

THE NELSON LEE

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THE RETURN of EZRA QUIRKE!

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

New Series No. 137.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

December 15th, 1928.



The panel opened as Handforth crashed against it, and next moment he found himself tumbling head over heels down a flight of stone stairs !

Chums, You've All Been Asking For Ezra Quirke—Here He Is!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

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

Ezra Quirke, and a haunted castle—in a story written by your favourite author! What more could anybody want? There's hours of enjoyment to be had in this stunning yarn, so "get down" to it now—Ed.

CHAPTER 1

Much Ado About Nothing!

"**T**HERE he is!"

Reggie Pitt, of the West House at St. Frank's, looked mildly surprised as he paused at the top of the stairs. Down in the lobby there were quite a number of Removites, and they were all looking up at him as though they had been waiting especially for his appearance. A humorous smile came into Reggie's deep brown eyes.

"Yes, here I am—all of me!" he said cheerily. "What wouldst, slaves? Speak, for I am minded to give ye audience!"

"Cheese it, you ass!" said Doyle. "We've been waiting for you for over five minutes. What's the idea of being so late?"

"Yes, buck up, Pitt!" said Fatty Little eagerly. "There's a letter for you in the rack!"

Reggie Pitt came downstairs and joined the other West House juniors.

"Zounds! And why all this pother?" he asked politely. "Why, forsooth, so much commotion over a scurvy letter?"

"Rats!" said Fatty Little. "It isn't a scurvy letter. It's a registered letter!"

"And it's marked 'Urgent,' too!" said Scott.

The West House skipper grinned.

"And you fellows, I take it, are somewhat hard up?" he asked, fully appreciating the position. "Ah, I know what it is! I've been like it myself! I've had the same wild hopes throbbing in my manly breast! A registered letter means much—or little."

"Generally much!" said Doyle. "People don't register letters unless they contain money. And if you're flush, Pitt, we thought that you might be in a mood to lend us a few bob each. It's getting near to Christmas, you know, and there are all sorts of extra expenses!"

The sound of feet on the gravel from outside caused a brief interruption. The big door stood open, and the Triangle was flooded with the weak sunshine of the wintry morning. The sky was blue, and there was more than a touch of frost in the air. The next moment Nipper, Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West and Edward Oswald Handforth came marching in.

"Ah! Just the man we want to see!" said Nipper briskly, as he caught sight of Reggie. "About the match for this week-end, Reggie. Have you got your team ready?"

"Never mind about the team now!" interrupted Doyle, glaring. "It's just like you Ancient House fellows to come here interfering! Why can't you keep in your own quarters?"

"Why, have we interrupted at an inopportune moment?" asked Nipper. "Sorry, and all that, but football is rather important—even though it is only a school game," he added dryly. "We've been so keen on the Blue Crusaders lately that our own games have taken a back seat."

"It's time we gave more attention to them," said Pitt, nodding.

"Look here!" roared Doyle. "What about this letter——"

"Football," said Pitt severely, "is far more important than any letter! So kindly be good enough to dry up until this subject is closed. I was going to ask Corky about the Christmas games. No chance of us seeing the Blues play during the holidays, I suppose?"

"Not much," replied Nipper. "I was having a word with Corcoran about them yesterday. The Crusaders are playing at home on the Saturday before Christmas, and they're going to Brampton on Christmas Day to play the Albion—and they'll be at home again on Boxing Day."

"Rotten!" said Reggie. "I was hoping they'd come to London for one of the games, at least."

"Corky is pleased with the arrangements," put in Handforth. "He's invited a crowd of those Fourth Form chaps to spend the holidays with the team at Bannington Grange, I believe. Tich will be there, too."

"About this letter——" began Scott pointedly.

But nobody listened. They were thinking about Lionel Corcoran, of the Fourth—the schoolboy owner of the Blue Crusaders Club Tich Harborough, of the Blues—and, incidentally, of the Remove—would probably be the only Removite in Corky's party. And this was as it should be, for Tich, of course, would have to be on the spot, he being a regular member of the League team.*

Christmas was not far off now, and most of the inhabitants of St. Frank's were thinking of the forthcoming festive season. Indeed, one fellow had already gone. Vivian Travers, of the Remove, had been taken away by his

people a day or two ago, and most of the other fellows envied him—since it was understood that he was to spend Christmas somewhere abroad in sunny climes.

Yet there were other juniors who preferred to remain at home. Christmas for them would not be right unless they spent it in the atmosphere of frosty weather and bright, cheerful fires

The juniors had been very closely connected with the Crusaders of late—mainly because of the misfortunes of Fatty Fowkes, the genial sixteen-stone goalie of the Blues. But that affair was straightened out now, and Simon Kenmore, of the Sixth—who had been largely responsible for Fatty's misfortunes—was showing signs of settling down steadily. Indeed, there were pleasant indications that he would change his bad old ways for good.

"Well, have you finished jabbering about football yet?" asked Doyle warmly. "It's like your nerve, Nipper, to barge in! Pitt's got an important letter here——"

"Sorry!" grinned Nipper. "Go ahead, then. Pray accept my apologies, Reggie, old man. I'd no idea it was so vital."

"That's all right," said Reggie. "You mustn't take any notice of these asses. They seem to think that this registered letter of mine is going to effect a change in their fortunes. But I'm not so optimistic. I don't believe there's any money in it at all!"

"What!" gasped Fatty Little.

"Sorry, old porpoise, but I've got to be blunt," said Reggie. "I had a nice remittance only last week, and I'm not expecting another until next week. And this letter isn't from my people at all."

"Then—then it's a swindle?" demanded Doyle indignantly.

"Oh, bother the letter!" interrupted Handforth. "We came here to talk about football——"

"Well, let Reggie deal with his correspondence first," chuckled Nipper. "We'll give you three minutes, Reggie, old man, to read the letter and digest it. Then we want to continue about footer. Is that a bargain?"

"I'm game!" said Reggie, nodding.

He broke the seal of the registered letter, tore open the flap, and withdrew the contents. He was watched by several pairs of eager eyes. And a united groan went up when it was seen that only a single sheet of paper came forth. There were no crisp currency notes—no fivers. In fact, that letter was absolutely devoid of cash.

"Why, there's no money in it at all!" said Doyle, with disgust.

"Didn't I warn you?" asked Pitt, with a chuckle. "This letter seems to be from old Middleton."

"And who's old Middleton?" asked Johnny Onions.

"Perhaps that's rather a disrespectful way of referring to him," said Pitt. "Mr. Horace

*All readers who would like to follow the adventures of Lionel Corcoran and Tich Harborough with the Blue Crusaders at the eerie, ghostly Bannington Grange, can find them related in the current issue of the "Boys' Realm."

Middleton is our family solicitor. He has looked after my pater's affairs for years, you know. The good old family lawyer."

"What's he writing to you about?" asked Doyle, unable to curb his curiosity.

"Cheese it!" growled Handforth, with a frown. "I don't see why you fellows should pry into Reggie Pitt's affairs. Why not let him read his letter in peace? Go ahead, Reggie—and get it over quickly."

Reggie was already reading the letter, and when he looked up there was an expression of slight surprise in his eyes.

"Well, this is rummy," he said, with a puzzled frown. "Old Middleton's coming to see me—this morning. Coming right from London—on business."

"Business!"

"So he says," said Pitt, nodding. "I can't understand what on earth it means. I don't know what business Mr. Middleton can have with me."

"Isn't it strange that he doesn't go to your pater?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Well, no," replied Pitt. "My father and mother are abroad just now—and won't be back in England until about March or April. Dad had a bit of a breakdown three or four weeks ago, and his doctor ordered him to go for a long cruise in tropic waters."

"What about Christmas?" asked Nipper.

"Well, I've either got to stay here at St. Frank's, or accept an invitation from Jack Grey," replied Reggie. "I don't think there's any question which it will be."

"No question at all!" said Jack Grey firmly. "I'm not taking any refusal."

"Well, it's rummy about this letter," said Pitt, reading it again. "Old Middleton is coming this morning, and says he'll be here at about half-past twelve—after morning lessons are over. But why? He doesn't give me any details, and it's a complete mystery to me. Not that I'm going to worry about it. You know what these lawyers are—they always make mountains out of mole-hills. We'll forget all about it."

Reggie Pitt stowed the letter away, and the juniors turned to the entertaining subject of football.

was very precise, and his smile was somewhat crinkly.

"Well, Reginald, my boy, I daresay this visit of mine is something of a mystery to you, eh?" he said dryly, as he sat in Study K, of the West House, after morning lessons. "You needn't look so grave. I have not brought you any bad news. Quite the contrary, Reginald—quite the contrary."

"I suppose I'd better be going," said Jack Grey casually.

"No, rather not!" said Pitt. "There's nothing private, is there, Mr. Middleton?"

"Well, I suppose not," said the lawyer. "There is no reason why this friend of yours should not remain. I do not propose to discuss any family secrets, my boy," he added, smiling at Jack. "If Reginald wishes you to remain, by all means do so."

"You're making me awfully curious, sir," said Reggie. "It isn't bad news, but quite the contrary. Has somebody left me in his will?"

The old lawyer adjusted his glasses.

"As a matter of fact, yes," he replied precisely. "You have hit the nail on the head, Reginald."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Reggie. "I was only fooling, sir! I'd no idea that —"

"Let me hasten to add that this legacy is not—well, it is scarcely of the type that will

particularly appeal to you. It is, in a way, a most extraordinary legacy."

"I'm more curious than ever, sir," said Reggie.

"You may remember a great-uncle of yours, Reginald," pursued Mr. Middleton. "I am referring to Mr. Roger Merton, a connection of the Pitt family on your mother's side."

"Why, of course, sir," said Reggie. "But I haven't seen Uncle Roger for years, and even when I heard that he had died, I couldn't pretend to be very cut-up. I don't seem to remember him much."

"I am not at all surprised," said Mr. Middleton. "I do not think you have seen your late great-uncle for at least ten years. You were merely a child of four or five when he made a habit of paying frequent visits to your mother and father. I understand that you were a very lovable little cherub in those days," added the lawyer, with a chuckle. "And your Uncle Roger, it seemed, fell in love with your cheeky smile and with your curls."

"I don't notice anything funny!" said Reggie coldly, as he noticed that Jack Grey was grinning.

"I was just thinking of you with curls," chuckled Jack.

"Ass!" growled Pitt.

CHRISTMAS IS COMING—

So is the specially enlarged Christmas number of the "NELSON LEE"

—NEXT WEEK!

CHAPTER 2

King of the Castle!



M

R. HORACE MIDDLETON was a lean, clean-shaven, grey-haired old gentleman. His manner

"Ahem! Let us proceed!" said Mr. Middleton hastily. "Well, the fact remains, Reginald, that you were quite a favourite with your great-uncle in those days. But at the time you were five years of age Mr. Merton suffered a severe stroke, and it became necessary for him to leave this changeable climate of ours, and to spend most of his days in a much warmer zone. Indeed, he settled down in Madeira, and only occasionally came to England—and even then only in the summer-time. But I do not think that he ever forgot the curly-headed little boy he had played with so frequently during his hale and hearty days."

"That was awfully good of Uncle Roger, sir," said Pitt. "I feel rather guilty about it, because I scarcely remember him at all. And do you mean to tell me that he has left me in his will?"

"In a way, yes," said the lawyer. "There is a legacy for you, Reginald—and a most curious one, too. Do you happen to know where your Uncle Roger lived in those old days, prior to his stroke?"

"Why, somewhere in this county, wasn't it, sir?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Middleton. "Your uncle lived in Raithmere Castle."

"Why that's it, of course!" said Reggie, nodding. "Raithmere Castle. I remember now."

"Sounds a pretty ghostly sort of place," remarked Jack Grey.

"And, indeed, it is ghostly, by all accounts," said Mr. Middleton. "Raithmere Castle is situated on the heights overlooking the peaceful hamlet of Market Donning."

"Why that's only sixteen or seventeen miles away from here, sir," said Jack. "We go through it sometimes when we have an away match."

"Market Donning is a very ancient village—and centuries ago, I believe it was a much more important place than it is to-day," continued the lawyer. "It has always been the home of the Mertons. And Raithmere Castle is the ancestral seat of the family. Unhappily, Reginald your great-uncle never married, and he remained a bachelor to the last, and thus, when he died, there were no more Mertons to carry on."

"That's rather sad, sir," said Reggie soberly.

"Yes, indeed it is," agreed Mr. Middleton. "And I am afraid that Raithmere Castle has been allowed to fall into a condition of dire neglect. After your great uncle's stroke he went abroad, and took no further interest in his family seat. The castle was simply left alone. It was shut up, and allowed to go to rack and ruin. A great pity—a very great pity! But there it is, and we are dealing with facts."

"But what has Raithmere Castle to do with me, sir?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"A great deal, I should imagine," replied Mr. Middleton. "Have I not already told

you that your Uncle Roger has left you in his will?"

"Yes, sir. But——"

"Well, Reginald, Raithmere Castle is now yours—lock, stock and barrel," said Mr. Middleton. "The castle, in fact, is your legacy. Your Uncle Roger left you the entire place, for what it is worth. It is your own freehold property, and——"

"Well, I'm blessed!" interrupted Reggie, his eyes gleaming. "Raithmere Castle mine! Well, this is a surprise!"



CHAPTER 3

An Important Person!

R. MIDDLETON was looking rather concerned.

"Let me hasten to tell you, Reginald, that this property is of very little use to you," he said. "If you need any advice, I shall be most happy to act on your behalf—or, to be more exact, on your father's behalf."

"But the castle is left to me, isn't it, sir?"

"It is, but you are a minor," explained Mr. Middleton. "Your father will naturally be trustee of the property until you are of age. I am the executor of Mr. Roger Merton's will, and it has been my duty to acquaint you of your legacy."

"But nothing can alter the fact that I am the sole owner of Raithmere Castle, sir," said Reggie Pitt. "Is it absolutely a ruin?"

"To tell you the truth, my boy, I don't know," replied the lawyer. "I have heard that the place has been allowed to decay very considerably. It is certainly in a state of great dilapidation. Yet it should be of some real value, for it is one of the oldest and most picturesque castles in the South of England. I have the keys here, in case you should need them."

"Rather, sir!" said Reggie. "I'll take the keys, if you don't mind. Market Donning is only a bike's ride away, and it'll be interesting to take a run over to the castle and explore it. It isn't every St. Frank's fellow who owns a castle, you know."

Mr. Middleton smiled.

"You are quite right," he agreed. "I daresay you will be eager to have a look at this acquisition of yours."

After a further talk the lawyer took his departure. When he had gone quite a number of visitors came round Study K, asking for news.

"We don't want to appear curious, old man, but what's the mystery about?" asked Fullwood, of the Ancient House. "Come into a fortune, or what?"

Jack Grey struck an attitude, and pointed to Reggie.

"Behold!" he said solemnly. "Here you see the owner of a real, genuine, guaranteed old English castle! Complete to the last

detail, including buttresses, ivy-grown keep, battlements, and all the usual offices."

"Let's get outside!" grinned Reggie. "It's becoming too stuffy in here!"

So they went out into the Triangle, where many other Ancient House fellows came crowding round. There were quite a number of Fourth-Formers, too.

"I say, what's this rot about a castle?" asked Bob Christine, of the Fourth. "Somebody's saying that you've inherited an old castle, Pitt."

"It's quite true," said Reggie calmly.

"What!"

"My Uncle Roger left me it in his will," explained Reggie. "I'm now the sole owner of Raithmere Castle, near Market Donning."

"Well, my hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"I mean to say, not really?" asked Archie Glenthorne mildly. "Absolutely a dashed castle, what? Congrats, old lad! Sundry cheers, and all that sort of thing. Absolutely!"

"A real old castle, eh?" said Solomon Levi, with a grin. "I wish you well to wear it!"

"It's not an overcoat!" said Reggie.

"Then I wish you well to live in it!" chuckled Levi. "By my life! It isn't every St. Frank's fellow that finds himself the owner of a real old castle! What are you going to do with it? Rent it to a film company?"

"Rats!" said Reggie Pitt. "There's no need for you fellows to get excited. I'm not excited, am I?"

"But aren't you going to do something about it?" asked Handforth. "Aren't you going over there to have a look at the place? It's your castle, and it might be worth heaps and heaps of money. You can never tell with these ancient places. It's empty, isn't it?"

"Been deserted for years," replied Reggie Pitt, nodding. "You see, my Uncle Roger had a bad stroke some years ago, and he had to go abroad. He left the castle just as it was. Locked it up and went away, leaving everything to go to rack and ruin, by all that I can hear."

"So you've only inherited a ruined castle?" asked De Valerie.

"That's all."

"Then it isn't much cop!" said Fullwood. "I mean, what's the good of a ruined castle to anybody?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Reggie. "It may be full of old masters, and antique furniture, and all sorts of things like that. You can't tell. Anyhow, it's a half-holiday this afternoon, so I don't see any reason why I shouldn't run over on my bike, and have a look at the place."

"Well, you couldn't have a finer day for a bicycle ride," said Nipper. "The roads are all hard, and the sun's shining gloriously. We don't get many days like this in December."

"We'll go over in the Austin Seven," said Handforth, turning to Church and McClure, his inseparable chums of Study D. "By

George! It'll be jolly novel, exploring an old castle like that. For all we know, there may be hidden treasure!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We haven't been invited yet, Handy," remarked Church pointedly.

"Eh?"

"Perhaps Pitt won't want us to go," put in McClure. "We don't want to force ourselves forward—"

"That's all right!" grinned Reggie. "The more the merrier, you know. Anybody is welcome to come. Perhaps we can get up a little party, and explore the castle."

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll come with you, Reggie," said Nipper. "Thanks! It ought to be interesting."

But not many of the juniors displayed a great amount of excitement over the matter. After the first novelty of the news had worn off the majority of the fellows decided to let it go at that.

The exploring party, therefore, was a comparatively small one—merely consisting of Reggie Pitt, Jack Grey, Nipper & Co., Fullwood, Archie Glenthorne, and Handforth & Co.

"All the better," said Handforth, later on, when they were preparing to start. "We don't want all the giddy Remove with us!"



CHAPTER 4

The First Warning!

WHEN the party finally started out in the wintry sunshine, Handforth & Co. were on their own bicycles. Church and McClure had pointed out to their leader that it seemed rather "off-side" for them to go by car, while all the other fellows pedalled. Besides, there was the exercise to think about. It was much better for them to be one cycling party, without a motor in their midst. And Edward Oswald Handforth, for once, was willing to see reason.

So there were ten cyclists in the party that set out, and they took the road through Bannington, and then branched off on one of the unimportant roads which would ultimately lead them to the little village of Market Donning.

Somebody suggested that they should pay a visit to Fatty Fowkes, and his pals of the Blue Crusaders, on the way, but this idea was vetoed. There was no time to spare—and the Blues, anyhow, were bound to be busy at practice.

It was very pleasant, cycling on the hard roads. The air was crisp and frosty, and the sun was shining out of a blue sky. It was one of those wintry days that seldom come in December. The visibility was perfect, and one could see for miles in every direction from the hilltops.

"Ever been to the castle?" asked Nipper, as they coasted down a long hill.

"Never," replied Reggie. "I don't know what it's like, or where it is. But Mr. Middleton said that it's somewhere near Market Donning, so we can't be far wrong."

"Well, if we don't see any sign of it before we get to the village, we shall have to stop and make inquiries," said Jack Grey. "The main thing is to get to Market Donning."

They arrived in the middle of the afternoon, after a healthy, uneventful ride. They were all glowing from their exertions, and they found Market Donning to be a very quiet, sleepy little hamlet. Indeed, there was not a soul in sight as they rode down the quiet village street, after passing the green.

"Well, there's been no sign of the castle," said Reggie Pitt, as he slowed down. "We'd better stop here, and make some inquiries."

"There's an old chap standing in the doorway of that inn," said Nipper, with a nod. "I should think he ought to know the way to the castle."

They jumped from their machines outside the Ship and Anchor. It was a picturesque old place, with gables, and with a half-timbered frontage. An elderly countryman touched his cap to them as they approached the rustic porch.

"Tea, young gents?" he suggested, evidently with an eye to business.

"Not just yet, thanks," said Pitt. "We're looking for Raithmere Castle. It's somewhere in this neighbourhood, isn't it?"

The old man gave the juniors a startled look.

"Ye'd best not go near that place, young gentlemen!" he said earnestly.

"Why not?" demanded Handforth. "What's the matter with it?"

"It ain't for me to say anything," continued the old fellow, "but you heed my words, young gents. Don't you go near to the old castle. You'd best go right back the way you come—while ye're still safe!"

Nipper laughed.

"We shan't come to any harm," he said dryly. "There are ten of us, and we ought to be able to look after ourselves. If you'll just tell us the way——"

"I'll tell ye, if ye insist, young sirs," said the innkeeper, looking very scared. "All the same, I warn ye! Don't say as I didn't give ye a word of advice! Go to the end of the village, and take the lane that leads off sharply to the left. Ye can't go wrong. It's a bit of a climb, but ye'll soon see the castle—aye, ye can't miss it. A stark old pile, if ever there was one! A grim, creepy spot."

"Sounds cheerful," remarked Church.

"There's folks round this village as wouldn't go near Raithmere Castle for a 'undred pounds!" said the old innkeeper impressively. "Nay, not for a fortune! It's as much as they will do to go past the place. Don't ye go exploring, young gents! There's queer things happening behind those old walls. Aye, and not only at night, either!"

