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SCOTTY of the SECRET SQUADRON— FINE CHRISTMAS STORY!


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THRILLS
OF THE
CIRCUS
RING!

The VANISHED HOST

The Schoolboy Detective and his chums are working hard to solve the double problem of the chain-clanking spectre and the disappearance of the owner of the old Moat House!

Caught in the Ghost Trap!

PORRINGE, of the Oakshott Fifth, rubbed his eyes and grinned a sleepy grin, as from somewhere in the deep silence of the Moat House, where he and his chums were spending Christmas, came the stroke of twelve.

When Pie and his chums—Len Lex, the schoolboy detective, and Harvey and Banks—had gone to bed at ten o'clock, it had been easy for Pie to make up his mind to stay awake, sitting on the bed, and wait for midnight. But he had fallen asleep in his clothes.

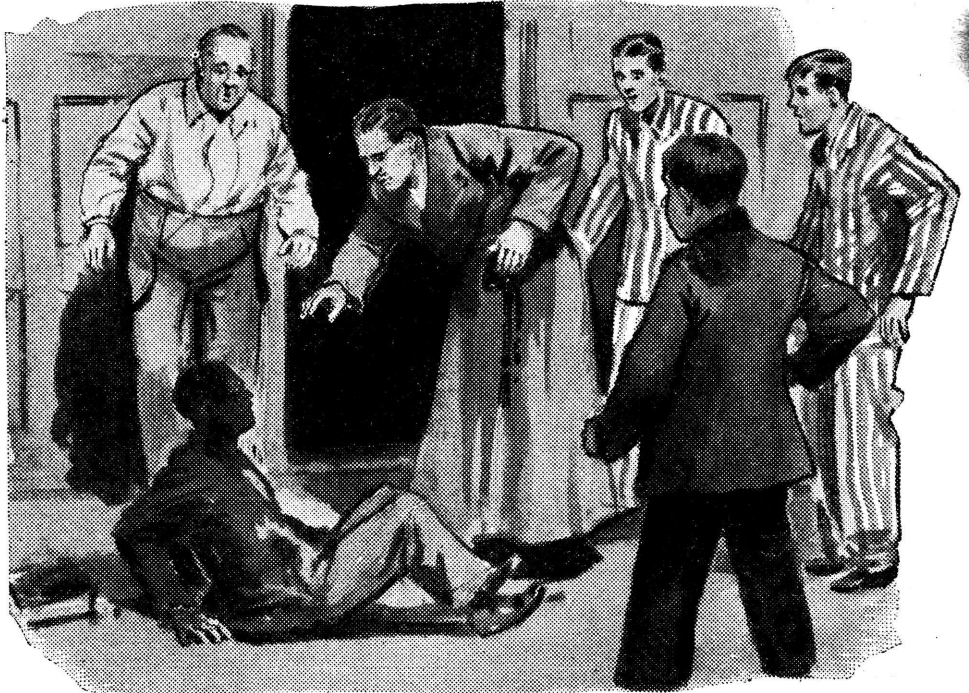
The night was frightfully cold, and Pie woke up shivering, his feet feeling like lumps of ice, as the last stroke of twelve died away. He listened.

All was silent in the Moat House. Everybody was—or should have been—in bed and fast asleep. Pie had no doubt that his three friends were deep in slumber. It was unlikely, he thought, that the idea of sitting up and keeping watch for the chain-clanking ghost of the Moat House had occurred to any of them. And if the ghost walked that night, as it had done the previous night, it was going to walk into his clutches.

And Pie had little doubt that the ghost would turn out to be Harvey's swab of a cousin, Captain Cecil Jerningham—nephew and heir of Harvey's uncle, Sir Lucian Jerningham, who had mysteriously disappeared when they had arrived to spend Christmas with him.

Pie did not believe in ghosts; but he believed that Harvey's cousin, for some reason of his own, would stop at very little to get rid of the schoolboy visitors to the Moat House.

Sleepy, but resolute, Pie got out a large cardboard box, and stooped in front of the old-fashioned chimney of his room. Taking the poker in his other hand, he raked down soot into the box.



Captain Jerningham stared down angrily at the sooty figure. "It is Lex!" he thundered. "Urrgh! I'm—ooogh!" spluttered Len, trying to get the words out.

A lot went over Pie's arms and shoulders, and some flecked his face, and some settled on his hair. Some went into his mouth, and he gurgled. A few flecks found a resting-place in his nose, and he very nearly sneezed.

Pie had not foreseen this when he planned his scheme, and he did not find it nice. But he was a stickler. He lifted the cardboard box out of the grate at last, nearly full of soot, resolutely regardless of the fact that he was approximating, in appearance, to a chimney-sweep who had had a busy day.

He jammed a handkerchief to his nose, and stifled a sneeze. The quarter chimed from somewhere. Taking the box in hand, Pie silently opened the door and peered into the darkness of the passage outside.

Vague sounds came to his ears as

he listened. But not the sound he expected. Leaning on the doorpost, the box of soot in his hand, he waited and listened.

