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. Do you mind if I come along with you for the vac, Raby?"

"Lovell!"

"You don't want me, I suppose; Jimmy? You can't have my fascinating society along with Lattrey's, anyway."

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Jimmy.

"If you don't want him, there's an end. I won't ask him."

"Good! Now we'll snowball the cad, just to show there's no ill-feeling. Come on, you fellows!"

"Hold on!"

"Rats!"

Lovell & Co. rushed off, gathering up snow as they went.

Jimmy Silver frowned. Lattrey of the Fourth gave a yell as the snowballs found him out, under the beeches.

Whiz! Whiz! Smash!

"Yah! Oh! You rotters!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Give it him!"

Whiz! Smash! Crash!

Lattrey fled to the schoolhouse.

After him went Lovell and Raby.

After him went Lovell and Raby and Newcome, roaring with laughter, and pelting away vigorously as fast as they could gather up snow.

There was a shout, and Conroy and Pons and Van Ryn, the Colonials, joined in the chase, whizzing snowballs at the fleeing outcast.

Flynn and Oswald, Higgs and Rawson, Mornington and Townsend and Topham, joined in from various quarters.

Snowballs whizzed at Lattrey from all sides.

In a shower of missiles he reached the steps of the schoolhouse, panting. There he turned to shake a furious fist at his pursuers.

They replied with a roar of laughter and a fresh volley. Snowballs smashed round him and on him on all sides.

He darted into the house and disappeared, leaving the merry juniors shouting with laughter.

Evidently Jimmy Silver's Christmas spirit of peace and goodwill was not quite shared by the Fourth Form at Rookwood.

The 2nd Chapter. Peace and Goodwill.

Lovell and Co. came in ruddy and cheery to tea.

They found Jimmy Silver in the end study, with tea ready. It was the last tea in the study for the term, as Rookwood was breaking up on the morrow.

Lovell glanced rather oddly at the captain of the Fourth. Jimmy was cheery enough, but there was a slight shadow on his brow. He was disappointed, though he did not mean to complain. Lovell's attitude was easily understood—in the matter of Lattrey more easily than Jimmy's, as a matter of fact.

But Lovell had been thinking a little.

"Don't scowl, old chap," he remarked.

"I'm not scowling," said Jimmy mildly. "Tea's ready."

"Look here," said Lovell abruptly, "would you really like to take that sneaking cad Lattrey home with you, Jimmy?"

"Well, no," said Jimmy honestly. "I shouldn't like it! I don't like him any more than you do. But—but—"

"But you've got a soft heart, and your head's still softer!" remarked Lovell.

Jimmy laughed.

"Let it go at that!" he said. "Nothing to worry about! You chaps don't mind having hot water instead of tea, do you? Tea's run out."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"It's really better for the nerves, you know," said Jimmy, who had a way of looking on the cheery side of everything. "People would be much healthier if they drank hot water instead of tea. Old people want it to buck them up, but young people don't. More than half of what people eat and drink is unnecessary."

"Are you preparing for war economy lectures?" demanded Raby.

"Well, I could give them," said Jimmy. "Cut out tea and coffee and tobacco and more than one meat meal a day, and you're ever so much healthier. That's a tip in war time. There's more real food in beetroots than in mutton-chops. And they're cheaper."

"Hear, hear—but give us a rest!" said Lovell. "The question is, do you want to take that cringing worm Lattrey home for the holidays?"

"No, I say. But I'd like to. Chap ought to do things he don't like sometimes; it's good training. And—and the poor brute is down on his luck."

"Doesn't he deserve it?" hooted Newcome.

"Yes, he does. But Shakespeare says—"

"Blow Shakespeare! Don't spring Shakespeare on us on the last day of term."

"Shakespeare says give every man his deserts, and who would escape whipping?" said Jimmy Silver. "Shakespeare was a knowing old card. Suppose we all got what we deserved—what a life!"

"Oh, rats!" said Lovell. "Look here, Jimmy, you're a silly ass, and a thumping idiot, and an insane blubbering jaggercock, but if you want to inflict that rotten Prussian on yourself for Christmas I don't mind. I mean I do mind, but I'll give you your head. This is my self-denial week! You can ask him to tea if you like! There!"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"If you really mind, Lovell, old chap—"

"Do you want me to ask you on my bended knees?" grunted Lovell.

"No, old son. I'll buzz off and see him, then."

"Go it, fathead!" said Raby.

Jimmy Silver, with a very bright face, quitted the study. His chums looked after him, with expressions in which affection was curiously mingled with exasperation.

Jimmy Silver was the kind of fellow who would have shared his last crust with friend or enemy, and though it was sometimes a little exasperating, his chums could not help liking him all the better for it.

Jimmy trotted along the Fourth Form passage, and knocked at Lattrey's door.

There was no answer to the knock, and Jimmy opened the door and looked into the study.

Mark Lattrey was alone there. He generally was alone when he was in his quarters. His study-mates avoided him as much as they could, even to the extent of sometimes doing their prep in other fellows' studies.

He looked up with an evil expression as Jimmy Silver stepped in.

The persecution, as he regarded it, which he received at the hands of his schoolfellows did not bring Lattrey to a sense of his wrongdoing. It only aroused bitter hatred and resentment in his breast.

Jimmy Silver did not appear to notice his evil look.

"Hullo, Lattrey!" he said cheerily. "Had your tea yet?"

"No!" snapped Lattrey. "What the thunder does it matter to you whether I have or not?"

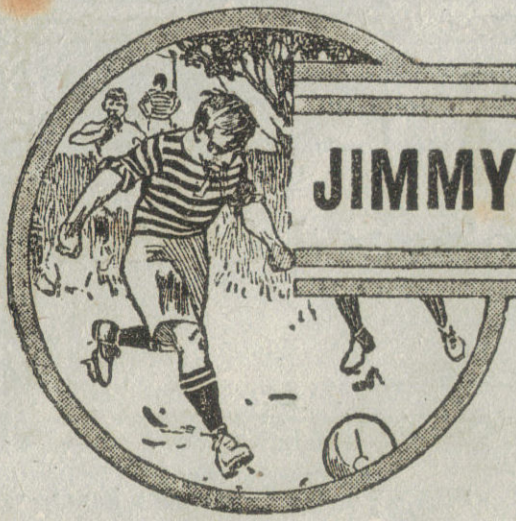
Jimmy coughed.

"Have you come to ask me to tea?" sneered Lattrey.

"Yes."

"Wh-a-t?"

"We've got rather short commons in the end study, but we'd be glad of your company," said Jimmy Silver.



JIMMY SILVER'S GUEST!

(Continued from the previous page.)

The 3rd Chapter. Home for the Holidays.

Jimmy Silver's home was a comfortable old place. His father and mother and his Cousin Phyllis greeted the schoolboys when they arrived at the Priory.

Lattrey was introduced, and warmly welcomed. Of Lattrey's reputation at Rookwood School Jimmy's people knew nothing. To them he was simply one of Jimmy's Form-fellows at the school.

Possibly his keen, sharp face and watchful eyes did not make a specially pleasant impression on them. But they made him very welcome.

Lattrey found himself quite comfortable, and in a home atmosphere that was very different from what he had been accustomed to. Unsuspecting kindness had not often come his way.

His father was a sharp and unscrupulous business man, and Lattrey had taken after him, and even at his early age his opinion of mankind was cynical and contemptuous.

Jimmy Silver's home was likely to do him good, if he was capable of getting the good out of his present surroundings.

Cousin Phyllis' bright eyes and bright smile were very pleasant, too.

When he went to bed that night, Lattrey was thinking more seriously than he had ever thought before in his life. There were half-resolves in his heart to make a better use of his life when he went back to Rookwood for the new term.

After all, the shady game did not even pay. To put it on the lowest ground, honesty was the best policy. His chances at school had been as good as Jimmy Silver's, and what had he made of them?

He was clever—he knew he was cleverer than Jimmy in many things. What he lacked was a sense of honour and straightness of character. And those could be acquired.

Lattrey came down the next morning in a cheery mood.

He joined in the skating with Jimmy and Lovell and Phyllis in the morning, and enjoyed himself thoroughly. In the afternoon there was an entertainment of wounded soldiers in the village, and the juniors went to help, with Phyllis, and Lattrey was as useful as any.

As they walked home in the winter dusk Lattrey was very silent. Jimmy Silver dropped behind to join him, Lovell walking on with Phyllis.

"Tired?" asked Jimmy cheerily.

"No; I've been thinking, Silver. I've been a confounded fool at Rookwood. I—I wish I could have my time there over again."

"You'll begin fresh next term," said Jimmy cordially. "All that Coventry business will be forgotten. You'll begin again like the rest."

"I—I suppose so. I mean to get clear of—of some things, and have a try, anyway. After all, Mornington made a fresh start, and he was pretty low down. I say—" Lattrey paused.

"Yes?"

"Your Cousin Phyllis is a ripping girl." Lattrey paused again. "You know I'm a rather sharp chap, Silver—"

"A bit too sharp sometimes," said Jimmy. "Tain't good for a chap to be too sharp."

"I know that. I wish sometimes that I didn't see so deep," confessed Lattrey. "But in this case—well, there's something bothering your Cousin Phyllis. She's worried about something."

"My hat! I haven't noticed it. Come to think of it, I have, though," said Jimmy thoughtfully. "I—I wonder if it's her brother?"

"Her brother?" repeated Lattrey.

"Young Algy. He's coming home from High Coombe to-morrow. He's been in rather hot water at his school, the young ass, and his headmaster's report was rather a corker. I'll speak to Phyllis."

As they came up to the gates of the Priory, Jimmy Silver joined his cousin, somewhat to Lovell's wrath. Lovell was rather fond of Phyllis' company. However, he put up with Lattrey.

"Anything up, Phil, old girl?" Jimmy asked, in his candid way.

"Why, no!" said Phyllis, with a smile. "I'm a little tired, that's all."

"Not bothering about your young fathead of a brother?"

Phyllis coloured. "I—I am rather worried about him, Jimmy," she said, in a low voice. "He's been in some trouble at High Coombe. I think he must have got into bad company. He has been punished for—gambling."

"Phew!"

"He's only reckless," said Phyllis. "He doesn't mean any harm. But—but he was always very self-willed. I'm glad he's coming here for Christmas. If he had gone home with some of his High Coombe friends—"

She paused. "He wanted to, but he was not allowed to. But he will be all right here."

"Young ass!" growled Jimmy Silver. "I'll give him a hiding, if you like, Phil, when he comes."

Phyllis laughed. "I'm afraid that wouldn't do him much good," she said.

Lovell passed them, going towards the house. He was tired of Lattrey's company. Lattrey was following Jimmy and Phyllis.

"Algy's a good little chap enough, Phil," said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully. "He only wants a few more lickings."

"I'm afraid there are some reckless boys at his school, and Algy has picked up his ways from them," said Phyllis. "He was very annoyed at not being allowed to go home for Christmas with some of his friends. But I'm glad he's going to be here. He will forget all that nonsense here; nobody here will encourage him in it, you see."

"No fear!" said Jimmy.

The thought of Lattrey came into his mind then, and he started. Lattrey was not exactly the right company for a reckless fag who required leading judiciously back to the right path.

Jimmy glanced round, almost unconsciously, as that uneasy reflection came into his mind.

Lattrey was close behind him, walking very quietly in the snow, his head bent forward.

Jimmy's eyes flashed. Lattrey started back the next moment, flushing; but Jimmy knew that he had been listening.

Lattrey had heard every word that passed between the two cousins.

It did not matter, certainly, but it was unpleasant. Lattrey was not changed; he was the sneaking eaves-dropper of old.

Jimmy made no remark; Lattrey was his guest. But the involuntary expression on his face was enough for Lattrey. The latter walked on quickly to the house, passing the cousins.

Phyllis compressed her lips a little; she had observed the incident, and her opinion of Lattrey was fixed accordingly.

Jimmy Silver was silent and uneasy as he walked on with Phyllis. He had done right in giving Lattrey a chance, he felt that. Christmas was the time for goodwill and kindness. But—

There was a "but."

Lattrey's company was about the worst conceivable for the reckless fag coming on the morrow from the Devonshire school.

They might be thrown together. If Lattrey desired it, they were certain to be thrown together. Jimmy could not always be watching his guest, that was certain; he revolted at the bare thought of it. And Algy Silver had more money than was good for him; he was much richer than Jimmy.

Suppose Lattrey—

Jimmy drove the thought out of his mind. Lattrey was his guest, and he would not suspect him. Surely the fellow would have the decency to play the game while he was under Jimmy's father's roof.

But there was a cynical smile on Lattrey's thin lips as he went to his room that night.

The scornful gleam in Jimmy's eyes had not escaped him, and it remained in his memory. He flushed as he thought of it.

And Lattrey was growing bored. There was plenty at the Priory to keep him amused and occupied, if he had been normal in his tastes. But he was not normal. Preparations for Christmas festivities bored him, quietness and calmness bored him, good conduct bored him inexpressibly.

He was beginning to yearn already for the shady associations, the reckless blackguardism, that had been his undoing at Rookwood.

"So there's a merry sport coming!" he murmured, as he turned in. "A giddy fag who's been licked for going the pace—ha, ha! And Miss Phyllis turned up her nose at me because she thought I was listening! Perhaps dear Miss Phyllis will be sorry for turning up her nose; perhaps I may find some amusement here, after all, before I'm bored to extinction."

He laughed. Such good as he was capable of had come to the surface that day. In his talk with Jimmy on the way home he had been earnest—for the moment. It had vanished now.

The cad of Rookwood was the cad of Rookwood still.

The 4th Chapter. Kindred Spirits.

"Coming along to the station, Lattrey?"

Jimmy Silver asked the question cheerily the next day.

Phyllis had gone out with Mrs. Silver, and Jimmy was to meet his cousin Algy at the railway-station. Lovell was going with him, and he gave Lattrey his choice.

Lattrey nodded at once. He was quite keen to make the acquaintance of the sportive fag from High Coombe.

"Certainly," he said.

The three Rookwood juniors walked down to the station together. Jimmy Silver was quite cheery and cordial to Lattrey. He was determined not to be distrustful.

It was evidently useless to ask Lattrey home, with the idea of making the best of him, if he was going to distrust him all the time. And Jimmy was of rather a trusting disposition, too.

He was no fool, but his own heart was so frank and loyal that he found it hard to realise that others might be wanting in loyalty.

That Lattrey could accept his hospitality, and insinuate himself into the good graces of the household, and then prove treacherous, was what Jimmy would have described as a "large order." He simply could not and would not think such a thing of anybody.

Lattrey was in high good-humour that morning, and Jimmy and Lovell found him agreeable enough. Even Arthur Edward Lovell was beginning to think that perhaps he had been a little hard on Lattrey at school.

He made up for it now by being quite friendly, and Lattrey met him half-way, so peace and good-humour reigned on all sides.

The juniors arrived at the station before the train came in, and waited on the platform for Master Algy, of High Coombe.

When the train came in, Jimmy rushed along to greet a slim, rather handsome lad, who stepped out of a first-class carriage.

Lovell and Lattrey regarded the lad rather curiously.

He was something like Jimmy in features, but his face was much softer in its outlines, perhaps better-looking, and his lower lip had a pouting curl that told of a petulant disposition.

The expression on his face was far from contented.

He shook hands with Jimmy Silver in a perfunctory manner, and greeted Lovell and Lattrey, when they were introduced, in quite an off-hand way.

Lovell's reflection was that the Third Form at High Coombe did not get as many lickings as would be good for them.

"You might look after my bags and things, Jimmy," said Algy, almost sulkily.

"Right-ho!"

"Had a good journey down?" asked Lovell, as Jimmy moved away.

Algy grunted.

"No; rotten!"

"Pretty cold, I suppose, in the train?" remarked Lattrey.

"Rotten slow train! All the trains are rotten and slow now."

"War-time, you know," remarked Lovell.

"Both the war!"

"Eh?"

"Blow the war!" said Master Algy, more emphatically.

Lovell's eyes gleamed. He moved off to help Jimmy with the baggage, repressing his desire to take Jimmy's cousin by the scruff of the neck and rub his nose on the platform.

Lattrey smiled. What he saw of Master Algy rather confirmed what he had heard about him. He surmised that Algernon Silver was a cheery youth, quite after his own heart.

"Bit dull, travelling along," he remarked. "You must be hungry."

"I'm ready for lunch," grunted Algy.

"You haven't had any lunch?"

Another grunt.

"No."

"You must be famished."

"There ain't any rotten grub cars on the trains now," snorted Algy.

"Pah! I had some sandwiches. Bah! All alone, too. Might have gone home with De Vere, only they wouldn't let me. Br-r-r!"

"Pal of yours?" asked Lattrey.

"Yes, rather!" Algy's face brightened a little. "Rippin' chap De Vere! One of the best. Awfully

goey! Some of the fellows said he wasn't goin' to be allowed to come back next term. I know the Head had him on the carpet for a terrific jaw. Rot, I call it! He goes the pace. So do I?"

Algy gave Lattrey a defiant look as he made that remark.

Lattrey smiled genially. The talk of a Third-Form fag about going the pace gave him a contemptuous amusement; but he was careful not to betray the fact.

"Why shouldn't you?" he said. "Oh, you think so!" said the fag in surprise. "Ain't you a friend of my Cousin Jimmy?"

"Certainly."

"I thought he only chummed with goody-goody little Master Stephens, like himself," observed Algy, regarding Lattrey with new interest. "I shall be horribly bored here. Nothin' doin', you know. Round games!" He sniffed. "Old Silver—"

"Who?"

"Jimmy's pater, my blessed uncle, he's down on everythin' that makes life worth livin'!" said Algy discontentedly. "Why, if he found a playin'-card or a bridge-marker about me, he'd pack me off home. Not that I'd mind, only it's frightfully dull at home. I wanted to go home with De Vere—rippin' chap! They wouldn't let me. Lots of things doin' at his place—huntin', bridge, late parties. Regular scorcher there! Just suit me. Br-r-r-r!"

"Hard lines!"

"I should say so. I shall yawn myself to death here. Round games—playin' for nuts! Good gad!" Master Algy sniggered. "Dancin' with dashed schoolgirls on Boxin' Day! Yaw-aw-aw! An' a sermon if a chap's found smokin'! Pah!"

"Oh, you smoke, do you?"

"You bet! I've got plenty of fags about me, too. I—I say, you won't give me away?" added Algy hastily.

"Of course not! I quite agree with you. We shall get on together," said Lattrey.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Master Algy. "I say, I'm glad I've met you here. What's your name—Lattrey? They'll want me to toot in the Christmas mornin' service. I shall hook it, I can tell you that! I shan't be found."

"Low yourself with me," grinned Lattrey. "We'll have a smoke somewhere."

"God nan! I say, you're my sort," said Master Algy. "Mum's the word! Here's my high-minded cousin!"

"Come on, kid!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily. "I've got your sack, and Lovell's got your bag. Trot along!"

The four juniors left the station together to walk to the Priory. Algy soon dropped behind with Lattrey.

He had found a congenial companion.

Lovell glanced back after a time. Algy and Lattrey were chatting at a great rate, and laughing.

"Young Hopeful seems to hit it off with Lattrey," Lovell remarked.

"Yes; doesn't he?"

"Lattrey don't seem such a rotter here as he did at Rookwood," remarked Lovell. "We may have been a bit hard on him. That kid seems to take to him, too."

Jimmy nodded. For some reason, perhaps unconsciously, he slown down for his cousin and Lattrey to rejoin him. Lattrey was speaking, and as he came up his words were audible.

"It's ripping here. There's going to be a skating tournament after Christmas, and I'm doing some practice to enter for it. You'd better do the same."

Jimmy felt a sense of relief. That conversation was certainly harmless enough. He was ashamed of the momentary uneasiness he had felt.

He walked on again with Lovell, and when he was out of hearing Algy made a remark that would have undecieved him, if he could have heard it.

"I say, what's-your-name—Lattrey?—you're a deep card! You babbled that rot about skatin' for Jimmy to hear."

Lattrey laughed. "In these precincts a chap has to be careful," he said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better not talk too much before your cousin, either, or say too much about De Vere. You won't get much of a time if you make them suspicious."

"I savvy," said Algy sagely. "I don't see any harm in seeing life a little, myself," said Lattrey, with one eye on the fag. "I'm a bit goey at school, as a matter of fact. I feel in a bandbox here."

"I wouldn't have come, if I could have helped it," grunted Algy. "What on earth did you come for? They couldn't make you."

"My people are away, you see. This is better than sticking it out at school."

Master Algy understood, or thought he did.

"No reason why we shouldn't brighten things up a bit, under the rose," smiled Lattrey. "There's a jolly old tower at the place—fine views from the top—"

"Bother the views!"

"I mean, nobody ever goes up there, and a quiet game wouldn't be interrupted."

"I say, you are a sport," said Algy.

The fag from High Coombe was looking quite cheerful when he arrived at the Priory. He had found a kindred spirit.

The 5th Chapter. Going the Pace.

"Penny for 'em!" Lattrey started. It was the following morning, and Lattrey had gone out by himself after breakfast.

He was tramping through the park, his hands driven deep into his pockets, a moody expression on his face.

He was thinking. Somehow, Mark Lattrey's mind was not at rest that bright, winter morning.