"Look here," said Handforth gruffly. "What are you trying to do? Scare us?"

"Heaven forbid, young gents!" said the old fellow. "I don't want to scare ye. But I reckon it's my duty to give you a warning. Three generations of the Mertons have died mysteriously within those old walls of Raithmere Castle."

"Mysteriously?" repeated Pitt. "Nonsense! That's all moonshine——"

"Ye can say what ye will, young sir!" interrupted the innkeeper. "I knows! Man and boy, I've lived in this inn—within a couple of miles of the castle. Even Mr. Roger Merton, the last of his line, had a bad stroke, and couldn't come nigh the castle agin! Ay, and what's more, he died sudden-like, too! His father and his grandfather—yes, and his great-grandfather, too—all died at Raithmere Castle. Not in their beds, young gents—but they died—— Still, I don't want to say too much. If ye're set on exploring the place, it's none o' my business."

"As a matter of fact, I'm the new owner of it!" said Reggie Pitt. "Mr. Roger Merton was my great-uncle, and Raithmere Castle is now my property. So, you can see, I'm rather interested in the old place."

The innkeeper raised his hands, and gazed at Reggie in an awed kind of way.

"Lor cakes, ye don't say so, young gent!" he exclaimed. "Then you be one o' the Mertons?"

"Not exactly," replied Pitt. "I'm what you might call a distant branch of the family."

"Well, it makes no odds—ye've got the Merton blood in your veins!" said the old fellow. "Don't go nigh the castle! That's what I tell ye, young gents—don't go near it! There's ghosts there—and there'll be nothing but tragedy if you enter those grey walls!"



CHAPTER 5

Not Very Cheering!

"HOSTS?" said Church uneasily.

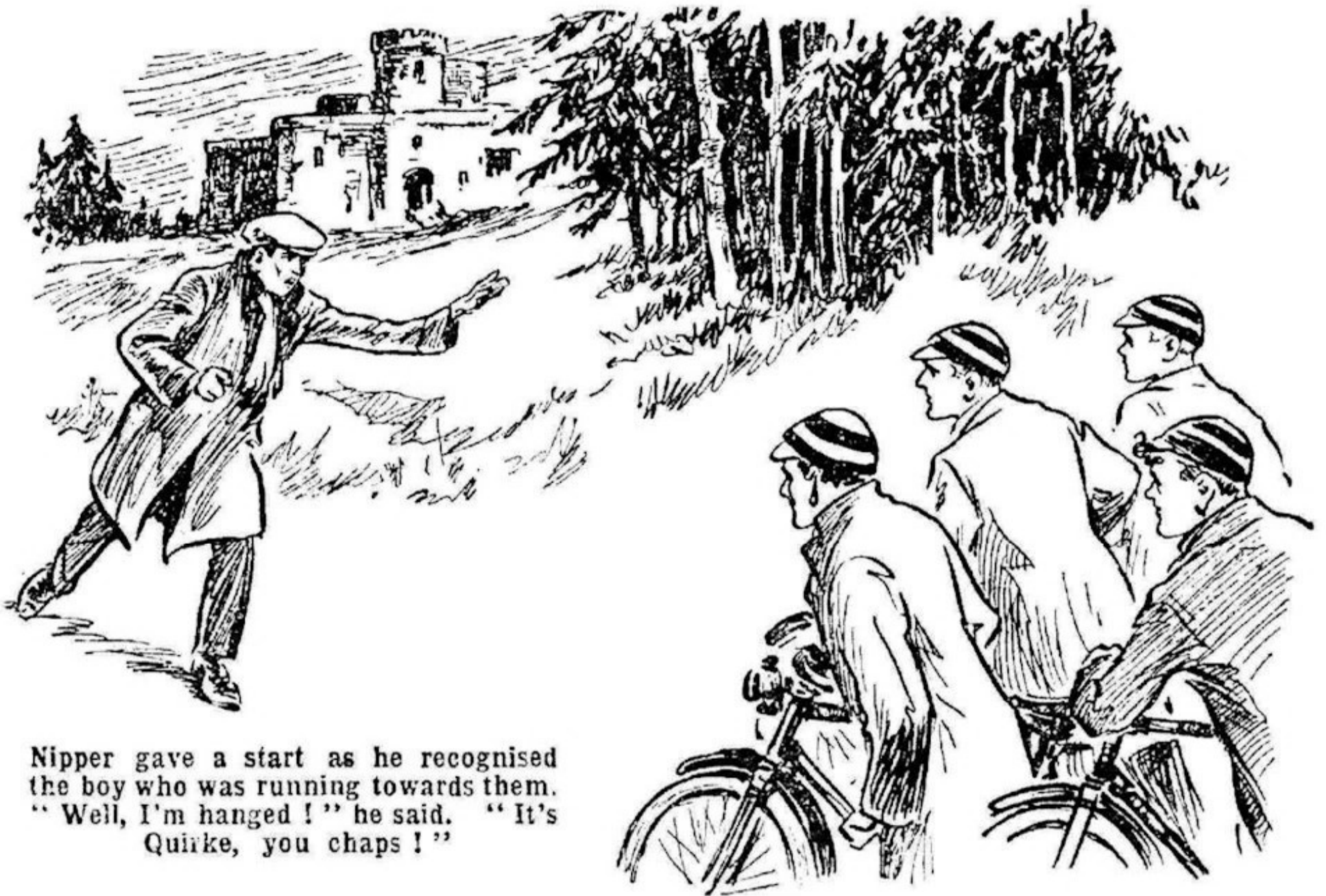
"Ay, young gent—ghosts!" said the

landlord of the Ship and Anchor. "The folks round this village avoid the castle like a plague! I don't wonder at it, neither! Many's the story I've heard——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth aggressively. "We don't take any notice of all this piffle! No disrespect to you, of course, but you can't kid us that there are ghosts in Raithmere Castle. Why, there aren't such things as ghosts. We don't believe in them!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as ye like, young gent," he said. "I ain't going to argue with ye. If ye're set on goin' to the castle, I don't s'pose it's any use my trying to stop ye. But, man and boy, I've lived in this village——"



Nipper gave a start as he recognised the boy who was running towards them. "Well, I'm hanged!" he said. "It's Quirke, you chaps!"

"Exactly!" said Reggie Pitt hastily. "And I dare say that all sorts of rummy stories have got about. It's not very surprising, is it? The castle has been shut up and deserted for a good many years, hasn't it?"

"Nigh on ten years now, young sir," agreed the innkeeper. "But it ain't absolutely deserted. *Things* have been seen."

"Well, we won't detain you any longer, thanks," said Pitt. "Straight through the village, and then up the lane to the left, eh? There'll be no harm in having a look at the place, even if we don't thoroughly explore it. Come on, you chaps. Thanks awfully for your information, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Higgles is my name, young gent," said the innkeeper. "Ben Higgles. Born in this very inn, I was, and so was my father before me! I know what I'm talking about, and—"

They left him there, talking—for it was evident that he had no particular desire to cease. He was still looking very scared and troubled when they mounted their machines and continued the ride. Reggie Pitt was chuckling, and Handforth was wearing an expression of impatience. But one or two of the others were looking rather sombre. They had been impressed by Mr. Higgles' warning.

"Well, it's not very cheery, is it?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Absolutely not, old Cheddar," said Archie. "At the same time, we've got to remember that these old countrymen are somewhat inclined to believe the superstitions of the rural populace. I mean to say, the lads of the village in a spot like this are apt to be slightly imaginative, what?"

"You've hit it, Archie," said Reggie Pitt, nodding. "The castle has been shut up for so many years that it's got the reputation of being haunted. You know what these old places are. If an owl sits in one of the trees, it's mistaken for a ghost! If a stray cat sets up a howl, people think it's the wailing of a banshee, or its equivalent in the Sussex countryside. My hat! I believe some of you chaps are getting scared!"

"Rot!" said several voices, in one breath.

"Well, anyway, it is still broad daylight, and who's afraid of ghosts by daylight?" asked Pitt cheerily. "This castle is my property, and I'm not going to be scared away from it by a lot of old wives' yarns."

"You're not very complimentary to the local wives, old man," smiled Nipper. "I rather fancy the old husbands are just as superstitious, if not more so!"

"Yes, we don't want to take any notice of these silly yarns," remarked Fullwood.

All the same, the innkeeper had impressed the juniors more than they cared to admit. He had not said much—only what they might have expected from a superstitious old countryman. But there had been something in his tone—something in the expression of his eyes—which had far more effect than his mere words. Old Higgles had been utterly alarmed at the very thought of these boys going to Raithmere Castle.

What did he mean by saying that ghosts were liable to appear in the afternoon? "Not only at night!" That was what he had said, and two or three of the would-be explorers remembered.

However, not for a moment would they admit that they were reluctant to continue the journey. Reggie Pitt had come into a

strange legacy—an old, deserted castle—and they wanted to see it with their own eyes.

They climbed a long, arduous hill, and before descending a slope on the other side they paused. Reggie Pitt pointed away towards the east.

"There it is!" he said. "That's the castle, as sure as a gun!"

None of the others said anything. There could be no doubt that Pitt was right. On the top of a neighbouring hill arose the gaunt, grey walls of an ancient building. There were turrets and battlements, and near by there were clumps of solemn, sombre-looking yew trees. Firs rose in profusion, too, and even at this distance the castle looked forlorn and sinister. The great buttressed walls and the quaint towers were clearly visible in the sharp afternoon daylight.

"Looks a fine place!" said Pitt enthusiastically. "By Jove, you chaps! Think of it! It's mine—every giddy stone and every bit of moss and ivy!"

"Lucky beggar!" said Nipper. "It isn't every chap who owns a castle!"

Pitt nodded.

"Mount your trusty steeds, my henchmen, for we now descend upon the moated castle!" he said. "Let us trust that the drawbridge is down, and that we do not fall into the moat, gadzooks! On, serfs—on!"

And, with many a chuckle, and feeling much cheered, the juniors continued the journey, and soon lost sight of the castle in the dip of the lane.



CHAPTER 6

An Old Acquaintance!

"By George!" said Handforth.

He and the others had come to a halt, and they stood gaz-

ing with curiosity and interest. At the top of the hill they had observed a weed-grown drive, with dilapidated gates that had long since been left to rust and decay. Proceeding along this drive, the party of juniors had come round a large clump of fir trees, and were now in full sight of Raithmere Castle.

It stood there, immediately ahead of them—an impressive pile.

It rose in grey masses of stonework, with enormous buttresses and picturesque battlements. Most of it was ivy-grown, and although some portions of the building seemed to be in a ruinous state, there were others that were apparently in a fair condition of repair. Immediately in front stood the great main door—an enormous affair, with iron-studded panels. It could only be reached by means of a drawbridge, and evidently led into a great courtyard beyond.

"That joke of yours about the drawbridge and moat was pretty near the mark, after

all, old man," said Nipper. "There's the drawbridge—and, yes, by Jove—there's the moat, too!"

"But how are we going to get in?" asked Handforth.

"I've got the keys," said Reggie. "They weigh about half a hundredweight in my side pocket. I expect one of them will fit that great door. Anyway, we'll have a shot. What do you think of my new possession, you chaps?"

"There's plenty of it, anyway," said Tommy Watson. "But I'm not particularly jealous of you, Reggie. It's too—too ancient and—and eerie."

"Eerie be blowed!" said Handforth, with a glare. "You're taking too much notice of that old innkeeper's twaddle! Why, it's a marvellous place! A real castle—one of England's historic piles! You lucky beggar, Pitt, to own a place like this!"

"I know it!" said Reggie, nodding. "As for the ghosts, they make the place all the more valuable. What's the good of an historic castle without a few ghosts thrown in?"

"Well, let's be getting on," said Nipper. "It's still daylight, but the sun is pretty low, and the dusk soon descends on these short, wintry days. Even as it is, we shall have to ride home through the darkness, for the most part. Come on, let's do our exploring."

"Hear, hear!" said two or three of the others.

"Just a minute," said Reggie Pitt, in a curious voice. "There's somebody coming!"

He was looking across the open space towards another clump of fir trees. A figure had appeared in sight—a slim, youthful-looking figure. There was something rather reminiscent about the newcomer's walk, too. Other juniors gazed at him, and experienced that same sensation of familiarity. They felt that they had seen this figure before.

It was a boy, and he was dressed in a heavy overcoat and a tweed cap. He was hurrying up in an evident state of alarm, and it was Nipper who first "placed" him.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said the Remove captain, staring. "Don't you see who it is?"

"No, I'm jiggered if I do!" growled Handforth. "He seems a bit familiar—"

"It's Quirke!" said Nipper.

"Quirke!" echoed all the others.

"Yes—Ezra Quirke himself!" said Nipper.

And then they stared harder than ever. Without any question, this figure was that of Ezra Quirke! Well did the St. Frank's fellows remember this strange, mysterious boy, and their recollections of him were not altogether healthy, either!

Ezra Quirke!

They could recall the time when Quirke had been a junior of the East House at St. Frank's. He had been known as the schoolboy magician, then, and he had caused all sorts of extraordinary manifestations at the old school. Seldom had the juniors been as puzzled as when Ezra Quirke had been perpetrating his trickery. They remembered that there had been some very ques-

tionable goings-on, too. Quirke's uncle, indeed—a man named Roach—had been arrested by the police, and had been taken away. The affair had been more or less hushed up by the school authorities, and Ezra Quirke himself had disappeared from St. Frank's for good. Many fellows had felt that he had been lucky to escape the attention of the police, but they all had realised that Quirke had been more or less in the hands of his uncle, and that he had been acting as a tool. It was surprising to see him again, and in such curious circumstances. For Raithmere Castle was a place of mystery apparently, and Ezra Quirke was a boy of mystery!

It was obvious that Quirke himself had recognised these schoolboys. He knew them as his old companions of the Remove and the Fourth.

There was a light of recognition in his eyes as he came up, his breath coming and going to quick, short gasps. He had been running hard, evidently, and there was something in his eyes which caused the juniors to look at him with fresh interest. Seldom had they seen such alarm—such fear—in the eyes of a boy!



CHAPTER 7

The Second Warning!

EZRA QUIRKE was really an extraordinary boy.

He was, perhaps, just over fifteen years old, but he had a curious older look about him. Nipper and Handforth and the other juniors could not help feeling the effect of Quirke's presence—the very instant he came up to them. Certainly there was something very striking—almost magnetic—in Ezra Quirke's personality.

WILL CONTAIN EIGHT EXTRA PAGES!

In figure he was quite normal, but his face was almost like a mask. There was something about it which caused people to look twice. It was an expressionless face—very pale, and with high cheek-bones. The checks themselves were sunken in, and the deep-set eyes were mysterious and black; and those eyes proved that this boy was full of life. His face was like that of a statue, but his eyes were unforgettable.

All those St. Frank's fellows felt a sort of discomfort in Quirke's presence. His lips were thin, his hands were long and tapering, with sinuous fingers, and as he stood there, facing the Removites, those fingers of his moved constantly. His eyes shot from one junior to another, and there was nothing that he missed.

"Well, Quirke, what are you doing here?" asked Nipper quietly, at length.

"That is not the question," replied Quirke. "What are you doing here? Am I right in believing that you are about to enter Raithmere Castle?"

"As a guesser you are pretty smart," nodded Reggie Pitt. "That's exactly what we're going to do, Quirke, my son!"

"Don't!" said Quirke impressively. "Take my advice and turn back—now! Do not cross that drawbridge! Do not enter the courtyard or the buildings! This is a place of sinister repute. There are evil things in Raithmere Castle!"

"It's far more likely that there's an evil thing outside of Raithmere Castle!" said Handforth pointedly, as he glared at

Q u i r k e.

"Clear off,

you rotter!

You give me

the jumps!

We had enough of you at St. Frank's, with-out—"

"Do not remind me of that unhappy episode, please," said Quirke quietly. "I was wrong then—I acted guiltily. But I was foolish enough to believe that you would tacitly forget my former behaviour. I would remind you that my uncle influenced me, and guided my—"

"We know all that," said Nipper hastily. "We don't want to drag up the past, Quirke. We're just curious, that's all. We were wondering what you were doing here."

"There is no necessity for you to wonder," replied Ezra Quirke. "I live here."

"Live here!"

"Good gad!"

"Not—not in the castle?"

All the juniors spoke at once, and Pitt, indeed, was looking astonished.

"Not in the castle," said Ezra Quirke. "I live on the other side of the village—in the far corner of Market Donning. Since that unhappy affair at St. Frank's, I have made my home with an aunt of mine. Another

branch of the

family, let me

add. My

uncle, of

course, is

"Still in prison, eh?" said Handforth bluntly. "Eh? What are you nudging me for, Church?"

"Cheese it!" said Church, turning red. "No need to rub it in!"

"Oh, about Quirke's uncle?" said Handforth. "That's all right! Quirke's not sensitive. Don't we know him?"

"Fortunately I am not sensitive," agreed Quirke. "I had learned that Raithmere Castle had come into the possession of a schoolboy, but it did not occur to me that one of you—"

"How did you learn it?" interrupted Pitt curiously.

"There is much gossip in these small villages," replied Quirke. "I may inform

you that I am greatly interested in the castle. I am investigating."

"The dickens you are!" said Pitt, displeased. "You've got no right here, Quirke. I suppose you know that this is private property—my property? I suppose you realise that you're trespassing?"

Ezra Quirke shrugged his shoulders.

"Can there be any question of trespassing?" he said. "The castle has been empty for years now, and the grounds have become public property. The castle is old—very, very old. It has strange, sinister associations, and I have been investigating."

"Well, Raithmere Castle is now my property," said Reggie Pitt. "What's the nature of this investigation of yours, anyhow?"

"For some months past I have made a study of the occult," replied Quirke. "I have come to the conclusion that Raithmere Castle is particularly rich in material for research. I might mention that I am gaining some reputation as a spiritualistic medium—"

"Twaddle and bosh and rubbish and rot!" interrupted Handforth indignantly. "You—you beastly fraud! You raving lunatic! Do you think we believe in spiritualism? Do you think we take any notice of the—the occult, as you call it? Rats to you, and your beastly spiritualism! It's a rotten business!"

"Steady, old man!" said McClure uneasily.

"Well, so it is—Quirke's brand, anyhow!" shouted Handforth. "There are earnest people who really believe in spiritualism, and I'm not saying anything about them. But when a chap like Quirke takes it up, you can bet your boots that it's rotten! As for his warning about not going to the castle, he can go and eat coke!"

"So he can—cheerfully!" said Reggie Pitt, nodding. "Is that quite understood, Quirke? You can go and eat coke, and we'll go and explore the castle!"



CHAPTER 8

Uncertainty!

THERE was a feeling of uneasiness in the air.

Ezra Quirke's words had a singularly depressing effect—coming, as they did, on the top of the warning from the old inn-keeper. Could it be possible that there was something in these stories? Was Raithmere Castle really a place to avoid? One or two of those juniors, at least, were beginning to feel a bit dubious.

Reggie Pitt himself, of course, was as keenly determined as ever to go forward and to explore his newly acquired property, and Handforth and Nipper were with him to the bitter end.

"You speak lightly—you speak contemptuously," said Quirke, with a dangerous flash of his eyes. "But let me tell you, my friends, that you speak without any knowledge of your subject. You are strange here—all of you. Even you, Pitt! You have never been to this castle before."

"Well, that's true," admitted Pitt. "I never have. But what of it?"

"For many years Raithmere Castle has been empty and deserted," said Quirke. "I will grant you that these local people—these rustics—are singularly liable to believe in ghosts. Such stories are commonplace in every country district."

"I am glad you realise it," said Nipper. "A house has only to be deserted for a few years, and it soon gets the reputation of being haunted. An old castle like this is even more apt to get such a reputation. Some of Pitt's relatives died rather mysteriously, didn't they? Or is that only part of the local folk lore?"

"It is true—every word of it!" said Quirke. "There are strange associations connected with Raithmere Castle. Do you know that more than one keen investigator has met his death within these walls within the past few years?"

"Good gad!" said Archie. "Not really?"

"Bunkum!" frowned Handforth.

"You may think what you will, but I am dealing only in facts," replied Quirke. "Earnest investigators have come to the castle, desiring to seek this Presence—this material menace—and to exorcise it."

"Do which to it?" asked Handforth.

"You will not understand," replied Quirke. "This is no ordinary ghost, and before it can be laid to rest it must be exorcised. In other words, it must be laid."

"What do you think it is—an egg?" asked Edward Oswald sourly.

"It is unwise for you to speak in this flippant tone," said Quirke coldly. "Even I, with my powers, have not dared to enter the building itself. I know better. I know what dangers exist."

"Quirke, my lad, you're talking out of the back of your neck!" said Reggie Pitt good-humouredly. "You surely don't think we'd take any notice of this piffle of yours? If we were proposing to go to the castle at midnight—the witching hour—it might be reasonable enough for you to warn us."

"Do not make the mistake of believing that this ghost can only exert a deadly influence at midnight," replied Quirke quickly. "It is a dangerous spectre—a deadly peril in every way. It is capable of bringing death to any foolhardy mortal who wanders within those walls. And let me tell you that this danger is unseen—unknown. At any second it might descend upon you. Keep away from Raithmere Castle! Do not venture beyond those battlements!"

Quirke turned away, his strange eyes aglow with fear. Both Nipper and Reggie Pitt had

been watching him closely. Did he really believe in the sincerity of his words? Or was it merely a pose? Somehow both Nipper and Pitt were ready to believe that Ezra Quirke was sincere.