Last night the ghost had walked, and Lex had gone after it and failed. Pie was not going to fail. With deep cunning, Pie had got that box of soot ready for the spectre of the old lord of Jerningham. For if the ghost was indeed, as he suspected, Captain Jerningham trying to frighten the Oakshott fellows away, it would not be a lot of use grappling with him. Pie was no weakling; but Harvey's cousin could have tossed him across the passage with ease.

Pie was not going to collar the ghost—he was going to smother him with soot from head to foot. And he calculated that that would keep the trickster busy for a minute or two while his friends came on the scene. Even if he got away, he would be in such a state that it would be a complete show-up.

Standing in the doorway, Pie was prepared to wait well on into the small hours, if necessary. But he had not been five minutes on the watch when he heard a faint sound, and felt a thrill of excitement.

It was the softest of footfalls. His grip closed hard on the box of soot!

Last night the ghost had walked

By
**CHARLES
HAMILTON**

with clanking chains. This time there was no sound of a clanking chain. Very likely he was going to turn on the clank at Harvey's room. It was Harvey he wanted to scare away—if Sir Lucian's nephew went, naturally the fellows who had come with him for Christmas would go as well.

Pie listened, with thumping heart. Someone was in the darkness of the passage, and nobody had a right to be there, except the Oakshott fellows—there were four rooms on that passage, occupied by Harvey, Banks, Lex, and Porrynge.

To Pie's intent ear came a faint sound of suppressed breathing, and he grinned. Ghosts, if there were such things as ghosts, would hardly emit a sound of breathing. The ancient lord of Jerningham, who had been done to death in the secret dungeon by a greedy heir, and who was said to haunt the house, might clank his rusty chains as he walked; but he would not be heard breathing, neither would his footfalls be audible, however soft.

As the unseen prowler passed him, Pie woke to action. Judging his movement by the faint sound he could hear, he made a step forward, the box of soot raised in both hands, and slammed it hard.

Crash! The cardboard box crumpled, and the soot flew out in black masses. There was a horrible gurgle from the dark, a sound of tottering feet, and a heavy fall.

"Got him!" yelled Pie.

Soot enveloped him, and he almost sneezed his head off.

"Urrgh! Got him! Wake up, you fellows! Atchooh—atchooh—atchooh! I say—yurrrrgh! I say—gurrgh! Got him—atchoooooop!"

There was a sound of startled voices—of opening doors, and lights flashed on. From one doorway rushed Harvey, from another Banks. They stared in amazement at a sooty Pie, with a still more sooty figure sprawling at his feet, spluttering.

"Got him!" trilled Pie. "Atchooooh! Got him!"

Terrific Uproar!

LEN LEX, the schoolboy detective, nephew of Detective-Inspector William Nixon of Scotland Yard, was an extremely wary bird. But on the present occasion he was taken utterly by surprise.

Len had not turned in that night. He had only waited for his friends to settle down before he slipped out of his room, in rubber shoes, to keep watch in the dark passage. Last night the unknown trickster who played ghost at the Moat House had escaped—apparently through a solid wall. No doubt that would have been easy work to a genuine spectre; but to Len it indicated a secret door in the old panels.

A long and careful scrutiny in the day-time had failed to reveal any such secret; but Len calculated that if the ghost of the Moat House used that hidden door while he was on the watch, he would spot it. So for two hours Len had watched—till a faint

sound in the dark guided him towards Porrynge's door.

That the goat of Oakshott had the same idea of keeping watch, he did not know—still less did he dream of the measures Pie had taken for identifying the ghost beyond the shadow of a doubt. When a box of soot crashed on him, smothering him, suffocating him, and knocking him over, Len Lex had the surprise of his life.

When the light flashed on in the passage, it came dimly to his eyes through a veil of soot. Voices came to him faintly through ears bunged up with soot.

Heedless of his own sooty state, Pie danced round the sprawling figure on the floor.

"I say, that jolly old ghost won't walk again in a hurry!" he chortled.

"Who—who is it?" gasped Cedric Harvey.

"What—what is it?" stuttered Banks.

"That's the jolly old ghost!" roared Pie. "Ha, ha! I sat up to wait for him—and I got him! I had a box of soot ready for him! See?" "Oh crumbs!"

The Oakshott fellows stared at the sprawling figure. Recognition was impossible. Len Lex's uncle, the keenest detective-inspector at Scotland Yard, could not have identified him at that moment. Only the whites of his eyes relieved the sooty blackness.

"Who are you?" roared Harvey.

"Gurrgh!"

Len sat up, but he could not speak. Soot was in his mouth and throat, almost throttling him. He could only utter horrible gurgles.

"Needn't ask that!" chortled Pie.

"I jolly well knew it was your swab of a cousin—Captain Jerningham. Ha, ha! He never knew I was waiting for him with a box of soot! Ha, ha!"

"You've woke the house!" said Banks.

Lights flashed on at the end of the passage. Startled voices and footsteps showed that others had been awakened by the alarm.

"O.K.!" chuckled Pie. "Let them all see the gallant captain! He's worth seeing! Ha, ha!"

Harvey and Banks, staring blankly at the sooty one, were struck by the fact that he did not look so tall as the Army man. But Pie was thinking of nothing but his triumph over the cheeky swab who had shaken him, and who had the neck to set up as master of the house because Sir Lucian Jerningham had mysteriously disappeared. Pie had no doubts.