Most Rookwood fellows who knew him would have grinned if they had been told that Lattrey's conscience was uneasy; they would not have credited him with having a conscience.

But, as a matter of fact, Lattrey was feeling a twinge.

Jimmy Silver had treated him well, even the sullen, suspicious cad of the Rookwood Fourth had to admit that. Jimmy had placed confidence in him, and somehow or other the fact that he was trusted made some little difference to Lattrey. He was not used to being trusted.

And he intended—he knew that he intended—to requite Jimmy's kindness and faith by treachery—the treachery that was a part of his tortuous nature.

He had tried to play the game, for a time. But he was tired of it—sick of it. Such a nature as his was not easy to change—and he had no real desire to change it.

And yet, strange as it seemed, to Lattrey himself, there was a hint of hesitation now. He was not satisfied with himself.

It was the voice of Algy Silver that interrupted him, with the offer of a penny for his thoughts. Algy came along under the trees, and he stopped as he saw Lattrey, and grinned at him.

Lattrey's face cleared, and he smiled. At the sight of his intended dupe the hesitation in his mind was gone.

His smile was caused partly by self-mockery, at the "softness" that had momentarily come over him. That softness, if it was softness, was gone now.

"Hallo! You on your own, too?" he asked.

"Yes, rather! I've dodged the gang," said Algy cheerily. "Phyllis wanted to march me off to see some dashed old codgers in the village. I looked it. Tame old codgers are not in my line."

Lattrey laughed.

"Nor in mine," he said.

"Goin' anywhere?" asked Algy, giving him a very shrewd look.

"Well, I was thinking."

"If there's anythin' lively goin' on, count me in," said Algy eagerly.

"Look here, you're not one of my Cousin Jimmy's sort! You let that out pretty plainly yesterday at the station. You're not enjoyin' yourself here in the way those chaps are. Is there anythin' good goin'?"

Lattrey gave him a very curious look.

The fag of High Coombe hardly wanted leading off the strait and narrow path. He was only too keen to escape from it.

"Well, I suppose you know how to keep mum?" asked Lattrey.

"You bet!" said Algy disdainfully.

"My dear man, you're older than I am, but I fancy you can't give me many points. I tell you, the Head at High Coombe had me up on the carpet before I came home. If I hadn't kept mum then there'd have been trouble for some fellows at my school. Don't be afraid I shall jaw to Jimmy. Jimmy bores me as much as he does you."

"Come along, then, if you like," said Lattrey. "We're going to see a couple of Rookwood fellows—my pals at the school."

"What else?"

"Ever played billiards?"

"I'll give you twenty in a hundred and run you out, and chance it," said the cheerful young gentleman from High Coombe promptly.

"Good!" said Lattrey, laughing.

"I'll give you the chance, with a quid on the game."

"Done!"

"But, for goodness' sake, not a word at the Priory!"

"Not a giddy syllable!" chuckled Algy.

He walked away with the Rookwood fellow, and they left the park behind, and followed snowy lanes and field-paths. Algy chuckled as the red roof of an inn showed up in the distance.

"You know the way," he remarked. "You haven't been long in getting your bearings in this neighbourhood, Lattrey."

"Chap can only live once," smiled Lattrey. "I came here for a quiet time, but—life's short. Why not make the most of it?"

"Why not, rather? I say, we'd better not be seen going into there, though; old Silver would cut up rusty if he found out. I don't want to be buzzed off home—not if I can help it!"

"All serene!" said Lattrey. "Leave it to me."

If Lattrey had felt any scruples—and perhaps he had—they were gone now. He was the cool, cynical, utterly unscrupulous young rascal now that Jimmy Silver had known at Rookwood.

By a narrow lane he reached the public-house garden, and opened a gate, and passed quickly in. Algy followed him, his heart beating a little.

It pleased the High Coombe fag to boast of "going the pace," but he

"You bet! He's givin' me twenty in a hundred, and backin' it up with a quid," said Lattrey, closing one eye at Gower.

Gower understood, and he exchanged a quick glance with Peele. The two young rascals were "on" at once. Algy did not see the signs that passed among the precious trio. The marker did, and he winked at the ceiling.

"Glad to meet you, kid, as it seems you're such a sport!" said Peele. "You can give me a hundred if you like, after Lattrey. Wait till we run out."

"I'm your man," said Algy.

He looked on, while Gower and Peele finished their game. Both of them played remarkably badly, and Algy's lip curled with contempt as he watched them.

The fag could play billiards, after a fashion, and certainly his play was much better than this. It really seemed as if Gower and Peele would never finish their hundred, so very badly did they play.

They were finished at last, and Lattrey and Algy took the table. Algy chalked his cue with quite a knowing air.

His offer to Lattrey, to give him twenty in a hundred, had been sheer "swank." But he was glad of it when Lattrey began. Lattrey muffed the easiest shots, and Algy drew rapidly ahead. He had only thirty to get, when Lattrey, with a very lucky break, cleared out ahead with the hundred.

Lattrey and the fag left the billiard-room, Algy still looking rather blue. His visit had cost him four pounds, and ran away with a good slice of his "Christmas tips."

Lattrey cast covert, amused glances at him, as they walked back to the Priory.

"I'll make it up at banker," said Algy, breaking the silence at last.

"I'm sure you will!" said Lattrey, with a smile.

But when the time came for the enterprising Algy to "make it up" at banker, he found that the great game of banker was a most deceptive game.

The 6th Chapter. Boxing Night!

Jimmy Silver looked for his cousin Algy on Christmas morning, when it was time to start for the morning service.

He did not find him.

Algy did not "toot" in the service, as he expressed it. Jimmy went with Phyllis and Lovell. Lattrey also had dropped out of sight somewhere. Jimmy did not even know that the two were together.

Lattrey came in early for lunch; Algy came in late. There was no hint that they had been together in the morning.

Christmas morning was naturally a very quiet time—much too quiet for Lattrey and the enterprising fag from High Coombe. Both of them disappeared to a suitable resort a mile

was fond of her brother, and concerned about him.

She did not like Lattrey. And, though the two were seldom seen together, Phyllis had noted that when one was absent the other was generally absent as well.

There were telltale stains of nicotine on Algy's fingers sometimes, and his temper was sometimes irritable and his peevish. He flatly refused to skate, or to join in anything.

On Boxing Day there were high festivities, and a crowd of guests and the young people enjoyed themselves, but Algy went through it all with a sully face. He was not enjoying himself.

Two or three Rookwood fellows came, and some of Jimmy Silver's friends from St. Jim's; but they were not in the least the kind of fellows Algy liked, and he avoided them.

There was nobody among them like his dear old pal De Vere of High Coombe. Erroll of Rookwood he detested, though he exchanged only a few words with him.

Mornington was there with Erroll, and Algy did not like him either, though probably he would have liked the dandy of Rookwood well enough in his earlier days.

Mornington eyed Lattrey rather keenly that evening. He had wondered how the cad of Rookwood would get on at Jimmy Silver's home. Apparently he was getting on very well.

Morny was a good hand at dancing, and he was greatly in request that evening.

At a late hour he strolled out on the terrace with Kit Erroll to taste the fresh air after the warmth inside.

"Begad, there's a light in the tower!" ejaculated Mornington, as they came to the end of the terrace.

"That's odd! There can't be anybody there!" said Erroll, in surprise. "Let's have a look."

They descended the steps, and crossed through the light snowfall to the old tower of the Priory.

It was somewhat remote from the inhabited part of the house, and a light at that hour was certainly surprising.

As they drew nearer a voice came to their ears from within.

"Your deal, Algy!"

The two jumped stopped dead. A grim, angry frown came over Erroll's face. Mornington laughed softly.

"I fancy we'd better be gettin' back," he murmured.

Erroll nodded without speaking. They retraced their steps.

"Dear old Lattrey at the old game again!" smiled Mornington, as they reached the terrace. "What a silly fool Jimmy Silver was to bring him home. I said so at the time."

"It's rotten!" muttered Erroll. "That kid, too—Jimmy's cousin! Jimmy ought to know about this!"

"Can't tell tales about a fellow-guest, dear boy!"

"I suppose not. But it's rotten!"

There was a burst of merry music from within.

"By gad! That's my waltz! Excuse me, old scout!"

And Mornington rushed in.

Erroll was left alone on the terrace, with a troubled brow. It was impossible to speak to Jimmy of what he had accidentally discovered. He could not be the cause of making bad blood between Jimmy and his guest. But he was troubled in mind about it.

There was a light step on the terrace, and Phyllis Silver, with a white shawl about her shoulders, met his eyes. The girl had come out alone.

She gave Erroll a smile.

"Have you seen my brother?" she asked. "You know Algy?"

"Yes; I have seen him, Miss Silver," said Erroll.

"Why, there is a light in the tower!" exclaimed Phyllis.

"Is—is there?"

"Yes. Algy cannot be there, surely?" The girl looked oddly at Erroll, reading the expression on his face. "I—I wish Algy would come in. I think I shall look in the tower."

"There's snow on the ground!" said Erroll hastily.

Phyllis smiled.

"That will not hurt me."

"Miss Silver, I—I shouldn't go to the tower, I think!" muttered Erroll, his face colouring.

He was deeply disquieted at the idea of the girl finding her brother gambling in that secluded corner with Lattrey.

Phyllis gave him a quick look.

"Why not?" she asked quietly.

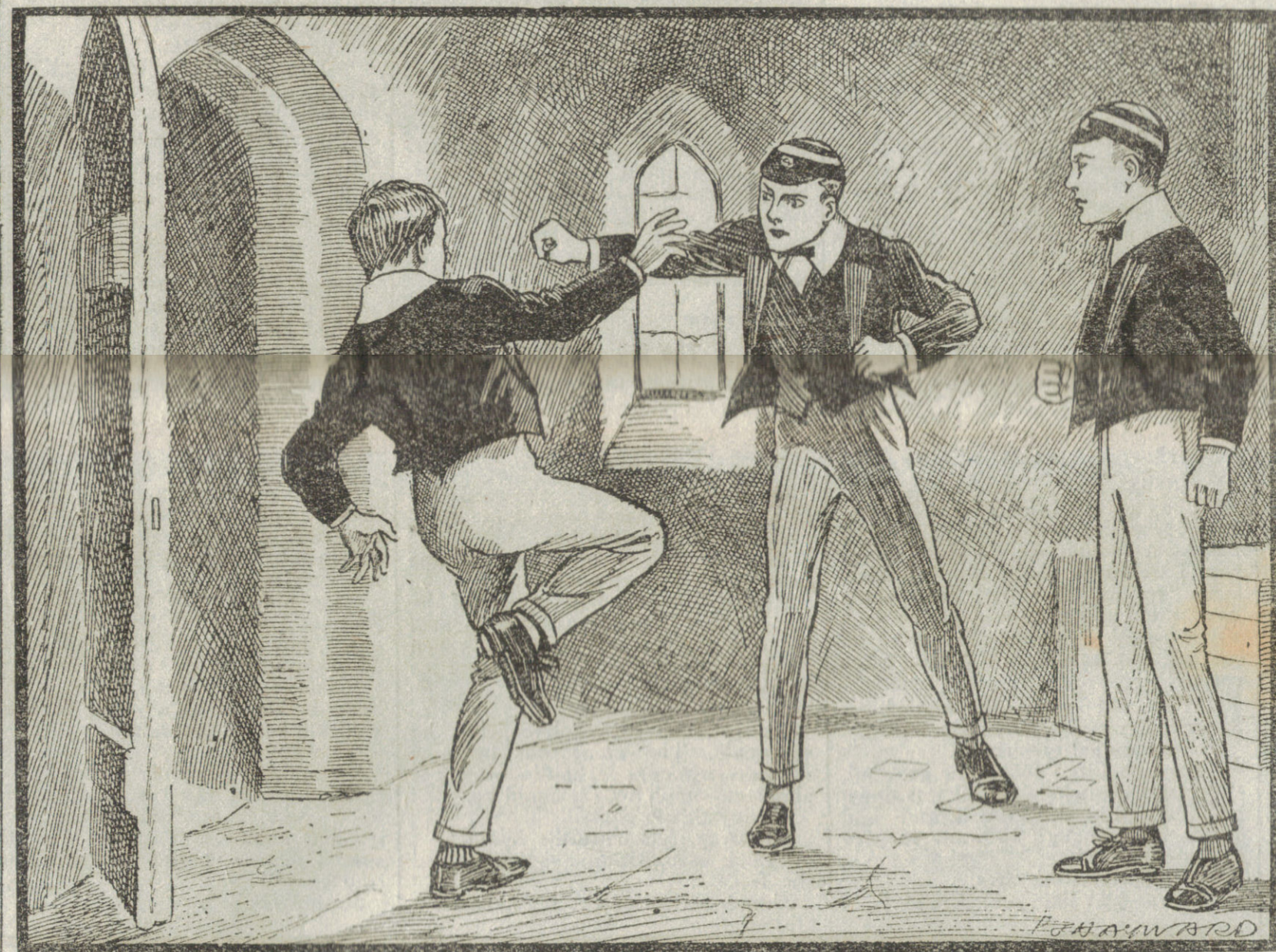
Erroll hesitated. The light in the tower went suddenly out, and he breathed with relief.

"There! It's out now!"

"But—"

There were footsteps by the terrace. "Better get back; we shall be missed."

It was Lattrey's low voice from the darkness.



"Hands off!" yelled Lattrey, as Lovell rushed on him. Crash! Crash! Lovell's fists came fairly crashing at Lattrey, and the cad of Rookwood put up his hands desperately to defend himself.

felt extremely uneasy at the idea of having to face his uncle afterwards, if his escapade came to Mr. Silver's knowledge.

Lattrey evidently knew the way. He moved round the house, with the fag at his heels, and looked in at the open French windows of a billiard-room.

Two fellows were there, with a greasy-looking marker.

They were Peele and Gower, of the Fourth Form at Rookwood, the former being a Christmas visitor at the latter's home, a short distance from Jimmy Silver's place.

They looked round towards Lattrey, and did not give him very welcoming looks. At Rookwood they had been chummy, but they had taken a share in sending Lattrey to Coventry.

Lattrey noted their expression, and smiled sarcastically.

"Fancy meetin' you!" he remarked.

"How the dickens did you know we were here?" grunted Gower.

"Where should I expect to find you in the morning, on a holiday?" said Lattrey, with a laugh. "My dear chaps, keep your scowls for Rookwood—it's vac now, you know. Using the table?"

"Yes," said Peele.

"All right—I'll wait! I've got a young friend here who's a terrific dab at billiards—knows the game inside out."

"Oh, does he?" said Gower, looking at Algy.

"You owe me a quid, dear boy," smiled Lattrey.

"Oh!" said Algy Silver.

He paid up, and Lattrey's eyes glistened as he saw that there were more than half a dozen currency notes in the fag's leather purse.

Algy was nettled by his loss, and remembering the bad play of the others, he was inclined to swank again.

"Two quids on the game, if you like," he said to Gower, as the latter took the cue from Lattrey.

"You'll beat me," said Gower. "But I'm game!"

To Algy's surprise, however, it was Gower who won. His bad play with Peele was not reproduced in his game with Algy. It did not occur to the unsuspecting fag that that bad play had been intentional, for him to watch.

Algy, with all his knowingness, had a good deal yet to learn of billiards and billiard sharpeners.

He was looking rather cross when he chalked his cue for the game with Peele, and he left the stake at a sovereign. Peele ran him out in a quarter of an hour, and pocketed the sovereign.

Algy looked rather blank.

"By Jove, we must be hurryin' back!" exclaimed Lattrey, looking at his watch. "We shall be late for lunch. Come on, Algy!"

"Give you your revenge any time," grinned Peele.

away, where a game of billiards could be had.

He was glad enough to have a companion, though it was only a Third-Form fag.

Besides, Algy paid for his companionship.

Under the lead of the estimable De Vere of High Coombe, Algy had learned many things not included in the school curriculum. He was a "dab" at banker, at nap, and at bridge. He fancied that he could play billiards, and prided himself on knowing something about "gee-gees."

The fag had plenty of money, and during those holidays a considerable portion of his money was transferred to Lattrey's pockets. Although he was a "dab" at games of chance and skill, Algy did not seem to have much chance against his new friend.

But he felt that he was "going the pace," as much as was possible in a household like Mr. Silver's.

Certainly, his holiday was much brighter than he had anticipated—brighter, that is, according to his peculiar point of view.

And there was no suspicion.

Phyllis glanced at her young brother with a questioning and somewhat troubled expression.

She had feared that he would be morose and discontented, and would try the patience of his uncle and aunt and cousin.

That had not happened; Algy seemed contented enough.

But his contentment was a suspicious circumstance in itself; and Phyllis



JIMMY SILVER'S GUEST!

(Continued from the previous page.)

Phyllis drew a deep, hard breath. Without a word she turned and disappeared through the doorway on the terrace.

Erroll followed her in quickly. He had no desire to meet Lattrey.

When Lattrey and Algy came up the steps the terrace was deserted. Algy shivered.

"Jolly cold out here," he said. "Better than that foolery indoors, though. Old De Vere never dances; he thinks it's rot. So do I. I suppose a chap's got to go in and keep civil."

"Necessary to keep up merry appearances," smiled Lattrey. "You go in first. No need to tell 'em we've been out together."

Algy laughed, and went in.

Lattrey followed him ten minutes later, slipping quietly into the crowd indoors, with a smiling face. Lattrey had found some pleasure in Boxing Night after all in his own way.

He found Algy Silver, on his first acquaintance, a reckless young scapegrace. He was on the way to turning him into a thorough young blackguard.

That did not weigh on Lattrey's conscience—if he had one.

He was quite cheery now, and he was humming a merry tune when he went to bed. The cad of Rookwood was in high feather.

The 7th Chapter.
Phyllis Speaks.

"Jimmy!"

It was the following afternoon. Jimmy Silver was mending a damaged skate, and whistling cheerily over his task, when Phyllis came into the room. Lovell was out on the ice with Erroll and Mornington, who were staying a few days.

"Hallo, Phil!" said Jimmy. "I thought you were skating."

"I want to speak to you, Jimmy."

"Go ahead, old girl!"

Jimmy laid down the skate, and his face became grave. He could see in Phyllis' pale, troubled face that something was wrong.

"What's up?" he asked quietly.

"Have you seen Algy lately, Jimmy?"

"Not since lunch."

"Or Lattrey?"

"Lattrey! Isn't he skating?"

"No."

"I haven't seen him this afternoon," said Jimmy. "What does it matter?"

"Is Lattrey a real friend of yours, Jimmy?"

Jimmy hesitated.

"Not exactly," he said. "Why?"

"Can you trust him?"

"I—I don't know!" said Jimmy Silver, taken aback. "What on earth's the matter, Phil? Has Lattrey been doing anything?"

Phyllis' look grew more troubled.

"I can't like him," she said. "He hasn't done anything, but there's something—something—I can't trust him. Jimmy, do speak plainly. If Lattrey's a real friend of yours, I know he must be straight, but—"

"We weren't friends at school," said Jimmy slowly, a troubled look creeping over his own face. "But tell me what's wrong, Phil?"

"I'm anxious about Algy," said the girl, with a tremble in her voice. "Isn't it odd that he should make friends with Lattrey as he has done?"

"I don't know that he has specially."

"He has, and they keep it secret."

"Phil!"

"You haven't noticed, Jimmy, that Algy often goes out by himself, and at the same time Lattrey is never to be seen about the place?"

"I—I hadn't noticed it."

"Last night there was a light in the tower."

"My hat!"

"I—I should have gone there, but your friend Erroll stopped me. He had a reason. He was troubled, and very grave. I—I had missed Algy and Lattrey. Well, then, two persons came back to the terrace, and Lattrey said, 'Better get back. We shall be missed.' A little while afterwards Algy came in, and later, Lattrey, I noticed."

Jimmy Silver's face was very grave now.

"Algy's written home for money," went on Phyllis. "I—I've had a letter from home asking me whether Algy is showing any of the reckless ways that got him into trouble at school."

"He can't have spent much money here, if any."

"He may have lost it."

Jimmy started.

"Playing cards, do you mean?"

"I—I fear so. Jimmy, was—was Lattrey that kind of boy at Rookwood? If he was, that makes it certain."

Jimmy Silver set his teeth.

"He couldn't be such a cad!" he said. "How could a fellow be such a vile rotter? I—I think I made a mistake in bringing him here, but—but—"

"Then he was a bad character at your school?" asked Phyllis quietly.

"Well, yes."

"He is not your friend?"

"No."

"You do not even like him?"

"Well, no."

"Jimmy, they are together now, I am certain of it—in the old tower, most likely, as that's where they were last night, and nobody ever goes there." Phyllis clasped her hands. "Jimmy, it's infamous that a child like Algy—he's only a child really—should be led into wickedness by a boy so much older than himself. If they knew at home—"

Phyllis paused, alarmed by the look that came over Jimmy Silver's face. She laid her hand quickly on his arm.

"Jimmy!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"Oh, I've been a fool—a fool!" muttered Jimmy Silver, white with anger. "Lovell was right. Raby and Newcome were right, and I was a fool!"

"Jimmy!"

"I can see it all now!" said Jimmy, with increasing bitterness. "Lattrey has been fooling me. I don't know that I ought to blame him. I fairly asked for it. But—but who could have thought a fellow could be such a vile rascal—under my father's roof—a guest in the house? Oh, it's too rotten!"