His mind was evidently in an unhealthy condition. He had been dabbling in this occult business, and it had affected his receptive mind.

But these other fellows were more healthy. Not that they were entirely indifferent to Quirke's warning. Church and McClure and Tommy Watson, for example, were looking decidedly uncertain, and as Quirke turned away they looked at the other juniors.

"Do you think we ought to go on?" asked Church dubiously. "Hang it, I'm not scared, or anything like that, but after all we've heard——"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "Of course we're going on!"

"But there might be something squiffy about the place, you know," said Tommy Watson. "It can't *all* be rumour, can it? I'm beginning to wish I hadn't come on this beastly expedition! I'm saying nothing against you, Pitt, old man, but this castle of yours is getting on my nerves!"

"We haven't entered the castle yet," said Pitt pointedly. "Surely it can't get on your nerves by merely looking at it?"

"Yes, but after all we've heard——"

"Cheese it!" said Nipper. "We mustn't take any notice of Quirke—or of that innkeeper, either."

But the others were silent for a moment. Glancing up, Nipper noticed that the sky had become strangely overcast. There was really something remarkable in that change. It almost seemed like an omen. Not half an hour before the sun had been shining, and the winter's afternoon had been singularly bright. But now the whole aspect was changed.

Dense clouds had come up, massing in ominous formation. The sun had gone, and a premature twilight had begun to descend over the landscape. Raithmere Castle was now looking sinister and grim in the extreme. Its picturesqueness had gone, and instead there was a brooding sense of mystery overshadowing that grey pile. A chill wind came blowing across from the east, and Tommy Watson involuntarily shivered.

"Let's get back to St. Frank's," he said uneasily. "We've seen the castle, anyhow—and that ought to be enough!"



CHAPTER 9

Still
Determined I

ALTHOUGH Reggie Pitt had lost some of his former gaiety, he was still determined.

"I don't see why we should turn back," he said obstinately. "We came here to explore the castle, and it would be sheer cowardice to turn tail now."

"Hang it!" protested Watson. "I'm not a coward——"

"I didn't mean it in that way, old man," put in Pitt. "I was just speaking generally——"

that's all. I'll admit that Quirke has made an impression on me, but it won't last long. I don't believe in his silly warnings."

"Neither do I!" frowned Handforth. "Ghosts! Bah! No sensible chap believes in ghosts!"

"Well said, O Mighty One!" nodded Reggie. "Blow the ghosts! Let them keep in their crevices and secret passages. We've come here to explore this legacy of mine, and we're jolly well going to do it!"

"Yes, and the sooner we start the job, the better," said Nipper, with another glance at the sky. "Those clouds look like snow—and we don't want to be caught in a snowstorm on the way home, do we? Let's spend an hour here, and then start the return journey. Got the keys ready, Reggie?"

Pitt produced a big bunch of heavy keys, and jingled them.

"Yes, here they are," he said briskly.

Ezra Quirke twirled round, his eyes glowing.

"You mean to leave my warning unheeded?" he asked.

"Sorry, old man—yes," said Pitt.

"You are fools—fools!" shouted Quirke passionately. "You do not know what folly you propose. Have I not told you that this old building is dangerous? It is no ordinary ghost that lurks behind those walls! It is an elemental—a material presence that is capable of picking you up and crashing you to the floor, dead! There is no limit to the power of such a Presence. Famous men—men of tested courage—have come here to investi-

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gate, and have turned back. For they have sensed the danger."

"Well, we can't sense it!" said Handforth gruffly.

"Of course not!" retorted Quirke. "You are not psychic—you do not possess the necessary power. But I do! Ordinary people feel nothing, but there are others—a few—who know at once that something is *different*. Even here, at this distance, it can be felt! Do not go near that place——"

"Are you going to dry up, or shall we tip you upside down?" demanded Handforth aggressively. "Clear off, Quirke! You were never any good at St. Frank's—and you're no good here! I'm fed up with your idiotic jabberings! I'm sick and tired of your rubbish! Clear off before I punch you in the eye!"

Ezra Quirke shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said quietly. "I am no match against your muscles, Handforth. I am no fighter. My words have proved useless, so I will let you continue this incredible folly."

He turned away without another word, and strode off.

There were one or two of those juniors who looked after him uncertainly—and they somehow felt, within their minds, that they were on the verge of an exciting experience. But they did not dare to suggest backing out. Nipper and Handforth and Pitt were determined. Fullwood, too, was just as eager to carry on.

"That chap will end up in a lunatic asylum!" said Handforth, with a frown. "He's dotty! As crazy as a March hare! Come on—let's get across that drawbridge and have a look at the castle from inside!"

"I—I suppose it'll be all right," said Church hesitatingly.

"Of course it will!" chuckled Pitt. "My dear chaps, there's no need for you to get the wind-up. Just analyse the thing. We've heard some talk from the old innkeeper, and Quirke has jawed a lot about spiritualism. Are we going to take any notice?"

"I should hope not!" said Handforth.

"It's only talk," went on Pitt, "and all that talk has come from two superstitious quarters. This old castle is as safe as a public library, or a railway station waiting-room. Come along—a brisk walk will do us good!"

"Just exactly what I was thinking," remarked Nipper. "It's so easy to soak in these rumours. We only need to keep our thoughts clear and our heads steady, and ghosts won't even occur to us. Besides, what can happen in the middle of the afternoon like this?"

"Wise words, O, my father," murmured Pitt. "What, in all sooth, can happen?"

"I know what *will* happen if Quirke comes back," growled Handforth. "I'll punch him on the nose—and then dot him one in the eye! He's scared Church and McClure until they're green with fright!"

"We're not frightened!" roared Church, turning red.

"Not likely!" snorted McClure.

The others chuckled, and they all approached the dilapidated drawbridge. The entrance to it was smothered in weeds, and thick grass grew everywhere. There were tangles of dead and rotting vegetation; and the moat itself proved to be filled to the brim with murky water. There was a faint ripple on its surface, but otherwise it seemed stagnant and sinister.

They crossed the drawbridge without any trouble, and one of Reggie Pitt's keys proved to be correct for slipping into the lock of the great door on the other side.

"Here we go!" murmured Reggie with satisfaction.

The great door creaked open; the party of St. Frank's fellows passed inside and found themselves within the grey walls of Raithmere Castle!



CHAPTER 10

Lord of All He Surveyed!

THEY were in a kind of inner courtyard, and the walls of the actual building rose up before them. There were many slit-like windows in sight, but only one door. This was a small affair, set deeply into a recess of the wall.

"What's this place—the keep, I suppose?" said Handforth, looking round. "Nothing but weeds and grass, anyhow. Nothing to look at here."

"I'm afraid you haven't much of an eye for beauty, Handy," said Nipper, with a chuckle. "What about the old associations of this place? Don't you realise that this courtyard must be hundreds and hundreds of years old? Try to picture a scene from the fourteenth or fifteenth century."

"What would be the good of doing that?" asked Handforth, in surprise.

"Knights in armour!" said Nipper musingly. "A cavalcade of horsemen clattering across the drawbridge, and then through the big doorway into the courtyard. Glittering soldiers in chainmail, and——"

"Sorry to interrupt the flow, but we didn't come here to talk about knights in armour and soldiers in chainmail!" growled Handforth. "It's getting pretty dark already, and if we mean to explore the castle we'd better be getting on with it."

"It's not dark—or even dusk," said Pitt. "There are another two hours of daylight yet, but these gloomy clouds have brought on a kind of premature twilight. Well, we'd better be getting on with the exploration. Let's have a look through this doorway."

He brought his keys into operation again; one of them fitted into the lock, and after a good deal of persuasion it condescended to turn. The juniors crowded in, almost forget-

ting their former uneasiness in their interest. It was rather jolly, exploring an old castle like this—particularly when it was remembered that the whole edifice belonged to one of their number.

That was the most attractive point, in fact.

"Stairs!" said Pitt, as he glanced through the now open doorway. "Stairs leading upwards, my lads! Come on—follow me to the battlements!"

"There's another door over there!" said Church, pointing. "I expect it leads into the castle itself. Hadn't we better go in now?"

"No, let's have a look from the top of this tower first," said Jack Grey. "Lead on, Macduff!"

They all went trooping up the old stairs. In some places they were crumbling, and ominous cracks were apparent here and there. But they seemed solid enough, and at last the juniors emerged upon the battlements. From this point they could see right over the castle—over every inch of its great expanse. And the view was certainly very impressive.

"Mine—all mine!" said Reggie Pitt, striking an attitude. "Lord of all I survey!"

"Absolutely!" nodded Archie. "Somewhat priceless, laddie! Enough to make a chappie feel considerably braced."

Reggie Pitt was certainly enthusiastic. His face was glowing, and his eyes were sparkling keenly. While the others were undoubtedly impressed, Pitt himself was aware of a great feeling of jubilation within him. He could hardly believe in his good fortune. It seemed too incredible to be true. This great castle—this imposing pile—was his. All his! Every stick and stone—every inch of ground! And that old innkeeper, and Ezra Quirke, had tried to keep him out of it!

A feeling of indignation came over him as he thought of that pair.

"Isn't it glorious!" he asked, turning to the others. "By jingo! Look at it, my sons! Look at it—and congratulate me again! I don't mind admitting that I'm jolly excited. I don't inherit an old castle like this every week of my life!"

"We can quite understand your feelings, old man," smiled Nipper. "We certainly do congratulate you again."

"Rather!" said Handforth. "But let's be getting on with the exploration."

"There's nothing like being practical!" grinned Fullwood. "I don't suppose Handy cares a jot about this scene."

"As a matter of fact, I don't!" replied Handforth bluntly. "I want to go inside—and have a look for that ghost! That's what I'm here for, my lads! If there's any mystery to be investigated, I'm the chap for the job!"

The others grinned to themselves, but made no comment. Down they went again, until they arrived at that second door. This proved to be unlocked, and, passing through, they now found themselves in a quaint arched passage.

There was a curiously dank smell about the place. It was earthy—unpleasant in the

extreme. Nobody said anything, but they were all aware of the change. Presently they found themselves looking into great apartments—lofty chambers with oak beams and panels.

"Why, it's furnished!" said Watson, in surprise.

"Of course," replied Pitt. "The place is just as my Uncle Roger left it, you know. But, I say, what a shame! Fancy leaving all this wonderful stuff to go to rack and ruin!"

They stood just within one of the great chambers. There was plenty of furniture in it—but everything was in a terrible state of dilapidation. Dust lay thick everywhere, windows were broken and boarded up. Here and there, great gaping holes yawned in the flooring. There were treacherous pitfalls everywhere.

The atmosphere of the place was now beginning to get hold of the juniors firmly. It gripped them. Outside they could afford to laugh at the stories of ghosts, but now—within these very walls—they could feel something intangible. None of them could give it a name. Perhaps it was just the association of the stories that they had heard with the dilapidated condition of the castle. But there was undoubtedly a ghostly, eerie kind of atmosphere in the place.

"By Jove! It's a good thing we didn't bring Fatty Fowkes with us!" said Pitt. "He's a huge, hefty chap, but he's superstitious, and this place would freeze the marrow in his giddy bones!"

The others were silent for a spell.

"It's queer—that's what it is!" said Fullwood suddenly.

"What's queer?" demanded Handforth.

"Why, about Pitt's uncle, of course," replied Fullwood. "Why did he leave the place like this? They say he had a stroke, eh? That's all very well, but couldn't he have put caretakers in the place? Couldn't he have had all this furniture taken away, and stored somewhere and preserved? Why was everything left like this—to decay and rot?"

Nobody could answer those questions!



CHAPTER 11

Reggie Pitt's Great Idea!

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD'S words had more effect than he had intended.

For they gave rise to all sorts of conjectures. Why, indeed, had Uncle Roger left Raithmere Castle so abruptly—without taking any steps to preserve its wonderful old panelling and its costly furniture? Surely there must have been a good reason for that?

And what reason?

Was it not likely that Mr. Roger Merton had been *frightened* out of the castle? What was that stroke of his, anyway? Was it conceivable that he had seen something here

—or felt something—and had then had a seizure in consequence? It was, indeed, strange that he had cleared off to a tropical climate, and had left Raithmere Castle so forlorn and deserted.

Jack Grey, in fact, put one or two questions to Pitt, but the latter shook his head.

"It's no good asking me anything," he said. "I only know the bare facts as Mr. Middleton told them to me this morning."

"But don't you know anything of your Uncle Roger's history?"

"Very little," replied Reggie. "I haven't seen Uncle Roger since I was a little kid—just a mere infant, you know—and I certainly don't remember him in the slightest way. As for his history, I'm almost in the dark. I only know that he had a seizure of some kind, that he left England, and since then he has allowed the castle to get into this condition. It's a shame—it's downright wicked. Not that I ought to say anything, since I've inherited the old place so unexpectedly."

"For all you know, it may be worth a lot more in this condition than it was before," said Tommy Watson. "A place like this is more valuable when it gets old and dilapidated."

"Something in that," chuckled Reggie. "Well, let's be getting on. We've hardly had a look at the place yet. There are scores of corridors to go through, and—"

He broke off, and an eager light came into his eyes.

"Thought of something?" asked Nipper.

"Yes," said Reggie. "What this place needs is a thorough warming up. It needs fires in every grate—lights everywhere. Dozens of people ought to be here, shouting down these corridors and laughing in the great rooms. That would bring some life to the old place!"

"I don't catch on," said Handforth, staring.

"No?" smiled Reggie. "And yet it's simple enough."

"Then explain, ass!"

"Christmas is coming!" said Reggie calmly.

"What!"

"Christmas is coming."

"You—you silly ass!" roared Handforth. "Don't we all know that Christmas is coming?"

"I thought I would remind you," smiled Pitt. "It's just a little point—"

"He's off his rocker!" said Handforth. "Why talk about Christmas now? We don't break up until next week—"

"Exactly," said Reggie. "Next week. And I would beg of you to remember, my comrades, that I am homeless for the holidays. My people are away—"

"That doesn't matter," interrupted Jack Grey. "You've got to come home with me."

"But why should I?" asked Reggie. "Why not spend Christmas here?"

"Odds schemes and brainwaves!" ejaculated Arnie, startled. "I mean to say, good gad!"

"Here?" said Handforth. "You—you mean—"

"Exactly," said Pitt, nodding. "A kind of house-warming, you know."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"A whole party of us, eh?" said Church. "You mean fifteen or twenty?"

"No, I don't," said Pitt. "I mean thirty or forty—or fifty! What do we care about ghosts, anyway? Christmas in this old castle! Doesn't it make your blood glow? Look here, I invite all you chaps to spend Christmas with me here!"

"That's awfully good of you, old man," smiled Nipper. "And I must say that it's a first-class notion. We ought to be able to have a ripping Christmas in this castle. It would be a regular old-fashioned house-warming. Still, there might be one or two problems."

"Such as which?" asked Reggie.

"Well, I don't like to introduce such unpleasant subjects, but it would cost you a pretty penny to have a big crowd of us under your roof, old man," said Nipper. "Have you thought of the point?"

"Well, I've got to confess that it slipped my memory," chuckled Pitt. "But that's only a trifle—a mere detail. As soon as we're back at the school, I can give orders—through Mr. Middleton—to have heaps of stuff sent down here. You know—beds and bedding, and plenty of food, and all that. Servants, too. Mr. Middleton knows that this is a valuable castle, and he wouldn't consider that any money was being wasted. He's in sole charge, now that my father is away, and I know that I can rely on him."

"But why have any servants?" asked Handforth. "Why not fend for ourselves? Wouldn't it be a lot jollier?"

"Well, I suppose it would," agreed Pitt. "But isn't it a bit thick to expect one's guests to fend for themselves. It isn't done in the best circles, you know."

"Rats to the best circles!" said Handforth. "Why, the Christmas party will be ten times as good if we're here alone—a whole crowd of St. Frank's fellows. I think it's a ripping scheme."

"Rather!"

"Better than spending Christmas at school, anyway!" said Pitt. "I know that you've invited me to your place, Jack, but you can understand my feelings, can't you. I've just inherited this castle, and it's nearly Christmas-time. What a glorious opportunity to celebrate Uncle Roger's legacy! You'll all join me here, won't you?"

"Absolutely, old boy!"

"We shall be jolly pleased to," said Handforth. "And as for the ghosts—"

Reggie Pitt snapped his fingers.

"That to the ghosts!" he laughed. "This is one of the loveliest old castles I've ever explored, and when I realise that it is all mine I want to shout. But I won't do so, because it'll make you all envious."

"We're envious already, old man," smiled Nipper. "You're a lucky beggar, you know—to have a fine place like this, all your own."



Nipper felt one of the panels and found it loose to the touch. And when he gave it a hard shove it opened, revealing a yawning black cavity beyond!

CHAPTER 12

An Extraordinary Occurrence!

HALF an hour later Reggie Pitt was feeling more elated than ever.

While two or three wings of the castle were in a very ruinous condition, one wing was practically intact. It was, indeed, in a splendid state of preservation. The great bedchambers were beautifully furnished, and although they were smothered in dust, they were comparatively dry, and nothing had been greatly harmed. It was the same with the reception-rooms downstairs. These were in fine condition, too.

"Why, we can spend a wonderful Christmas here," Reggie Pitt was saying, as he stood on one of the great landings, examining an old mullioned window. "This wing, in itself, is like a big house. Imagine what it will be like with fires roaring everywhere, and with decorations——"

"Listen!" broke in Jack Grey suddenly. "What was that?"

"Eh?"

"What was what?"

"I—I thought I heard something," said Jack, looking startled. "A rummy sound from downstairs!"

"Only your imagination, I suppose," said Handforth, as he stared down the corridor. "I didn't hear anything?"

"Not getting nervy, are you, Jack?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"No, of course not," said Jack Grey, turning crimson. "Of course I'm not getting nervy. But I thought I heard——"

"By Jove!" interrupted Pitt, as he succeeded in forcing the window open. "Look at this, you chaps! Well, I'm jiggered!"

"What is it?" asked the others, crowding forward.

They stared out of the window, and then they broke out into all sorts of exclamations.

"Snow!" said Church. "By Jupiter! And it's coming down thickly, too!"

Nobody had thought of looking outside until then. During the brief period that they had been exploring the castle, however, a great change had come about in the weather conditions. All the juniors had noticed those dark clouds coming up over the sky, but they had not realised that snow was so near.

The vista from the window was limited. For the snow was whirling down in such clouds that it was almost like fog. It was impossible to see for more than two or three hundred yards. The flakes were coming down steadily and thickly. And there was silence everywhere—the strange, dull silence which always seems to come with a fall of snow. Already the courtyard was white, and the ground further out was losing its ordinary character. The snow was laying as

it fell, and by the look of things the downfall would be a heavy one.

"We'd better be going," said Nipper. "I'd no idea it was snowing so heavily as this. It's getting dark, too."

"Yes, we have had enough, I think," said Reggie Pitt. "Even as it is, we shall have a job to get back to the school before calling over. And if this snow keeps on so heavily we shall be ploughing through a foot of it by the time we get to Bannington."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "There's no harm in a little snow. All the better, in my opinion. It's nearly Christmas-time, and why shouldn't it snow? I like to see it. It's seasonable."

"Well, there's that about it, of course," smiled Nipper. "But when we're cycling we're apt to think of our own comfort, you know. And nobody can say that it's actually pleasant cycling through a heavy snow-storm."

Reggie Pitt closed the window again, and they all prepared to make an immediate departure. They had sixteen or seventeen miles to ride back, and that would take them at least two hours. Perhaps longer, considering the condition of the roads now.

But it really seemed later than it was. In ordinary circumstances there would still have been a little daylight left, but the heavy snow clouds had obscured the sky, and a premature gloom had descended. The upper corridor of the castle was almost dark, and it seemed even darker to the juniors after withdrawing from that open window.

Then, just as they were about to move down the corridor, a sound came to their ears.

Crash!

They all came to a standstill, glancing at one another. At the end of this corridor there was a wide, stately staircase leading down to an enormous hall. And there could be no question that that crash had come from that direction.

"There you are!" muttered Jack Grey, looking startled. "What did I tell you? I heard something a few minutes ago, but—"

"Listen!" interrupted Handforth.

Crash—crash!

There it came again—louder this time. The rending of woodwork—the thudding of something heavy upon a stone floor.

"What the dickens can it be?" muttered Church. "There's nothing down there! We're all up here—every one of us! You didn't leave that door open, did you, Pitt?"

"No," said Reggie, frowning. "I locked it behind me—after we came in."

"Well, it's no good standing here and talking," said Nipper briskly. "We'd better rush down and see what the trouble is."

"But it can't be an ordinary intruder!" panted Jack Grey. "If anybody had got in, he wouldn't start smashing the furniture about—just to attract our attention!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "It's probably somebody having a lark. I shouldn't be

surprised if that beast, Quirke, followed us in."

"He couldn't have done—the door's locked!" said Pitt. "Still, we'd better go and see."

They raced along the corridor, until they came to the head of the stairs. Nipper and Pitt, who were leading, were just in time to see a heavy, antique chair crash on to its side on the further side of the hall. It had apparently hurtled through the air, although there was no visible means of what had caused it to do so. During those past few moments there had been a veritable ascendo of crashes from the hall.