"Call Lex!" chortled Pie. "I wonder he hasn't woke up, with all this row! Hallo, here they come!"

Whishaw, the butler, came round the corner of the passage from the landing. Others could be heard following him. Evidently the whole household had been awakened by the terrific uproar. Whishaw, half-dressed, startled out of his usual calm, jumped almost clear of the floor at the sight that met his eyes.

"What—what—" he gasped.

"The jolly old ghost, Whishaw!"

chortled Pie. "I got him with a box of soot! Know who he is, Whishaw? Ha, ha! They wouldn't know Captain Jerningham if he turned up on parade like that! What? Ha, ha!"

"Captain Jerningham!" gasped the butler. "But—"

"What—ho!" trilled Pie. "I say, look at him! Ha, ha!" Then his merry chortle broke off at sight of a figure that followed Whishaw round the corner. Pie stared, with starting eyes, at Captain Jerningham!

"What the dickens is all this disturbance?" roared the captain angrily, as he strode up the passage. "What silly schoolboy trick is this?"

Pie did not answer. Up to that moment he had not had the faintest shadow of doubt that Cecil Jerningham sprawled at his feet, smothered with soot. Now he could not speak! He could only goggle!

"What does it mean?" thundered the captain. "Cedric, is this the kind of trick you play, a mad schoolboy joke, in the house of your uncle whose fate is unknown—for whose body the police are searching the park? Good heavens, have you no sense of propriety, no sense of shame?"

Harvey gave him a defiant glare.

"You can shut up, Cecil!" he retorted.

"You young rascal! You and your mob of silly schoolboys!" panted Captain Jerningham. "You shall leave this house to-morrow!"

"Chuck it!" answered Harvey. "You're not master here yet, Cecil Jerningham—and won't be, if my uncle is found! And—"

"How dare you play such silly tricks?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" snapped Harvey. "Somebody's been playing ghost here, and Porrynge seems to have got him!"

"Who is that?" Captain Jerningham stared down angrily at the sooty figure. He made a movement to grasp at it, but drew back his hand; it was too sooty to touch. "Who—who is it? Whishaw, do you know who it is?"

"No, sir!" gasped the butler.

"Who are you?" roared the captain, and backed away a little as the sooty figure tottered to its feet, shedding clouds of soot.

"Oooooogh! Urrgh! Groooooogh!"

A crowd of startled servants stared from the end of the passage. Whishaw looked round at them.

"I—I—I cannot imagine who it is, sir!" stammered the butler. "Everybody is here, except Mr. Chard—"

Mr. Chard was Sir Lucian's librarian and secretary.

The captain gave an angry laugh.

"It cannot be Mr. Chard! Who is it?" His eyes gleamed at the Oakshott fellows. "Where is the other one—the boy Lex? Is it he who has been playing tricks?"

"Rot!" snapped Harvey. "Lex is in bed in his room—"

"Blessed if I know why he hasn't woke up, with all this row!" said Banks. "I'll call him!"

"It is Lex!" thundered the captain. "Good heavens! This is the kind of thing your friends think appropriate in a house of mourning,

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Cedric! A stupid schoolboy practical joke!"

"It—it can't be Lex!" stuttered Harvey, and added as Banks came out of Len's room, with a startled face: "Haven't you called Lex, Banker?"

"He—he's not there!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Urrgh! I—I'm— Oooogh!" spluttered Len, trying to get the words out. "I'm— Urrrrgh! Ooooch!"

"This is Lex!" snarled the captain. "A schoolboy prank—in such a place—at such a time! Pah!"

He turned on his heel and strode away. Harvey and Banks gazed at Len—they knew it was Len now, though they were as far as ever from recognising him. Pie blinked at him.

"That ass Lex!" gasped Pie. "That ass playing ghost—my hat! I thought it was that Army swab! Lex! Oh crumbs!"

"You fool!" came through the soot. "Urrgh! You dunderhead! Ooooch! You silly—groogh—ass! Ooooch!"

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Pie indignantly. "What were you playing ghost for, I'd like to know?"

"You born idiot!" Len was getting his voice back at last. "You goat! I was keeping watch for the ghost!"

"Oh!" gasped Pie.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Banks.

"Goodness gracious!" gasped Whishaw, then grinned. "Really—ha, ha!"

"That goat Porrhinge!" said Harvey. He grinned. "Poor old Lex! That priceless goat Porrhinge has—"

"I—I thought—" gasped Pie. "Here, keep off! Keep off, Lex, you silly ass!" he yelled, as the sooty figure leaped at him.

Generally, Len was very good-tempered and patient with the goat of the Oakshott Fifth. But his temper failed him now. He hurled himself at Pie, hitting out right and left.

Pie, yelling, landed on his back with a crash. Then, breathing wrath and soot, the schoolboy detective tramped away to the bath-room. He had plenty of work on hand for a considerable part of the night with soap and hot water!

No Luck!

"BREAKFAST, sir!" hinted Whishaw to Len Lex, who was leaning on the oaken balustrade of the high gallery that surrounded the hall of the Moat House, deep in the columns of a newspaper, reading what it had to say about the mysterious disappearance of Sir Lucian.