"Why did you ask him here, Jimmy, if you don't like him?"

Jimmy smiled bitterly.

"Because I'm a fool!" he growled.

"Because the whole school was down on him, and he deserved it, and—and I was idiot enough to want to give him a chance!"

Phyllis pressed his arm.

"It was just like you, Jimmy."

"It was," said Jimmy. "I suppose I was born a fool!"

"I don't mean that. It was generous, like you. But—but—"

Jimmy Silver compressed his lips.

"I'll look into this," he said. "Don't you be afraid, Phil. They've only known one another a few days, anyway. I'll see about it, and if Lattrey—"

"Jimmy, you must not— Remember, he is your guest!" exclaimed Phyllis, with a catch in her voice.

Jimmy nodded.

"I know that, Phil. The cad feels safe, I dare say. But, anyway, I'm going to look into it. Wait a bit for me, old girl. If Lattrey's up to his old tricks he's going to be stopped sharp!"

Jimmy Silver hurried out of the house.

His face was pale with anger. There was no proof yet, but suspicions fitted together so much that they had the force of proof. After all, it was nothing new for Lattrey. He was treacherous to the core. He had always been so, as Jimmy Silver knew.

But if he had played this treacherous trick there would be a final reckoning.

Jimmy hurried to the old tower.

"Hallo, here you are!" called out Lovell. "This way, slacker!"

Jimmy Silver did not heed. He did not answer. He ran on towards the half-ruined tower, leaving Arthur Edward Lovell staring.

In a few minutes Jimmy was in the tower. There was no one in the lower chambers, and he ran quickly and lightly up the steps.

"Shuffle, kid!"

It was Lattrey's silky voice from a room that opened on the spiral stairs half-way up the tower.

Jimmy drew a quick breath. There was proof if he needed it. His footsteps were heard the next moment, and he heard an alarmed voice in the room. It was Algy's voice.

"Somebody's comin'. Oh! Jimmy!"

Jimmy Silver strode into the room the next moment.

The 8th Chapter.

Lattrey's Luck is Out!

Lattrey sprang to his feet.

He had been seated on a campstool in the deserted room, near the old loop-hole window.

On a box before him the cards lay gleaming, and there were loose coins and cigarettes on the box.

The atmosphere of the room was heavy with cigarette-smoke.

Algy Silver sat on the corner of the box with a cigarette in his mouth. He did not rise. He seemed frozen there by the sudden appearance of his cousin Jimmy.

Lattrey's face paled.

He retained his coolness, but he was pale. The game was up now with a vengeance. The discovery was about as complete as it could be.

Jimmy Silver panted.

"Lattrey, you cowardly hound!"

"Look here, Jimmy—" mumbled the fag.

Jimmy turned on the fag fiercely.

"Hold your tongue, you young blackguard! By gad, I've a mind to take you by the neck and take you straight to my father! You shady young rotter, how dare you play this game in my father's house!"

"I didn't want to come here," said Algy sullenly. "I'm fed-up. I had to come. I'm goin' to do as I like, too. 'Tain't your business!"

Jimmy Silver strode towards him.

Algy jumped up and backed away, but Jimmy's strong grasp closed on his collar, and he was shaken like a rat.

"Let go!" yelled Algy furiously.

Shake, shake, shake! It was for Phyllis' sake that Jimmy did not give his cousin the thrashing he deserved. But the sportive Algy was shaken like a rat in the teeth of a terrier.

Lattrey made a move for the doorway. But the doorway was suddenly blocked by the sturdy form of Arthur Edward Lovell. Lovell had followed Jimmy into the tower, wondering what was the matter.

He saw now what was the matter. His eyes blazed at the sight of the cards and the money. As Lattrey came to the door, Lovell shoved him back unceremoniously.

"Let me pass!" hissed Lattrey.

"You sneaking worm!" said Lovell between his teeth. "You try to pass, and I'll knock your teeth down your throat!"

"Let me go!" shrieked Algy.

Shake, shake, shake, shake!

"There, you young rascal!" panted Jimmy Silver, releasing the fag at last, with a whirl that sent him spinning to the door. Let me catch you at it again, that's all! Get out!"

"You—you rotter!"

"Here, you travel along!" said Lovell, taking the furious fag by the shoulder and spinning him out of the room. "Shall I kick him downstairs, Jimmy?"

Algy did not wait for Jimmy's reply. He scuttled down the stairs, breathing fury.

Jimmy Silver faced Lattrey.

The cad of Rookwood had recovered himself now. He was a guest in the house, and even after his wicked rascality he felt that he had, at least, no punishment to fear. He regarded his enraged host with a sneering smile.

"You unspeakable cad!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

Lattrey shrugged his shoulders.

"I was a fool to think you could be decent, you worm; but you knew I trusted you, and—and you've led my cousin into this filthy gambling under my very nose!"

"He didn't want much leading!" sneered Lattrey. "Accordin' to his yarns, he's quite used to it at school. Merry young blade, in fact!"

"You're older than he is. You know better. He's a young fool, but you're a rotten scoundrel!"

"Thanks!"

"You—you cowardly hound!"

"Are you always as polite as this to a guest?" inquired Lattrey, with insolent coolness. "Is this the special Silver brand of hospitable courtesy?"

Jimmy choked.

"Lick him!" said Lovell. "Thrash the measly skunk, Jimmy! I'll hold your jacket, old man!"

"I—I can't hit him! He's a guest, as he says!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Lattrey, you cad, you know you're safe! You've got to get out! You leave the house to-day—by the next train!"

"Pleased!" yawned Lattrey. "I hate to mention it, dear boy, but I've been bored almost to tears during this cheery holiday! Your pater's rather an old bore. Have you noticed it? The goody-goody atmosphere of the house, too, gets a bit on a fellow's nerves. It's piled on a bit too thick, don't you think?"

Jimmy clenched his hands convulsively. He was very near at that moment to disregarding the sacred laws of hospitality. But he controlled himself.

"Get out!" he muttered thickly.

"Certainly! Ta-ta, old scout! Can I offer you a smoke before I go?"

"Aren't you going to lick him?" shouted Lovell.

"Hang it! No! He's a guest!"

"Well, he's your guest," admitted Lovell. "I suppose it isn't according to the laws of hospitality to punch a guest. But he's not my guest; he's not under my merry roof. No reason why I shouldn't thrash him, and I'm jolly well going to!"

"Lovell—"

"Rats!"

"Hands off!" yelled Lattrey, as Arthur Edward Lovell rushed on him. Crash! Crash!

Lovell's fists came fairly crashing at Lattrey, and the cad of Rookwood put up his hands desperately to defend himself.

But his defence availed little against Lovell's attack. Blows fairly rained on his savage, furious face. Round and round the room Lovell drove him under a shower of fierce blows.

Jimmy Silver looked on. He could not touch Lattrey himself, but, as Lovell had said, Lattrey was his guest, not Lovell's, and Lovell could do as he liked. And he did. For five minutes the cad of Rookwood felt as if he were the centre of several cyclones.

A terrific right-hander sent him spinning through the doorway at last, and he sprawled down on the stone steps.

A yell ring on the staircase. Lovell rushed after him.

"Hold on, you cad! You're not thrashed yet! My hat! He's off!"

Lattrey was bolting down the steps three at a time. He vanished from sight almost in a twinkling.

Lovell turned back to his chum. Jimmy Silver was standing pale and troubled and silent. Lovell dropped a hand on his shoulder.

"Buck up, old chap! You couldn't help it!"

"I ought to have known that cad better," muttered Jimmy.

"Quite so. But you couldn't help being an ass, you know," said Lovell comfortably. "You're done with him now, at any rate. Lucky you spotted him. To be quite candid, Jimmy, I suspected something of this kind, but I couldn't say anything."

"You—you did?"

"Anybody but a soft old bird like you, Jimmy, would have!" said Lovell, with a grin. "Come on! Cheer-ho! Keep smiling, you know. Your own merry maxim."

Jimmy Silver smiled faintly as he followed Lovell from the tower.

An hour later Lattrey was in the train, having departed without taking leave of anyone. He was not likely to darken the doors of Jimmy Silver's home again.

Lattrey's sudden departure caused some surprise, but he was not missed. Phyllis, at least, was glad that he had gone. And the sportive Algy, relieved of his evil associate, found healthier occupations for his time than banker and nap and billiards; and he found, too, that he could enjoy a holiday without those questionable resources to help him out.

Lattrey had gone, and Jimmy Silver did not expect to see him again till the new term at Rookwood.

But, as a matter of fact, he was not quite done with Lattrey. Before the Christmas holidays were over the chums of Rookwood had more to do with Jimmy Silver's Guest.

THE END.

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THIS WEEK: "THE CHRISTMAS MAIL!"

BY CONROY THE CORNSTALK.



Bill rode right down upon the man, and, drawing alongside, simply thrust out a strong arm and pulled the fellow off his horse.

"I think," said Jimmy Silver musingly, "that Conroy promised to spin us a yarn one night."

"Hear, hear!" said Lovell. "I've been waiting for something about Australia for a long time. I reckon you must have had some pretty exciting times out there, Conroy. Let's hear one of them."

The Cornstalk laughed.

The chums of the Fourth were gathered in the dormitory for the usual story which it had become customary for one of the boys to tell before they turned in.

"I could tell you one yarn which has a bit of go in it," said Conroy. "Of course, Australia isn't all excitement by any means. But we had a rare incident on the ranch, and it was one Christmas, too."

"Christmas!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "That's just the sort of thing we want! Get on with it, Conroy!"

The Cornstalk sat down on the bed.

"As it was chiefly concerned with the letters from the Old Country," he said, "I'll call it 'The Christmas Mail.'"

The 1st Chapter. Bill Jones' Letter.

I was pretty young at the time this happened—about nine or ten, I suppose. But I was old enough to be pretty useful about the ranch when we had our holidays.

I went to a boarding-school in Sydney at the time, and used to come home only for the vacations. And it was about a week before Christmas that I got to the ranch, and they were pretty busy at the time with the cattle.

I found that my pater had taken on a new fellow as a stockman. He was an interesting old chap, and went by the simple name of Bill Jones.

I had a yarn with him one night, though, when we were riding over the plains, and he told me quite a lot of his history in the days when he lived in the Old Country.

He had been a circus performer as a youngster, and kept at the job for several years—one of those Johnnies, you know, who jump through hoops, tumble about with the horses, and do all sorts of daring things.

Well, Bill, I should imagine, had been a proper goer.

He was getting on in years then, but he was a splendid horseman for all that, and I could see that he had been something pretty hot stuff in his time.

I asked him how he came to give up the circus business, and he merely said that he got fed up with it. But I thought all the time that he was keeping dark about something.

You see, he told me in an idle moment that he was just preparing for a big Christmas show when he left the circus, and he dropped it.

He'd thought out a lot of jolly clever tricks, too. But these he never did.

The rest of his life was a blank which I couldn't get him to talk about.

Well, as Christmas came along he began to get a bit excited, and he told me once that he was expecting a letter.

"I don't suppose it will come," said Bill. "But still I'm expecting it, if you can understand me. You see, I've been looking for that letter now for nigh on twenty-five years. I know it will come some time. And it will be one Christmas. But I've had twenty-four disappointments so far."

"What's it all about, Bill?" I asked curiously.

"You wait and see!" he said, with a laugh. "I'll tell you all about it if it comes."

And with that I had to be satisfied.

Well, a couple of days before Christmas the pater told me to saddle up one of the horses and ride into Sydney for the letters. You see, we had to fetch our own, as we were pretty well forty miles out.

"Bring all the mail that there is for us," said the pater, as I left. "And don't," he added, with a laugh, "forget the letter for Bill Jones!"

I laughed, too. We all knew about the letter he was expecting, but it didn't seem the sort of thing that was going to turn up.

Well, with that I rode off.

I reached Sydney in the afternoon, and had a look round first. I hadn't got to get home until the next day, so I had plenty of time to myself.

I went out and looked up some of my chums, and we went down together for

a bathe. After that we had tea, and parted.

Then it suddenly struck me that I had better get the mail.

So I went along to the post-office and drew the mail for Red Stone Ranch—and it was a pretty big one, too.

There were letters for all of us, and parcels from the Old Country. But the wonder of all was that there was a letter for old Bill Jones!

I had to sign for it because it was registered. It came from England, and there seemed something about it which impressed me that it was frightfully important.

I put it in the bottom of the sack which I had brought with me, and piled the other things on top.

As I was leaving the post-office I saw a rather shabby-looking fellow watching me. Somehow I did not like the look of him.

"Wonder what he wants?" I muttered.

I went on a bit farther, and looked cautiously round again. He was still following along the street. This fed me up a bit, so I stopped to look in a shop window. But, instead of catching me up, the man stopped, too, and looked in a jeweller's place.

I had decided to stay the night at a rather decent hotel they called the Valetta. It was only a few yards farther along, so I decided to go in and leave my mail-bag in my room and lock it up.

I went in, and booked a room in the hall, and having got the key, started to go upstairs. But for some reason—probably because I hadn't lost the idea of being followed—I looked back.

The man I had seen in the post-office had just come in, and was looking in the book curiously. As I watched he booked a room himself, and went up a different staircase. But I could have sworn that he knew the number of my room.

Deciding not to worry, however, I went upstairs, had a wash, and, leaving the bag in a cupboard that locked, took the key of that, and also locked the door. Then, feeling fairly free in my mind again, I went out.

I was meeting some chums, and we were all going to a theatre that night. So I made my way along to the corner where we had arranged to meet, and felt quite prepared to have a jolly evening.

I met my chums, and we made our way to the theatre.

While we were going through the entrance-hall I suddenly felt a touch at my side pocket. It was only slight, but my keys were reposing there.

I turned quickly, to see that the man who had followed me from the post-office was standing beside me!

The sight of him gave me a bit of a turn, and I knew that I gave him a pretty startled look. But he took no notice of me at all, and his only object seemed to be to get into the theatre.

Well, we went into the theatre, and the man took a seat quite a long way from us.

I started wondering whether I had only imagined that he was following me, and soon quite convinced myself that this was the case.

When the play, however, started I soon forgot all about him and about the mail. It was a rattling good show, and a rare treat to us.

It was pretty late when the show finished, and, as I intended to make an early start back in the morning, we weren't long in saying good-night. I returned to the hotel, and found my room again.

For safety's sake I locked the door, and then opened the window wide.

After that I made sure that the mail-bag was safe in the cupboard, and turned in.

As I was doing so I noticed a little electric bell in the wall just at the head of my bed, and a small piece of ivory giving full directions for use.

One ring was for someone or other, and

two for something else. I forget what they were now.

That didn't matter to me. But I decided to remember the position of the bell.

I went to sleep quickly. How long I lay I didn't find out then, but some strange sort of noise caused me to sit up suddenly in bed. I felt sure that someone was tampering with the lock of the door.

Before I had time to think any further the door opened, and a man walked into the room and shut the door behind him. I recognised him as the strange fellow who had followed me from the post-office.

He spotted that I was awake, and crossed to the bed.

"What do you want?" I gasped.

The fellow gave me a horrible look.

"You raise your voice about a whisper," he growled, "and I'll stun you!"

Naturally, I didn't want to be stunned. But I knew pretty well that the man was up to no good.

I reached quietly behind my back, and sought the bell-push. Fortunately, he didn't see the movement.

"I want to know," said the fellow, in a grating voice, "where that letter for Bill Jones is?"

My hand was touching the bell now. I pretended that I didn't catch what he said, and, while he was repeating the message, pressed the bell five times. I was pretty certain that would fetch someone before long.

"What letter?" I asked.

The man seized me roughly by the shoulders. I felt like a baby in his grasp. He was immensely strong.

"You know the thing!" he snapped. "The registered letter. I saw you take it in the post-office this afternoon. Hand it over, and be quick!"

There was nothing else for it. So I hopped out of bed and started fishing for the key. All that I wanted now was time. I knew that help would come if I waited long enough.

The 2nd Chapter. A Stern Chase.

The next two or three minutes were like a nightmare to me.

Naturally, I wasn't going to find the key for him if I could help it.

I was more than interested now in Bill's letter, and I saw that it probably meant a tremendous lot to him if this fellow was so keen to get it.

"Hurry up!" snapped the man suddenly.

"Only one more pocket," I returned. "It must be in this one."

I felt calmer now, for I had caught a faint sound of a step on the stairs. The man himself heard it a moment later, and he turned to me fiercely.

"Quick!" he snapped. "There's someone coming!"

I tried to laugh lightly.

"Don't worry," I said. "I expect that it's only Old Bill come to look me up."

"Bill!" gasped the man. "Wh-what do you mean?"

A hand rattled the knob of the door. As it did so the stranger leapt away from me and bolted to the window.

"Help!" I sang out.

"Coming!" replied a couple of voices.

A moment later two men burst into the room, and I must say that I was jolly pleased to see them.

They were hotel officials, and they had come in answer to my ring.

But the stranger had already clambered over the window-sill, and now he was going hand-over-hand down the water-pipe. He was a good way down when the men reached the window.

"The basement!" snapped one of the men. "Quick! We'll catch him yet!"

He turned and darted from the room. I watched from the window. But my visitor was an amazingly agile man.

He reached the ground long before I

could have expected the two hotel attendants to do so, and, turning, darted away through a yard and over a wall.

It was not till then that my rescuers appeared.

"Over the wall!" I shouted to them; and they understood.

I stopped up for half an hour after that, trembling with excitement in case they had caught the fellow.

But at the end of that time one of the men came to say that they had missed him somewhere, and that he had escaped.

That finished the business so far as I was concerned for the time being. The door had been opened with a skeleton-key, but I was able to lock it up again, and then I turned in. It wasn't much use staying up.

I woke pretty early, and, dressing, went downstairs with the precious mail-bag. There I had a light breakfast, and then paid my bill.

I made my way to the stable where I had left the horse, and tied the mail-bag firmly across in front of the saddle. Then, as I mounted, I glanced round with a sort of apprehension that I was being followed.

My heart almost stopped beating. Half-way down the street, watching me with a curiously evil sort of grin, was the fellow who had broken into my room the previous night!

I turned to the man who had stabled the horse, and pulled him to the door.

"Look at that fellow!" I ordered.

For a second perhaps the man remained in view. Then he suddenly disappeared down a side turning.

I told my story in a few words, and in another minute we were both mounted and galloping in the direction that the man had taken. When we reached the side turning the man had disappeared.

I must confess that I didn't like the look of the thing.

In the end I turned the horse's head, and said that I was going home.

"Not going alone, surely?" said the chap from the stable.

"May as well," I said. "I can ride quickly; and, anyway, that fellow is unmounted. I shall be jolly glad to get this letter into the right hands. It's worrying me. The less it stays in this place the better it will be for everyone."

The chap tried to argue, but I was pretty determined then. I jerked the rein, and set off at a smart canter for Red Stone Ranch.

I struck the trail, and continued along it for perhaps ten miles quite uneventfully. I was not forcing the pace, for I felt that, once clear of Sydney, I should be pretty safe.

But suddenly, when I looked round, I saw that a mounted man was pursuing me.

I took a second look, and there was, no doubting it this time. It was the man who had tried to steal the letter from me.

I set the horse on a gallop at that, and the race began in earnest.

I don't think that I shall ever forget that chase. I didn't go all out at first, for I was afraid of tiring the horse.

But when we had covered another ten miles I saw that it was going to be a neck-or-nothing race. The man was rapidly drawing nearer.

The next five miles we covered pretty well keeping our distance. I was a pretty good horseman, and I knew just how much I could expect to get out of my mount. But after six miles he began to flag.

Still, we kept on for another two or three miles, and then the fellow had got near enough to me to shout. I heard his voice coming thinly across the morning air.

"Stop and give me that letter," he cried, "or, by Harry, I'll ride you down, and flay you alive when I catch you!"

"Perhaps!" I muttered.

The man who was chasing me whipped his horse savagely, and charged along in

my rear. I could hear from the sound of the hoofs that he was catching me up.

What was I to do? I looked desperately round, and suddenly I spotted a figure on horseback far to the right. But even at that distance I recognised old Bill.

What was more, he saw me, too. For he suddenly turned his horse round, and started galloping in my direction.

I took the tip from him, and reined round in his direction. This enabled my pursuer to cut a corner off, and he did so. He had resolved by now to play a pretty desperate game.

He drew his horse up until we were running neck and neck. Then he tried to edge in so that he could snatch the mail-bag away.

But as he edged in so I edged away. And suddenly the man saw that the game was up.

He turned his horse's head and tried to make a bolt for it. But he was too late.

Old Bill swerved from his course, and was after him like a shot.

I saw the other man try to dodge and escape. But Bill was giving him no opportunities.

He rode right down on him, and, drawing alongside, simply thrust out a strong arm, and pulled the fellow off his horse.

I saw the fellow roll off the saddle and fall on the plain, while the riderless horse galloped on. Old Bill swerved round, and came back to the spot just as the man was rising.

Bill leapt off his horse, and gave it an order to stand still. Then he advanced on the man with clenched fists.

I saw the other man square up, and then they were at it hammer and tongs. My word, it was a fight! But Old Bill won.

He seemed to fight as though he had a personal grievance against the man, I thought at the time. And afterwards I was to find out that such was really the case.