As the juniors tumbled down those great stairs they looked round eagerly for some signs of a human intruder. But although they arrived on the lower floor only a few seconds after the last crash had sounded, there was not the slightest sign of anybody.

The hall was empty and deserted. The passages and corridors leading from it were also quiet and silent. One or two doors stood open, but a glance within proved that nobody was there. After a brief survey, the St. Frank's fellows collected together in the hall, and gazed at one another with genuine consternation and vague alarm.

"What can it mean?" muttered Church. "Who did it? Three or four chairs nearly smashed to pieces—and that old table on its side! What the dickens does it mean?"

"I—I think we'd better get out of here!" said Tommy Watson, with a gulp. "Don't you remember what Quirke told us? He said that this ghost isn't merely a Presence—it's something that is tangible! It can do bodily harm—"

"You'd better get those ideas out of your head, old man," said Nipper quietly. "We don't believe in ghosts, and we're not going to be fooled by a trick of this sort! I don't think we'll go home just yet—in spite of the gathering gloom. This matter needs investigating!"



CHAPTER 13

Very Mysterious!

HANDFORTH snorted.

"Yes, by George!" he said aggressively.

"An investigation is needed! There's been

some tomfoolery here! Somebody's trying to scare us—that's what it is! But whoever heard of such rot? Fancy trying to scare us by chucking furniture about! That's something new!"

He strode forward into the centre of the hall, and raised his voice.

"Hi!" he bellowed. "Who's here? Who's been messing about?"

But only the echo of his own voice came reverberating across from the panelled walls. Not that Edward Oswald was in any way impressed by this non-reply.

"Oh, you're keeping silent, are you?" he said aggressively. "All right, whoever you are! We'll soon rout you out, and then we'll make you pay!" He turned to the others. "Come on, you chaps! Let's make a quick search, and find out who this joker is!"

Handforth's attitude was like a tonic. Although the others would not have admitted it, one or two of them were beginning to feel just a little bit quaky. Nipper and Reggie Pitt were entirely of the same opinion as Handforth himself, but Church and McClure, and even Fullwood and Tregellis-West were—or had been—feeling uncertain.

But Handforth would not even consider the possibility of a ghostly manifestation. He scorned it. Somebody had been tricking them. That was the only possible explanation, in Handforth's opinion. And that trickster had to be discovered.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of the trickster.

A quick search was made, and it was as thorough as possible. Every inch of the hall was examined; the corridors were explored, and all the rooms near by, too. But there was no sign of any human presence beyond themselves.

"Well, it beats me!" said Handforth at last, scratching his head. "Not that I've changed my opinion!" he added, glaring. "There was plenty of time for the rotter to get away. I don't know who he is, and I'm not going to guess, but——"

"Listen!" interrupted Church. "What's that knocking?"

Thump—thump—thump!

It came to their ears dimly—from the distance. They all looked at one another with fresh expressions of wonder.

"No need to get scared!" growled Handforth. "It's only somebody knocking at the door! Sounds like that door we came through, too."

"It can't be," said Reggie Pitt. "I locked the outer door—the one that leads directly on to the drawbridge."

"Well, we'd better go and see, anyhow," said Nipper. "Mysterious smashing of furniture—and now mysterious knocking! This is getting quite interesting, you chaps!"

"Oh, rather!" said the others.

But one or two of them were not very enthusiastic. However, they all went along the corridor, and at length reached that little door which led into the courtyard. As Reggie Pitt flung it open there came the sound of thudding bangs on the great door beyond—explaining the little mystery.

"Hallo!" shouted Pitt. "Who's there?"

"I am thankful that you are still safe!" came the anxious voice of Ezra Quirke. "Why do you not come out? Why do you defy ——"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth, in disgust. "It's that ass, Quirke!"

Most of the others looked relieved, and Reggie Pitt strode forward through the snow and flung open the great door. Ezra Quirke stood there, his shoulders covered in snow, his overcoat collar turned up. He ventured in.

"This is madness!" he said. "I tried to go home—to forget you. But I know the dangers here—I realise the peril you are in by remaining. And it was on my conscience. I had to return—I could do nothing but come back, and I want to persuade you to——"

"We're not coming out, just because you want us to!" said Reggie Pitt curtly. "We don't take any notice of your nonsense, Quirke. My only hat! It's like your blessed nerve to expect us to! After all the trickery you got up to at St.

Frank's in the old days, it's a bit thick for you to believe that we shall have any faith in you!"

Ezra Quirke recoiled slightly.

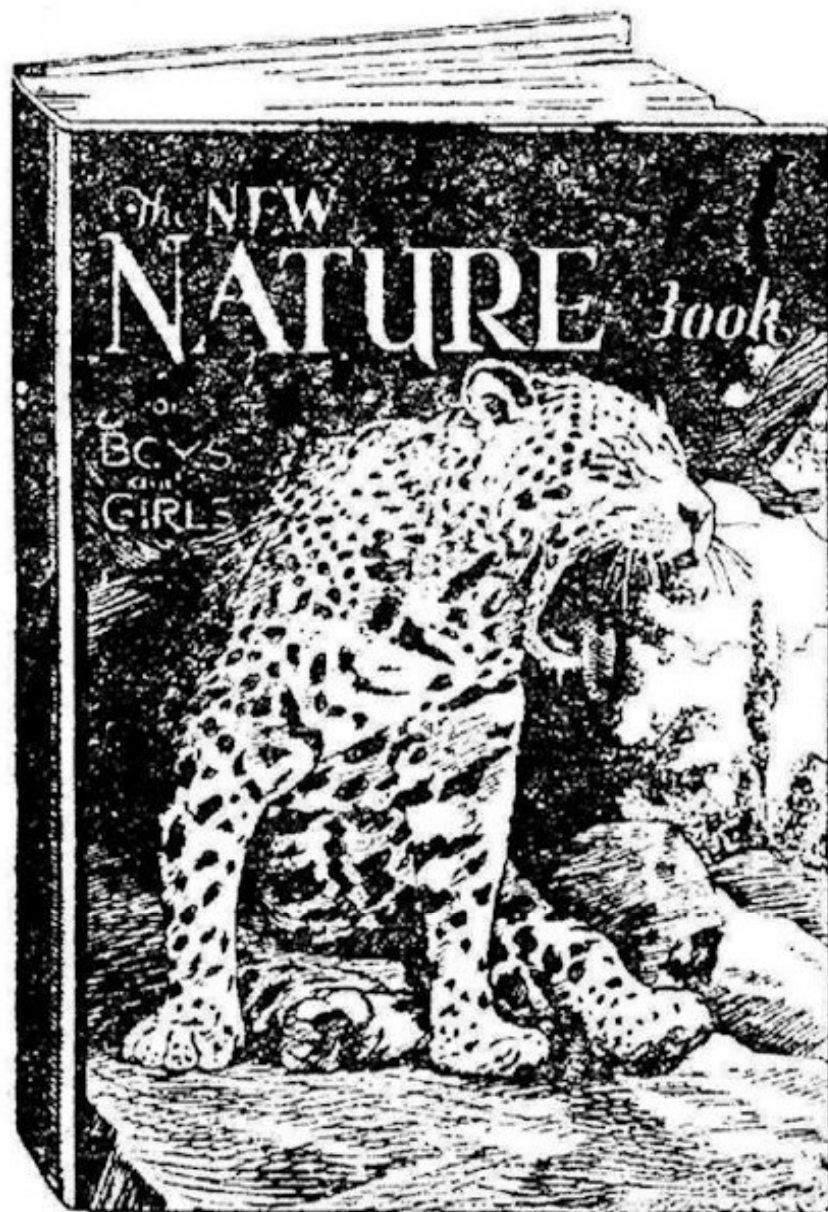
"Perhaps you had every cause to distrust me in those days," he muttered. "But this is different. I am not attempting to fool you. Can't you believe me? Can't you see that I'm in earnest?"

He looked at them anxiously.

"Well, Quirke, I rather believe that you are in earnest," said Nipper quietly. "But you mustn't expect us to believe in your own ideas, you know. We're all pretty obstinate, and we don't believe in ghosts. No ghosts, for example, can throw chairs about, and ——"

"Do—do you mean that there has been such a manifestation here?" interrupted Quirke excitedly.

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It was so unusual for this strange boy to show such emotion that the others looked at him in wonder for a moment. Then a roar came from Handforth, and he seized Quirke by the shoulder and shook him.

"Why, here he is—here's the trickster!" shouted Handforth. "He's the fellow who threw those chairs about in the hall just now!"

"It's not true!" shouted Quirke, trying to free himself. "I have not been near the castle until this minute! Oh, come away—come away! I tell you that the spirits are resentful of your presence. You are lucky to be safe."

"Oh, that's all rubbish!" growled Handforth. "You must have found a way in somehow, and you're trying to fool us again—with a variation of your old tricks."

"How can you say that?" interrupted Quirke passionately. "Why should I try to fool you? And if you want any proof, look at my footprints!" he added, turning and pointing to the distinct marks in the snow. "Follow them—see where they lead to! I am not trying to throw dust into your eyes now. These footprints will lead you only to the road beyond. If I had been in the castle, as you state—"

"Yes, that's true enough!" interrupted Nipper. "The footprints lead straight away from the castle—and Quirke couldn't have been mixed up in that rummy affair. Well, we'll go back again and have another look round. I'm not satisfied yet."

And when they all returned indoors, Ezra Quirke went with them. If anything, he had turned a shade paler, and his eyes were glowing with a strange light!



CHAPTER 14

The Hall of Mystery!

"WELL, it beats me!" Nipper made that remark seven or eight minutes later, after a thorough examination of the hall had been made. It was now gloomier than ever, for dusk was falling in earnest, and the heavy snowclouds only served to hasten the coming of night.

"What is this I hear?" asked Reggie Pitt, in surprise. "You confess that you're beaten, Nipper? Where is that strong spirit of yours? Where is that bold, never-say-die attitude that you were wont to have? Beaten? Let it never be said!"

Nipper grinned.

"I don't say I'm completely beaten," he remarked. "I feel certain that there's a logical explanation to all this mystery. But I very much doubt if we shall find it out to-night. There isn't time."

"Hear, hear!" said Church. "Let's be going!"

"Just what I was going to say," remarked Tommy Watson. "There's no sense in staying in this beastly old place any longer."

"Thanks!" said Reggie, bowing.

"Oh, sorry—I forgot it belonged to you!" said Tommy Watson. "All the same, it is a beastly old place!"

"Well, there's nothing like being frank," nodded Pitt. "At the same time, Thomas, kindly let me remind you that the conditions are very unfavourable. There isn't a fire in the whole place, there isn't a friendly light, and we know that the castle has the reputation of being haunted."

"That's it!" said Handforth, nodding. "The place will look absolutely different when we have fires going in all the rooms, and lights gleaming everywhere. By George! It'll be ripping, having Christmas here! You can count me in as a guest, Pitt!"

"And all the others, too, I hope—in addition to lots more," said Reggie. "Christmas at the haunted castle! Doesn't that sound attractive?"

Ezra Quirke came forward, his eyes glowing curiously.

"It is not well that you should make light of these grave matters," he said. "This is no ordinary haunting. It is not just a spirit—but a deadly, acute peril. The Thing which is abroad here is so horrible that I dare not imagine the result if we are attacked."

"Rats!" said Handforth aggressively. "Rot! Rubbish! Somebody has been playing tricks, and that's all there is about it! Some funny idiot was downstairs in this hall throwing chairs and things about. Are you trying to tell us, Quirke, you fathead, that a ghost can chuck solid articles all over the place?"

"Your ignorance on psychic matters is appalling," said Quirke. "It is well known by all investigators into the occult that there are certain types of ghosts that can materialise. That is to say, they take shape—they become powerful over material things. Such a ghost is in possession of this castle. You talk of spending Christmas here? It is madness! It is sheer insanity! Proceed with this plan, and there will be tragedy!"

"Let's be going," said McClure uneasily.

"Yes, it's about time," agreed Fullwood. "It's nearly dark, anyhow, and we've got to think of the ride home. It won't be any too easy in this snowstorm."

"I am glad to see that some of you are sensible," remarked Quirke. "The others, in their superior indifference, will probably say that you are becoming scared."

"Who's scared?" demanded McClure, glaring.

"I did not mean any offence," went on Quirke. "Indeed, if you are frightened, you are only revealing your common sense. For there is every reason to be frightened. Can you not feel the influence of this uneasy spirit in the very air?"

"You'll feel my fist on your nose if you talk any more of that rot!" said Handforth angrily.

"Perhaps I am wrong to expect so much," said Quirke quietly. "I am psychic. I have certain powers as a medium. Therefore I can feel these things—I know them to be. But you are all different. You are worldly—unbelieving—and thus you take no notice of me when I tell you of your deadly danger."

Nipper looked at Quirke straightly.

"If there is so much danger here, Quirke, why did you come in?" he asked. "We never knew that you were particularly brave——"

"It is no question of bravery," interrupted Quirke, twirling round. "You mistake me. You do not realise the nature of my warning. There is deadly danger for you—but no danger for me."

"That's interesting!" said Reggie. "Why are you immune?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie Glenthorne, adjusting his monocle and inspecting Quirke with great interest. "This is frightfully entertaining, dear old boys. Why is Quirke immune from the good old ghostly effects? Surely the blighter isn't a pal of this spectre-johnny?"

"There is no danger for those who believe," replied Quirke tensely. "This ghost will only be angered by the presence of sceptics. Don't you understand? It will vent its anger upon you sooner or later. If you come here in a calm spirit, satisfied that there is a real haunting, then no disaster will befall you. But if you come here—as you come now—with laughs and jeers at the possibility of a real ghost, there can be only one result. You may escape in safety this evening. I hope so—I pray so. But if you spend Christmas here, in defiance of the power of the ghost, then you will suffer."

Reggie Pitt laughed.

"Does it well, doesn't he?" he asked. "Bravo, Quirke!"

"What do you mean?" asked Ezra Quirke fiercely.

"You've got all the tricks of the trade at your finger-tips," replied Pitt, grinning. "Those sort of things might influence ignorant rustics, or simple-minded old ladies, or doddering old gentlemen, but when you speak them to us it's very much like pouring water on a duck's back. It has no effect. My dear deluded ass! I believe that you sincerely mean all this tosh. It's got hold of you thoroughly—and it's having an unhealthy influence. Forget it, Quirke—go out into the open air, and let these cobwebs be blown out of your brain. You're getting morbid—you're getting touched. As for Christmas, I've made up my mind to spend the holidays in this castle. There's going to be a big house-warming, and all these fellows are coming here to celebrate and to be joyous. So you can keep your croaking to yourself."

"That's the sort of spirit!" said Handforth approvingly. "Good man, Reggie!"

Ezra Quirke shrugged his shoulders.

"I have done my best—and I have failed," he said quietly. "I can do no more. A warning, it seems, is useless. There is danger in every moment you remain, but it seems

that you are reluctant to depart. Very well—I will say no more."

Reggie nodded.

"Then that long speech of mine wasn't wasted," he said lightly. "Come on, you fellows! Let's go into the banqueting-hall and have a good look at it. I want to make a mental list of the things we shall require for Christmas."

And they all went crowding into the banqueting-hall—Ezra Quirke bringing up the rear, his pale face drawn, his eyes glowing with resentment and excitement.

Was he genuinely convinced that the castle was haunted, or had he an axe to grind?



CHAPTER 15

The Chair That Moved!

THE banqueting-hall was a big, lofty apartment in that section of the castle which was still habitable. There were great oak beams across the ceiling, and all the walls were heavily panelled. Down one side of the room were many enormous windows, and a fair amount of light was coming through them. Outside, the snow could be seen falling steadily. The weed-grown terrace beyond the moat was already completely white.

"Well, it's not so bad in here," said Reggie Pitt cheerily. "It makes all the difference when there's some light. The hall is dark and gloomy—but this room is wonderful. Just imagine us sitting all round this huge table enjoying the turkey and the plum-pudding and all the other good things!"

"Yes, it'll be fine!" said Fullwood, with enthusiasm.

"Lights burning everywhere—logs blazing in the grate," went on Reggie, drawing upon his imagination. "Twenty or thirty of us round the festive board—including Irene & Co., if we can manage to get them here. I shall have to have a serious word with my sister, and she'll probably be able to work the oracle."

The table in the banqueting-hall was in a splendid state of preservation. It was a tremendous affair, reaching from one end of the vast room to the other. All the furniture was in a splendid condition. The chairs were dusty, and traces of mould could be seen here and there, but on the whole there was nothing much to grumble at.

What a tremendous difference—what a wonderful difference—there would be in this magnificent banqueting-hall when the decorations were put up, when the lights were gleaming, and when the place rang with joyous laughter! All those St. Frank's fellows could picture the scene as it would be. Ezra Quirke was the only one present who allowed his thoughts to drift into a sombre vein.

Crash! Without warning—and with a thudding crash which made everybody jump—the great picture came tumbling down from the wall!



"I do not like to hear you speaking in this way, Pitt," he said earnestly. "It seems to me that you are determined to spend Christmas here—to bring a great number of your friends. But I want to warn you—"

"Dry up!" roared Handforth. "I thought you weren't going to speak again?"

"I cannot help it!" panted Quirke. "You are forcing me to speak—by your obstinacy and blindness! I cannot hear you making these plans without telling you of the danger. It is foolish—it is madness! Even now, while we are talking here, this ghost might materialise and seize one of you and dash him to death!"

"Ghosts don't do that sort of thing," said Church impatiently. "Ghosts are only seen—"

"You are wrong!" interrupted Quirke. "This particular kind of ghost is capable of menacing human life."

"Are you going to dry up, or shall we smother you?" roared Handforth. "You silly, gassing ass! Ghosts only appear at midnight. Any chump can tell you that!"

Quirke looked amazed.

"But do you believe that nonsense?" he asked, aghast. "Do you really believe that ghosts can only appear at midnight? That is all rubbish! You are thinking of the foolish stories that are told to children. Midnight is no different from any other hour. I tell you that Presence is here. It is with us all the time. It does not matter whether the hour is midnight or whether it is noon. In the brightest sunshine a ghost of this kind can reveal itself and exert its deadly power. I know what I am talking about—"

"Oh!" gasped Jack Grey suddenly.

"What's the matter?" said Pitt, turning to him.

"Nun-nothing!" said Jack, with a gulp. "My imagination, I suppose!"

"But did you see anything?"

"I'm not sure," replied Jack Grey. "I thought I did—but I must have been mistaken. Of course I was mistaken!"

"This is getting interesting," remarked Reggie. "Jack has seen the ghost! Come on, Jack, let's hear all about it!"

"But I didn't see the ghost!" said Grey, colouring. "Don't be an ass, Reggie! I suppose it was a trick of the light, or something. But—but— Well, it seemed to me that that big chair at the end of the table moved a bit just now."

"The chair moved?" repeated Handforth.

"Yes!"

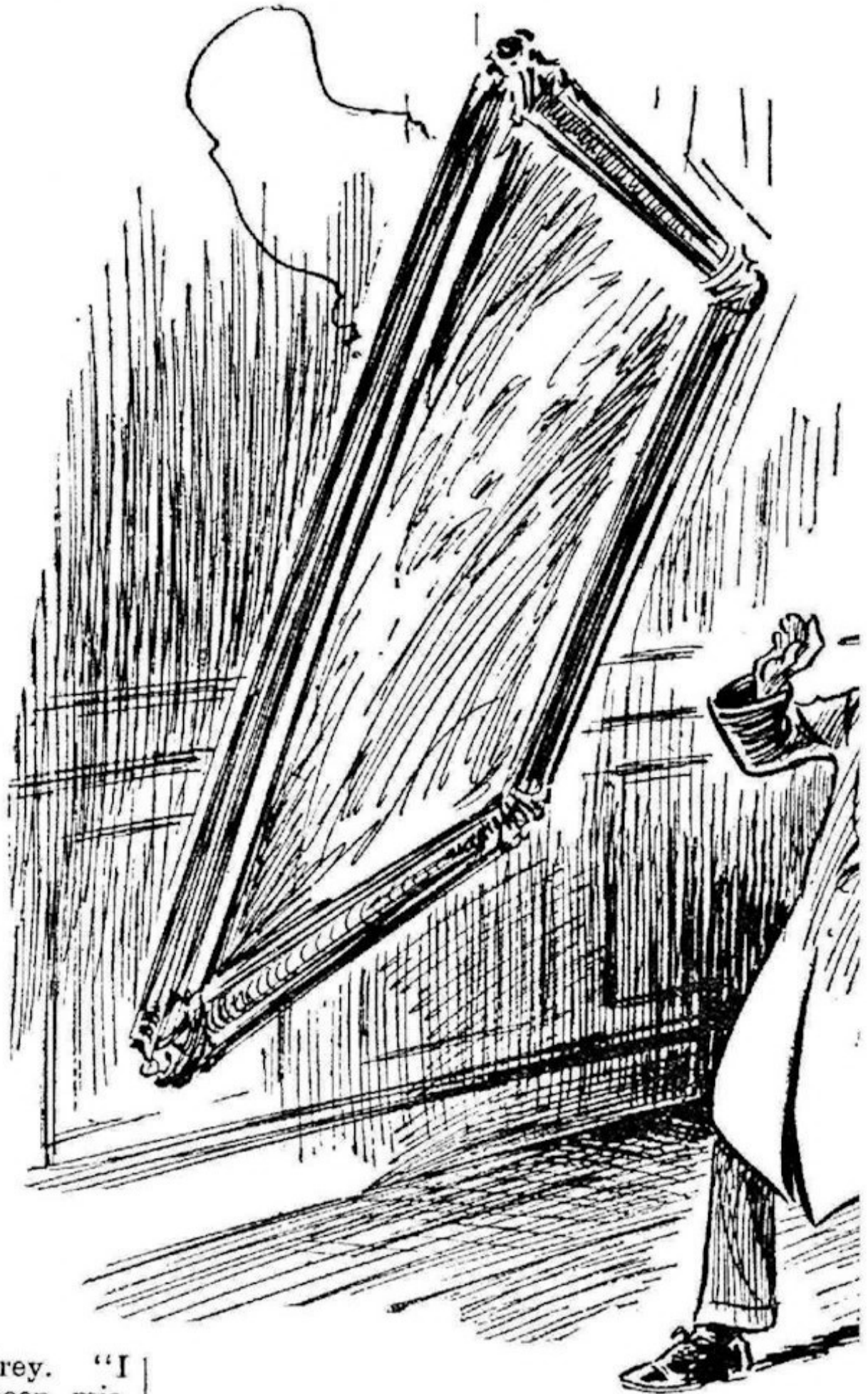
"By itself?"