Len glanced up from his newspaper, keeping his place with a finger-tip, and said:

"Tell the others I'm coming in two ticks, Whishaw!"

"Very good, sir!" said the butler, and disappeared down the staircase. Len was deep in his newspaper again before Whishaw was gone. Even

breakfast on a cold and frosty morning, and the summons from his friends to join them, seemed unable to tear him away from his perusal.

Little sleep as Len had had overnight, he had been up early in the morning. He had paced in the oak gallery over the hall while he waited for his friends to turn out; but when they went down, he did not follow. Had anyone in the Moat House been aware that Len was a detective as well as a schoolboy, such a one might have inferred that he had some reason for remaining where he was, apart from his desire to ascertain all that the newspapers had to say about lost Sir Lucian.

Deep as that perusal was, Len was keeping watch and ward. Captain Jerningham passed him—omitting an audible sniff as he passed—and went down, Len apparently deaf to it. But when John, one of Whishaw's staff of menservants, came up with a well-laden tray in his hands, Len closed the newspaper and stepped right in John's way.

Like all the other menservants in the Moat House, John had turned out at the alarm in the night, and had seen Len sprawling in soot, and he grinned at the recollection. He ceased to grin, however, as Len very nearly barged into the tray. John halted, and jerked back the tray out of his way.

"Oh, sorry!" said Len. As if he feared that the tray would be upset, he caught hold of it. Finding it safe in John's hands, he let go again, flicking away the spotless table-napkin that covered what it bore. Breakfast—a very ample breakfast—was revealed on the tray.

"Well, I'm getting clumsy!" remarked Len, with a smile, as he put the table-napkin back in place. "Mr. Chard still breakfasting in his room, John?"

"Yes, sir," said John. "I'm taking it up now, sir!"

"Mr. Chard's cold does not seem to have spoiled his appetite!" smiled Len. "But I suppose most of that will be taken away again!"

"Oh, no, sir!" said John. "Precious little, sir! I think Mr. Chard believes in feeding a cold, sir. Cook says it's wonderful how his appetite has improved since he caught that cold in the park, looking for the master!"

John marched on with his well-laden tray. Having seen him turn into Mr. Chard's room, Len went downstairs and joined his friends at breakfast. Captain Jerningham was not there; he did not choose to breakfast with the Oakshott party.

Len sat down with a good appetite, and a smiling glimmer in his eyes. Detective-Inspector William Nixon would have recognised that glimmer had he been present, and would have known that the schoolboy detective was satisfied with the way matters were going.

"The ghost never walked after all," said Harvey. "But I fancy he would have if that goat Pie hadn't kicked up a shindy and warned him that he was being watched for. I expect he heard it all from behind the secret

panel in the passage. You might have got him but for that goat!"

"Well, I like that!" said Pie warmly. "I'd have got him if he walked—if Lex hadn't barged in and bagged the soot! Lex spoiled the whole thing!"

"Well, we mucked it up between us," said Len amicably. "I'll leave keeping watch to you after this, Porrhinge."

"Do!" said Pie, with a grunt.

Banks gave Len a penetrating look. "You mean that you don't think the ghost will walk again, Lex!" he remarked.

Len grinned. Of his three friends, old Banker was the keenest; and he had read what was in Len's mind.

"It's rotten, you know," said Harvey. "It gives my dashed cousin a handle against us. Not that I care what he thinks, blow him! Like his cheek to butt in! But he makes out that we've been going in for schoolboy larks, while my poor old Uncle Lucian—" Harvey's voice trembled a little, and he buried his face in his coffee-cup.

"Checky swab!" said Pie. "Look here! Let's go after him when he goes out, and give him a jolly good snowballing—what?"

Pie's three friends replied together: "Shut up, you goat!"

Pie snorted. The Oakshott fellows finished their breakfast—Len, who had started last, finishing first, and rising from the table.

"Anything on?" asked Banks.

"What about another squint at those oak panels upstairs?" suggested Len. "We jolly well know there must be a secret door where the ghost vanished the other night!"

"We've had a jolly good look for that!"

"Let's have another!"

"Oh, all right!"

The Oakshott fellows went up to where their bed-rooms were. While his friends rooted up and down that passage, however, Len Lex gave his attention to the old oak wall of the gallery. If he hoped to spot any secret in that wall, he had no luck; and he ceased his scrutiny when Mr. Chard came along from his room, a green baize bag in his hand.

"Good-morning, sir!" said Len.

And his friends came out into the gallery to bid Mr. Chard good-morning also. All of them liked the plump, good-tempered librarian of the Moat House. Len glanced at the well-filled bag in Mr. Chard's hand. The librarian carried books and documents from the library to his room in that bag. Harvey had told his friends that Chard was a book-worm, and it certainly looked as if he was.

"Any luck yet, sir?" asked Harvey eagerly.

"I am sorry to say no!" answered Mr. Chard. "I am making a very careful search, Master Cedric, among the old parchments and plans in my charge. If the secret dungeon exists, as you fancy, I may chance upon some hint concerning it. But I fear that I can hold out little hope!"

Harvey's face set obstinately.