Well, the man went down in the end, and stayed down. And after that Bill stooped and tied his legs together with a stout piece of cord.

Between us we carried him to the ranch, and if Bill was pleased to have caught him—and he looked it—you can guess that I was more so.

Of course, Old Bill was full of nice compliments about the way I had handled things, and when he heard about the registered letter he seemed nearly to go into hysterics.

That same evening—it was Christmas Eve—he told us his whole story. The registered letter which he had waited for for twenty-five years had come at last, and he could speak.

It seemed that just when he gave up the circus business a rotten charge was made against a big pal of his—the chap who owned the circus—and, rather than see him go broke, Bill agreed to shoulder the crime himself, and then clear out of the country.

As a matter of fact, neither he nor Bill were guilty. But it was certain that one of them had to suffer. I believe it was over a big robbery at a bank, and all the evidence pointed to one of them.

Well, Bill, it seemed, came to Australia, and his friend in England kept him posted with events for a bit. Then he wrote one day to say that he had discovered from a private source the identity of the real criminal, but that the man had escaped.

He found out one thing, though. The man had invested all the money in a certain concern, which paid out only once a year, about six weeks before Christmas.

It was certain that the fellow would have to come to draw the money from one of the branches, but not until the name under which he was masquerading was found out could he be brought to justice.

That was how Bill had come to spend twenty-five years of his life as an out-cast, while his pal in England every year for that twenty-five years got up to every sort of dodge to try and spot the criminal and find out details about him. And one day he succeeded.

By some means or other the robber got wind of what had happened. He was too late to stop the registered letter leaving England, so he followed it to Australia, hoping to get it back. It meant his exposure and ruin.

How he failed you know, and also how he fell into Bill's clutches. And when the whole situation was explained to my pater he told Bill exactly how his damaged life could be righted once more.

So you can guess we had a pretty jolly Christmas the following day. And it was chiefly made so happy by the Christmas mail which I brought.

"Jolly fine yarn!" said Raby, as the Cornstalk finished. "You must have had a pretty exciting time of it, Conroy!"

"I should just think so!" said Jimmy Silver warmly.

"By the way," said Lovell, "what happened to Bill after that?"

"Bill?" said Conroy. "Oh, he left us soon after Christmas, and went back to England. His honour was soon cleared, and the fellow who had gone unpunished for twenty-five years got what he deserved. Papers were found in his luggage which incriminated him quite enough. Bill went back to the circus as a partner, and he's making a pile there now."

"And I don't suppose," said Jimmy Silver, "that he forgets the Christmas mail."

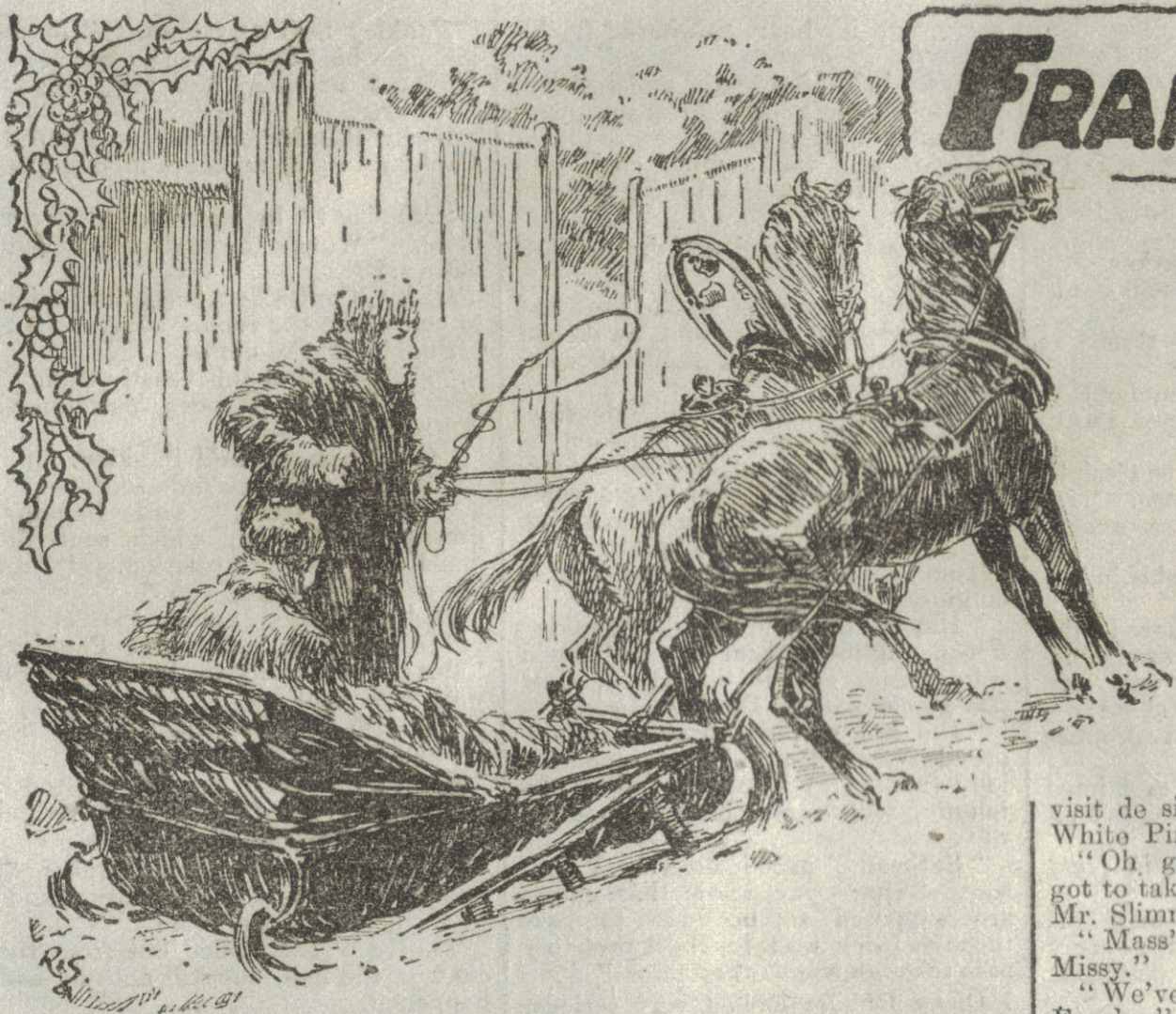
THE END.

**NEXT MONDAY!
"THE FOOL OF THE FAMILY!"
By TOM RAWSON.
DON'T MISS IT!**

FRANK RICHARDS' CHRISTMAS

A Magnificent Double-Length Story, dealing with the Schooldays of Frank Richards, the Famous Author, at the School in the Backwoods.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



The 1st Chapter. A Canadian Christmas Eve.

"Christmas Eve—and jolly cold!" said Frank Richards.

Bob Lawless laughed. The chums of Cedar Creek School were standing in the doorway of the ranch-house, looking out on the white plain.

The Lawless ranch glimmered with white, under a sky of steel. Snow was still falling.

The air was clear, and keen, and crisp, refreshing as wine. Far away in the distance the giant Rockies loomed on the horizon, snow-clad.

It was Frank Richards' first experience of a Canadian Christmaside. The cold was a new experience to him. It was sharp, sharp as a knife. But the gloriously keen, fresh air was health-giving, invigorating.

Frank had never felt better in his life than when he stood there, in the deep porch of the ranch-house, looking out on the snow-covered plains.

"Colder than Old England?" asked Bob Lawless.

"Yes, rather. But isn't it ripping?" exclaimed Frank, his eyes glistening. "You don't want to snuggle indoors and sit on the stove?" grinned Bob.

"No fear."

"That's lucky, for we've got to work this morning," said Bob Lawless, with a laugh. "A good four hours' sleighing. Don't come if you don't feel up to it, though."

"I feel up to anything," said Frank. "Who's going to drive?"

"I guess I am. I'll give you a turn with the ribbons in a safe place."

"And where are we going?"

"School first, to see Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey. Then along to Cedar Camp to pick up the Cherub, and then round the clearings with messages from popper. We shall have a good crowd here to-morrow."

"Good!" said Frank Richards.

"Come and get your things on, and mind you wrap up well. Winter in the Canadian West is no joke, I can tell you. There's such a thing as frost-stroke, and you want to keep your napper well covered."

Bob Lawless went back into the house to speak to his father. Frank Richards hurried up to his room for his fur coat and cap and leggings.

He looked a bundle of furs when he came down, his healthy boyish face glowing from the midst of them.

Outside there was a musical tinkle of sleigh bells.

Billy Cook had brought the sleigh round, and Mr. Lawless had come out to see his son and nephew off.

"Don't land in a drift, Bob," said the rancher, "and don't try the ice at Indian ford; it mayn't hold. Well, Frank, how do you like December in Canada?"

"Topping!" said Frank cheerily.

"Keep the rugs round you," said the rancher, tucking his nephew in the sleigh. "Now, then, Bob."

Bob Lawless jumped into his seat, and took the "ribbons" and the whip.

"So-long, popper."

The whip cracked, and with a merry jingle of silver bells the sleigh glided away down the trail.

The long, well-worn trail by which Frank and his cousin rode to school earlier in the year was hidden from sight now under a thick carpet of snow.

With an easy, gliding motion the

sleigh slid along the smooth surface, behind the two mettlesome horses.

Frank Richards breathed deep as the keen wind blew in his face, fluttering light snowflakes over him.

Bob Lawless gave all his attention to his horses.

Jingle, jingle!

The music of the sleigh-bells rang far over the silent plains, and echoed among the giant trunks as the gliding vehicle followed the trail through the timber.

Two horsemen coming along the trail drew aside, crushing into the blackened larches, to let the sleigh pass.

Frank glanced at them.

He recognised them; he had seen them before at Cedar Camp—Euchre Dick and Dave Dunn, the two worst characters in the section.

"Merry Christmas!" called out Bob Lawless in passing.

The two rustlers did not reply to the greeting.

They sat their horses, staring after the sleigh as it dashed on up the trail towards the creek.

Euchre Dick glanced at his companion as he pulled his horse out into the trail again.

"I reckon that outfit would fetch a thousand dollars, Dave, sold down the valley," he said, in a low voice.

"And I guess the Mounted Police would fetch us if we tried on that game in this section," was Dave Dunn's reply.

And the two "bulldozers" rode on.

Frank Richards glanced back after the two riders as they disappeared among the leafless trees.

"You know those galoots, Frank?" asked Bob Lawless.

"Yes; I believe"—Frank hesitated—"I believe one of them, if not both, was mixed up in the affair some weeks ago, Bob, when you nearly got kidnapped coming home from school."

"I guess so," said Bob. "The hoboos were never found, anyway. It was the kind of gun-game Dave Dunn would be mixed up in. I guess I shouldn't care to meet those two bulldozers on the prairie on a dark night. They were charged at Kamloops once for holding up an emigrant in the Fraser mountains, and running off with his outfit—waggon, hosses, and all; but they crawled out of it somehow. Hallo, here's the school!"

Cedar Creek School was in sight.

With a rattle and a jingle the sleigh dashed up to the lumber school.

Bob brought the steaming horses to a halt outside the gates, and jumped down, followed by Frank Richards.

The school grounds presented a very different aspect from that which the chums had been accustomed to during the school term.

The wide enclosure was deserted and carpeted with snow, and deep silence hung over the place, save where the horses moved and champed in the corral.

Bob Lawless thumped on the school-house door with his whip-butt, and it was opened by Black Sally.

"Merry Christmas, Sally!" roared Bob jovially, and in the exuberance of his spirits he threw an arm round the big negress, and waltzed her round the porch.

"Loramussy, Mass' Bob!" gasped Sally; "you done took away dis chile's breff."

"Where's Miss Meadows?" asked Bob.

"Missy am out," said Black Sally, gasping for breath; "Missy done gone

visit de sick piccaninny way down at White Pine."

"Oh gum!" said Bob, "and I've got to take a message back. Where's Mr. Slimmey—in his cabin?"

"Mass' Slimmey done gone wid Missy."

"We've drawn the school blank, Franky," grinned Bob Lawless. "We'd better buzz along to the shack and pick up Beauclerc, and then hustle for White Pine. We can give Miss Meadows a lift back, perhaps. Jump in!"

And once more the sleigh went merrily on its way, with cracking whip and jingling bells, whizzing gaily through the powdering snow.

The 2nd Chapter.

The Home of the Remittance Man.

Vere Beauclerc was seated on a log outside the shack by the bank of the frozen creek.

An axe rested against his knee, and there was a flush of healthy vigour in his handsome, finely-cut face. Beauclerc had been at work that morning, chipping logs, and he had paused to rest.

The silence of the great West was around him. Hardly a murmur came from the timber, where the trees were stripped of foliage.

The creek, which bubbled and sang past the shack in the summer days, was silent as the grave in the icy grip of winter.

The boy was thinking as he sat there, his faraway gaze fixed upon the frozen forest.

He thought of Christmases in far-off England in days that were like a dream to him now, before his father's fall—before Lascelles Beauclerc had become an unsuccessful emigrant and a "remittance man."

Beauclerc had known more than one Christmas in the Canadian West, a time of grim hardship to the son of the remittance man.

What work was done at the little shack was mainly done by the boy. What time Lascelles Beauclerc could spare from roystering was generally spent in recovering from the effects of his latest "burst."

There was no other habitation near the shack, but there were distant neighbours, all willing and ready to be kind to the remittance man's son, and to show him the hearty and unbounded hospitality of Western Canada.

But the sensitive lad had always shrank from accepting kindly advances.

With all his father's faults, Vere was an affectionate and respectful son. He made allowances for his father that he could not expect others to make.

He knew how the remittance man was regarded by the quiet and hard-working Canadian settlers. They had no use for a loafer in the Thompson valley.

And all his nature shrank from accepting kindness from people who, he could not help feeling, despised his father.

His life had been very lonely.

But he was thinking now of the difference it made to him since he had become friends with Frank Richards and Bob Lawless.

With his usual sensitive distrust he had repulsed both of them at first. But that had passed.

They were firm friends now—Frank Richards, the sunny-tempered English lad, Bob Lawless, the sturdy young Canadian, and Vere Beauclerc, the descendant of an old and noble family of the Old Country, fallen upon evil days.

This was the first Christmas of his Western life that was to be anything like Christmas to him.

He was to spend it at the Lawless Ranch with his chums, and with a crowd of the neighbours, "neighbours" being a wide term in the West, covering distances up to fifty and sixty miles.

The chums were to call for him that morning to take him to the ranch, and Mr. Lawless had sent a kind message to the remittance man, asking him to come with his son, and spend a homely but hearty Christmas at the ranch.

Mr. Beauclerc, though with great urbanity, had declined the invitation for himself. He had other engagements, as it happened.

Beauclerc knew that the other engagements probably were poker games and faro with Poker Pete and his set at Thompson.

But it was not for a son to criticise his father, and he said no word.

He was glad that he was going to the ranch. It would have been deadly solitary at the shack during the grim Christmas with his father absent at the town. Work was his only resource, and there could be too much of that.

He started from his deep reverie and looked up, as there was a jingle of bridles and hoofs over the snow.

His face brightened as he looked up the trail, expecting to see the sleigh from Lawless Ranch.

Then it darkened again. It was not the rancher's sleigh. Two horsemen rode out of the wood towards the shack.

A darkly troubled look came over Vere's face.

Every time he saw Euchre Dick or Dave Dunn at the shack it gave his very heart a chill.

He knew their evil influence over his father. He had only too much reason to know that Lascelles Beauclerc, once at least, had almost been led into crime by his rascally associates.

A querulous voice called from the interior of the shack. It was the voice of the remittance man.

"Vere!"

The boy rose from the log.

"Yes, father."

"Who is on the trail?"

"Two friends of yours, father," said Beauclerc, with an unconscious bitterness in his voice.

"Good!"

Lascelles Beauclerc appeared in the doorway. His face had an unhealthy flush; his eyes were heavy and the lids reddened. It had been a late hour the previous night when Mr. Beauclerc had come zigzagging home from Cedar Camp.

He glanced up the trail at the approaching horsemen, and then glanced rather uneasily at his son.

"Were not your friends calling for you this morning, Vere?" he asked.

"Yes, father. I expect them any minute."

Lascelles Beauclerc frowned. It was easy to see that he would have preferred his son to be gone before his friends arrived at the shack.

But the sleigh was not yet in sight, and Dave Dunn and Euchre Dick rode up through the powdering snow, and dismounted and followed the remittance man into the little habitation.

There was a murmur of voices, and the sound of a bottle clinking on a glass within. Beauclerc, with a sigh, picked up his axe and resumed his work.

With a heavy heart but a steady hand he chipped the logs that were needed to banish the bitter winter cold from the shack by the creek.

His father looked out of the doorway again.

"You may as well go down the trail to meet your friends, Vere," he said, without meeting his son's eyes.

"Very well, father," said Vere in a low voice.

He went into the shack for his coat

and leggings, passing the two rustlers without a glance. They watched him curiously, without speaking.

The remittance man's son was a good deal of a puzzle to Lascelles Beauclerc's associates.

As he dressed himself in the inner room the murmur of voices came to Vere's ears. Euchre Dick was speaking.

"I guess the outfit's worth a thousand dollars. Look at us now—frozen broke. Poker Pete rounded up my last cent last night. A thousand dollars of the best, if we ran the outfit down across the line. And that kid could help. He's friends with them young scallywags. He could contrive—"

"Silence!" broke in Mr. Beauclerc's deep voice, with a note of anger in it. "Are you mad?"

"I guess I'm talking hoss-sense. I tell you the kid could help."

"If he could he would not."

"You're his popper, ain't you? Won't the young jay do as he's told?" demanded Euchre Dick sullenly. "A cowhide laid round him would make him step up to time, I calculate."

"Not a word more, I tell you!"

"Not a word more, I tell you!" snapped the remittance man savagely.

"Look hyer, Beauclerc—"

"Hold your tongue, confound you!" muttered Lascelles Beauclerc, as Vere came out of the inner room.

Euchre Dick scowled suddenly. Mr. Beauclerc followed his son from the shack, leaving the two ruffians muttering together.

"Good-bye, my boy!" said the remittance man, not unkindly. "I hope you will have a happy Christmas at the ranch."

"I wish you would come, father. Mr. Lawless would really be glad to see you there," said the boy wistfully.

"I should not care for it, my boy. I cannot come, anyway. Good-bye!"

"Father, I could not help hearing what that man said!"

"You must not hear what is not intended for your ears, Vere. But if you heard him you heard how I answered him."

"But, father—"

"Good-bye!"

Lascelles Beauclerc turned back abruptly into the shack. Vere, with a sigh, strode away down the trail to the forest.

His heart was heavy.

What the "outfit" might be that Euchre Dick had alluded to he did not know, but he knew that some villainy was simmering in the mind of the ruffian, in which he would doubtless seek the remittance man's help—in which, indeed, his words showed that he thought Vere might help.

There was anxiety in his heart as he strode away, but there was nothing he could do but hope.

"Hallo, Cherub!"

Half a mile from the shack sleigh bells rang merrily out over the snow, and Bob Lawless' hearty voice called him. The sleigh halted in the snow.

"Coming to meet us, Beau?" asked Frank Richards brightly.

Beauclerc smiled. The sight of his chums' cheery faces banished for the moment the dark doubts and sadness from his breast.

"Yes, Frank. What a ripping day!" he exclaimed. "And how ripping of you fellows to come along for me!"

"Bow-wow! Jump in!" said Bob.

"Isn't your popper coming?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"Oh, rot!" said Bob. "I say, let's rush in on him, and make him come. We'll rope him in, Beau."

"No, no!"

"Why not?" said Bob exuberantly.

"We'll pitch him in the sleigh, and run him off!"

"Ripping!" exclaimed Frank Richards, laughing.



FRANK RICHARDS' CHRISTMAS

(Continued from the previous page.)

"No, no!" Beauclerc thought of the two ruffians even now in discussion with his father at the shack, and shivered. He did not want his chums to see them there. Neither was Bob's hare-brained idea quite likely to please the remittance man. "No. Let's get off, Bob."

"Oh, all serene! Jump in!"

"Are we going straight to the ranch?" asked Beauclerc, as he drew the buffalo robe and bearskin about him, sharing them with Frank.

"Nix. We're going on to White Pine first," said Bob. "Miss Meadows is there, visiting Muldoon's kid; the poor little beggar's ill, you know. Slimmey's gone with her. We're going to round them up, and I've got some messages to drop at half a dozen places. You're booked for a long drive, if you don't mind, Cherub."

The 3rd Chapter. Bridget of White Pine.

"White Pine!" said Bob Lawless at last.

It was still early in the afternoon, but shadows were creeping over the snowy plains.

Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc looked about them with interest as Bob drove up to White Pine.

It was a lonely spot. There had once been several clearings in the district, but they had been abandoned by settlers, who had moved on to fresh fields and pastures new.

Only one habitation remained—a small cabin of mingled logs and lumber. It was plain, at a glance, that the place belonged to the poorest kind of unsuccessful emigrant.

Poor Micky Muldoon and his wife had come up from Chicago, to take up a grant of land in the North-West.

Life in the city of canned pork had not well prepared them for a life on the land. Lacking both capital and experience, Micky Muldoon had a hard row to hoe.