"Yes," said Jack. "Silly, isn't it?"

"Dotty!" growled Handforth. "How the dickens could that chair move of its own accord? There's nobody near it—we're all up this end of the room. Chairs don't move without being handled!"

Quirke was looking down the great hall with awed eyes.

"The chair moved!" he whispered. "What did I tell you? Already this ghost—this



materialised spirit—is beginning its tricks! If it so chose, it could lift even this great table and send it crashing down upon you. You laugh at me, you seem amused. But I'm only warning you of a great truth. Ask any investigator of the occult! I do not pretend to be an authority, but—"

"There!" yelled Jack Grey, pointing. "Didn't you see it, you chaps? It moved again!"

"What!"

"Good gad!"

"I—I say, let's get out of here!" muttered Church, glancing over his shoulder.

"I'm not nervous, but I don't mind admitting that I'm feeling pretty uncomfortable."

"I didn't see the chair move," said Nipper, giving Jack Grey a curious glance. "Are you sure of this, Jack?"

But Jack was staring fascinatedly at that chair at the other end of the room.

"Yes," he muttered, "I'm sure! My eyes didn't deceive me that time. Look! There, can't you see it now?"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Look—look!"

They all stood there, spellbound. For now there could be no further doubt on the point. All those St. Frank's fellows saw the same phenomenon. The big armchair at the head of the table was moving!

It was moving slowly, deliberately, and yet no soul was near it! Ezra Quirke was

Crash! Without warning—and with a thudding crash which made everybody jump—the great picture came tumbling down from the wall!



furthest away of all, so he could not be suspected of trickery here. He was staring at the chair with glowing eyes.

"Look!" he breathed. "It is a sign! Keep back—keep back! Do not go near it—do not dare to interfere!"

There was certainly something uncanny afoot.

The big chair was still moving—gliding noiselessly across the dusty floor. It was moving sideways, towards the great fireplace. Then, with a sudden thunderous crash, the chair toppled over on to its side.

The juniors gulped, and every face was a shade paler!



CHAPTER 16

The Mystery Deepens!

CRASH! The overturning of the chair seemed to break the momentary spell. Everybody shouted at once, and there was a rush down the banqueting hall. No notice was taken of Ezra Quirke's alarmed cry.

The first to reach the chair were Handforth and Nipper. It was made of solid oak, and exceedingly heavy. The juniors picked it up and set it on its feet again.

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

"As good as Maskelyne and Devants!" said Reggie Pitt, with a grin. "I don't pretend to know how it was done, but it was jolly smart!"

"What do you mean—smart?" asked Jack Grey.

"My dear chap, it was only a trick," said Reggie. "You won't get me to believe that this chair was drawn across the floor and hurled over by some supernatural force. Not likely! I'm a pig-headed sort of chap, and I'm not swallowing those yarns!"

"But—but we saw it!" protested Church.

"Yes, exactly," said Pitt. "And when we go to an illusionist's show we see a sweet young thing screwed into a wooden box, and we see the wooden box sawn in half. But is the sweet young thing sawn in half? Of course she isn't! In full view of the audience, the illusionist unfastens the lid of the box and out steps the damsel, unscratched."

"That's true enough," admitted Fullwood. "They do it by trickery."

"Naturally," nodded Pitt. "It would be rather awkward if they had to get a fresh young lady for every performance. Besides, it's a criminal offence to saw a girl in halves. It isn't done."

"You are determined to remain jocular," said Ezra Quirke, coming up. "But it is fatal, Pitt! Let me tell you that it is foolish



CHAPTER 17

Nipper Investigates!

NIPPER grasped Reggie Pitt's arm just as the West House junior was following Handforth and the others into the hall.

"Hold on!" muttered Nipper. "I want you."

"Eh?" said Reggie. "What for?"

"Leave this other business to Handforth," said Nipper. "I don't suppose for a minute that Handforth will make any discoveries. This trickery is too clever for him."

"You're convinced it's trickery, then?"

"Aren't you?" asked Nipper.

"Well, yes," admitted Reggie. "But it's pretty smart, all the same."

They were left alone in the banquet-chamber, and they could hear all sorts of shouts from outside in the hall. But they took no notice. Nipper led the way across to the big fireplace; he produced a big electric torch, and flashed it on.

"That's better!" said Reggie. "Why the dickens didn't you bring that torch out before?"

"There wasn't any need for it before," replied Nipper. "You're the owner of this castle, Reggie, and it seems to me that somebody is trying to make you scared of it."

"But who would do it?"

"We don't know—we can't even guess," replied Nipper. "Not that it matters much now. The main thing is to prove that these manifestations are caused by trickery. We're both satisfied that that chair moved by some hokus-pokus, aren't we?"

"You bet we are!" said Pitt, nodding.

"Very well, then," continued Nipper. "The chair moved in the direction of this fireplace. It wasn't controlled by a ghostly hand, and it wasn't pushed. Therefore it stands to reason that it must have been pulled."

"By Jove!" said Reggie. "You mean—wires?"

"Wires are generally the medium for such dodges," agreed Nipper. "And if there were any wires, we might find some traces of them in the fireplace."

"But wouldn't they have been attached to the chair?"

"Yes—while the chair was moving," said Nipper. "But wires can be jerked free, you know—and pulled out of sight. I don't suppose for a minute that we shall find any wires, but there's just a chance that we might

find some holes—where wires might have come from."

"That's a cute idea," said Reggie enthusiastically. "Come on—before those other chaps come back. Let's make a thorough examination."

It was a sensible plan; and the two juniors would find it necessary to be quick, too. The others would certainly come back within a minute or two, and this did not leave much time for a careful examination. Nipper was particularly anxious to make this investigation before Ezra Quirke saw what he was up to. Nipper did not actually suspect Quirke of any complicity in the trickery, but he could not forget Quirke's earlier record.

"No, there's nothing here," said Pitt, as they stared eagerly at the panelling near the fireplace. "Not a sign of a hole—not even a crevice."

"And yet the chair was moving in this direction," said Nipper. "If there were any wires, they must have come from somewhere near here. By Jove! Just look at this fireplace itself! This chimney is big enough for a couple of men to hide in."

They had crouched down, and had entered the enormous open fireplace. Flashing his torchlight upwards, Nipper could see a great, cavernous chimney.

It yawned over their heads, and there was nothing but utter blackness above. It was one of those wide old chimneys, and it was obvious that it had not been used for years, for there was scarcely any soot on the walls.

"No, there aren't any stakes or crevices in the brickwork," said Nipper. "I don't think anybody climbed down this chimney. But what if some wires were let down? One pull, you know, and they would vanish up this chimney in a flash."

"You mean that they were attached to that chair all the time, and only pulled at the right moment?"

"Something like that," said Nipper. "But we're working in the dark, remember. We can't possibly know how the dodge was done, but we can suspect. And if those wires came down this chimney, they would naturally pass under the oak mantelpiece, and there might be some marks there."

"That's not very probable, is it?"

"When that chair was suddenly jerked—in order to overturn it—the wires must have come against the woodwork pretty hard," said Nipper. "Of course, we're taking it for granted that wires were actually used. We may be on the wrong track. Anyhow, let's make certain."

A moment later he gave a little murmur of satisfaction.

52 PAGES

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TWOPENCE!

"Look at this!" he said tensely. "What do you make of it, Reggie?"

They were staring at two little marks on the edge of the mantelpiece—on the underside, at the entrance to the great chimney. Sure enough, there were two tiny scorings visible. Pitt himself would never have seen them if his attention had not been attracted. They were almost invisible—until one went quite close.

"Yes, by Jove, these marks certainly look as though they might have been caused by a couple of wires," said Reggie. "Then your theory was right, Nipper? The chair was deliberately pulled—"

"There's no proof that I'm right," interrupted Nipper. "We can't be certain of anything, Reggie. But it looks suspicious—that's all."

"It is suspicious," said Reggie Pitt grimly. "And I don't mind telling you that I'm as determined as ever to spend Christmas in the castle. By jingo! Think of the excitement! Tricksters all over the place, trying to scare me out! Well, they've got hold of the wrong customer!"

"Good man!" said Nipper approvingly.

"They're not going to scare me out with their fakery," went on Reggie. "Not likely! I don't know who they are, or why they're doing it, but this discovery has made me pretty obstinate. I've invited you and the other chaps to spend Christmas here, and I'm not going back on my word because of a few ghosts. No giddy fear!

When I get back to St. Frank's I'll make every arrangement for spending Christmas under this roof. I'll invite half the Remove—and some of the Fourth-Form fellows, too—and young Willy and his pals of the Third! We'll have a big party—a regular house-warming!"

"With ghosts and manifestations thrown in, free of charge!" chuckled Nipper. "Christmas in Raithmore Castle promises to be pretty exciting, Reggie!"

"Well, I believe in doing a thing thoroughly," said Reggie dryly. "What's the good of a Christmas party in an old castle if a ghost or two doesn't appear? Come on—let's go and join the others, and see what's been happening."

They emerged from the fireplace, and crossed over towards the hall. Reggie Pitt had made his decision. Nothing would prevent him from spending Christmas under this mysterious old roof!



CHAPTER 18

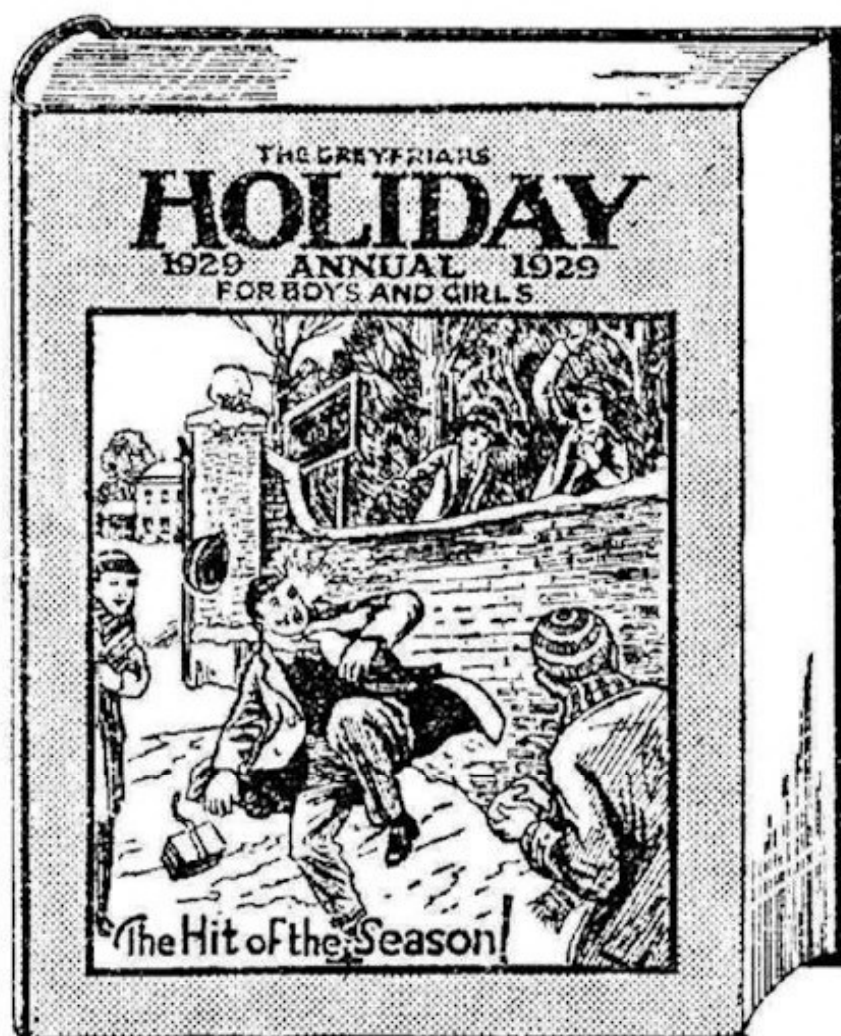
The Fallen Picture!

"WELL, what's the trouble out here?" asked Reggie Pitt briskly.

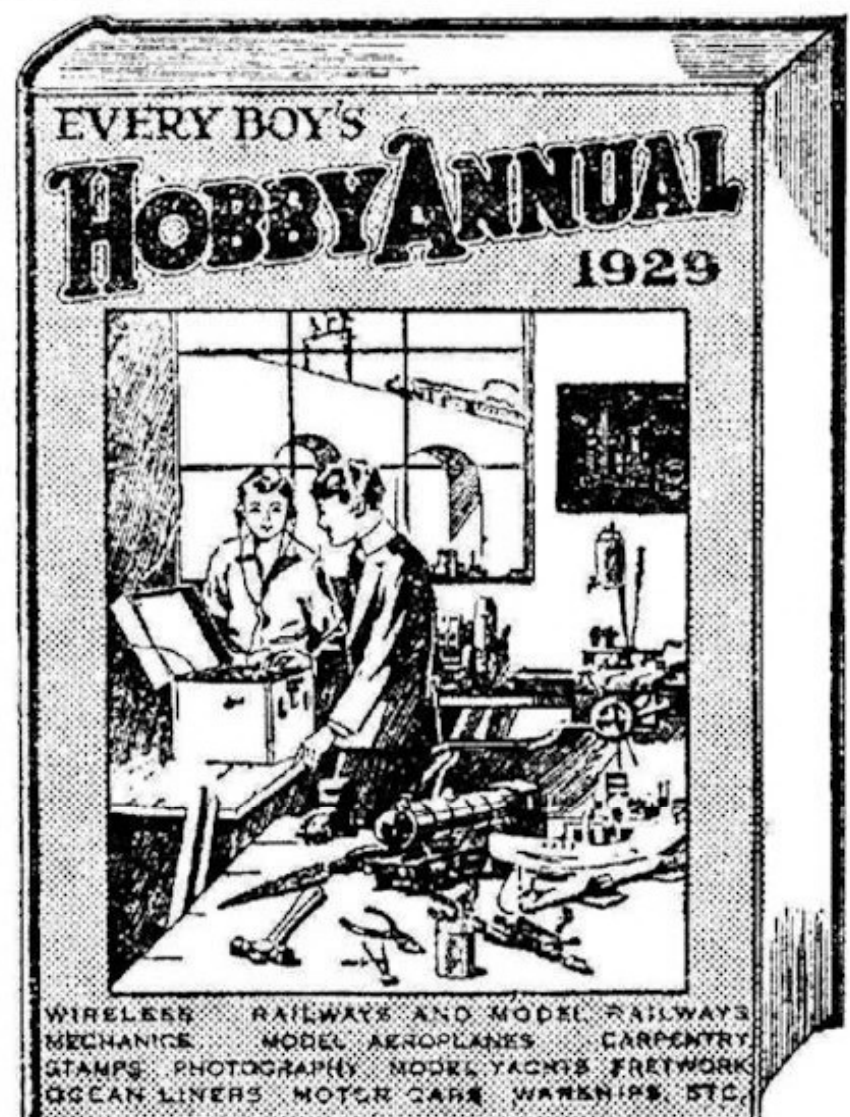
He and Nipper had just come into the hall, and they found Handforth and the other

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juniors standing about, talking in low voices. The daylight had practically failed by now, and only a dim glimmer was coming through the tall, narrow windows. Ezra Quirke was standing separately, a rather mysterious figure. Indeed, his presence only tended to increase the air of ghostliness.

"What's the matter out here?" repeated Reggie.

"Nothing," growled Handforth.

"But there was a clatter——"

"A suit of armour had fallen down," said Jack Grey unsteadily. "There's nothing to account for it, either. We found it lying on the floor, and——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Anything is liable to make a suit of armour fall over! A passing motor-bus, or something like that!"

"But motor-buses don't pass the castle!" said Fullwood. "There isn't a public road for a mile!"

"Well, perhaps there's a stray cat in the place," said Handforth firmly. "By George! That's about the size of it!" he went on eagerly, struck by the brilliance of his own idea. "A stray cat! It may have been roaming in the castle for weeks and months. It's half-wild by this time, and it's scared because we came in."

"And I suppose this stray cat turned that chair over?" asked Church sarcastically.

"Eh? Oh, well——" Handforth paused. "Never mind about the chair," he went on. "That must have been done by a rocky leg, or something."

Ezra Quirke came forward.

"It is pitiful to hear you suggesting these preposterous explanations," he said. "I am compelled to speak again. Why do you not go from this place? Darkness is nearly upon us—and the danger is always more acute after daylight has fled!"

"I thought you said that the ghosts could be just as active at noon as at midnight?" asked Fullwood.

"Absolutely!" nodded Archie. "The frightful blighter positively said it."

"But the darkness is, nevertheless, more dangerous—since we human beings are made of poor stuff," replied Quirke impressively. "In the darkness we are less courageous—we are more apt to lose our reason."

"Speak for yourself, my lad!" said Reggie Pitt. "In my opinion, you've pretty well lost your reason already! That is, of course, if you ever had any! Why don't your people keep you in a home?"

Quirke took no notice of these sallies. He stood there, looking almost like a ghost himself. Handforth was about to make some caustic remark, but he did not utter the words. For at that moment another dramatic interruption came.

Crash!

Without warning—and with a thudding crash which made everybody jump—a great picture came tumbling down from the opposite wall. It was an oil-painting, seven or eight feet in height, with a massive frame. It hit the floor sideways, splintered, and then fell with a thud upon its face.

"Oh, my hat," muttered Watson, pale to the lips.

"Let's—let's go!" gasped Church. "Hang it, I'm getting scared! I'm not a frightened sort of chap as a rule, but this—this is too much! Let's go!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean to say, odds scares and frights! This sort of thing is enough to make a chappie go all jellified!"

"It is another sign!" said Ezra Quirke. "Will you never be satisfied? This uneasy spirit has so far left you alone, but sooner or later there will be a change. One of you will suffer—and perhaps it will mean death!"

"Dry up!" said Pitt, turning on him sharply.

"I am only giving you a warning——"

"Dry up!" repeated Pitt. "We don't want to hear any of that piffle from you, Quirke! Haven't you got more sense than to talk about death at a time like this?"

"If you will heed me——"

"That's enough!" roared Reggie dangerously.

Nipper had switched on his torch, and he was examining the great picture with interest. The others were crowding round, glad of that brilliant patch of light.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about," said Nipper. "You've got to remember that these old pictures have been hanging here for years—and they are liable to fall down at any moment. A slight vibration may be sufficient to cause the wire to snap."

"But there hasn't been any vibration," said Tommy Watson.

"The vibration caused by our voices might be enough," replied Nipper. "Anyhow, let's have a look."

"They say that it's unlucky when a picture falls," muttered Church. "I'm not superstitious—I don't believe in those silly yarns—but, all the same, it's queer, isn't it! Why should that picture fall just when we're here? There's no end to these mysterious happenings!"

"And look there!" said Fullwood, pointing. "That wire isn't broken, Nipper! It's as sound as ever!"

"So I see," nodded Nipper, puzzled. "The picture didn't fall because the wire broke—we've established that fact, anyhow. This wire is like a piece of steel cable. It's as solid as ever—and in perfect condition."

"Perhaps the nail came out?" suggested Tregellis-West. "Nails have a habit of coming out sometimes, dear old boy."

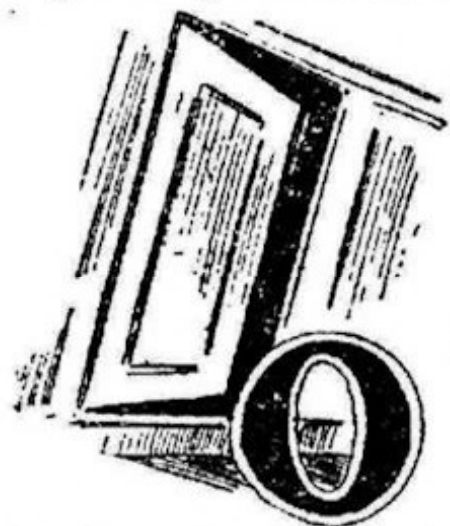
"Yes, I expect that's the explanation," said Nipper. "But it'll hardly be a nail, Montie. A big stake, I should think."

He flashed his light upwards, and, sure enough, a heavy stake could be seen in the wall, high above. It was a very large one, with a hook on it a full inch in height. The stake was still embedded in the wall like a rock!