"The secret dungeon does exist," he

said. "That old legend was not founded on nothing. Sir Lucian of Tudor times was shut up in that hidden dungeon, and left to die in chains by his nephew and heir; that was the beginning of the ghost story. Ten to one there's some clue to it in the Jerningham papers!"

"There are a vast number of ancient parchments dealing with the records of the Jerningham family," said Mr. Chard. "I am going through them, annotating them for my work on the 'Antiquities of Jerningham.' So far, I have found no allusion whatever to the existence of a secret dungeon. But I have very many yet to examine. I shall do my best, Master Cedric."

"I'm sure of that!" said Harvey. "We're going down now, sir," said Len, as the librarian turned towards the stairs. "Please let me carry your bag down for you!"

He put his hand on the green baize bag as he spoke. Mr. Chard jerked it away quite sharply.

"Thank you—not at all!" he said. "Going down, Lex?" asked Porridge, with a stare. "I thought you came up here to hunt for—My hat!"

Why Len Lex gave him a sudden barge, Porridge did not know. It was not like Len to play such thoughtless tricks; it was much more like Pie himself to barge a fellow headlong, and think it funny! This time, however, it was Len who barged, so suddenly that Pie went staggering and crashed right into Mr. Chard—sending him staggering, too, and the green baize bag shooting from his hand.

"You ass!" roared Pie.

"Lex!" gasped Harvey and Banks together.

Len, unheeding, leaped for the green baize bag. Quick as he was, Mr. Chard was quicker. He jumped at the bag, grasped it, and pushed Len back with the other hand. For the moment, the good-humoured expression had quite left his face.

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Len. "I—"
"You clumsy young fool!" gasped Mr. Chard. Evidently his good temper had for once failed him!

Harvey reddened with annoyance. Captain Jerningham was coming up the stairs, and he stopped in the gallery, looking on with a sarcastic sneer on his face. It was intensely annoying to Cedric Harvey. Whatever might be said of the sooty episode of the night, there was no doubt that this was reckless skylarking; extremely inappropriate in a house of which the master had mysteriously disappeared just before Christmas, and whom few expected to see in life again. This time, at least, Captain Jerningham had reason for his contemptuous sneer.

"So you are getting the benefit of schoolboy high spirits, Chard!" said the captain. "I heard you say that you liked youthful company in the house. I hope you find it enjoyable."

Mr. Chard gasped for breath, but did not answer. And the young Army man, with a curling lip, walked away to his room.

"You utter ass, Lex!" panted Pie. "Gone mad, or what?"

"I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. Chard," said Len penitently. "I really hope—"

"Really, such frolics are quite out of place in this house, Lex!" said Mr. Chard, in quite a good-humoured tone, however. He seemed to have recovered his temper in a moment. "You might have scattered my documents all over the place, and some of them are of inestimable value from an antiquarian point of view. However, there is no harm done!"

Mr. Chard went down the stairs. Len's friends looked at him expressively.

"You frabjous ass!" Pie recommenced. "Barging a fellow over—right into poor old Chard, too!"

"Oh, come on!" said Len.

He followed the librarian down the stairs, and his friends followed in rather grim silence. Mr. Chard went into the library, and shut the door after him. The Oakshott fellows remained in the hall.

"Well, are we going down to the vaults again this morning?" asked Harvey, rather gruffly. "That was the programme."

"Let's!" said Len. "But—I think I'll speak to Mr. Chard. He might care to come with us!"

He went into the library. In the alcove in the wall by the fireplace which was called Chard's cosy corner, the librarian had set the green baize bag on the table, and was about to draw the velvet hangings which shut off the alcove from the great room. In that cosy corner Mr. Chard did most of his work. As Len came up, the librarian glanced at him and sat down, taking up a pen and dipping it into the ink.

"We're going down to explore the vaults again, Mr. Chard," said Len. "I was wondering if you'd care to join us?"

Mr. Chard smiled.

"I am afraid I must decline," he said. "I have a slight cold, and the damp air of the vaults would hardly do it good. Moreover, I have promised Master Cedric to go through the Jerningham papers. I shall be busy here till lunch-time."

"Then we'll see you again at lunch, sir," said Len. "We shall stay down till then."

Mr. Chard nodded, and began to write a letter. Len left the library, and rejoined his friends.

"Chard coming?" asked Harvey, with a touch of sarcasm.

"No; he doesn't seem to like the idea."

"You must be an ass to think he would!" said Pie. "A man who has a cold, and has to breakfast in bed, going down into damp vaults—I must say you're an ass, Lex, old man!"

"Oh, come on!" said Banks. "Let's get going!"

Whishaw provided the key, and the Oakshott fellows proceeded to the old arched entrance of the vaults at the end of a dark stone passage. Dark and gloomy looked the old vaults as they descended the stone stair—far from inviting. Three of the fellows flashed on torches—but Len went through his pockets and failed to produce one.

"Mean to say you've forgotten your torch?" asked Pie. "Well, some fellows are blithering idiots!"

"Three will be enough," said Harvey. "Let's get on!"

"Well, you fellows get on! I'll cut back and get my torch and follow you," said Len. And he ran up the stone stair. Harvey grunted, and led the way through the series of gloomy stone arches. Banks and Porridge at his heels. Len emerged a *b o v e* ground; and perhaps he thought that he might have left his torch in the library, for it was to that apartment that he proceeded. He crossed over to Mr. Chard's cosy corner, and looked in between the hangings.