But he worked hard, and kept up his Irish cheerfulness, and hoped for the best.

And there was the child, little Bridget was six—a pretty and delicate child, ill fitted to face the north-western winter in a frontier cabin.

With the coming of grim winter, little Bridget had become ill. Miss Meadows, the schoolmistress of Cedar Creek, visited the lonely cabin regularly, to help in tending the little invalid.

Kind neighbours would ride ten miles to bring little gifts for Bridget, and to ask how she was doing.

Frank Richards caught sight of burly Micky Muldoon, at work at a distance from the cabin. In a foot of snow, the hardy emigrant was hewing logs.

Bob drew the sleigh to a halt at a little distance from the cabin, in order not to disturb the sick child.

The three schoolboys alighted, and went softly towards the place through the snow, that deadened their footsteps.

Bob Lawless tapped on the door, and opened it softly.

A fire, fed by pine chips, was burning smokily in the cabin. A pale and troubled woman was tending it.

Mr. Slimmey, the assistant master of Cedar Creek School, sat in a corner, very grave and quiet. He glanced at the boys with a grave nod and smile.

Miss Meadows was beside the little cot where the child lay, near the fire.

The schoolboys stopped, irresolute, just within the cabin, Bob closing the door softly to keep out the bitter wind.

The child was speaking, in a low and weak voice.

"Mummy!"

The worn woman by the fire came to the cot.

"Yes, dearie?"

"It's Christmas to-morrow, mummy."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Muldoon, with a sigh.

"Is Father Christmas coming?"

Mrs. Muldoon did not answer.

Father Christmas was not likely to come to the lonely emigrant's cabin, bound in the grip of winter and poverty.

The child's pale face turned towards the troubled mother.

"Mummy, will Father Christmas come?"

"Sure, the snow's too heavy for Father Christmas to come, alanna," said poor Mrs. Muldoon.

"But Father Christmas doesn't mind the snow, mummy, and he always used to come at home."

"Yes, dear; but—"

"You'll hang up my stocking, mummy, for Father Christmas to-night," said Bridget, her bright eyes on her mother's face. Sure, he'll come. He don't mind the snow. He always came at home."

The poor woman's eyes filled with tears.

In the far-off city Father Christmas had always come. There, a few pence had been enough to purchase some poor little gift to be placed in the stocking overnight.

On the North-Western frontier it was different.

Children's toys were not to be had in the upper Thompson valley. For those who could afford them, they came at great expense from distant towns.

But it was hard to tell the unsuspecting child that her old friend, Father Christmas, who had never failed her yet, would fail her at last.

Miss Meadows' kind face was gravely troubled. Mr. Slimmey, in the corner, wiped his gold-rimmed spectacles.

Frank Richards & Co. stood silent and uneasy.

The child's voice went on.

"I want Father Christmas to bring me a doll, mummy. Do you think he will bring me a doll if he comes, mummy?"

"Sure, I can't tell, alanna."

"I hope he'll bring me a doll, one that moves its eyes," said Bridget.

"Sure, Father Christmas won't forget us, mummy; he never has."

"Sure, I hope he won't, dearie. But—"

"I'm sure he won't!" said the child confidently. "He won't forget us. You'll hang up my stocking, mummy?"

"Yes, dear."

Miss Meadows rose quietly and moved towards the door. Bridget raised her head. She had caught sight of the three schoolboys inside the cabin.

"Bob! It's Bob!"

Bob Lawless came towards the cot.

"Hallo, Bridget, old girl!" he said. "You look ever so much better."

Bridget nodded and smiled.

"I'm thinking about Father Christmas," she said. "Last Christmas I told mummy I wanted a Teddy bear, an' Father Christmas brought me one. Do you think he'll bring me a doll this time, Bob?"

"I—I guess—" stammered Bob.

"He's sure to come. I sha'n't believe in him any more if he doesn't. But he'll come, sure," said Bridget, with a confident nod. "You'll see."

"I—I hope he will!" stammered Bob. Certainly Father Christmas would have come to the lonely cabin if Bob Lawless could have contrived it. But a doll was not to be obtained for love or money in the Thompson valley.

The child's look grew troubled with the expression on Bob's honest face.

"You don't think he'll come this time, Bob?"

"I—I guess he will, kid," said Bob, alarmed at the change of expression.

"He's—he's a good sort, you know; he never forgets good kids at Christmas."

The little face brightened again.

"I'm sure he'll come," said Bridget. "And I guess he'll bring me a doll. Father Christmas always guesses what you want most."

"You bet!" said Bob, as heartily as he could.

"You must sleep now, dear," said the mother softly.

"Yes, mummy."

Bridget's eyes closed. But they opened again immediately.

"Mummy!"

"Yes, dear?"

"You won't forget the stockings. I'm sure he'll come."

"I—I won't forget, alanna. Go to sleep now."

"Yes, mummy," said Bridget drowsily.

Her eyes closed again.

Bob Lawless and his chums quietly left the cabin. Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey were outside now.

Frank Richards drew the door shut. The three chums were strangely troubled. The child's faint words, her confidence in "Father Christmas," had moved them to the very heart.

And they knew that Father Christmas could not come. There were no children's toys on the banks of the Thompson river.

"Poor little kid!" muttered Beauclerc.

"It's rotten," said Frank, in a low voice.

"I—I suppose there's nothing doing, Bob. I'd ride twenty miles, like a shot—"

"Nothing doing," said Bob, with a shake of the head. "Kids' dolls ain't quite in our line in this section. Things like that have to be ordered weeks ahead, and come up by the store waggons. Nothing nearer than Fraser, I reckon."

"It's rotten."

Miss Meadows was speaking to Mr. Slimmey in a low voice, evidently discussing the doll question.

But their looks showed that no solution was to be found.

"I'm going to drive you back, Miss Meadows, if you'll let me," said Bob, "and Mr. Slimmey, too."

"Thank you; I shall be very glad," said Miss Meadows, with a smile. "I suppose, Lawless, you do not know

mistress and Mr. Slimmey alighted, and the schoolboys jingled away in the sleigh for home.

But their faces were not bright now.

Somehow, the thought of the pale little face in the emigrant's lonely cabin haunted them, and they were still thinking of little Bridget when the sleigh jingled up to the Lawless Ranch.

The 4th Chapter. A Reckless Venture.

Frank Richards was very thoughtful during dinner at the ranch.

It was a late dinner for the schoolboys, for the drive had taken up the greater part of the day, and Mr. and Mrs. Lawless had dined long before, with the guests that had already arrived at the ranch.

Frank's thoughtful mood was shared by his chums.

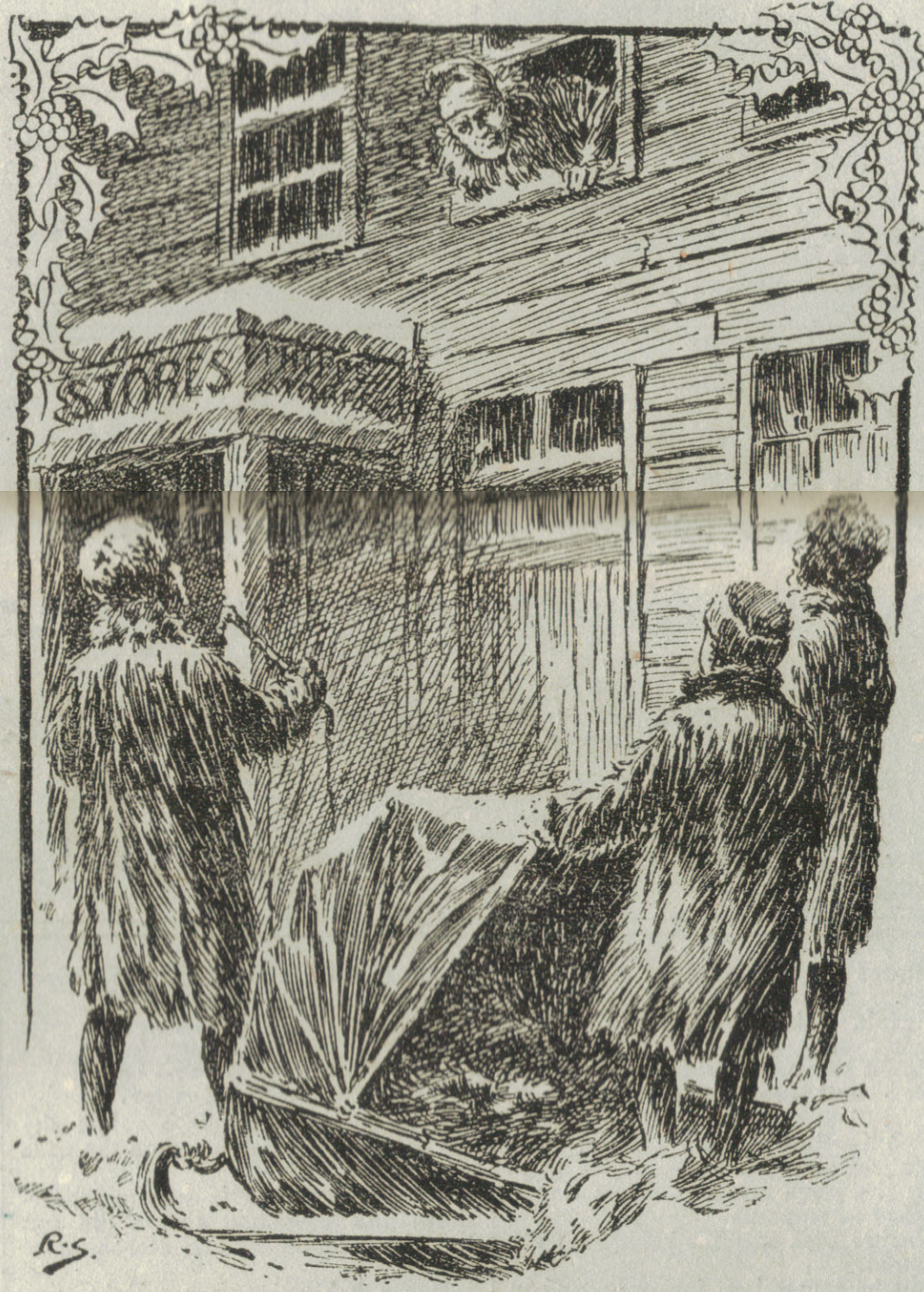
After dinner, Bob made his comrades a sign to follow him, and they left the ranch house.

Outside, deep dusk was on the snowy countryside.

The snow was falling, more heavily than before.

Bob stopped at the opening of the porch, with a wrinkle deep in his boyish brow. He looked at his chums.

"What are you thinking of, Frank?" he asked.



"Vamoose, you noisy jays!" roared the man at the window, "or I'll pitch a bucket of water on your dunder-heads! Hop it!" "Good-evening, Mr. Phipps," said Bob Lawless cheerfully.

of any way of satisfying poor little Bridget?"

Bob shook his head ruefully.

"Nothing nearer than Fraser!" he said.

"And that is thirty miles—and across the river."

"Yes, ma'am. I—I wonder—"

Miss Meadows shook her head at once.

"You must not think of that," she said. "The ice is not quite safe at Indian ford. And there is a blizzard coming on, Mr. Muldoon has told me. Poor little Bridget! I am afraid Father Christmas will not come, and she will lose her faith in her old friend."

Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey stepped into the sleigh, and the schoolboys followed.

They were silent as they drove to Cedar Creek.

The clear sky was darkening in the direction of the Rockies, with a drift of clouds laden with the coming snow-fall.

In the winter dusk they arrived at Cedar Creek.

All of them were thinking of little Bridget, and the bitter disappointment that was in store for her when she found her stocking empty on Christmas morning.

At the lumber school, the school-

"Bridget Muldoon and her doll," said Frank, half-laughing. "So were you, old scout."

"Same here," said Beauclerc. "I wish something could be done."

Bob Lawless drew a deep breath.

"Are you fellows game?" he asked.

"Game as pie!" said Frank. "But for what?"

"Look here!" Bob sunk his voice. "I can't get that kid and her Father Christmas out of my mind. It will fairly knock her out, you know—she believes in Daddy Christmas; kids do. It's a shame for her to have to give it up, before she's old enough to know that Father Christmas is spoof. And—and the poor little beggar wants a doll. Blessed if I know what for, but girls do, you know."

"They do!" agreed Frank.

"Well, suppose—"

"Well?" said Frank and Beauclerc together.

"They've got dolls at Fraser," said Bob. "Heaps of 'em. We've got the cash—we'd pool supplies if necessary—"

"You bet! That's not the difficulty!"

"Dolls and such things come pretty high out here, of course. But never mind that—we can manage that part. Bother that! But—but Fraser's a good thirty miles away—and night's

coming on." Bob wrinkled his brows again. "Are you chaps game for a run-over to Fraser in the sleigh?"

"Bob!"

"I know it sounds potty, just for a doll," said Bob, colouring a little. "But—but that kid, you know—poor little beggar! She'd be no end chippy if Father Christmas came, after all. It's worth a bit of a risk!"

"A bit?" said Frank gravely.

"The snow's coming down heavier to-night, Bob. We couldn't get back before morning, if—if—"

"If we got back at all," said Bob, with a nod. "I understand. I know the popper would jump on me if I suggested it to him. There's risk—"

"The ice isn't strong at Indian ford," said Beauclerc quietly. "We should have to cross the river near there, or go fifteen miles round—and that would knock it on the head."

"I know! There's risk. I guess I'm not going to confide in the popper. He would be mad with me. But—but after we came back, he would be pleased right enough. Are you fellows game?"

"Fathead!" said Frank. "Of course we're game. If it's barely possible to do it—"

"I think it is. We could get back to Muldoon's cabin before dawn—in time for the doll to go into the stocking. But—but there's no need for you chaps to risk it, either—one's enough—"

"Do you want your nose punched, you ass?"

Bob laughed.

"Well, is it a cinch?" he asked. "I can get the sleigh round, with fresh horses—the popper wouldn't ask any questions. There's no reason why we shouldn't do it safely. And—and I want Father Christmas to come to Bridget Muldoon to-night—I do!"

"It's a go!" said Frank.

Beauclerc nodded quietly.

"It's a go!" he said, "and a jolly good idea. I'm with you, Bob! I think it's a ripping idea!"

"Not a word about it, though," said Bob. "I don't quite know whether the popper would object—he might, and he might—but the popper would be anxious. I wouldn't like her to be anxious."

"Right-ho!"

"Then it's a cinch!" said Bob. "Get on your warmest things. I'll see to the sleigh!"

The chums of Cedar Creek had made up their minds.

It was, perhaps, a hare-brained scheme. Snow-covered plain, and ridges barred with drifts, lay between them and the distant rail-head town—and the frozen river was between. And the ice was not known to be strong enough to bear.

There was risk—terrible risk. But the excitement of that wild drive through the winter night appealed strongly to the imaginations of the chums.

They would be out all night—driving through blinding snow, facing a hundred perils. And it was all for the sake of a child—in order that the sick girl might not be disappointed on Christmas morning.

But the motive could not have been a more generous one. And the schoolboy chums did not hesitate.

Half an hour later, the sleigh was standing on the trail, with three horses this time harnessed to it.

Mr. Lawless was busy with his guests in the ranch-house, and he was not even aware that his son was arranging a sleigh-drive. But the rancher would have raised no objection to that; he could trust the hardy Canadian lad to take care of himself.

Certainly he would not have been likely to suspect that Bob was planning a wild night drive to the distant town on the railway.

Frank and Beauclerc stepped into the sleigh, and Bob took up the reins, after wrapping the bearskin closely round him. The cold was bitter and intense.

"Look out for the drifts, Bob, if you're going to Cedar Camp," said Billy Cook, as the rancher's son gathered up the reins.

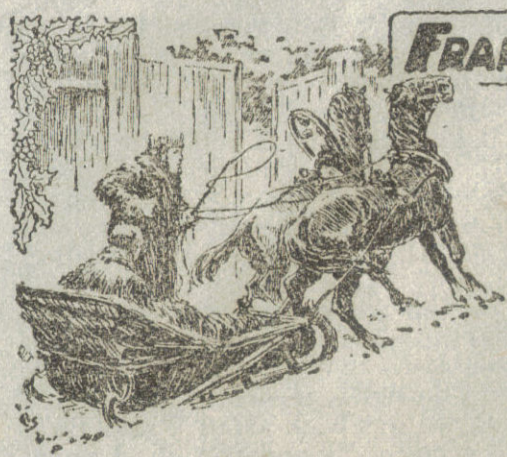
"Right you are, Billy!"

"And if you see Dave Dunn on the trail, give him a wide berth," went on the ranch foreman. "I passed those two scallywags half an hour ago—Dunn, and Euchre Dick, coming up from the creek."

Beauclerc started.

He could guess that the "scallywags" had been coming away from the shack, when the ranchman met them.

"Those two galoots are fairly asking to be roped in by the sheriff," went on Billy Cook. "They're dead broke, and desperate. They looked at me on the trail, and if I hadn't had a shooter handy, I calculate they would have held me up—and gone through me, sonny. Steer clear of



FRANK RICHARDS' CHRISTMAS

(Continued from the previous page.)

Well enough the schoolboys knew what the signal meant.

It meant that the ruffian's partner was ahead of them on the trail, and that Dave Dunn was warned to stop the sleigh as it came up.

The intention of the ruffians could not be doubted now.

The sleigh and horses were too valuable a prize to be missed, now that that prize had ventured fairly into their hands, in the dark night on the lonely prairie.

Having captured the sleigh, it would be easy for the two rascals to drive it away, and to get clear of the country before pursuit could possibly be started on their track.

The three boys would be left to tramp home wearily in the snow, deprived of the sleigh, the horses, the furs and rugs, and any money they had about them.

With such a prize in their grasp, the two rustlers could well afford to abandon the section, and recommence their rascally career in another part of the country, or over the "Line" in the United States.

There was no doubt as to their intention. The question was whether they could carry it out. Not if Frank Richards & Co. could prevent them, that was certain.

"Halt, you fool!" snarled Euchre Dick, as he rode abreast of the steaming horses. "You'll be stopped on the trail anyway!"

"Rats!"

"Will you halt!"

"No!"

Euchre Dick's hand groped among his furs. Something that shone and

"Halt!" he thundered out. Bob Lawless did not heed. The sleigh rushed on, three powerful horses rushing right down on the rider in the trail.

Had Dave Dunn stayed to await the shock of collision he would certainly have been swept over and trampled down, whatever had happened to the sleigh.

But he was too wise to wait. As the sleigh thundered down on him, and he realised that Bob did not mean to stop, he leaped his horse desperately out of the trail right into the frost-blackened larches. It was the only way to escape death, and he took it, and he was only just in time.

The horseman crashed into the larches, with curses on his lips, and the sleigh thundered by, with a crash of bells and a thudding of hoofs. Before the ruffian could drag himself from the trampled thicket the sleigh was gone, vanishing at terrific speed round a bend of the trail.

"Hurrah!" shouted Frank Richards.

Bob Lawless chuckled breathlessly. "I guess those bulldozers are kenoed this time!" he gasped. "We sha'n't see their cheery faces again this side of Christmas!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The merry laugh of the schoolboys rang through the frozen woods.

Frank Richards looked back. For some moments he thought he could hear the thud of hoof-beats in pursuit, but the sound died away into silence.

The rustlers were left far behind. The first peril of that wild night was passed.

In the starlight, Cedar Creek School loomed up for a minute or two to the right, as the sleigh swept out on the plain.

Then they dashed on into the open prairie, with the bright stars above their heads, the waste of untrodden

Down the slope to the frozen river the sleigh went jingling. They were upon the ice now.

Would it hold?

The schoolboys sat tight and waited with grim calmness. Under the runners the frozen river glided back.

Frank Richards' heart gave a throb as he heard a low, wailing sound from the river. He knew that it was the voice of the ice-pack.

Crack!

Bob Lawless' whip rang out like a pistol-shot.

He, too, had heard that warning wail of the straining ice. The horses, as if they, too, realised the peril, were straining hard. The sleigh flew.

Beaulere's grasp closed on Frank Richards' arm. Frank looked at him. The son of the remittance man was quiet and calm, even smiling.

"We shall get through, Frank!" he whispered.

Crack, crack!

The last crack was from the ice, not from the whip. The schoolboys set their teeth.

But the leader was trampling the frozen rushes of the bank now. The horses strained ashore, and the sleigh glided up the slope.

Crack!

It was not the whip.

Frank Richards, his heart thumping, looked back at the surface of ice lighted by glittering stars.

The runner-tracks lay through the snow clean-cut as by a knife, but across the white surface there appeared a dark bar, where the ice had split. Dark water was welling up through the snow-covered ice.

Frank caught his breath.

"A close shave, Beau!" he muttered.

Beaulere nodded and smiled.

The danger had been very close, but it was past.

The sleigh glided on.

It was a clear run now, and the

"They're unknown here, but sometimes in winter—"

He drove on without finishing.

The wailing cry was heard again, but faintly, afar. The sleigh rushed on at greater speed, and there was silence. The mournful, echoing howl died away in the far distance.

Crash!

There was a sudden, shrill neigh from one of the horses, and the other two reared and plunged. It was a snowdrift at last, and the sleigh was fairly in it.