"I say, that's queer!" said Fullwood, in a strange voice. "The wire's intact, and the

stake is still in the wall! How did the picture come off? What caused it to fall?"

"Why do you ask these questions?" demanded Quirke passionately. "Will you never be convinced? Must I talk to you endlessly? When will you learn? I tell you this place is haunted—and you have had ample proof! Yet you will not believe! You are mad—you are insane to stay here! With every minute that passes the danger is growing more acute!"



CHAPTER 19

The Loose Panel!

NE or two of those juniors felt more uneasy than they would have cared to admit. Was there something

in Ezra Quirke's talk? Was this quaint old castle really haunted?

Certainly, there had been a strange series of unaccountable manifestations.

They had been cumulative, too—they had come one on top of the other, as though to convince the intruders that they were in the presence of some supernatural force.

This latest happening was the most remarkable of all. Even Nipper was puzzled. How had that picture come from its fastening? What had caused it to crash down in that dramatic way?

A general uneasiness had settled over the juniors. The dusk had deepened so much now that it was practically night. When Nipper flashed out his torch, it seemed as though the boys were in complete blackness.

"Here, steady!" said Watson. "Let's have that light, Nipper!"

"Sorry!" said Nipper. "I'd forgotten that it was nearly dark. I suppose we'd better be going, eh?"

"Yes, rather!" said most of the others.

"You are wise—at last!" murmured Quirke.

"All the same, I don't like leaving," went on Nipper. "There's something very rummy about this castle of yours, Pitt. First of all, a chair starts moving of its own accord. After that a suit of armour topples over, and finally a picture falls."

"A regular succession of hair-raising incidents," said Reggie Pitt cheerily. "Unfortunately, my hair refuses to stand on end."

"Oh, don't rot, old man," said Jack Grey. "You're welcome to your old castle! I don't envy you in the least!"

"What was that?" asked Handforth abruptly.

Several of the juniors started.

"Eh?" muttered Church. "What—what was what?"

"I thought I heard a sound from this corridor," said Handforth, peering down a black, mysterious-looking passage. "A sort of stealthy movement—like something sliding along the floor. I may have been mistaken——"

"Probably the ivy catching against one of the windows," said Nipper practically. "We can't stop to investigate now."

"Can't we?" said Handforth grimly. "I heard something, and I mean to find out what it was! It's quite likely I shall run into the rotter who's been performing all these tricks! And when I capture him, by George, I'll punch his nose!"

Handforth went off before any of the others could stop him.

"Hi!" yelled Church. "Come back. Handy! It's all dark down there, and you haven't a light——"

But it was no good. Edward Oswald was running full tilt into the black corridor, and they could hear him thudding along. He evidently turned a corner, for the sounds grew less distinct.

"Oh, the ass!" gasped McClure. "The silly fathead! He'll only lose himself down these interminable passages and corridors! It was bad enough in the daylight, but it's ten times worse now! Where's your torch, Nipper? Let's go and drag him back!"

"Just like Handy to delay us all, when we were on the point of going!" growled Watson. "He was always an ass like that!"

In the meantime, Handforth was still running. He had got it fairly fixed into his head that something had moved down this corridor; and, as he did not believe in ghosts, and as he was certain that some practical joker was at work, he felt no tinge of nervousness. He just ran on, with a vague idea in his mind that he might overtake the intruder.

And then—crash!

Edward Oswald hardly knew what had happened. As a matter of fact, he had run full tilt into a wall. In the gloom, he had not noticed that the passage had taken another sharp turn, and instead of turning the corner he ran headlong into the wall.

But that was not all. Something gave way, with a sharp, loud snap. And as Handforth went tumbling through a mysterious aperture, there came another snap.

A panel! The entrance to a secret passage!

Without knowing it, Handforth had stumbled upon this secret of Raithmere Castle! The panel swung to and snapped into position immediately after he had passed through the opening. Not that Handforth knew anything about it.

He was far too busily engaged. For there was not an ordinary passage on the other side of that secret panel—but a flight of stone stairs, which led downwards into the dim, mysterious depths beneath the castle.

And Edward Oswald was tumbling down them head over heels!

Dazed by his original collision, he had commenced falling down the stairs before he really knew where he was. It was utterly black here—inky black. At last his fall came to an end.

He sprawled on some damp stones, dazed and bewildered. He was hurt, too—bruised in a dozen places. Actually, he was lucky to escape so lightly. Anybody less clumsy and robust might easily have broken a limb.

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Handforth dizzily, as he sat up. "Where am I? What's happened?"

He tried to think clearly, but only became more confused.

"The rotter!" he said fiercely. "The murderous cur! I didn't see him, but he must have grabbed me and thrown me down those stairs! And now I don't know where I am, or—or anything!"

Painfully he picked himself up, and walked forward a pace or two. It was a rather fatal thing to do, for he had not yet

reached the bottom of the stairs, and he plunged forward and fell heavily. Thoroughly shaken, he staggered to his feet again, then walked dazedly on. He turned a corner somehow, and his hands, touching the walls of the passage, encountered dampness. He was far below the castle, in a labyrinth of secret passages!

And when, some little time later, he fully recovered himself, he was staggered by the realisation that he was lost!

Lost down in these mysterious depths—without a match on him, and without any means of finding his bearings again!

A number of startled exclamations went up from the juniors as they saw the strange, eerie figure at the top of the stairs.



anybody else, how he needed looking after!

They had turned one bend in the corridor, and then they had paused, uncertain. Nothing but blackness yawned ahead of them. There seemed to be no windows here, and everything was utterly ghostly and eerie.

"Handy!" shouted McClure again. "Oh, you ass! Where have you got to?"

"Nipper's coming!" said Church thankfully. "He's coming

with that torch of his!"

"About time, too!" said Mac.

Nipper came up, with Reggie Pitt and all the rest. It was noticed that Ezra Quirke was clinging to the crowd. Where they moved, he moved. His actions were hardly in accordance with his statement that the "ghost" could not harm him. At all events, he had no desire to be left all alone.

"Haven't you found him?" asked Nipper, as he ran up.

"No, and he won't answer, either," said Church. "He only came along here a minute ago, and yet there's not a single trace—"

CHAPTER 20

Handforth Disappears!



H

"E'S gone!" said Church hoarsely.

"Handy! Handy!" shouted McClure.

But no reply came.

Only the echoes of their own voices sounded in that grim old corridor.

Church and McClure had been the first to rush after the leader of Study D. They were his chums, and they knew, more than

"Yes, there is!" broke in Nipper, as he flashed his torchlight on the floor. "Look at this dust! It's been undisturbed for years! And there are Handy's footprints, as clear as you like!"

"By Jingo, yes!"

"Let's follow them!"

"A brainy scheme," said Archie stoutly. "Human bloodhounds, what!"

"I thought I heard a kind of crash, too," said McClure, as they walked eagerly on. "Perhaps the silly thump fell down a staircase somewhere!"

It was a good guess, although Handforth's chum did not realise it. Just then Nipper came to an abrupt halt, for Handforth's tracks had ended. This particular corridor had not been explored earlier, when many of the other passages had come under attention. Handforth had been the first one to set foot on that dusty floor.

"Well, this is funny!" said Nipper, in a queer voice.

"What's funny?" asked Reggie.

"Look!" said the Remove captain. "Can't you see?"

"I can see some footprints, if that's what you mean," replied Pitt. "If we go along here——"

"No, don't disturb them!" interrupted Nipper quickly. "Don't move forward, Reggie. We shall only confuse the tracks."

The others halted, and Nipper pointed, his torchlight showing up the flooring with great clearness just ahead.

"We can see the footprints quite distinctly," said Nipper. "There they are, but they abruptly end. That's what I can't understand. There isn't a window here, or a doorway, either. Just the walls and the floor. And yet Handforth's footprints completely vanish!"

"Oh, corks!"

"What—what can it mean?"

"It's so uncanny!" said McClure desperately. "Where is Handy? What's become of him? How did he disappear like this? He couldn't have vanished into thin air!"

"But there's no other explanation," said Watson. "Beyond the spot where these footprints end the dust is absolutely undisturbed."

It was an extraordinary affair. In spite of themselves, the juniors felt creepy sensations down their backs. For the first time they were beginning to suspect that there was, indeed, some deadly Presence. Otherwise, how could Handforth have vanished so utterly and so strangely?

"Where is he?" asked Mac hoarsely. "Oh, where is he?"

"At last you are realising the truth!" came a voice from the rear. "Is it not clear what has happened?"

They turned upon Ezra Quirke, and stared at him.

"What do you mean—clear?" asked Church. "How can it be clear? It's an absolute mystery!"

"There is no mystery," replied Quirke. "I have already explained to you that this ghost is capable of materialising. To my mind there can be only one explanation of this mystery. The foolish Handforth encountered the spirit of Raithmere Castle, and then and there it seized him and bore him away into the Unknown. Are not these footprints indicative of the true story? There is no window within reach—no doorway! And yet Handforth vanished. It is all obvious."

"Rot!" said Nipper angrily. "How many more times have we got to tell you to stop

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



this nonsense, Quirke? Handforth's vanished, and our job is to find out how. He didn't go further along the corridor, because there aren't any footprints. So it stands to reason that he must have vanished here, just at this spot."

"But where did he go to?" asked Pitt, losing some of his jocularly. "Hang it, Nipper, this is a poser!"

"It seems like it, but I can't be fooled so easily," said Nipper. "As Handforth didn't go any further than this, and as he couldn't sink through the floor or float up to the ceiling, he must have gone through one of these walls."

"But there isn't a door," said Watson.

"Then he must have passed through a panel," replied Nipper briskly. "My dear chaps, why make a mystery out of nothing? You know what these old castles are. Panelled walls everywhere, and secret passages——"

"Secret passages?"

"Why not?" asked Nipper. "There may be all sorts of hidden doorways—Hallo, what's this?"

He broke off abruptly, and felt one of the panels just at the spot where those footprints vanished. Nipper had hit upon the practical explanation of the mystery, and a moment's examination proved that he was right.

For one of those panels, seemingly so solid, was loose to the touch. When Nipper gave

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it a hard shove, it opened, and revealed a yawning black cavity beyond!



CHAPTER 21

Not So Uncanny!

"OPEN Sesame!" said Reggie Pitt lightly.

Nipper turned, and his face was full of concern.

"I don't like the look of this," he said. "There are stairs here—steep stone stairs, leading straight downwards for a tremendous way!"

"What about it?" asked Watson.

"Well, Handy may not be very safe," replied Nipper. "Even if he managed to get

down the stairs all right, there's always the chance of gas."

"Gas!"

"You know what these old tunnels are," said Nipper. "Full of gas—fire damp, they call it. It's horribly poisonous, too."

"Oh, crumbs!" said Church, in alarm. "Let's go down!"

In his anxiety for his leader, he thought of no danger. But Nipper pulled him back, and was himself the first to go through that panel.

"This ought to be a lesson to you, Quirke," he said, looking back. "Perhaps you won't be so ready with your idiotic explanations again."

"I don't know what you mean," said Ezra Quirke.

"I mean that Handforth accidentally banged into this wall, and the panel flew open," said Nipper. "All your talk about a ghost was silly nonsense. I'm sorry that Pitt allowed you to come indoors."

"Never mind about Quirke—let's find Handy!" said McClure anxiously. "Handy—Handy!"

He raised his voice and called loudly, but there came no reply from those depths. Then, without any more ado, the juniors descended.

Nipper led the way with his torch, and Church and McClure came immediately behind him. The rest trailed off, with Ezra Quirke bringing up the rear. He was still clinging to the main party.

The stairs were crumpled and broken in parts, so the juniors descended cautiously.

Nipper was grateful for the faint current of air which came along the tunnel. It seemed to prove that there was an outlet somewhere—perhaps a mere crevice among the old bricks. But it was sufficient to admit the pure air. When at last the bottom of the stairs was reached, the air was still quite breathable, although dank and evil-smelling.

"There are his footprints!" said Nipper, pointing. "He had a fall here, by the look of it, but he must have picked himself up, because his footprints are quite clear. If he didn't move too quickly we shall soon overtake him."

"Let's hurry on!" said Church and McClure in one voice.

Occasionally they halted and called, but there came no reply. At various points they encountered other secret passages, branching off mysteriously to left and to right. They were never in any doubt, however, for Handforth's footprints were clearly impressed in the dust. These old tunnels had remained undisturbed for centuries, in all probability.

By now Nipper was getting really anxious. Where had Handforth wandered to? He had been in the dark—as was obvious from the erratic course he had taken. Perhaps he had fallen into some trap—into a hidden pitfall of the flooring.

But at last a reply came—unexpectedly. Church and McClure had just been calling, and this time, instead of silence, Handforth's voice sounded out of the gloom ahead.

"Hallo!" it came. "By George, I'm glad to hear your voices, you chaps! It's about time you came, though!"

"Handy!" roared Church. "You're safe, then!"

They turned a curve of the tunnel, and they came upon Handforth. He was looking dusty and grubby. A smear of blood was on his left hand, and one side of his face was grazed, too.

"Did you catch him?" he asked eagerly. "It doesn't matter about me. I'm not hurt much. Don't make a fuss, you fatheads!"

"Thank goodness you're safe, Handy!" said Church. "We—we thought——"

"Blow what you thought!" growled Handforth. "Did you catch that rotter who tried to murder me?"

"What happened?" asked Fullwood. "We haven't seen anybody—and yours are the only footprints that we've been following, Handy!"

"I don't know anything about footprints," said Handforth. "But some rotter chucked me through a hole in the wall, or something, and then pitched me down a long flight of stone steps. It's a wonder I wasn't killed! It was enough to break my neck!"

"Let's get up to the corridor again," said Nipper practically. "We can do all the talking we want to there. I don't relish this damp tunnel."

So they retraced their steps, and easily found the stone stairs. It was impossible to make a mistake, since their footprints were clearly defined in the dust on the floor. There was no possibility of wandering off down one of the unexplored passages.

Nipper was grinning by the time they reached the exit, for Handforth had been talking a lot—enlarging upon his story.

"The best thing you can do, Handy, is to cool down," said Nipper, with a twinkle in his eyes. "You weren't thrown down the stairs by anybody."

"I tell you——"

"My dear chap, what happened is obvious," continued Nipper. "You charged down the corridor, and instead of turning the corner you went full tilt into that wall. Nobody pushed you, and you weren't attacked. This panel gave way under your weight, and you were precipitated down the stairs. That's all. Not so very uncanny, is it?"

"My hat!" said Handforth, staring. "Do you mean to tell me that it was only an accident?"

"Of course it was only an accident."

"Then it's a swindle!" said Handforth. "I thought somebody had tried to murder me! I thought I was on the track of the trickster! And instead of that I only barged into this panel, and went through it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

In spite of themselves, the juniors couldn't help roaring with laughter. Handforth's expression was comic. He seemed quite disappointed to realise that he had only himself to thank for what had happened.

"Blow it!" he said disgustedly. "I've had enough! Let's be going—let's get out of this silly old castle. There aren't any ghosts at all—and it's high time we were off!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie Glenthorne. "I feel the need for a cup of the good old brew!"

None of the others disagreed. They were unanimous in their opinion that the sooner they got out of Raithmere Castle, the better.



CHAPTER 22

The Apparition!

IT was rather rough on Edward Oswald, but all the other members of the party chuckled hugely over his misadventures. They felt, indeed, that the incident had happened just in time to prevent them getting really scared; and the knowledge that they were all going out cheered them up wonderfully.

It was snowing outside, and there was a long ride home before them, but they did not care. Anything would be better than remaining in this grim old castle after dark. They had stayed much longer than they had originally intended, and they knew that they would be late for calling-over.

The snowstorm would probably excuse them, however. They would certainly have a good story to tell. A long ride, and caught in a snowstorm. It was hardly likely that they would be punished for being late.

Ezra Quirke was silent.

He was covered with confusion, although he did not exactly show it. His "explanation" of Handforth's disappearance now seemed utterly fantastic and idiotic. It had sounded very impressive at the time, when Handforth was still missing, but now that he had been found—now that his disappearance had been so satisfactorily explained—Quirke's theory became nonsensical.

"We'd better go out through that same door," said Nipper, as they proceeded towards the main hall. "We know the way, and so there can't be any mistake. Besides, it's probably the only way across the moat. Keep well behind me, you chaps."

"Don't worry—we shan't stray!" said Fullwood. "You've got the torch, and we're not going to lose sight of it."

They had hardly proceeded another five yards before Nipper suddenly gave a sharp cry. The torch flew out of his hand, and fell to the floor with a clatter. They were plunged into complete gloom.

"What did you do that for?" asked Watson, with a gulp.

"I did nothing," replied Nipper, groping for the fallen torch. "Something seemed to hit the torch in my hand—and it was knocked completely out of my grip!"

"Something hit the torch?" repeated Pitt curiously.

"So it felt," said Nipper. "I can't understand it. It was just as though somebody had thrown a stone, or— Hang it! The lamp's broken!"

"Does that mean that we can't have a light?" asked Watson.

"I'm afraid it does," said Nipper. "Not that it matters much now. We shall soon be outside—and then we shall find that there's still a glimmer of daylight left. Come on—no sense in getting nervy. But I'd like to know what it was that threw that torch out of my hand."

"Sure you didn't just drop it?" asked Pitt.

"I'm positive," said Nipper. "It felt just as though something had hit the torch, and I believe something *did* hit it."

Nipper, in fact, was highly suspicious. If there were tricksters at work, it was quite possible that they were anxious about that electric torch of Nipper's. Tricksters do not like brilliant light.

The juniors reached the main hall again, and they were thankful. They would soon be out of doors now—out under the falling snow. They had almost crossed the hall, and were preparing to make for the outer exit, when Tommy Watson gave a curious little gulp and clutched at Nipper's arm.

"Look!" he panted. "What—what's that on top of the stairs?"

"Steady, old man!" muttered Nipper. "Your nerves—"

"There's something there, I tell you!" shouted Watson hoarsely. "Look at it! Oh, great Scott!"

"Look, you chaps!"

Many exclamations went up. The hall was almost in total darkness, and the stairs themselves could not be seen. But there, on the upper landing, standing at the head of the stairs, was—a figure!

There was something eerily uncanny about that figure, too. In spite of the surrounding darkness, every detail of it could be seen. Yet it was not luminous, after the fashion of traditional ghosts. There was no glow emanating from it. It was just the figure of an old man clearly defined, visible in the darkness!

"What—what is it?" murmured McClure.

Nobody answered him. The figure on the top of the stairs was still—as though halted in meditation. It was that of a curiously bent old man. He was dressed in old-world clothing, and there was nothing actually ghastly in his appearance. Indeed, he seemed to be quite a benevolent-looking old chap.

"I can't understand it," whispered Reggie Pitt, close to Nipper's ear. "How is it that we can see him so clearly?"

"I don't know!" muttered Nipper. "It's—it's mysterious! There's no light thrown in that direction—and the figure itself isn't supplying the light. Where does it come from? How is it that we can see him like this?"

"Because, my friends, you are gazing upon a spectral presence!" said Ezra Quirke tensely. "And yet I cannot bring myself to believe that this is the Elemental."

"The what?"

"The evil force that has been creating such strange manifestations," said Quirke. "But is it not likely that there are several ghosts in a place of such antiquity?"

"Look!" said Watson, pointing. "He's moving!"

Sure enough, the figure on the stairs had come out of his long reverie. He was descending the stairs now—coolly, deliberately; and there was not a sound. The old man came downstairs as though he knew nothing of the presence of those boys. He did not look at them—he did not take the slightest notice. Strangely enough, it almost seemed as though he floated down—treading on the very air, an inch or two above the stair treads themselves.

There was another point which gave Nipper much food for thought—which puzzled him more than a little.

He had descended those stairs himself, and, being an observant chap, he had noticed that they creaked rather badly. Under his own weight they had protested again and again.

But now those stairs were silent!

The old man was coming down them, but not the faintest creak sounded. It was so startling, so unaccountable, that Nipper held his breath in wonder and consternation.

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CHAPTER 23

Beyond Explanation!

FASCINATED, the juniors watched. They were rooted to the spot by the mystery of this apparition. In some vague way, they felt that they were looking upon a real human being. For there was nothing ghostly in that old man's appearance. He was wandering downstairs so tranquilly, so peacefully. Now and again he paused, although never once did he look at the juniors.

"Hadn't we better go up to him and ask him what he's doing here?" whispered Handforth. "This isn't a ghost, you fatheads! It's some old chap who's been living here."

"But it can't be, Handy," whispered Church. "Look at his clothes! They wore clothes like that in the fifteenth century."

"Make no mistake," said Ezra Quirke. "This is the spectral presence of one of Mr. Merton's ancestors!"

"Dry up!" said Handforth aggressively.

The juniors continued to watch the quaint old man. They weren't afraid—they had no desire to flee. They were only very curious—eager to know what this old man would do, and whether he would accost them.

In their curiosity, indeed, they had overlooked the fact that this thing was, in a way, impossible. For, by all rights, they ought not to have seen the old man at all. The hall was in darkness, and yet the figure was obvious to them all. Every feature of his clothing could be seen. Every line of his wrinkled face was visible. No light was upon him—no light came from his person. Yet he was there, just as though lamps were glowing everywhere.

But Nipper, at least, was aware of this phenomenon. Glancing at his chums, he could hardly see them. And yet he could see this old stranger!