"If you've seen a torch lying about, sir—" he said.

He did not finish the sentence. The cosy corner was unoccupied. Mr. Chard, who had said that he would be busy till lunch, had apparently changed his mind, for he was gone. The green baize bag also was gone.

For a long moment, Len stood looking into the deserted cosy corner; then he left the library, a faint smile on his face. He went upstairs to his room, where he found the missing torch without difficulty, and hurried down to the vaults to join Harvey & Co.

Winking lights far down the gloomy vaults guided him. In a few minutes more he was with his friends. For three hours the Oakshott fellows explored the dark vaults that stretched far and wide beneath the Moat House—tapping walls, peering into corners and cavities; Len as industrious in the quest as his comrades.

In Harvey's mind was the fixed conviction that the secret dungeon, in which the Sir Lucian of ancient times had been done to death, still existed—and almost as strong was his conviction that the Sir Lucian of the present day was immured in it, like his remote ancestor, and for the same reason—the ruthless greed of a nephew and heir who could not wait!

But if the secret dungeon existed, it was well hidden. The Oakshott fellows came up, grubby and tired and glum, in time to get a wash before lunch. And Mr. Chard, at the lunch-table, had no news—his search of ancient documents had been as futile as the schoolboys' search in ancient vaults. No discovery had been made by either party—unless, indeed, the schoolboy detective had made a discovery that morning, of which he said no word!

Uncle Bill Takes a Hand!

"**T**OO thick for a car, Chard!" said Captain Jerningham.

He was standing in the doorway, looking out into the dusk. All day the snow had been coming down, and the old roofs and red chimney-pots of the Moat House were hidden under it; the ancient moat was filled to its brim, and the leafless trees in the park were ridged with snow. Snow lay banked among the trees,

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and the search for lost Sir Lucian in that direction had been abandoned for the time. The drive—from the doorway to the bridge on the moat—was piled with snow.

Mr. Chard, looking out at the captain's side, nodded. It was obvious that no car could be taken out.

"I shall walk to the station!" said Mr. Chard.

"I'll walk with you, Chard," said Captain Jerningham. "I shall be glad to get out for an hour!" His glance rested as he spoke on the group of four Oakshott fellows standing by the crackling log-fire in the hall. "What train are you catching?"

"The five-thirty at Olkham—to change at Holme for London."

"Plenty of time, then! A rotten night for your journey, though!" said the captain.

"I shall not enjoy it," said Mr. Chard. "But it is a matter of duty. For many years I have never failed to spend one night a week with my aged father—nothing short of actual illness would keep me from it!"

"With your cold—"

"That is very slight!" Mr. Chard smiled apologetically. "If it were a matter of pleasure, sir, I should naturally forgo my accustomed weekly visit to London, in the present tragic circumstances here. But it is, as I have said, a matter of duty. I shall hope to hear good news when I return to-morrow."

"Not much chance of that!" muttered the captain. "I've been clinging to the hope that my uncle still lives. But what is the use? If he lives, where is he? Kidnapped? Nonsense! Who could have any imaginable motive—"

"That is hard to say, sir!" said Mr. Chard. "But I shall still hope and trust that Sir Lucian will yet be found alive and well."

"But how—where?"

"That is beyond me, sir! But I have great faith in the sagacity of the police."

Captain Jerningham gave a grunt, which indicated that he did not share Mr. Chard's faith. They moved away from the door, and went to prepare for the walk to the station. The Oakshott fellows exchanged glances.

"Ever hear such an awful humbug?" breathed Pic. "Doesn't he know all the time jolly well where your uncle is, Harvey, old man?"

"I believe so!" said Harvey, between his teeth.

"Chard's a decent old boy," said Pic. "He's not a young man, and it's not every man of his age who would trip up from Hampshire to London to see his jolly old pater in weather like this."

"He's always done it ever since I've known him," said Harvey. "One night a week in London—regular as clockwork. My uncle would have been glad for him to bring his old father down here sometimes, but the old chap's too old—over eighty, I believe. Chard's a jolly good sort."

"I don't envy him the trip!" said Banks.

"Same here! Look here, as Chard's going out, I'm going to squat in his cosy corner and root through some of those dashed parchments," said Harvey. "Might turn something up. You fellows like to help?"

"Like a shot!" said Banks.

"I say!" Porringe glanced round mysteriously, and lowered his voice. "I say, I've got an idea, you men. That swab's walking to the station with Chard. Lots of time to get ahead of them and give him a few snowballs—"

"Fathead!" said Banks.

"Goat!" said Harvey.

And they walked away to the library, leaving Pic indignantly frowning and Len Lex grinning. Len touched the goat of the Fifth on the arm.

"I'm game!" he murmured.

Pic brightened again.

"Good man!" he said. "Let's get our coats."

Well ahead of Mr. Chard and Captain Jerningham, Pic and Len slipped out of the house. They crossed the bridge over the moat, and tramped down to the gates on to the Olkham road.

"Frightfully parky!" said Pic, coming to a halt at last. "This will do, Lex. No need to go farther."

"Unless they take the short cut!" murmured Len.