Before the schoolboys knew what was happening they were tossed into the snow, and the sleigh rolled over in the drift amid the maddened, plunging horses.

The 7th Chapter. Shopping in Fraser.

Frank Richards sat up dazedly in the snow.

For a moment or two he could not realise what had happened.

His brain was whirling.

A strong grasp on his arm drew him to his feet. It was Bob's hand that helped him. Vere Beaulere was scrambling up.

"All serene?" asked Bob, panting.

"All serene, old chap! And you —"

"Right as rain."

"Nobody hurt," said Beaulere, "but the horses—"

"I guess I missed the trail by a few yards," said Bob ruefully. "It couldn't be helped. I don't know this trail well."

"It's a miracle to me that you've kept to it at all," said Frank.

Bob laughed.

"Lend a hand," he said.

The sleigh was overturned, and rugs and blankets were tossed in the snow. The three horses, almost buried in the drift, were kicking and plunging wildly.

It was no tempting task to venture among the lashing hoofs of the maddened animals, but Bob Lawless had known horses from childhood, and he was at home with them.

Without a moment's hesitation he plunged into the drift to the rescue of the team. Frank and Beaulere followed him at once.

With a steady hand and murmured words Bob soothed the leader, and dragged him up and out of the drift. The horses were got upon their feet, trembling but soothed, and almost buried in snow.

The overturned sleigh lay upon a slope, and care was required, for if it had rolled over into the drift no human means could have extricated it or the horses. And that was—death! For no one on foot could have reached safety from the heart of the snow-swept plain.

The three schoolboys grasped the sleigh when the horses had been quieted, and with combined efforts righted it at last.

They stood panting, almost exhausted, when the sleigh was once more upon its runners, but Bob only paused a few moments to recover breath.

He examined the sleigh with an anxious eye, fearful that injury might have been done, but there was no damage from the tumble in the soft snow.

"All serene!" called out Bob, in great relief.

The rugs and buffalo-ropes were gathered up and shaken clear of snow, and the sleigh was led back to the trail. There the schoolboys took their seats in it again, and Bob Lawless drove on at a more cautious pace.

The snow had ceased to fall, and the stars were shining out brilliantly once more. Bob Lawless pointed with his whip at last.

Far in the distance ahead a light glimmered.

"What is it, Bob?"

"Fraser!" said Bob briefly.

"Oh, good!"

The sight of the distant town gladdened the hearts of the chums of Cedar Creek. The half of that perilous ride was nearly over at least.

It was long past midnight, and Fraser was silent and buried in slumber when the sleigh glided into the streets.

Bob halted before the door of a store.

"The gee-gees will be all the better for a rest," he said. "Shove these rugs over them. They've got a bit of a job before them yet to get back. And now for Bridget's doll!" added Bob, with a grin.

He dealt a thundering blow at the door with the butt of his whip. It rang and echoed down the silent, frozen street.

Bang, bang!

There was a sound of movement in the house at last. An upper window was opened, and a nightcapped head, with a fur-coat wrapped round the

Hearty Greetings

from the Editor.

glittered in the starlight came into view.

"Halt, Bob Lawless, or I'll bring down your leader!" the ruffian shouted savagely. "I guess you'll have to halt then, with a broken neck, maybe!"

Bob Lawless did not answer. His teeth set, and he touched the team with the whip, and the horses leaped onward in response.

Euchre Dick was left behind for the moment.

But he spurred on furiously, and in a few minutes was level with the team again, and his right arm swung up, the revolver in his hand.

Frank Richards half rose in his seat.

In his hand was a thick rug, coiled up as hard as he could make it. His arm swung up as the rustler rode alongside, and the coiled rug flew through the air with a whiz.

Whiz! Crash!

The unexpected missile struck the horseman fairly on the side of the head, and sent him spinning.

The revolver dropped into the snow, as Euchre Dick spun over the flank of his horse, grasping desperately at rein and mane to save himself.

The horse dashed madly on, with the dismounted rustler clinging wildly to its back, panting out curses.

Bob Lawless lashed at it with the whip as it fled frantically by, and the startled animal wheeled from the trail, dashing off into the open prairie.

Horse and man vanished from sight among the whirling snowflakes.

"Good man, Frank!" muttered Vere Beaulere, his eyes glistening.

"Good man, by gum!" gasped Bob.

"I guess that rustler is sorry he spoke! Gee-whiz! Here's the other scallywag!"

Just as the sleigh entered the timber the schoolboys sighted a horseman ahead, halted in the middle of the trail, facing them.

snow round them, and the frozen river ahead.

The 6th Chapter. The Peril of the Ice.

Like points of fire in a velvet sky the stars glittered down upon the wide waste of snow.

Warmly wrapped in furs and bearskins, the schoolboy chums did not feel the cold, bitter and searching as it was.

Not a habitation, not a light, was to be seen on the lonely waste. They were ascending the ridge now, and beyond the ridge lay the river, frozen fast, a hundred yards of ice.

Would it hold?

As they came down the slope of the ridge the wide river came in sight. It was still and silent in the grip of King Winter.

Snow lay on the ice like a mantle of white velvet.

Surely the ice would hold. For weeks it had been freezing. Up by the ford there was danger. But Bob Lawless had struck the river lower down, where the water was deeper and the ice thicker.

If it did not hold they knew what it meant. They could picture the crash of breaking ice in the middle of the wide river, the yelling of the drowning horses, the fierce struggle for life in freezing water among the ice-chips.

But it would hold—it was sure to hold! Hold or not, they were going to risk it. The sleigh never paused a second.

The well-worn trail was hidden from sight under the carpet of snow, but Bob Lawless followed it as if by instinct.

And in the glittering starlight they could see traces of runners left in the snow, showing that another sleigh had passed the trail before them.

The sight of the runner-tracks encouraged them. Where others had gone they could go.

perils were from snowdrifts in the gullies. Bob Lawless slackened speed a little. He did not want to pump his team. There was hard work before them yet.

"Snow again!" muttered Beaulere, pulling his fur cap closer to his head.

It came down in masses.

The light of the stars was dimmed. In a ghostly twilight the sleigh plunged on like a phantom of the night.

Distant hills loomed like white spectres to right and left. Bob Lawless pointed with his whip to some landmark indistinguishable to his chums.

"Ten miles more to Fraser!" he called out.

"Hark!" exclaimed Frank.

From the silent waste there came a sudden, strange, eerie sound—a long-drawn, wailing cry.

So strange, so eerie was that cry of the winter night that Frank felt the blood throb to his heart as he heard it.

"Beau, did you hear—"

"I heard, but—"

"What was that, Bob?"

Bob Lawless did not answer. He did not seem to hear. Frank Richards leaned forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"Bob, did you hear that?"

"I guess so."

"What was it?"

"Nothing," said Bob.

"Don't be an ass, Bob! You know what it was. Tell me."

There was a moment's silence, and then Bob Lawless answered:

"Wolves!"

Frank Richards sank back into his seat.

"Wolves!" he repeated.

He scanned the dim plain with his eyes. Wolves! In spite of his courage, it was a word to chill the heart.

"It's hunger that's driven them down from the hills," said Bob.

them if they're still on the trail. I warn you they're looking for trouble."

"Only those two, Billy?" asked Vere Beaulere, whose handsome face was troubled.

"Them two, on their lonesome," said the ranch foreman. "What are they doing in the saddle at a time like this hyer? Looking for trouble, I guess. Steer clear of them!"

"You bet!" said Bob. He hesitated a moment. "Billy, when my popper asks after me to-night—he's bound to miss me at bed-time—tell him we've gone for a long drive, and mayn't be back before dawn."

"What?" ejaculated the ranchman. "Tell him we're all O.K.," and mother's not to be anxious," said Bob. "Gee-whiz!"

The sleigh started.

"But—" shouted the ranchman.

But the sleigh was going now, and Billy Cook was left shaking his head very solemnly.

With a musical jingle of bells and harness, the sleigh glided down the snow-covered trail.

"Keep an eye open for those two bulldozers, you chaps," said Bob. "I don't trust them half an inch—I know they're ripe for mischief. They're not going to play the same trick with this outfit that they played once with an emigrant's waggon. They would if they got half a chance."

"This outfit!" muttered Vere Beaulere, the word recurring to his mind. "That is what Euchre Dick was speaking of, then?"

"What did you say, Cherub?"

"N-nothing! But—but if we meet those two scoundrels, Bob, I'm certain they will try to stop us and collar the sleigh. They think they could sell it for a thousand dollars at a distance from here."

"I guess they could—easy!" said Bob.

"They'll try it on, if they get a chance."

"They won't get a chance!" said Bob.

The sleigh jingled on, away over the deeply shadowed plain—away at a spanking speed. Three splendid horses were pulling, and the sleigh glided behind them as if on glass. Snowflakes dashed in the faces of the schoolboys.

Far off, through banks of clouds, there was a hint of a coming moon. Through the falling snow the stars glittered like precious stones.

The well-known trail through the timber-belt lay before them; and as the gaunt trees loomed up there was a beat of hoofs in the snow, and a horseman rode alongside the sleigh.

A hoarse voice shouted from the dusk, and Bob Lawless cracked his whip and the sleigh drove on faster. The first danger of that wild night's drive was at hand.

The 5th Chapter. Rushing the Rustlers.

Bob Lawless sat like a bronze image, looking neither to right nor to left, with an iron hand on the reins. All his attention was needed to handle those powerful and mettlesome horses.

But Frank and Beau looked round at the ghostly stranger who had so suddenly loomed up from the night.

A squat figure wrapped in furs was all they could see. He sat his horse within two yards of the sleigh, keeping pace with it.

The hoarse voice shouted again.

"Bob Lawless! Is that Bob Lawless?"

"I guess so!" called back Bob, without looking round.

"Halt!"

"I guess I'm in a hurry, Euchre Dick!"

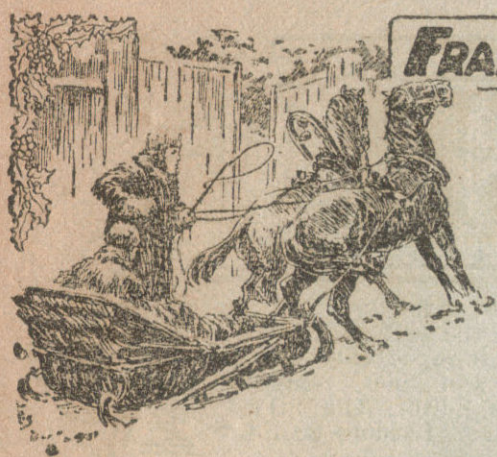
"So you know me, hang you!" muttered the horseman, pulling a little ahead so as to ride abreast with Bob's team. "You know me, you young cub!"

"I guess I'd know your galloways-face anywhere, Euchre Dick," said Bob coolly, "and your gaul-bird voice, too!"

"Hang you! Halt!"

"Not this evening."

Euchre Dick put his fingers to his lips, and a loud, sudden whistle rang far through the gloom of the timber ahead.



FRANK RICHARDS' CHRISTMAS

(Continued from the previous page.)

neck, looked out, and a fierce voice demanded:

"Who's there? Vamoose, you noisy jays, or I'll pitch a bucket of water on your dunder-heads! Hop it!"

"Good-evening, Mr. Phipps!" said Bob cheerfully.

"Great snakes! Is that young Lawless from the Thompson Valley?" yelled the storekeeper.

"You bet!"

"Well, what in thunder are you knocking a man up for at this hour?" demanded Mr. Phipps in tones of deep indignation.

"I've come to buy a doll."

"What!"

"A doll."

"You young coyote!" yelled Mr. Phipps. "You—you've come to me at one in the morning to buy a doll! Are you mad?"

"Nope!"

"Go home with you! I'll ask your popper to lay a cowhide round you for this!" shouted the storekeeper. Slam!

The window closed with emphasis. "Oh, my hat!" murmured Frank Richards in dismay.

Bob Lawless laughed softly.

"The dear man isn't quite savvy," he remarked. "After all, it's a bit disturbing to be woke up after midnight by a chap who wants to buy a doll."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But he's going to sell us that doll all the same," said Bob. "Dear old Phipps has got to come down! Here goes!"

Bang, bang, bang!

The heavy butt of the whip crashed on the door of the store. Frank and the Cherub lent the aid of their boots, and the din was something terrific.

Dogs began to bark along the street.

In five minutes the infuriated Mr. Phipps could stand it no longer. The window above the store flew up, and a red and wrathful face glared out, and the barrel of a shotgun came into view.

"I've got you covered!" roared Mr. Phipps. "Now, if you don't want a charge of buckshot into your carcass, you light out! You hear me yap?"

"I guess I'm not deaf, Phipps, old scout," said Bob sweetly. "I rather reckon half Fraser can hear you. But I'm set on that doll."

"I give you one minute to vamoose before I let buckshot into you!" shouted Mr. Phipps.

"We've not vamoosing, old pard. Look here, Phipps, it's something special. We've come all the way from the Thompson valley for that doll."

"Wha-a-at!" stammered Mr. Phipps.

"Honest Injun!"

"You've loped thirty miles in the snow for a doll!" gasped the astounded storekeeper. "You ain't staying hyer in Fraser, young Lawless?"

"Not a bit. You see, it's for a sick kid, who won't be pleased with anything else," explained Bob. "You don't want us to have the journey for nothing, Mr. Phipps. Be a good white man, and come down."

"Wal, I swow!" said Mr. Phipps. "Wait till I get into my trousers, Bob Lawless. I'll be down in a brace of shakes. Blowed if I ever heard the likes of this!"

The window closed, and Bob smiled contentedly.

"Phipps ain't a bad sort," he said. "I guessed he'd play up when he knew what it was for. All O.K. now."

In five minutes there was a rattling of a chain and the grinding of a bolt, and the door opened.

A lamp glimmered out into the snowy street, held aloft in Mr. Phipps' hand. The storekeeper seemed restored to good-humour now.

"Amble in, you young scallywags!" he said amiably.

The three chums entered the store, and Mr. Phipps pushed the door shut. The snow was blowing in after them.

"Now, I guess you've surprised me, some," said Mr. Phipps, looking very curiously at Bob. "You've humped all the way from Thompson to get a doll for the kid—hay?"

"That's it," said Bob. "Kid expects Daddy Christmas in the morn-

ing, and we're not going to disappoint her—see?"

"Wal, carry me home to die!" said the storekeeper.

He set down the lamp.

"Hyer's my stock," he said. "Purty near sold out, of course, but there's a few left. Take your choice, gents."

The storekeeper's stock of Christmas toys, brought up on the railroad for the season, had been greatly depleted by the purchases of Fraser's citizens. But there were some goods left, and the schoolboys looked over them.

"I say, that doll looks a corker!" said Bob, picking up a huge doll, the eyes of which opened and shut of their own accord as it was moved.

"Why, it's a good two feet long! That's a good 'un!"

"You bet it is!" said Mr. Phipps. "That doll's fifteen dollars, and no galoot wanted to stump up to that tune, and I guess it goes back on the railroad after Christmas. It's a bit too rich for Fraser."

"I guess it doesn't!" said Bob

cardboard box, and proceeded to wrap it up carefully.

The twelve dollars were paid over—five dollars and fifty cents from Frank and Bob each, and one dollar from Vere Beauclere, all he had.

Gladly enough the chums would have refrained from using Beauclere's little contribution, but he had a right to share, as far as he could, in helping Father Christmas to come to White Pine.

"There you are, sonny!" said the storekeeper, handing the box to Bob Lawless. "You've got a long run back."

"All serene, if Father Christmas gets in before Bridget wakes in the morning!" grinned Bob. "So-long, Mr. Phipps! Sorry we've spoiled your beauty sleep."

Mr. Phipps opened the door, and the chums trooped back to the waiting sleigh, where the box containing the doll was packed away safely. Mr. Phipps called out from the doorway as they stepped into the sleigh.

"Say, young Lawless!"

"Hallo!"

"I've heard that there are wolves on the range. Keep your eyes peeled goin' back!"

"You bet! Good-night, Mr. Phipps, an' a Merry Christmas!"

"Same to you! Good-night!"

The sleigh jingled gaily away into the starlight, and the storekeeper

Eerily through the night came the howl, faint and afar. Without the crack of the whip the horses started into greater speed. Well they knew the whine of the prowling wolf.

Driven by hunger from their lairs in the northern hills, the savage animals had ventured nearer to the habitations of man. Gaunt and hunger-stricken, they were terrible foes to approach.

And there were no weapons in the sleigh. The chums had not even thought of them. Not that weapons in the schoolboys' hands would have been of much use against a hungry wolf-pack.

The sleigh jingled on.

The howl was repeated again and again. It was coming nearer. With thumping hearts the chums realised that the prowling brutes had heard the sleigh-bells or scented the horses.

Beauclere raised a steady hand to point.

In the dimness, where the starlight lay on the drifting snow, a dark form appeared, looming through the shadows. Two fierce red eyes glittered as they caught the light.

It was a wolf.

The whining howl sounded again, and there was a whiny of terror from the horses. Another and another dark figure leaped into view from the snow.

dropped behind, and were lost to view amid the powdering snow.

But three of the fearful animals were close in pursuit, and gaining on the sleigh.

"And we have no weapon!" muttered Vere Beauclere.

"How far off now?" asked Bob, in tones of quiet calmness. He did not look round. He dared not take his eyes from the straining team and the snow-driven trail ahead.

"Twenty yards the nearest," said Frank Richards quietly. "Only three keeping up."

"When they're half the distance, throw out the bearskin rug."

"Right!"

The three schoolboys were calm and quiet. The very nearness of the terrible danger seemed to calm them.

Frank and Vere loosened the big bearskin rug, ready to throw. They had heard of such a device to delay a pursuing pack. Bob Lawless had thought of it at once. Closer and closer came the ravenous three, with red, rolling eyes and snapping jaws.

"Now!" muttered Beauclere.

Frank tossed the great, heavy bearskin into the snow behind.

In a couple of seconds the three wolves had reached it, and were tearing it madly with their teeth. The three gaunt animals struggled for it, gnashing their teeth furiously, and the schoolboys heard the horrid sound as the sleigh fled on, unpursued for the moment.

Then came a wild uproar of snarling and yelling. Snapping teeth had caught a paw in the struggle for the bearskin, and the bitten animal turned savagely upon the assailant, biting in return.

Two savage brutes were rolling over in the snow, tearing and snarling and foaming as if in madness. The third was rending the bearskin to tatters.

The sleigh raced on.

"The river!" panted Beauclere.

The frozen river gleamed ahead in the starlight. There was a long, low, howl behind, and Frank looked back. A single wolf was keeping up the chase, and faintly from the far distance came the echoes of the savage conflict still proceeding between the other two.

But the sleigh had gained a long stretch. It swept down to the frozen river, and glided out on the snow-clad ice.

The juniors almost held their breath.

But the ice was thicker here. It stood the strain without a sound. Like an arrow the sleigh passed across the frozen surface, and rushed up the bank. Frank Richards stood up to look back.

On the far side of the river the last wolf was disappearing from view in the snow. The sleigh had won the deadly race.

"All serene!" panted Frank, sinking back into his seat. "My hat! I don't want to go through that again!"

"All's well that end's well," said Beauclere, with a faint smile. "Father Christmas has had a narrow shave, but he will get to White Pine now."

For several miles more the sleigh kept up good speed. But the weary horses slackened at last. The danger of the wolves was past, and Bob allowed his team to fall into an easy trot.

Clouds had hidden the stars again. There was darkness round the sleigh, save for the white gleam of the snow. But this was familiar ground to Bob Lawless, and he drove on without a doubt or a pause.

Through the dimness a pale gleam crept in the eastern sky. Like spectres in the dark the distant summits of the Rockies loomed into view, whitened by the dawn.

It was the dawn of Christmas.

Till now the schoolboys had hardly been conscious of fatigue. But as the pale winter dawn crept up the sky they realised that they were very tired. Darkness rolled away from the mountains and the plain. Trees loomed up dimly, and then more clearly. But they were close to White Pine now.



There was a sudden shrill neigh from one of the horses, and the other two reared and plunged. Before the schoolboys knew what was happening, they were tossed into the snow, and the sleigh rolled over in the drift amid the maddened, plunging horses.

Lawless emphatically. "I guess that doll goes to Micky Muldoon's little girl at White Pine!"

"Fifteen dollars!" said Mr. Phipps laconically.

"How are you fixed, Franky?" asked Bob. "I've got the ten-dollar bill the popper gave me for Christmas."

"I've got the same," said Frank, "and some odd dollars besides."

"And I have one dollar," said Vere Beauclere quietly. "Little enough, but it goes in. Here you are!"

"Right you are, Cherub!" said Bob Lawless. "Change those bills, please, Mr. Phipps, and wrap up the doll."

"By gum!" said the storekeeper. The big, burly Canadian storekeeper hesitated a minute, and then went on; "I guess I'm not making any profit on that doll, young Lawless. I paid twelve dollars for it, and you're goin' to have it at that. So it's twelve you're stuck for, and not a cent over!"

"You're a white man, Phippy!" said Bob. "We'll tell Bridget that Father Christmas' other name is Billy Phipps."

The storekeeper laughed, and replaced the big, handsome doll in its

closed his door. Down the silent main street of Fraser the sleigh-bells jingled, and once more the white waste lay before the adventurers. Through the lightly-falling flakes the stars glittered down upon the speeding sleigh.