At last the figure reached the bottom of the stairs, and then he paused, but only for a moment. Instead of coming on towards the juniors, he turned sharply and went off in the direction of a heavy table which stood in the centre of the hall. Then, for the first time, Ralph Leslie Fullwood noticed another feature—and he pointed it out in a voice which shook with emotion.

"This—this is too uncanny for words!" he muttered. "Look, you chaps! We can see right through him!"

"What!"

"It's a fact!" said Fullwood. "Look at that table! I can still see the table, although the old fellow—"

"Oh!" panted Church. "He's walking into the table—right into it!"

They all held their breaths. This was too much for them! The illusion that the old

man was really alive had gone. How could he be alive? The table could be seen—although he stood in front of it!

Then came the most staggering thing of all. For the spectre, instead of going round the table and proceeding down the hall, walked forward just as though the table did not stand there.

And he walked clean through it!

Unbelievable as it was, the thing was an absolute fact. The figure of the old man went right through the table, and they could still see every trace of his clothing—the very glimmer of his shoes. Yet the table was there, and it should have hidden these things. On he walked, slowly and deliberately—to turn round when he reached the far side of the hall.

Then the old man threw his head back, and a strange, ghastly kind of smile came over his lined face. He threw his hands up and pointed—pointed straight at the juniors.

Then, swinging round suddenly, he turned—and walked into the wall. *Into the wall!* There was no doorway there—nothing but the solid stonework! No panelling—no possibility of any trickery. The thing had disappeared into the wall, and grew fainter and fainter. Following that a laugh sounded from far down the hall—a low, mocking laugh.

And then—silence!

"Hurry for your lives!" panted Watson suddenly. "The place is haunted! It's haunted! We've seen a ghost!"

"Run—run!"

"Let's get out of here—let's get out of this place while we're still safe!"

With one accord, over half the juniors ran madly. This had been too much for them. They bolted—they fled as though demons were at their heels. Handforth and Nipper and Reggie Pitt, perhaps, were the only ones who retained their balance. But even they were feeling very unsteady—very scared.

At last they arrived at the courtyard door—that narrow door which led out upon the big gates. They tumbled out breathlessly, and were intensely relieved to find that not every vestige of daylight had gone. It was snowing hard, and the ground was carpeted with whiteness. There was a lingering glow in the cloud-laden sky.

Slam!

Reggie Pitt closed the castle door heavily, and he ran towards the other great door which gave on to the drawbridge. It was soon opened, and then they all went hurrying across—over the moat, and out into the deserted parkland. Not until they had got completely beyond the castle grounds did they pause. Terror was still lending them speed. Only when they arrived at the spot where they had left their bicycles did they pull up, panting and gasping.

"I say, what a lot of frightened kids we are!" said Reggie Pitt, with alarm.

"But—but that ghost!" panted Church. "Did you ever see anything like it? It couldn't have been a fake! It *couldn't* have been!"

"We've seen fakes before, and we've been fooled," said Nipper. "At any rate, it wasn't a man dressed up. No human being can walk through a table, and vanish into a solid wall!"

"And that laugh, too!" muttered Watson, shivering. "I can hear it now! Let's get right away from this place—and I vote we stop in the village and have some tea. We need something to buck us up!"

"A somewhat fruity remark, dear old boy!" said Archie Glenthorne. "Tea, what? Lead me to it, laddies!"

But the others gave no thought to tea. Their minds were still pondering over that extraordinary experience within the walls of Raithmere Castle.



CHAPTER 24

Reggie Pitt's Decision!

"**B**Y Jingo! That's better!" said Reggie Pitt gratefully. "What-ho!" observed Archie. "I mean to say, absolutely! A dashed good cup of the stuff that cheers, what? Who cares for ghosts now?"

The juniors were seated in the little parlour of the village confectioners, and were partaking of an excellent tea.

Ezra Quirke had gone. They had left him to walk to his own home, and he had been full of his warnings, telling the juniors that to visit the castle again would be to imperil their lives.

"With all due respect to you, I must say that your legacy is a pretty uncanny sort of place," remarked Fullwood, as he helped himself to some pastry. "I've been in some haunted houses at different times, but I've never felt so scared as I was in that castle!"

"I believe Quirke was mostly to blame," said Pitt thoughtfully. "His influence, you know—"

"But Quirke had nothing to do with that apparition," protested Grey.

"No, I don't suppose he had," replied Pitt. "But what was the apparition? That's what I can't understand, you fellows. How did it appear like that? And how did it vanish into that wall?"

"Perhaps we'd better not say anything more about it for the moment," said Nipper. "Reggie, are you still determined to spend Christmas under that eerie roof?"

Pitt set his cup down, and looked at the other juniors across the table.

"Yes!" he replied steadily.

"What!" ejaculated Church. "You mean that you're going to hold that party there, after all?"

"Yes—I do mean it."

"But you must be dotty!" protested Watson. "How could anybody have an enjoyable time in a gloomy old place like that?"

"It was gloomy this afternoon, but it won't be gloomy at Christmas-time," declared Pitt. "I officially invite you all to Christmas at Raithmere Castle. Do you accept?"

The others hesitated.

"Don't all shout at once!" said Pitt dryly. "I would remind you that there will be any amount of good things. Food galore—and everything possible in the fun line. Don't come if you don't want to, of course."

"I'm coming, anyhow," said Handforth, glaring round at the others. "And thanks, Pitt, for the invite. Christmas at Raithmere Castle ought to be ripping!"

"My people are rather keen on my being home for Christmas," said Church. "I think I ought to—"

"That's enough!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "You can count on Study D, Pitt! We'll all spend Christmas with you!"

"But look here—"

"Coward!" said Handforth tartly.

"Who's a coward?" roared Church, leaping up.

"You are!" said Handforth. "You're afraid to spend Christmas at the castle!"

"I'm not!"

"Then why are you trying to tell us that your people want you home at Christmas?" asked Handforth sarcastically. "No, my son, it won't do! You're frightened—"

"Well, I'll admit that the prospects didn't fill me with joy at first," said Church, rather sheepishly. "But perhaps you're right, Handy. Pitt's a good 'un for inviting us all, and we'll accept!"

"Hear, hear!"

The others agreed—and they felt just a little thrill, too. They were feeling so comfortable after their tea, and the room was so cosy and warm, that they had half-forgotten their apprehension of an hour since.

And soon they ventured forth into the snowy night, and set off on their bicycles for St. Frank's. Back there, on the other side of the village, on the heights, stood the grim outline of Raithmere Castle. It was dark, gloomy, and deserted. Reggie Pitt's legacy! A queer place—a ghastly, mysterious spot!

And these juniors were preparing to spend Christmas there. Nipper and Handforth, at least, were thoroughly delighted, for they both wanted to investigate—to discover the secret of that grim old pile.

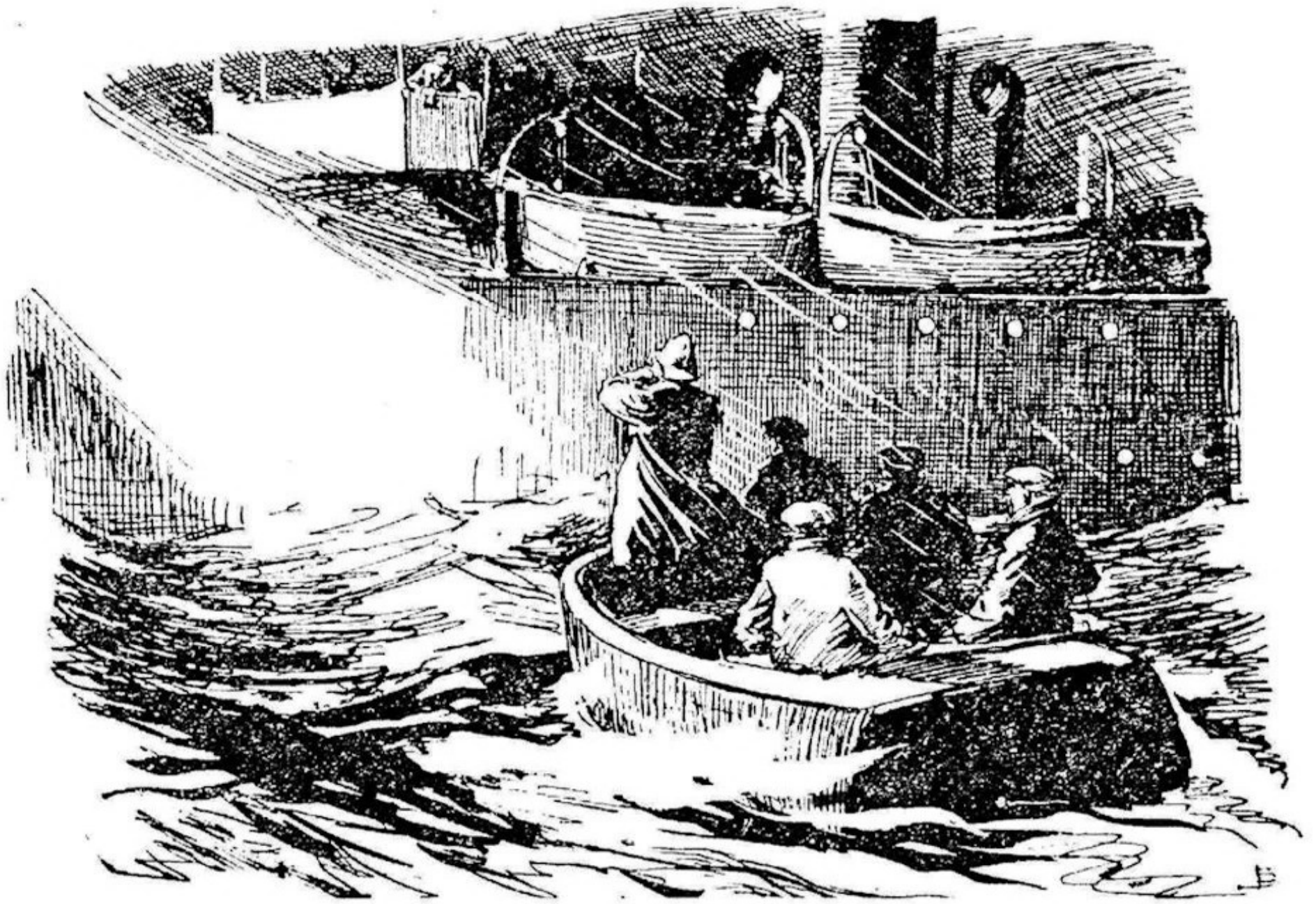
The others were coming because they did not want their host to believe that they were afraid. At all events, one thing was certain. Christmas at Raithmere Castle would be interesting—and exciting!

THE END.

(How's that for a fine, gripping story, lads? Next week's is just as good—if not better! It's entitled, "The Mystery of Raithmere Castle!" And don't forget that next Wednesday's issue is our special Christmas Number—enlarged by eight pages! Make sure you get a copy by ordering NOW!)

ANOTHER SENSATION! There have been many sensations in Northmouth while Nelson Lee and Nipper have been there, but this week Detective-Sergeant Stone, of Scolland Yard, springs the greatest one of all!

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE ROVERS?



A Surprise for Nipper!

"WHAT happened?" asked Nipper again, as Edward Colton, still terribly agitated, did not answer his question.

With an effort the director tried to pull himself together. He replied:

"Someone seized my throat from behind, but I managed to call for help. Thank goodness you came up! Where are the others?"

"Round the bus," said Nipper cheerfully. "We'd better get to them before your attackers realise that I bluffed them. Did you recognise either of the men? They were only like shadows to me."

"I couldn't see a thing in the fog, but I recognised your voice, and I thought you had some other men with you."

"So did they," said Nipper, vaguely indicating the direction in which the two men had disappeared.

Guided by the blur of light from the bus, Colton and his rescuer hurried back. Nipper was looking thoughtful. Who had attacked Colton? It was useless to search for them in the fog if the attackers were tramps, but had they been tramps? Had two of the players stolen away with the intention of trapping the director? Nipper tried to count the men when he got back, but it was impossible. Some were round the bus, some were mere

shadowy figures round the two cars, and others were on the other side of the road, watching the 'plane with its propellor whirling in the fog as Langton warmed up his engine.

"You'd better get into the car, uncle," said pretty Clarice, as they came up. "What was the matter?"

"Some footpads out to rob me, I suppose," replied the director in a puzzled voice, and as he stepped in front of the headlights of his car, Nipper saw the fear in his bulging blue eyes. "I am very grateful to this young man for his prompt action."

"I shouldn't think he knows what fear is," said the girl admiringly. "Nor, by the look of it, does Mr. Langton."

The big 'plane was taxi-ing off into the fog. It disappeared, and then after a short interval they heard the steady drone of the wonderfully silent engine high above their heads. Minter was now bustling the players into the bus.

"Barter has good eyes in a fog, and he will lead the way," he was saying. "Miss Colton will follow him, and the bus will bring up the rear."

At last Northmouth was reached. Nipper left the rest of the players, and, cold and hungry, hurried to the Harbour Hotel.

He found Nelson Lee sprawling comfortably

by a roaring fire in the smoke-room, reading a book.

"Well, young fellow, had enough of fog and football?" greeted the famous detective.

"Not enough football, gov'nor, but a sight too much fog! Colton told me that you had 'phoned him about Stone, so, of course, you know that he's given us away."

"Yes, confound him!" snapped Lee. "But I want to talk to you about Stone. The Yard have got a rather startling theory; they suspect our client."

"What!" gasped Nipper.

"Detective-sergeant Stone believes that Edward Colton is carrying on an extensive system of smuggling, and that he is responsible for the disappearance of the two men."

A Startling Theory!

NIPPER forgot his hunger. He sank down opposite his chief in the deserted smoking-room of the hotel, held out his hands to the glowing fire, and stared blankly at Nelson Lee.

"Suspect Colton? Stone must be mad!" said Nipper incredulously.

The great detective was slowly filling his pipe, a thoughtful expression in his keen, searching eyes.

"No," he said, "he's got something to go upon. Of course, I knew nothing about the smuggling until he came to see me this morning, and told me that he was going to put all his cards on the table. It seems that the authorities have been concerned for some little time over the large amount of alcohol and drugs being obviously smuggled into the country, presumably from the Continent, Holland being the most likely country. Now this is Stone's theory, and it can't be dismissed with a wave of the hand.

"Colton is a shipowner. He has regular sailings from Northmouth to Holland—big-gish boats that carry cargo and a few passengers, in addition to about half a dozen

small tramp-steamers that knock about the world."

Nipper nodded.

"But they've Customs officers here," he said.

"Certainly," agreed Nelson Lee. "But if there was a conspiracy between a large ship-owner and a number of his responsible officers, it would not be a very difficult matter to outwit the Customs. You can scarcely imagine the board of directors of a large company sitting down with their captains and mates, their pursers and stevedores, and deliberately planning to swindle the revenue, and secretly to import dangerous drugs. But the Green Star Line, of Northmouth, is practically a one-man show, and Colton is the one man.

"Stone considers that a big point, but he also points out that it is a strange coincidence that one of Colton's boats sailed for Holland on the night of Ridley's disappearance, and also upon the night that Mark Mayhew vanished. Stone emphasised, too, that both men were friends of his."

"Well, that's against his theory, gov'nor. A man does not kidnap a pal."

"But it gives him excellent opportunities of kidnapping a man with whom he has pretended to be friendly," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I give Stone full credit for having evolved a very interesting theory."

"But what would have been Colton's motive? And if he is the man, why on earth did he call you in?" asked Nipper.

"The motive is obvious. Both men are wealthy, and wealthy men held as prisoners will usually pay through the nose to obtain their freedom. Stone, who can never be accused of being tactful, suspects that Colton called me in to put the police off the track, and to bamboozle me over a football mystery, when football has nothing to do with it."

"But what about the rat-faced chap and Barter, who followed Colton to London. What

WHAT'S GONE BEFORE.

NELSON LEE, the famous detective, and his assistant,

NIPPER, are investigating the mysterious disappearance of James Ridley and Mark Mayhew, two directors of Northmouth Rovers, the famous First Division football club. Lee fears that they have been kidnapped, and suspects that Bert Barter, Coles, and Mr. Minter, centre-half, trainer and manager of the Rovers respectively, are implicated in the affair. He is also suspicious of both

DICK RIDLEY, James Ridley's nephew, and International centre-forward of the Rovers, and

STEPHEN LANGTON, the club's chairman, who is known as the "Bat," owing to his aerial activities. Nelson Lee and Nipper have been using assumed names, but Detective-Sergeant Stone of Scotland Yard, who is also on the case now, unwittingly reveals their identities. Nipper plays for the Rovers at centre-half, having deposed Barter. On the way home from the match at Midbury, the players get held up in the fog. Langton makes a forced landing in his aeroplane at the same spot, and later Barter unexpectedly arrives in Minter's car. Suddenly there comes a cry for help. Nipper rushes to the rescue, and finds Edward Colton, another Rovers' director, struggling with two men. The men escape. "What's the matter?" Nipper asks Colton, whose eyes are bulging with fear.

(Now read on.)

about the attempt that was made on him to-night?" put in Nipper quickly.

"What attempt?" demanded the detective sharply.

Nipper told him how they had been stranded on the lonely heath, of Langton's aeroplane coming down in the fog, the arrival of Barter, and then the attack upon Colton. Nelson Lee listened thoughtfully.

"Stone would say that it was all faked to deceive us," he remarked.

"He would," said Nipper. "But, I say, gov'nor, you don't believe him, do you?"

"No, Nipper. In the first place, I don't think that Colton has sufficient nerve to play such a daring game. I shall never forget when he entered our hotel in London, when he could have had no idea we were watching him. There was a stark, staring fear in his eyes that no actor could feign. I don't think Stone is right, but he has too strong a case to dismiss lightly. I chewed him up for having blurted out your identity, and he was apologetic. I suppose, as a sort of peace offering, he's invited us to be present at the test."

"The test?" queried Nipper interestedly.

"On Tuesday night the Green Star boat for Holland is to be held up outside the harbour for a drastic search, and we're to go on the Custom's launch. I told Stone that we accepted providing we were still here in safety—which is doubtful, thanks to him."

Nipper blinked into the fire.

"You mean you think it's going to be very unhealthy here now?"

"Probably!" said Nelson Lee, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Unless, of course, the Yard is right! Then we'll merely look prize idiots!"

Dave Williams is Disappointed!

NIPPER, practising with the team on the Tuesday morning, kept one eye on the ball, and the other upon the players. After his experience with Grogan on the Saturday afternoon, and the murderous kick that had only just missed his head as he lay on the ground, he was anxious to prevent any further "accident."

But the burly, sullen-looking Grogan kept out of his way, and though Nipper was constantly on his guard, he saw no suspicious movement towards him.

Nothing had happened since Saturday. Nelson Lee frankly declared that he was marking time, waiting to see what happened outside the harbour that night. They could not believe in the C.I.D. man's startling theory, yet there was enough in it to give food for thought; though, as Nipper said, if Colton was the man behind the amazing affair he called them in to solve, he was not only one of the world's most audacious crooks, but also one of the finest actors that had ever lived.

And if Stone was right, where did Minter and Bert Barter, the trainer and Grogan,

come in? Nipper knew those four were in some way connected with the mystery. Then there was Langton and Dick Ridley; there was something mysterious about them. It certainly was a teaser, but it was possible that this evening might throw a little more light upon the case.

Towards the end of the practice, Nipper saw Stephen Langton standing on the touchline watching the players, and he wondered if his presence meant that he—Nipper—was going to be politely told that the Rovers no longer needed his services as an amateur player.

His chief doubted if he would be welcomed now that the manager knew his real identity, and when on leaving the field to make for the dressing-room, Langton stepped up to him, he felt fairly certain that he was going to be served with a polite notice to quit.

But the "Bat's" hawk-like face was quite genial, and his somewhat harsh voice friendly.

"You're playing very good football," he said, "and with Barter still anything but up to top form, we shall be obliged if you can turn out for us in the match against Oldbury Albion here on Saturday."

"Thanks," said Nipper, taken by surprise. But, as he made for the dressing-room, he knew he did not completely trust the chairman whose audacity in the air he so greatly admired, and he wondered if there was anything behind this unexpected invitation to play against Oldbury.

Dave Williams, the Welsh goalie, joined him as he was leaving the ground, and they set off down into the town together.

"Look you, I am most excited about you being a detective," began Dave, "and it is most difficult to keep the secret. I have never known a detective before whatever, and I can't understand how playing football should give you clues."

"That's recreation," said Nipper guardedly. Dave glanced at him suspiciously.

"I thought you were after Dick Ridley," he said bluntly.

Nipper gave him a look of well-affected surprise.

"Whatever made you think that?"

"Well, Ridley's done jolly well by his uncle's disappearance, and he's a funny sort of chap in some ways. Clever and popular on the football field look you, but he always seems to be keeping something quiet. You never see him about in the evening, and though he has a big allowance he never seems to spend much money, though the story is that he had a row with his uncle over getting into debt."

"You hear some pretty weird and wonderful stories," commented Nipper.

"Oh, I don't want to say anything against Dick Ridley," declared the goalie hastily. "I don't think he'd do anything dirty, and I like him better than any man in the team. But I thought it might help you to know what people are saying, and I thought if

(Continued on page 40.)