"Oh crumbs! I hadn't thought of that!"

"Let's get on to Olkham! Bound to see them at the station."

"Oh, all right!"

Pic had not anticipated so long a walk, and he was tired of tramping through snow by the time the lights of Olkham village glimmered through the December gloom. He trudged on wearily towards the railway station, without noticing, in the dark, that his companion dropped behind for a few minutes.

During those few minutes Len Lex was occupied in a way that would have surprised Pic had he been aware of it. Len stopped at the glimmering window of a cottage on the outskirts of the village, and tapped at the glass, three sharp taps. Immediately the light in the window went out, and the lower sash was pushed up. A glimmer of firelight within dimly revealed a stocky, muscular figure. A voice whispered from the gloom:

"You young rascal! What's the game now?" Detective-Inspector William Nixon, of Scotland Yard, peered at the half-seen figure of his school-boy nephew outside.

"I'm glad you were able to run down here, Bill," murmured Len. "I jumped for joy when you told me on the phone that you'd come. I thought a spot of country air would do you good, Bill. In this delightful weather, too!"

"Cough it up!" said Mr. Nixon briefly.

"I hate to take you away from these delightful rural surroundings, Bill. But you've got to catch the five-thirty, change at Holme, and carry on till you see the lights of London."

"Give it a name!"

Len whispered. The man at the

cottage window listened without interruption. Once or twice he grunted—that was all. When Len had finished, Mr. Nixon said briefly: "I get you!" and shut the window. From the darkness came Pic's calling voice:

"Lex, you ass! Where are you? Lost yourself, or what? Of all the blithering asses—"

Len hurried on.

"Blessed if I know how you missed me," snorted Pic. "I thought you were at my elbow, and when I looked round—"

"Come on, old bean."

They tramped on to the station. Taking up a strategic position at a convenient corner, they watched. A few minutes later a stocky man muffled up in a thick overcoat loomed from the gloom. Pic made a movement—Len gripped his arm and pulled him back. Mr. Nixon passed on into the station without even seeing them, and disappeared. It was a quarter of an hour later that two figures appeared, and Pic made another movement. Again Len held him in check.

"Wait till Chard's gone!" he murmured.

"Oh, all right!"

Mr. Chard and Captain Jerningham passed into the station. Ten minutes later the sound of the train was heard. The engine shrieked; the train rolled away, glimmering through the December dark, carrying away Mr. Chard and Mr. Nixon, among its other passengers.

A minute or two more, and Captain Jerningham would be coming out of the station, to walk back to the Moat House. Pic gripped snowballs in both hands, and grinned in happy anticipation. He chuckled softly—and his chuckle was turned into a frantic howl as his companion suddenly wedged a handful of snow down the back of his neck.

"Yuuuurrrgh!" gurgled Pic. "You mad ass—urrgh—I'll—"

He whirled fiercely on Len, who, laughing, beat a retreat up the village street. After him rushed the infuriated Pic, hurling snowballs. They missed by yards. But a snowball that came whizzing back did not miss—it landed right on Pic's nose, and squashed there. Pic staggered.

"Oh, you swab!" gasped Pic, and rushed on.

He forgot that Captain Jerningham would be coming out of the station—forgot everything but vengeance on that swab Lex. That Len was leading him away from the spot, undesirous that Captain Jerningham should see anything of them, or that Pic should carry out his stunt of snowballing the Army man, Porringe did not guess—any more than he guessed that Len Lex had private reasons for taking that walk down to Olkham.

Pic had enough to think of in the way of snowballs, for Len, as he retreated whizzed one after another, and his aim, unlike Pic's, was good. Snowball after snowball squashed on Pic's infuriated countenance—and a dozen times he nearly had the retreating enemy—but never quite.

A hand reached out of the darkness and grabbed his cap.

"Race you home!" said Len.

"Gimme my cap!" shrieked Pie.

The chase was breathless—right up to the porch of the Moat House. Then, at last, Pie had his enemy cornered. He grabbed back his cap, jammed it on his head, and punched, and punched, and punched.

Len, feeling that poor old Pie was entitled to some compensation, let him land a few punches, which did not do much damage on a thick overcoat. Whishaw opened the door and stared at them.

"Pax!" gasped Len. "Give you best, old man!"

"I've a jolly good mind——"

"Pax, old man! You win!"

And Pie, mollified by his victory,

tramped in after Len, gasping for breath, under the disapproving eye of Whishaw.

Harvey and Banks, looking tired and dispirited after a fruitless search for mention of the dungeon in the ancient documents, met Len and Pie in the hall.

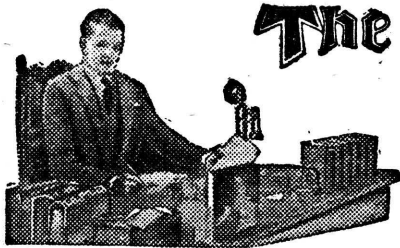
"So you're back!" growled Harvey. "I'm surprised at you, Lex. Everyone knows Pie's a goat, but you—surely there's been enough trouble in this house to-day, without you giving my cousin additional cause for going off the deep end!"