The 8th Chapter.
From the Jaws of Death!

Jingle, jingle!

The snow had ceased to fall. The sky was like sapphire, the stars set in it like diamonds. The merry music of the sleigh-bells rang and echoed through the vast silences of the prairie.

The speed was not so great now. Hardy and strong as the Canadian horses were, the journey was telling upon them. But there was ample time to reach White Pine before the dawn whitened the summit of the Rockies, if all went well.

The chums were silent as the sleigh glided on. They were thinking of the wild and mournful howl they had heard on the prairie on the outward run. Their eyes swept the dim expanses on all sides.

Frank Richards caught Beauclere's arm suddenly.

"Listen!" he muttered.

"They're after us!" said Frank between his teeth.

Bob's whip cracked like a pistol.

But it was hardly needed. The horses were straining now. Fatigue was forgotten in the terror inspired by the howl of the wolf.

The schoolboys looked back as the sleigh fled on. Five wolves were in sight—gaunt, haggard, wasted by famine—the famine that had drawn them far from their accustomed haunts.

As they loped behind the sleigh the schoolboys could see the gleaming jaws, from which the hot breath poured like steam.

Once within reach of those hideous fangs it was all over with the occupants of the sleigh.

Bob Lawless sat as steady as a rock, driving, holding his terrified team well in hand, and getting every ounce of speed out of the horses.

"How many, Frank?" he asked, without looking round.

"I can see five."

"Are they gaining?"

"I think so."

"We're not far off the river now," said Bob quietly.

Bob had taken a slightly different route, to cross the river lower down than before, to avoid the place where the ice had cracked. But the river was not yet in sight.

With fascinated eyes, Frank and Vere Beauclere watched the gaunt animals that loped after the sleigh in ferocious pursuit.

In the fierce race two of them

The 9th Chapter.
Father Christmas at White Pine.

A yellow sun looked down from a grey sky as Bob Lawless brought his weary team to a halt at White Pine. Even as he halted the door of the emigrant's cabin opened, and Micky Muldoon came out.

The settler stopped and stared at the sight of the sleigh.

Bob Lawless jumped down, followed by his comrades.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Muldoon!" he sang out cheerily.

"Merry Christmas to you, sorr, begorra!" said Mr. Muldoon. "And phwat are yez doin' so far from home at this hour?"

"We've just come from Fraser."

IN YOUR EDITOR'S DEN

I would like all my readers to look upon me as their real friend, someone to whom they can come for help and advice when they are in doubt or difficulty. It is never "too much trouble" to me to be of use to my boy and girl friends if they feel they would like to write to me.

Write to me whenever you are in doubt or difficulty. Tell me about yourself; let me know what you think of the BOYS' FRIEND. All readers who write to me, and enclose a stamped envelope or postcard, may be sure of receiving a prompt and kindly reply by post. All letters should be addressed: "The Editor, THE BOYS' FRIEND, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4."

THE GREETINGS OF THE SEASON!

I feel that it is incumbent upon me to commence my Chat this week by wishing all my loyal readers the greetings of the season. I trust that every one of my chums will have a good Christmas, unaccompanied by any form of revelry. There are no times for gaiety of any description. There is serious work on hand. We have to carry on with the task of defeating the unspeakable Hun. It is a formidable task, but if we have not the grit and the determination to carry the job through to the end, we are not worthy of the name of Britishers. Thousands of our countrymen have given their lives in the great cause. They leave friends and relations at home who deeply mourn their deaths. Their sorrow is great. Let us not, therefore, add to their sorrows by indulging in revelry, and showing an utter disregard to the sufferings of others. Let us rather spend our Christmas in a quiet, orderly manner, observing all the while the injunctions of the Food Controller. When we have achieved the victory for which we are fighting, when the Prussian military machine has been crushed for ever, then may we all spend our Christmas as of yore.

I trust that in twelve months' time I shall have the unbounded pleasure of addressing my Christmas wishes to you with the knowledge that the Hun is suffering the sorrows of defeat, and that the peace of the world has been secured for generations to come.

NEXT MONDAY'S PROGRAMME.

As I told you last week, more will be heard of Algy Silver, Jimmy's scapegrace cousin. He will appear in next Monday's long, complete tale of the Rookwood chums, entitled:

"MORNINGTON'S LAST PLUNGE!"

By Gwen Conquest.

The scene of this story is laid at Jimmy Silver's home. Peele and Gower, the cads of the Fourth, are staying near by, and they succeed in leading Algy astray. You will, I feel sure, be interested to read how Mornington made a last desperate plunge, and of what came of it.

Our next story, dealing with the schooldays of Frank Richards, the famous author, is entitled:

"GUNTEN'S LITTLE GAME!"

By Martin Clifford.

Miss Meadows has occasion to call Gunten to account for playing cards. Gunten is very indignant at being

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reprimanded, and he longs to get his revenge on the "schoolmarm." Miss Meadows sends Frank Richards to the office of the Thompson Press with an advertisement. And then Gunten chips in. What he does you will learn when you read this splendid yarn.

"THE BOYS OF THE BOMBAY CASTLE!"

By Duncan Storm.

due to appear in our next issue, calls for special comment. El Pulga, the bandit, offers to return the boys their clothes providing three of the latter box and defeat three of the bandit's followers.

Chip hits upon a splendid idea. He

decides to dress three of the stokers up as schoolboys, and send them to box the bandits. The fight will send you into roars of laughter, and you will also enjoy reading how Flashman, the bully, endeavoured to get the boys captured by the police, and how the tables were neatly turned on him.

Next Monday's long, complete tale of Dick, Frank, and Joe, dealing with their quest for King Nadur's diamonds, is entitled:

"THE WHITE DWARFS!"

By Maurice Everard.

The little party of adventurers are finding the quest for the diamonds a very hazardous one, and in next Monday's story they have some most exciting times. There are incidents in this story that will hold you spell-bound, and I would urge upon everyone of you not to fail to read it.

The concluding item in next Monday's issue will be a fine tale told in the dormitory by Tom Rawson, entitled:

"THE FOOL OF THE FAMILY!"

Tom Rawson describes in a splendid style how a young fellow, called by all the fool of the family, through the schemings of his rascally brother, was made to suffer, and how in the end, by sheer grit, he pulled

through, and won for himself a high position.

In conclusion, I would advise every reader to make a point of ordering next Monday's issue in advance. The shortage of paper is getting more serious than ever, and only those readers who place an order with their newsagents are sure of securing their copies.

DUNCAN STORM'S GREAT STORY.

Have you secured your copy of "The Maharajah's Belt"? If not, you had better do so at once, otherwise you will find that your newsagent has sold out.

"The Maharajah's Belt" is the first volume of that most successful BOYS' FRIEND serial story, entitled "The Secret City." It is a story that created a great sensation when it appeared in the "B. F.," and it is a story that none of you should fail to read in book form.

You should ask your newsagent for No. 408 of the "BOYS' FRIEND Library."

Your Editor



FRANK RICHARDS' CHRISTMAS

(Continued from the previous page.)

Muldoon, with tears in her tired eyes, as she took the doll.

The settler's wife went into the cabin.

"Now it's about time we got home to bed," grinned Bob. "Come to think of it, I'm a bit tired."

"Hark!" said Frank. They stepped closer to the doorway of the cabin.

A weak, childish voice could be heard. Bridget had awakened.

"Mummy!"

"Yes, dearie."

"It's Christmas, mummy."

"Yes, dear, it's Christmas."

"Has Father Christmas come?"

Frank Richards and his chums looked at one another. But for the arrival of the schoolboys poor Mrs. Muldoon would have had a bitterly disappointing reply to make to the child's question.

At that moment the chums of Cedar Creek felt more than repaid for the stress and the danger of that wild night's ride through the snow.

In silence they listened.

"Has he come, mummy? I'm sure he would come. See if Father Christmas has been, mummy."

"Sure, I'll see, darling."

The poor woman's voice was happy now as she answered.

There was a pause, and then from the cabin came a cry of delight.

"Oh, mummy!"

It was a cry so full of infantile joy and satisfaction that it went straight to the hearts of the listeners.

"Begor!" murmured Micky Muldoon, "begor, an' sure Heaven will bless ye, young jintlemen, for phwat ye've done."

"Oh, mummy! Isn't it a beauty? I knew Father Christmas wouldn't forget us, mummy. Oh, mummy!"

Mrs. Muldoon stepped to the door, and signed to the schoolboys to enter. They looked in.

Little Bridget was sitting up in her cot, with the doll in her arms. It was such a doll as the child had never seen before, such a doll as she had never dreamed of possessing. Her pale face was flushed now, her eyes were sparkling. She hugged the doll and crooned over it.

She looked up brightly, and smiled to the schoolboys.

"Bob! He's come!"

"Has he?" exclaimed Bob; "who has, Bridget?"

"Father Christmas!" Bridget laughed happily. "I knew he would, Bob, and you said he would, too."

Some folks don't believe in Father Christmas. Look what he brought me!"

"It's ripping!" said Bob. "Good old Father Christmas! He was bound to come, Bridget!"

"You can hold it if you like, Bob," said Bridget generously.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob.

He took the doll for a moment, Bridget watching it hungrily. And the child was evidently glad when her little arms closed once more upon her treasure.

"It's eyes open and shut, Bob. Look!"

"Fancy that!" said Bob, in great surprise.

Bridget laid her head on the pillow again, the doll cuddled in her arms. Bob Lawless rejoined his chums.

"Come on, you chaps," he said. "By gum! It was worth that drive!"

"Heaven bless you!" was all poor Mrs. Muldoon could say. "Heaven bless you, young gentlemen, for this!"

With happy hearts, the chums of Cedar Creek stepped into the sleigh. At an easy pace Bob drove away from the lonely cabin. They left happiness behind them there.

"Home now," said Frank.

"We'll call at the school!" said Bob.

"Miss Meadows was to be fetched to the ranch early this morning. We'll take her along, and the popper can't rag us with Miss Meadows looking on—see?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And they drove on merrily to Cedar Creek.

The 10th Chapter. A Merry Christmas

Miss Meadows was expecting to be called for at the school that morning. The rancher's sleigh arrived a little earlier than was expected, that was all.

Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey entered the vehicle, and Bob turned his team in the direction of the ranch.

"You boys look tired," Miss Meadows remarked, as Frank Richards' chin was dropping on his chest.

Frank straightened up rather guiltily.

"Nunno—not at all!" he stammered.

"Not a bit!" said Beauclerc.

Miss Meadows looked at them rather keenly.

"The horses are tired, too," she said. "You must have been out a very long time; yet it is still early morning."

"Tell Miss Meadows, and she'll make it right with the popper, Franky," said Bob Lawless, over his shoulder.

"What have you to tell me, Richards?" asked the schoolmistress,

a little severely, and Mr. Slimmey blinked at the chums over his gold-rimmed glasses.

"We've been out all night, Miss Meadows," confessed Frank.

"What! Where have you been?"

"To Fraser!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Slimmey. "My boys—Fraser—and there are wolves on the range."

"The wolves have had Mr. Lawless' bearskin rug," said Beauclerc. "I hope he won't mind, as they had to have that—or us!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Meadows. "Tell me at once what you have been doing."

Frank Richards told the whole story. He wondered whether Miss Meadows would be angry; but as he looked at the schoolmaster's face when he had finished he saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

"My dear, dear boys!" said Miss Meadows; "my dear, dear boys! You should not have gone—it was too terribly dangerous; but—but I am proud of you! I do not think Mr. Lawless will be angry when he knows!"

"So Father Christmas came to White Pine after all!" said Mr. Slimmey, wiping his spectacles.

"You bet!" chuckled Bob Lawless, "and if you'd seen the kid's face, Mr. Slimmey, you'd have thought it was worth it."

The sleigh jingled up to the ranch. Mr. Lawless ran to meet it, and Mrs. Lawless, in the porch, breathed a deep sigh of relief at the sight of her son, safe and sound.

"You young rascals!" shouted the rancher as the sleigh halted. "Good morning, Miss Meadows; good-morning, Mr. Slimmey! Merry Christmas! You young rascals, where have you been?"

"Bob!" exclaimed Mrs. Lawless.

"You weren't alarmed, mother?" asked Bob, remorsefully. "I gave Billy Cook a message—"

"Billy gave us the message," said the rancher gruffly; "but your mother was anxious all the same, you young scallywag. Do you think you are old enough to take a night out on the prairie in a sleigh?"

"Under the circumstances, popper," said Bob. "You tell him, Miss Meadows—I can see he is going to be mad with us."

The rancher was in rather a difficulty. His son's escapade could not be passed over, but a dozen guests were gathering round to see the returning wanderers, as well as Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey.

But Miss Meadows hastened to explain, and the cloud cleared off from the rancher's brow.

Several of the Cedar Creek schoolboys had arrived at the ranch with their parents for Christmas Day, and

they gathered round Frank Richards and Co. There was a buzz of amazement from all as Miss Meadows told the story of Father Christmas coming to White Pine.

"The young rascals!" gasped the rancher. "Oh, the scallywags! Bob, you young villain—suppose the wolves —"

He gasped.

"They've had your bearskin rug, popper," said Bob cheerfully.

"You've been to Fraser, Bob!" exclaimed Chunky Todgers, catching Bob's arm. "Well, it beats the Dutch! I say, old fellow, did you think of bringing back any maple sugar with you?"

"Never thought of it, Chunky," said Bob, with a chuckle.

"I wish I'd been with you!"

"I wish you had, Chunky; you'd have stopped the wolves better than the bearskin if we'd dropped you out!"

"Groogh!" said Chunky, with a shiver.

"You young rascals!" repeated the rancher; "you ought to be cowed for running such risks. But if your schoolmistress thinks you can be forgiven, I'd better think the same, I guess."

"Hear, hear!" said Bob cheerily.

"I—I say, mother, I—I'm sorry if you were anxious. I—I thought you'd like that kid to get the doll, though what anybody wants with a doll beats me hollow. You're not waxy?"

Mrs. Lawless bent and kissed her son with tears in her eyes.

"I have been alarmed," she said.

"I should have been terribly alarmed if I had known what you were doing. But—but I am proud of you, Bob, and of your friends, too!"

"Three cheers!" roared Billy Cook, waving his hat.

And the crowd of guests and the ranchmen joined heartily in the cheers, till Frank Richards and Co. were glad to hide their blushes in the ranch-house. And that Christmas Day was spent by the chums of Cedar Creek in deep slumber.

But in the evening they were quite themselves again. It was a merry Christmas at the ranch—one of the merriest Frank Richards had ever known—and it was made all the happier to the chums by the knowledge that they had brought happiness to others. And a dozen times, at least, the story had to be told of how Father Christmas came to White Pine.

THE END.

NEXT MONDAY!

"GUNTEN'S LITTLE GAME!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

DON'T MISS IT!



DE COURCY'S CHUM!

A Splendid Long Complete Christmas Story, introducing the Juniors of Highcliffe School.

Specially Written for this Issue of the BOYS' FRIEND.

**The 1st Chapter.
Rough Luck!**

"You're too suspicious, Rupert!" It was Frank Courtenay, the captain of the Fourth Form at Highcliffe, who said this; and he spoke to his chum, Rupert De Courcy, generally known as the Caterpillar.

"Think so, dear boy? But I know you do. You're wrong, though, by gad! When a fellow has to do with the dear Pon—the merry Pon—he can't be too suspicious. Bolo and Bernstorff, and the gentleman in the Argentine who wanted 'em sunk without trace are all mere amateurs in Hunnish willness compared with the merry Pon!"

"But Pon's gone! We sha'n't see him again till next term. He and Gadsby, and Monson and Vavasour all went off together yesterday."

"Yaas, Franky, I know that. Question is why they cleared out a day before the rest of us!"

"And the answer is 'Don't know, and don't care a rap!'"

But the Caterpillar shook a doubtful head.

On the face of it, there really was not much reason why he should think that Cecil Ponsonby had some fresh plot against Frank Courtenay on foot, merely because Ponsonby and his special pals had got leave to go home for the Christmas holidays a day in advance of the rest of Highcliffe.

But the Caterpillar looked deeper than appearances; and the close watch he kept upon Pon had saved Frank from more than one very real danger.

Courtenay and Ponsonby were cousins; but they were not friends, and they never could be, though Courtenay was willing enough to be reconciled with Pon.

But Pon felt differently.

When it had been discovered that Arthur Clare—"the boy without a name"—was really Frank Courtenay, the long-lost son of Major Courtenay, all Cecil Ponsonby's chance of succeeding to his uncle's money had vanished.

He had hated and persecuted Clare, the nameless outsider; but he hated Courtenay, "the usurper," with far greater venom.

Frank Courtenay was going home with the Caterpillar for the earlier half of the holidays. Later he would join his father, and the Caterpillar would go with him.

At present, Major Courtenay was engaged on very special business for the War Office.

Greatly to his disgust, he had been pronounced too old for the fighting-line; but he could be useful in other ways, and, of course, he was glad to be so.

The arrangement suited both boys. David and Jonathan were not closer chums than Frank Courtenay and Rupert De Courcy.

They had never yet tired of one another's company, and they could not imagine themselves doing so.

"Telegram for you, sir," said the page, approaching Frank.

"Don't open it, Franky, dear boy! I've a presentiment that it's somethin' ghastly unpleasant, y'know. Drop it in the fire, an' forget it!" said the Caterpillar.

Frank laughed as he slit open the orange envelope, though his laughter had not its usual ring.

"You may deal with things in that off-hand way, Rupert," he said.

"But I can't."

"Comes of havin' too tender a conscience, by gad!" murmured the Caterpillar. "Glad mine got hardened once for all in the dear, dead days beyond recall, when Pon an' I played together on the brae—whatever a brae may be—an' pulled the gowans—whatever gowans are—anyway there was plenty of nap an' banker, which are more suitable to Pon's tastes than braes an' gow-

ans— Why, what on the earth is the matter, old chap?"

Frank had not been listening to De Courcy's chatter. His face had paled as he read the wire, and now it dropped from his hand.

The Caterpillar picked it up.

"Read it, Rupert!" said Frank hoarsely.

"Sure you want me to, dear boy? I don't want to intrude, y'know."

"You can't! When I begin to have secrets from you—"

Frank broke off.

In one glance his chum read the fateful telegram.

He crumpled it up in his hand, and his eyes glinted as he said:

"Franky, I shouldn't go!"

"What? Oh, that's too silly, Rupert! I must go!"

"I shouldn't! I should take no dashed notice of this!"

Courtenay stared at him in amazement.

"The pater wires to me that he's ill and practically alone at Castle Lawbreck, miles away from anywhere; and you tell me you'd take no notice of it—you wouldn't go? Why, you must be mad!"

"I may be, dear boy. One never knows. But I don't think I am. An' I don't believe that the major is at

the right place," answered Frank, smiling wanly. "And if it's a big scale map you may find Castle Lawbreck marked, too. It's up in the wilds, far away from the nearest station, and half ruinous."

"In the Highlands, I take it?"

"No, chump! I'm not sure whether it's Kirkcudbright or Wigtown, but it's somewhere in that corner of Scotland."

"Oh, yaas! The south-west corner—go up one, De Courcy! But what's Castle Thingummy got to do with the house of Courtenay, by gad, Franky?"

"It belongs to the pater—left him a year or two ago by an old Scottish friend who had no relatives he cared about."

"Ever been there, dear boy?"

"No. The pater had a shooting-party there once. There's hundreds of acres of hill and moor and peat-hags. But the Castle is something short of watertight for the most part, and staying there means roughing it. Not that I'd mind that, of course. But there really isn't much to go for. The place is a bit of a white elephant altogether."

"Pon ever been there?"

"I don't know. Yes, he has, though—I remember now."

always seemed to appreciate me no end."

"So he does, Rupert! So he ought, for no fellow ever had a better chum than you've been to me. But there may be something seriously wrong—and yet that seems impossible, too! What should there—what can there be? My father is not the kind of man the shadow of shame could touch."

"An' even if he were—but he isn't—that wouldn't be a reason for keepin' me out of it, Franky! If your help were needed—well, then, in my little way I might help, too, surely—an' by gad, I would!"

Frank wrung his chum's hand. He was genuinely touched; but his mind refused to share what he regarded as De Courcy's wild suspicions, and to him there seemed nothing to be done but to obey the summons given him in that telegram.

It was rough luck!

He did not greatly mind a long journey under very wintry conditions. That was nothing to a fellow of his hardy frame.

But he had looked forward to the good times at De Courcy's home; and he knew that the Caterpillar had looked forward to them, too, and would not enjoy them half as much in his absence.

As for his chum's somewhat off-hand manner, that did not surprise him in the least. It was not the Caterpillar's way to show what he felt.

And it was not the Caterpillar's way to desert a friend in danger.

Perhaps Courtenay wasn't in danger. He refused to believe that he was. And Rupert De Courcy's wildest imaginations did not stretch quite to actual tragedy.

Pon didn't mean killing. The Caterpillar was sure of that, at least. But if Pon was in this—and the Caterpillar believed he was—he meant something beastly unpleasant for his enemy.

De Courcy had no intention of going to Paddington at all. He had already wired home that he and Frank need not be expected until they arrived.

He went to the booking-office, and took a ticket to the same station for which Frank had booked.