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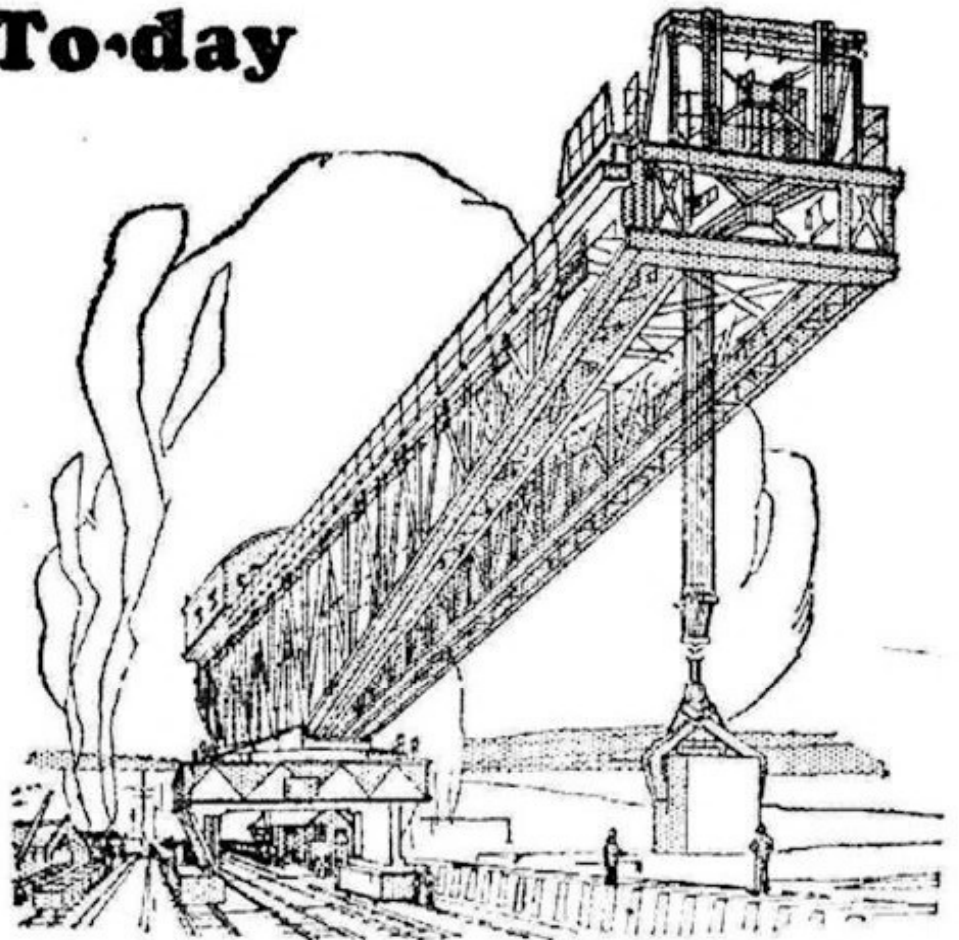
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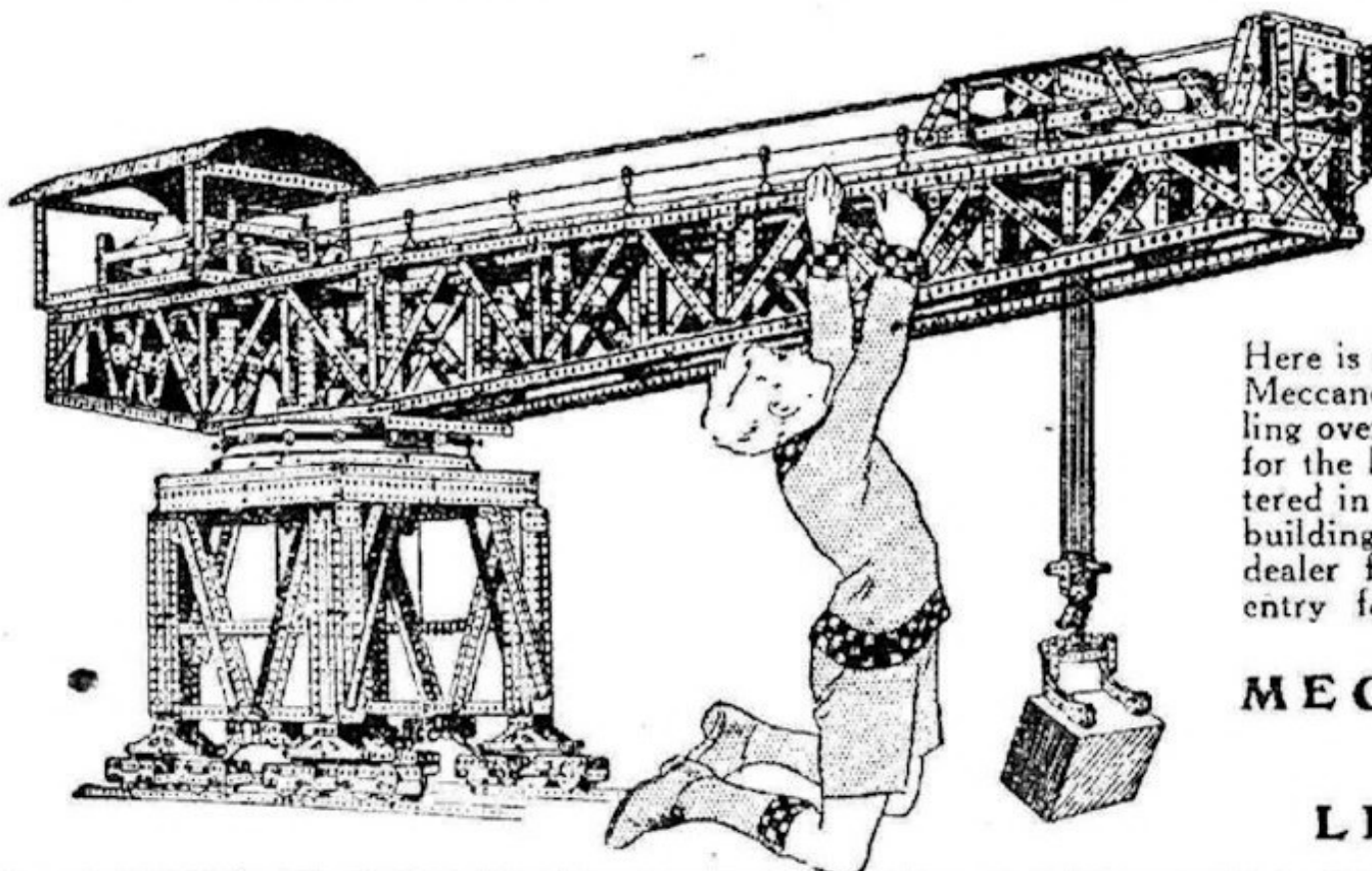


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(Continued from page 38.)

I gave you a useful tip you might let me know when you were going to make an arrest, look you, and I could be there to see you. Yes, I tell you, I should like that very much indeed, for I have never seen an arrest, and it must be most exciting."

"Sometimes a sight more exciting than wholesome!" said Nipper dryly. "I'd like to oblige you, but you can take it from me that I'm nowhere near making an arrest in this case yet!"

Dave looked glum, and as Nipper left him to walk to the Harbour Hotel, he wondered what the talkative Welsh goalie would have said had he told him of the adventure before him that night. If Detective-sergeant Stone of Scotland Yard was right in his theory, there might be several arrests on the high seas that night!

But somehow Nipper doubted if the Rovers' goalie would have been very keen on sharing the task before them.

The Search!

THE wind whistled round the wooden inspection shed on Custom House wharf, accompanied by a drizzling rain that made Nipper thankful that his mackintosh was a good one, and lined with fleece. On the one side of him was Nelson Lee, also attired in belted mackintosh and cap pulled down well upon his head, and on the other the stocky figure of the Yard man in oilskins and sou'wester.

A man in a flapping black mackintosh and peaked cap appeared from the shadows.

"A rotten night for the job, sergeant!" this man said.

"Known worse!" retorted the detective from Scotland Yard shortly. "Is the launch ready?"

"Down at the steps, and the skipper says we're in for a dusting up when we get outside. For the life of me I can't see why we can't board the Northern Queen now. There she lies, over there, ready to sail in half an hour, and if there's anything suspicious on board of her we might as well search in comfort as not."

Nipper looked across the dark harbour. In the light of the arc lights on the Green Star's wharf lay a biggish steamer, with steam up. Cranes and donkey engines were busy, and some passengers were hurrying on board.

"Think I'm keen on a joy ride to-night? Not me!" jerked Sergeant Stone. "But it's the element of surprise I want. If I'm right, you can bet that they're prepared for a visit whilst lying alongside the wharf. They won't be prepared for being boarded outside the harbour. Let's get into the launch, and out to sea."

"I suppose they will stop all right?" said Nelson Lee mildly, as they walked down some slimy steps towards a tossing motor-launch, which a man in glistening oilskins was holding by a boat-hook attached to a rusty chain.

"We're going to send up a distress rocket, and board her as she stops. I'm taking full responsibility."

The C.I.D. man spoke a little pompously, and Nelson Lee merely shrugged his shoulders as he stepped into the launch.

Nipper followed with Stone and the Custom's officer. The man in the bows let go of the chain, the bearded man at the wheel growled something, and the engine was started. Soon the motor-launch was throbbing rapidly down the dark river, past big timber barges and rusty tramps.

"I hope you're all good sailors," said the bearded man gruffly, as they approached the mouth of the dark harbour.

The Inland Revenue official said he hoped he would be all right, but his voice lacked confidence. The C.I.D. man said he had never been seasick. Neither had Nelson Lee nor Nipper, but they did not shout about it. Suddenly the motor-boat was dancing erratically, and spray was breaking over her bows.

The Inland Revenue man looked a picture of misery.

Whooooo-ooop!

The Northern Queen was coming out of the harbour, sounding her siren.

"Now then!" said Stone sharply. "Get ready with that rocket."

An exclamation of dismay came from the bows.

"It's got soaked, sir. It won't fire in a month of Sundays!"

Nelson Lee leant forward.

"Dip the torch paper in petrol. It will go then."

He spoke quite calmly. He might almost have been giving a lesson at St. Frank's. But there was command as well as suggestion in his voice, and a spare can of petrol was passed hastily into the bows, and the blue paper dipped into the opening as soon as chilly fingers had removed the brass cap.

"Put the cap on the tin, you ass!" snapped Nelson Lee to Stone, and the man from the Yard hastily screwed on the cap before the Revenue man struck an evil-smelling fuse.

Then came a mild explosion, a sizzle and a flash.

Swis-s-s-s-s-sh! Bang!

A trail of fire in the dark sky, a star shattering overhead.

The clang of the telegraph bell on board the boat for Holland.

A searchlight swept over the dark sea, but the launch was almost beside the big vessel before the dazzling ray picked her up.

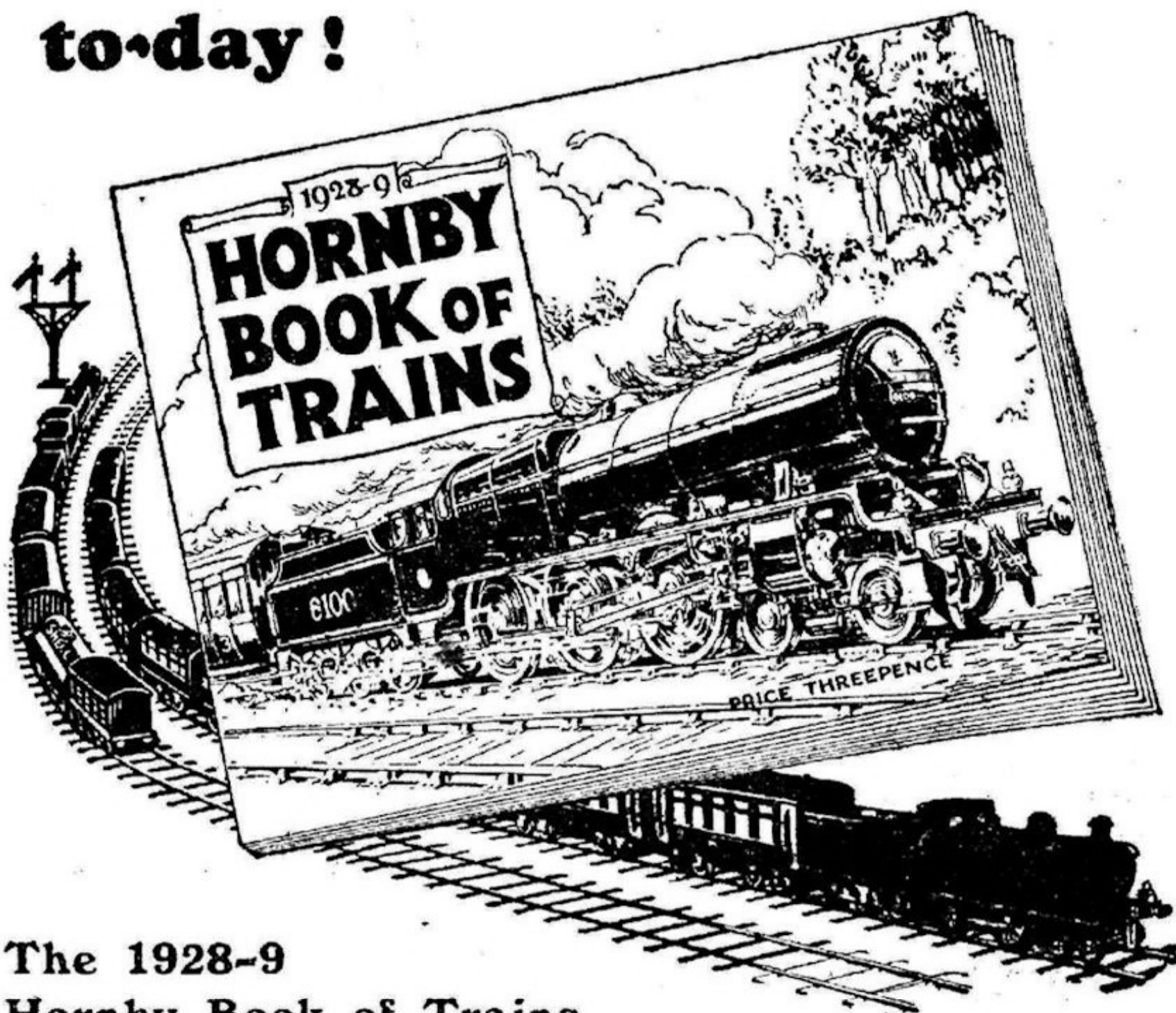
"Who are you? What's the trouble?" bawled a voice through a megaphone.

Stone, who was looking a little green, staggered to his feet, and cupped his cold hands—a squat, glistening figure in wet oilskin and sou'wester.

"I am a police officer, and I have a warrant to stop and search your ship!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

(Will Detective-Sergeant Stone's theory prove correct? Will he find anything incriminating on board this vessel? Read all about it in next week's stunning instalment.)

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BETWEEN OURSELVES!

OUR AUTHOR CHATS WITH OUR READERS

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



DORIS KELLY

THE reason you've seen nothing of Matthew Noys lately—"Old Leytonian" (Glasgow)—is simple. This junior left St. Frank's some time ago. He was never a prominent character, anyhow, and I don't think his loss has caused much pain. Here are the occupants of the Fourth Form studies you inquire about: No. 4—Sessue Yakama; No. 7—Walter Skelton, and Eugene Ellmore; No. 9—Empty; No. 10—Empty; No. 11—John Holroyd, Edwin Munroe and Peter Cobb; No. 13—Clement Turner, Joseph Page and Donald Harron. Arthur Kemp is in Study No. 17, with Cyril Conroy; William Freeman, Eric Dallas and Arthur Steele occupy Study No. 16. All studies up to No. 10 are in the Modern House, and from No. 11 to 20 in the East House. So that's that.

* * *

Perhaps you saw my reply last week—J. E. A. Pike (Waltham Cross)—to G. S. Hunnabell, regarding Professor Zingrave and the League of the Green Triangle? If so, you'll probably be feeling pleased, as you tell me you like this type of story. I'm preparing some yarns even now, featuring Professor Zingrave, and you'll be hearing more about them in a few weeks' time. No doubt there are lots of other readers who will also be pleased with this piece of news, as so many have written to me asking for a revival of the Green Triangle yarns. You can have my photograph with pleasure, old man—at least, I'll send it with pleasure, although I can't guarantee the quality of your emotion upon seeing it—if you will let me have yours first. That's the idea of the Photo Exchange, you know—yours first.

* * *

The reason I haven't replied to any of your previous letters—"Wronged Reader" (Pendleton)—is simply that I haven't had the space. As I have previously explained on this page, I can only give replies to a *very few*. I like everybody to write to me, and to write often, but you must surely realise that I cannot possibly give any guarantee of a reply. Everybody who writes stands his or her chance of having a reply in these columns, or by post. But, I must repeat, those who do get replies

must necessarily be in a minority. And whether I send a reply or not largely depends upon two factors: the amount of spare time I have at my disposal, and the subject matter of the letters received. So you mustn't feel wronged, but, instead, you must imagine that your patience is a piece of elastic. I'll try not to stretch it to the breaking point. Here are the questions you want replying to: 1.—As I have said above, I can only reply to regular correspondents when I have the necessary time, and when these regular correspondents write me such letters that *must* be replied to. 2.—Dick Goodwin is a Lancashire lad. 3.—Clarence Fellowe is still at St. Frank's, and he will appear again when I feel in a poetic mood. 4.—Clarence's birthday is February 19th.

* * *

I hope you like the reproduction of your photo (above, right-hand corner)—Doris Kelly (Birkenhead). Dick Goodwin hasn't vanished; but, like a good many other characters, he must necessarily be in the background. With so many fellows at St. Frank's, it is impossible to feature them all. The chief characters in my yarns, such as Nipper and Handforth and Travers and Willy and Archie are always prominent, but the lesser lights must take their turn to occupy the front of the stage.

* * *

Talking about this week's reader's photo reminds me of something. A few readers have sent me photos of other people, purporting to be likenesses of themselves. Some of them have confessed their duplicity, and have made such comments as this: "We bluffed you fine, didn't we?" Where does the bluff come in? If you send me your friend's, or a stranger's photo, I can't be a magician and detect the trick. All readers who get my photograph by this means are guilty of a mean, contemptible action. It isn't funny at all.

Our Weekly Pow=Wow!

By
THE EDITOR.

Next Week's Number.

SPACE this week is, unfortunately, very limited, chums, but I think there's enough in which to say a few words about next week's bumper Christmas number. Bumper is the right word to use. Eight extra pages; a grand long complete yarn of Nipper, Handforth and many other favourite St. Frank's characters—a yarn in which Edwy Searles Brooks has really excelled himself; a long instalment of our popular serial; special Christmas articles and jokes. Oh, yes, next week's N.L. is the absolute "goods"!

And now for a few words of advice. There's sure to be a big demand for this enlarged Christmas number of the N.L., and if you haven't already got a standing order with your newsagent you might not be able to

get a copy. What a calamity! The only way to avoid such a disappointment is to tell your newsagent to reserve a copy for you now. There can't be any mistake about it then, can there?

Your Favourite Author!

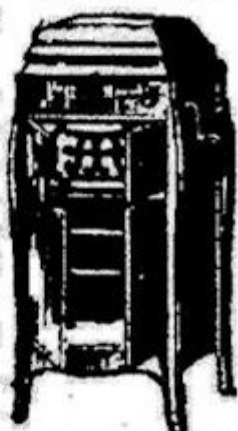
Again and again I have mentioned in these columns and elsewhere that Edwy Searles Brooks is writing stories in our companion paper, "The Boys' Realm," but I'm sure there are still many readers who are unaware of this. They don't know what they're missing, and I reckon it's up to me to give them the tip.

Mr. Brooks' stories in the "Realm"—which, by the way, comes out on the same day as the N. L.—are about that famous football club, the Blue Crusaders, which has been so often mentioned in the N. L. of late. These tales about Fatty Fowkes and Tich Harborough and the other cheery Crusaders are real top-notchers, take my word for it! The St. Frank's juniors are also introduced from time to time.

Why not get a copy of the "Realm," chums? This week's issue is the specially enlarged Christmas number, and besides Edwy Searles Brooks' yarn—entitled "The Team of Ghosts!"—there are many other attractive features.

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DAVID JACK

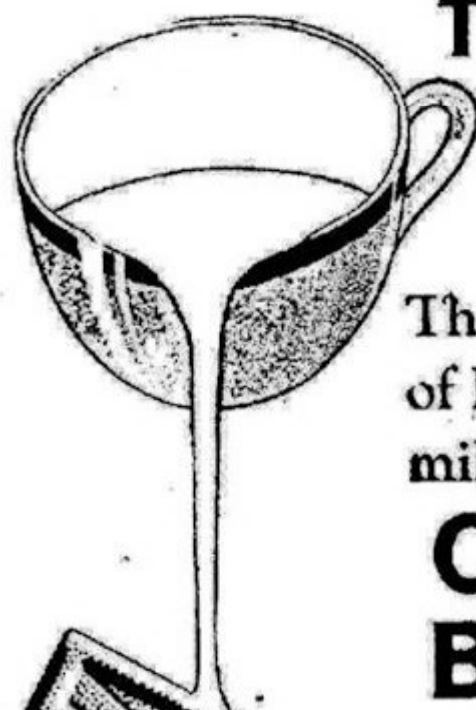
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