A hot retort sprang to Len's lips, but he bit it back. It certainly did look as if he'd been playing the fool, and it was impossible to account for his actions without disclosing the fact that he was a detective.

"Captain Jerningham will have no cause for complaint when he returns," he replied quietly, and went up to bed.

"Poor old Harvey's all strung up," he murmured, as he got between the sheets. "But unless I'm hopelessly out in my reckoning, he'll be enjoying his Christmas to the full before very many hours have passed." And with a happy smile on his face, he fell asleep!

Len is NOT far out in his reckoning, as it happens, and he gives his chums a real big surprise when he clears up the mystery that is hanging over the old Moat House. That's next Thursday's story—a big Christmas Eve treat for you!



The Editor Talks

Address your letters to:
The Editor, THE MODERN BOY,
Fleetway House,
Farringdon Street,
London, E.C.4.

All letters must bear the full name and address of the writer

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IT WILL BE CHRISTMAS EVE when next we meet for a "talk"—for the next issue of MODERN BOY will be out on THURSDAY, December 24th.

Don't forget that. It's important. I want MODERN BOY to be part-and-parcel of YOUR Christmas, and if you forget to get it on Christmas Eve there might not be a copy available for you at all when Christmas has gone. And that would be just TOO bad.

SPLENDID NEWS FOR YOU!—There are some big things coming along, including a new story of the Royal Air Constabulary, by PERCY F. WESTERMAN—in MODERN BOY week after next!

The appearance of a new Colin Standish story by Mr. Westerman is always a big event, and this one that I have secured for you is going to rank as one of his very best!

A NEW CAPTAIN JUSTICE story starts that same week, and I need not tell you that that also is a VERY BIG event. It is the most ingenious and exciting plot that Murray Roberts has yet evolved. And you know what THAT means. If you don't, any regular reader of MODERN BOY will be only too pleased to tell you.

SIDNEY HARGRAVE, who has written some of the best and most amusing stories ever published in any paper, has been busily engaged on a new series for you, and the first of his new stories will appear the week after next.

In Thursday's issue I will tell you more about these three new stories. That's another reason why you should

make quite certain you get MODERN BOY on Christmas Eve!

THE OLD BOY hopes you are able to give yourself full marks for your solutions to his puzzles on page 32. Check up here.

NUTS AND WINE.—If the answer is even, the even number is in the right hand. If the answer is odd, the odd number is in the right hand. Whatever his answer, even or odd, that is what he has in his right hand. *Example:* Right hand, 6 nuts \times 3 = 18. Left hand, 1 nut \times 2 = 2. 18 and 2 are 20. The answer is even, and there is an even number in his right hand.

FIGURE FUN.—The answer is $6\frac{1}{2}$. If you divide it by 5, you get $1\frac{1}{5}$. If you take away 5, the answer's the same.

THINK IT OUT.—It's ten to one if he catches it. 12.50 always is!

MODERN BOY'S CHRISTMAS PARTY!—And WHAT a party! The guests are Captain Justice, Flaznagel, O'Mally, Midge, Connor, Biggles, Algy, Ginger, Len Lex, and Porryng—with the Old Boy as host! Before they can tuck in the guests all have to do a trick, and when the Old Boy describes the party in next Thursday's MODERN BOY you will not only laugh at the fun, but you will learn some stunning tricks as well! That's the centre-pages feature. You'll revel in it!

NEXT THURSDAY'S STORIES.—The Schoolboy Detective provides his chums with an amazing surprise when

he clears up the mystery of the old Moat House. It will surprise you, too!

Young Midge, in his battle of wits with the mysterious Christmas visitor to Justice Island, becomes involved in more surprises, too, before the "Co." sit down to their Christmas Dinner!

Robin of the Railway gets his reward for roughing it. Christmas has great things in store for him!

The long instalment of "Menace of the Terribore"—our Three Hundred Pounds Prize story—tells how the mechanical monster captures the two schoolboys and Perry!

"The Poison Train" relates how a German ammunition train with a load of poison gas thunders towards the Front Line. Can SCOTTY of the SECRET SQUADRON stop it? You'll find it impossible to put down this story until you have read it to the end!

PEN PALS WANTED.—In the Straits Settlements, to exchange foreign stamps, by S. Parsonage, 11, Stanley Road, Quinton, Birmingham. In the U.S.A., by C. N. Day, Highfield, Thanington, Canterbury, Kent. Anywhere in British Empire and U.S.A., by L. B. D. Ryder, Ashbourne, Ash Bank, Bucknall, Stoke-on-Trent. In France, speaking English, stamp collector, by G. C. France, 46, Brighton Avenue, Bolton, Lancashire. Anywhere in British Empire, exchange stamps and coins, by R. Goodman, 5, Rue Mariette Pasha, Heliopolis, Egypt. In France, by W. Mathew, Glaslant, Taff's Well, near Cardiff, Glam.

JUNIOR ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY.—New members wanted. Write M. F. Eadie, 94, Dundas Street, Glasgow, C.1.

DANCE BAND.—Members wanted, between 13 and 17 years of age (girls, too). Write D. Lovett, 2, Selborne Gardens, Hendon, London, N.W.4.

SEE YOU AGAIN ON THURSDAY, THE 24th—CHRISTMAS EVE!