"I say, I take it there really is such a place, y'know, old sport?" he said to the booking-clerk.

"What do you think?" snapped that official.

"Well, as you ask me, I don't think there is."

"What do you want to go there for, then?"

"I don't, old chap—I don't! It's about the last place—barrin' Jericho—I'd care to go to."

"But you've taken a ticket for it."

"Yaas. Matter of necessity. You're a truthful-lookin' individual—regular George Washington cut about you, by gad!—an' if you'll only say that Gatehouse of Fleet is a real, bona fide place—"

"It is. Please move on. There are others wanting tickets."

"But not for Gatehouse of Fleet, dear boy, I'm sure. Don't tell me I'm not an unique case, now, or—"

"I tell ye so, laddie," said a voice behind him. "I'm no wantin' a ticket, for I've a warrant, ye ken; but I'm gaun to Gatehouse of Fleet, and moreover, it's my hame when I'm at hame."

The Caterpillar made room at the pigeon-hole for the next passenger. That personage—a stout old gentleman, muffled up to the very tip of his nose, snorted angrily at the delay; but De Courcy paid him no attention.

He was looking at the man who had spoken to him.

This man was plainly on leave from the Front. He bore the badge of a famous Scottish regiment, and he carried his pack and a "tin hat," and various trophies, on his broad back. He was tanned and scarred and hard-bitten, an old soldier from top to toe.

And he was old enough to be the Caterpillar's father. But that did not matter.

From the moment the sleepy blue eyes of Rupert de Courcy looked into the honest grey ones of David Carmichael the bonds of friendship were knitted between them.

No more than most Scots was Corporal Carmichael in the habit of making sudden friendships. But the Caterpillar had a way with him.

"I'm charmed to hear it, by gad!" said De Courcy. "An' you have really lived at Gatehouse of Fleet? I begin to think better of the place already. May I have the honour of travellin' with you?"

"Ay, laddie, if ye wull. Ye should be lively company, I'm thinkin'."

"Yaas, perhaps—when I'm awake. But the real benefit of the arrangement will be that when we come to the places to change—I suppose there will be a dozen of them, more or less—you can wake me up if I happen to be asleep. D'ye catch on?"

They walked off together.

The Caterpillar found that there was time to visit the refreshment-room, and he laid in a stock sufficient for two healthy appetites.



A single light loomed up over the moor. Frank Courtenay had not expected a blazing, cheerful front, but this one light was almost worse than darkness. There was no promise of welcome in it.

Castle Lawbreches, or whatever the name of the dashed place is, either!"

"But this proves it!" said Frank, taking the telegram from the Caterpillar's hand to look at it again.

"Not at all, dear boy! It doesn't even prove that Castle Lawlord, or whatever it is, exists. It has been handed in at a place called Gatehouse of Fleet—such a dashed silly name that I should have my doubts about that if we hadn't a sign an' token that it has a telegraph-office, which it couldn't have if it wasn't there—though I'm dashed if I know where there is!"

"You'll find Gatehouse of Fleet on any map of Scotland if you look in

"Ah!"

"But what's Ponsonby got to do with it?" snapped Courtenay.

"Pon knows his way there. That's point No. 1. Pon left twenty-four hours in advance of present company—point No. 2. Pon would do anythin'—anythin' in the wide, wide world to make things unpleasant for his beloved cousin—that's point No. 3. No, I wouldn't go if I were you, Franky! An' if I did, I'd take a pal with me."

"But the pater specially says I'm to come alone."

"Was it the major who said that? It doesn't sound like him to object to yours faithfully. The old boy has

Rough luck, indeed! But his father called, and he must go—and go alone!

**The 2nd Chapter.
Following Up.**

"Well, ta-ta, dear boy! I hope you will find things just as you'd like to have them, y'know, but I can't say I expect it."

Frank Courtenay was rather surprised that the Caterpillar should desert him before his train went out. He knew that there was more than enough time to reach Paddington before the train which they were to have taken together left.



DE COURCY'S CHUM!

(Continued from the previous page.)

It might not be precisely what he would have chosen; but it had to do, and these were not days for counting upon grub on the train. He had escorted Frank well to the front of the train. He and his new friend took their places in a compartment near the rear. Within a few minutes the snow-covered roofs were sliding past them, and they were en route for Gatehouse of Fleet and Castle Lawbreck—Castle Lawbreck in the Caterpillar's case, that is. But Carmichael knew the castle, it appeared, and was aware to whom it belonged. "This a lonesome place," he said. "No the kind o' place I'd fancy ye spendin' Christmas in, laddie. But fin' an' easy lyin' an' good livin' will brighten ony place—forbye friends to welcome ye." "I'm not too sure of any of those things," replied the Caterpillar coolly. "Eh? Are ye daft?" "I don't think so, old sport. But other people do. I won't hide that fact from you." Carmichael laughed deep down inside him—a great, rumbling laugh. "There's a story hangin' to this, I'm thinking," he said. "Yaas, you're right. I'll tell you it before we get to Fleethouse—" "Gatehouse of Fleet," corrected the Scot. "Oh, beg pardon! I won't get wrong again. Meanwhile, you might tell me about the things that go on over there." "Weel, there isna muckle to tell. We fecht, an' we eat when we can, an' we lie hard an' soft—when it's soft it's wet, ye'll ken—an' we keep Fritz busy. An' we see oor best freens killed by oor sides an' we dinna love Fritz the better for that, seein' that we ken fine he made this war. An' the ither day I lost ma best chum, an' my wrest-watch forbye. I'll tell ye about that, laddie." He told a story—a simple enough one, such as all of us have heard. A sentry on duty—a shell—another item for the casualty list—a good man gone—and David Carmichael's wrist watch, which the sentry had been wearing, gone, too. David grieved for his friend sincerely, but he was angry about the loss of his watch. That Mucklewrath should go west was all in the day's work; it might as easily have been Carmichael, or any other—but that the watch should have been smashed to atoms seemed to David nothing short of personal spite on the part of Fritz. The Caterpillar's wrist-watch was worth at least twenty pounds. If he could have had his way he would have handed it over to Carmichael then and there. But he knew better than to offer it. Such an offer would only have offended his new comrade. All through the Midlands snow lay thickly alongside the line. In the Black Country and Lancashire it was pitted and spotted by the smoke from the many chimneys, and everything looked miry and woe-begone; but when they had passed the thronged and busy districts they saw a far-spreading mantle of white on either side, and above it a lowering, purple sky that promised more to follow. At Carlisle it was town snow again—a dirty grey at best—and the smoke hung low over it, and night was drawing in. Beyond this last busy town there seemed nothing but snow, and on the branch line the train crawled through it as if at any moment it might have to stop. The soldier and the schoolboy were like old friends by this time. They had eaten together and talked together. They had seen the last of their fellow-passengers get out, and now had the compartment to themselves. And at the junction, Carmichael, on a bare request, and without a word of explanation, had shielded the Caterpillar from the gaze of Frank Courtenay as he wandered past, while they waited on a bleak platform for the local train. And now De Courcy told the soldier his story. "You'll think I'm mad, of course," he said, when he had made an end. "But that's how it is." "I dinna think ye mad, laddie. I think ye're a freen in a thousan'! Ye may be wrang; but, somehow, as ye tell the story, it seems like eno' to me. Yon Castle Lawbreck's a weird auld

place, an' onythin' might happen there. If there's aught to be done, ye'll let me help ye?" "Oh, by Jove, you know, I can't drag you into it, old sport! It would spoil your leave to be wanderin' around in these deserts with me, instead of sittin' by the home fires." "The auld mither's dead," said Carmichael simply. "There's a welcome for me still. Ma brither John wul be pleased to set eyes on me again. But he doesna ken I'm on the way, an' he an' his wife winna miss me. An' as for deserts, they're that to the like of ye, I'm no doubtin'; but they're hame to David Carmichael, an' there isna a place within a score miles o' Gatehouse of Fleet that he couldna find his way to blind-fold." "I won't say 'No,' then," said the Caterpillar. "By gad, it's luck to have happened on the one man who can really give me guidance an' help! I mustn't say the only inhabitant of Gatehouse of Fleet, I suppose, as your brother and his wife live there, an' I don't suppose they'd keep a telegraph-office an' a railway-station goin' just for those two. But I might have gone all my life without happenin' upon another man who knew Castle Lawbreck."

The 3rd Chapter. Frank in the Toils.

Frank Courtenay all this time imagined the Caterpillar as on the journey they two were to have made together. He thought of him often, and wished that he could have had De Courcy's cheery company. But the telegram had said that he was to come alone, and he had felt it impossible to bring the Caterpillar along in face of that. Chiefly, however, he thought of his father—wondered what could be wrong with him, why he had not explained more, why he should be at bleak, lonely Castle Lawbreck for Christmas. Gatehouse of Fleet was reached at last, and Frank alighted, utterly weary and depressed. Something sinister seemed to be hanging over him. Of danger to himself he had no thought; and his cousin, Cecil Ponsonby, was not in his mind. But he dreaded what might have happened to his father. It was snowing hard now, and the platform of Gatehouse of Fleet was not brilliantly illuminated. Frank failed to perceive the only other passengers who got out of the train; and this was not wonderful, for they were at some trouble to keep him from seeing them. A lean, dark-visaged man whom he had never seen before came forward and asked: "Are you Mr. Courtenay, sir? I have a trap waiting for you outside." "Yes," said Frank. "But tell me first—is my father all right?" "The major, sir, had taken a turn for the better before I left. So much I am allowed to say, but my instructions are that beyond that I am not to talk. All will be made clear when you reach Castle Lawbreck. Would you be wishing any refreshment before we start, sir?" "No!" snapped Frank, though he was both hungry and thirsty. He did not like this smooth-spoken, mysterious man. They passed out together, and the Caterpillar, keeping well under cover, saw Frank clamber into a trap. His heart sank as his chum disappeared into the swirling snow. But he had to let him go. If all turned out well, Frank should never know that he had been dogged the whole length of England and over the Border by a too anxious pal. And if anything was wrong—the Caterpillar was more than ever inclined to believe that this was a plot—there was no need to keep the trap in sight, or to worry about finding his way to Castle Lawbreck. The first would have been clean impossible. There was no vehicle at the station to follow in. As for finding his way, he had the man from the Front to depend upon, and his faith in David Carmichael was as the faith of Bruce in the Lord of the Isles—"firm as Ailsa Rock." "I'll speir a thing or twa here," said David. "The porter's an auld acquaintance o' mine, an' he'll talk to me suner than to ye, I'm thinkin'." Another fellow might have thought it necessary to put questions into David's mouth. The Caterpillar did not prompt him by as much as a syllable.

He stood there in the draughty waiting-room, with a smouldering fire and a guttering light, while David held converse with Jock Samson, the wooden-faced-looking porter. And David proved worthy of his confidence. "Ye're richt—richt up to the hilt, laddie!" he said, returning to Rupert. "Jock tells me that he's acquent wi' the major, an' he's certain sure that the major's no at the castle. Na ane was there at a till a day or twa back, when yon black-avised loon that drove young Courtenay aff wi' him came along. But yestreen there came four dressed-up mannies, an' Blackface met them, an' Jock heard ane o' the four call anither 'Pon,' an' anither was 'Vav,' an' yet anither 'Gaddy,' Unco' queer names, Jock thoct—outlandish like. Ye'll be wantin' a machine, I jalouse?" "A tandem would be quite a hefty notion if there wasn't so much dashed snow an' my legs weren't so dashed cramped." "Was it a bicycle ye thoct o'? Nay, laddie; a machine hereaboot means a vehicle, ye ken." "By gad, I'm glad of that! It will be cold, but better than a bike. Can you get a machine, David?" "Ay, an' that wull I, if I hae to lift it oot o' its owner's bairn. But they ken me in Gatehouse o' Fleet, an' that wull no be necessair, I'm thinkin'. Wull ye wait here?" "No fear! I'll go with you, David. I should get the horrors if I let you out of my sight!" "I'm thinkin' ye'd bear up like a mon in worse than that!" replied the soldier drily. They passed out side by side, and behind them Jock Samson began to put out the station lights. The Caterpillar walked in darkness with the man he had known but a few hours, and felt as confident as if he had a whole Army corps at his back. Meanwhile, Frank Courtenay sat by the side of the silent driver, with the snow whirling round them, and fell a prey to all sorts of forebodings, except the right ones. Of Pon he did not think, in spite of the Caterpillar's warning; but he imagined all sorts of dreadful things in connection with his father. The drive seemed endless. Not once did they pass through a village. Now and then a far-off light twinkled through the snow, that was all. The drifts were piled high by the wayside, and the wind howled, cutting to the bone. And never once did the driver speak of his own accord. He answered Frank's few questions as briefly as might be. None of them as brieny as might be. None of them concerned the boy's real fears. He was too proud to inquire after what the man had said. "That is the castle, sir," said the fellow at length. His tones were respectful enough, but there was something in his manner which made Frank dislike him acutely. "Where?" "That light over there." A single light loomed up over the moor. Frank had not expected a blazing, cheerful front, but this one light was almost worse than darkness. There was no promise of welcome in it. Five minutes later he clambered stiffly from his seat. He was chilled through and through, and the snow lay thick upon his overcoat. He was little fit for fight, and as little did he expect that a fight lay before him. Yet when the heavy oaken door swung open, and he saw the sneering face of Cecil Ponsonby in the lighted hall, and behind Pon's the faces of Vavasour and Gadsby and Monson minor, the fighting-blood was up in him at once. The Caterpillar had been right, then! Frank did not doubt that now. He had been tricked and trapped. The telegram was a lie. There was nothing wrong with his father. Even in his rage that certainty came to him as a relief. This was but another of his black-guardly cousin's plots, and these grinning cowards, any two of whom he would cheerfully have undertaken to thrash, were all in it. Well, they should see. If only the Caterpillar had been there! They two together would have made those four young scoundrels rue their trick. "Welcome to Castle Lawbreck, Courtenay!" said Pon, grinning. The answer he got was a fist full in his face. He staggered back. Gadsby went down. Monson was hurled on top of him. Vavasour bolted. But the fight was brief. Frank was handicapped by his overcoat, and the four would have been far too much for him without any help from the man behind. It was the man behind who got Frank down, though. He flung his

arms around him, and bore him to the floor. "Shall I tie him up, sir?" he said to Ponsonby in just such a tone as he might have used had he been asking whether Pon would take a cup of tea. "He seems inclined to be violent." "Oh, by gad! Inclined to be violent, by gad! Why, the brute's murderous!" spluttered Monson. "Really, Courtenay, this is too dashed thick for anythin'!" said Ponsonby, with a well-pretended air of virtuous indignation. "What on earth did you go at your father's guests like that for?" But not even for a moment did Frank doubt now that the Caterpillar was right. "You lying cur!" he hissed. "But you shall smart for this!" "Think so, Clare? I ain't so dashed sure of that, d'ye know! You're my prisoner here, an' you don't go till I've had your word of honour that you won't try to get at any of us in any way whatever for this little game of ours—see? We're not goin' to do anythin' horrible, y'know. We only mean to give you a really enjoyable Christmas. An' you're such an honourable chap that you can't go back on your word, an' such a dashed forgivin' one that I don't doubt that in a few weeks you'll be ready to offer me the glad hand of a kinsman again, as per usual, by gad! Oh, you sneakin', low-bred, usurpin' pup, you're in my hands now, an' by gad I'll make you wish you'd never crossed my path!" "I say, Pon, don't rub it in too hard, y'know," said Vavasour weakly. "Serve the brute right!" mumbled Monson. "Buck up, Vav! It's only a little joke on Courtenay," Gadsby said, with an evil grin. "Oh, absolutely!" replied Vavasour. "Only a little joke, Courtenay. It ain't a bit of good gettin' on your ear about it, y'know!"

The 4th Chapter. To the Rescue!

But it would have been very much more than a little joke had not the Caterpillar and David Carmichael, of the Cameronians, intervened! A room with broken window-panes in a snowstorm, a mattress and a single blanket, the scantiest of food, and no drink but water that froze in the pitcher, no hope of release till he had given his assurance that he would not tell or seek revenge—all these things seemed to Frank Courtenay anything but a joke! He was at the mercy of those four young blackguards who hated him, and there seemed to be no one else within the walls of Castle Lawbreck but Simons, Ponsonby's man, the dark-visaged fellow who had met him at the station. Simons was the slave of Ponsonby's will; in him there lay no hope. And Frank had made up his mind that he would endure anything before he gave that assurance. He would bite his tongue out first! It had been late—far past his usual bedtime—when he reached the castle; but whole weeks of misery seemed to pass before the grey light of a snowy dawn made its way through the barred and broken windows. Not once had he closed his eyes. Christmas Eve! And this was to be his Christmas—a prisoner to his enemies, fellows whom he had never harmed by word or deed! What was the Caterpillar doing? Somehow Frank was sure that De Courcy had not put all his doubts from him directly he turned his face homeward. Would he wonder at hearing nothing, and come to seek his chum? He did not guess that Rupert had already come—and gone! But not gone for good. It was not the Caterpillar's way to throw up an enterprise in which his sympathies were really enlisted. David had got a "machine." But the horse which drew it was a far older and less powerful animal than that which Pon had hired. The journey to Castle Lawbreck was an ordeal that the Caterpillar will never forget as long as his life lasts. Once they capsized in a snowdrift, but David hauled the horse out somehow, and never apologised by so much as a word. The Caterpillar liked that. David was doing all he knew how, and it was only right that he should take it for granted his companion knew it. And at last, through the driving snow, they sighted the black mass of the old, half-ruined castle. "What's the plan of campaign, sir?" asked David. "Dashed if I know! There's no light showin', by gad! Everybody's gone to by-by—Pon & Co. on featherbeds, no doubt, an' poor old Franky in the deep, dark dungeon!" "I dinna think they'd daur pit him

in the dungeon, laddie. Castle Lawbreck dungeons are no vera safe. We might hae a try to wauken the scoundrels, but it'll be labour lost, I'm thinkin'." And it was! They beat at the great oaken door. They shouted till they were hoarse. But no one came; and, well as he knew the castle, David could not suggest any way of entering it in the darkness. There were too many pitfalls, he said. Every window on the outer sides was shuttered and barred, too. "I'm not goin' back to Gatehouse of Fleet—dashed if I am!" said the Caterpillar. "I'll find some sort of hole to shelter until mornin'. You go back, old sport!" "Eh, mon, but it's a pair sort o' sport ye take me for, if ye think I'd be for doin' that!" said the Scot indignantly. "I didn't think it, old fellow; but it was only decent to give you the chance. An' what about the poor old gee?" But David was at no loss. By ways over the moor, through the driving snow and the dark night, he led the horse to a shepherd's cot that he knew of old; and the Caterpillar, who had dozed off in his seat, woke to warmth and light and hospitality. The food was coarse and the bed hard, but the sybarite of Highcliffe complained not at all—he could live the Spartan life when need was. He woke to see through the little window the old castle standing up black above the snow not a mile away. He had thought it must be miles distant. David would not hear of a frontal attack. "They wad haud the fort against us, laddie," he said. "An' this is better weather for besieged than besiegers, ye ken. Trust ye to Corporal Carmichael, an' he'll find ye a way to win in!" And he did. Through a ravine, along the course of a frozen beck, he led the Caterpillar right up to the frowning walls of the castle. They stole out, and made their way inside the ruins of the old keep while Pon & Co. were still dozing in their comfortable beds. They waited, crouching behind a mass of fallen masonry, till they saw a door open, and Simons came out. Then, keeping to cover till close upon him, David crept forward. "Up an' at them!" he shouted, and flung his arms around Simons, and bore him down in the snow. A rope was found, and he was tried up. A gag was thrust into his mouth. They laid him on the worn stones of the great old kitchen, and started on a search. It was a silent search, for they had gathered that the Highcliffe nuts were still upstairs, and as yet they had no mind to disturb them. But it did not take long. A locked door—a key taken from the pocket of the sullen Simons—the door flung open, and then— "Franky!" "Rupert!" There was the wildest amazement in Courtenay's tones. He could not understand for the moment. "Don't be waxy with me, dear boy!" said the Caterpillar. "Beastly intrusive, I know; but I simply had to follow you up. This is my very good pal, Corporal David Carmichael, of the Cameronians." "But—but—" "Let's attend to the dear Pon an' his merry little friends first, dear boy! We'll talk afterwards—over the brekker that the scoundrel in the kitchen was preparin' for them." Like one in a dream Frank Courtenay gripped the hand of David, and followed the active Caterpillar upstairs. Three minutes later four figures in gorgeous pyjamas made spots of colour in the piled-up snow of the courtyard. The Caterpillar had been deaf to argument or entreaties; he did not care if it broke every bone in their bodies, he said. Out they had to go—by way of the windows. And they went! Twenty minutes later, having been allowed in to dress, they left, Simons with them. They were five to three; but there was no fight in them. Pon swore, and Vav whimpered; Gaddy scowled, and Monson muttered. But they went! Then rescuers and rescued sat down to a good breakfast, and later in the day the train bore Courtenay and the Caterpillar east and south. The Caterpillar no longer wore his wrist-watch. It had been hard to get David to take it, but he had consented at last—under penalty of not having a line from either of them when he got back in the trenches if he held out. And, after all, it was in the Caterpillar's family circle that Frank Courtenay's Christmas was spent!