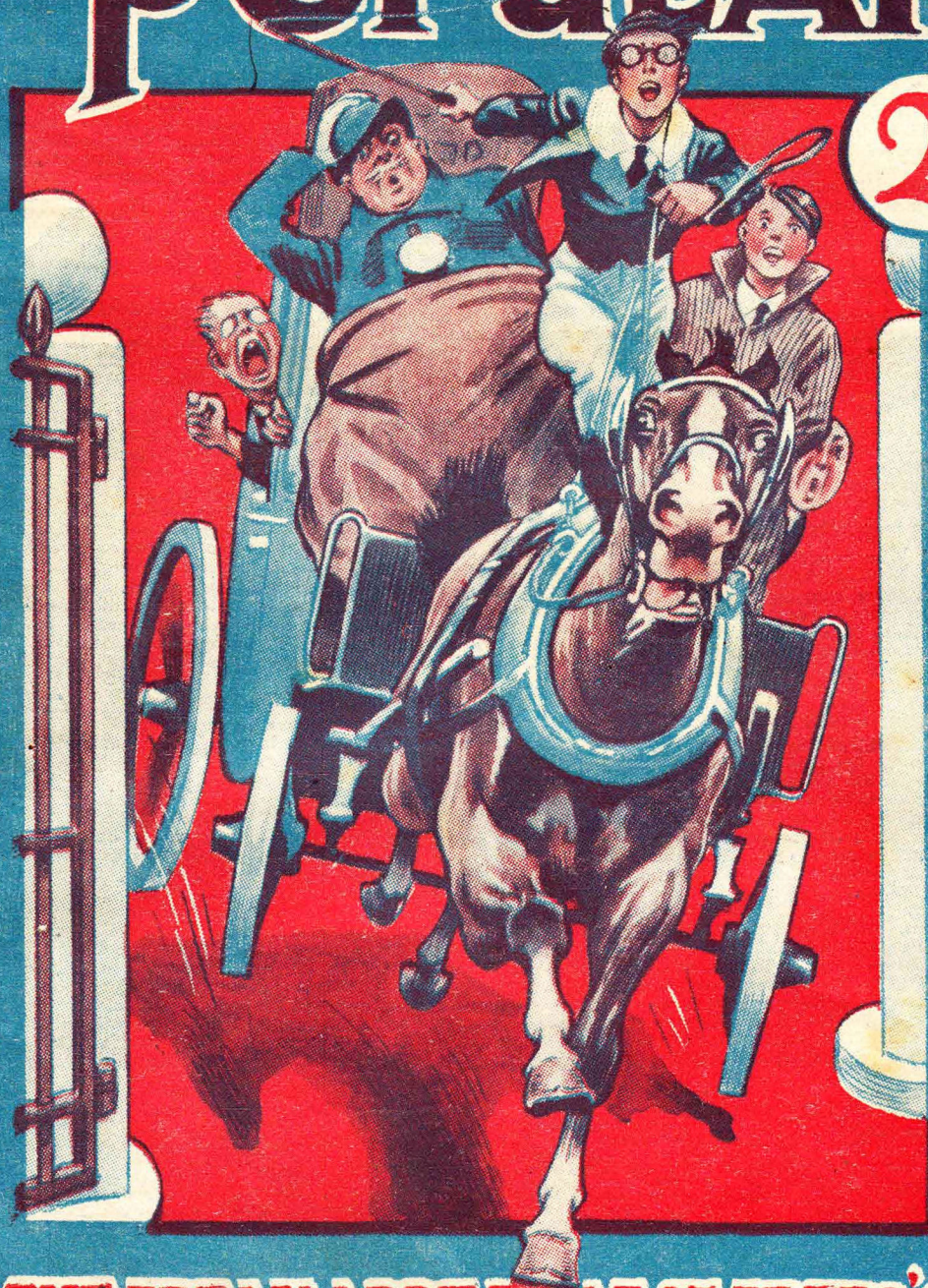


"THE FREAK OF ST. FREDA'S!"
Great New School Story Within!

The POPULAR



2^d

THE FREAK ARRIVES AT ST. FREDA'S!

MORNINGTON HUNTS THE GHOST! Mornington is determined to lay the grisly spectre of the Priory by the heels, and in the silent watches of the night he waits for the Phantom Prior to walk again!



The Ghost-Hunters!

A Dramatic Christmas Story of Jimmy Silver & Co., and Val Mornington, the chums of Rookwood on Holiday.

BY
OWEN CONQUEST.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Alarm!

"HELP!"

Jimmy Silver opened his eyes and blinked round him drowsily in the darkness of the room.

From somewhere, far off in the December night, a cry rang in his ears—unless it was a dream.

Jimmy Silver was not much given to dreaming, but certainly his dreams had been busy that night. Round the fire-side at the Priory that evening ghost stories had been told, and Jimmy was worried, too, by the fact that his chum, Arthur Edward Lovell, had persisted in sleeping in the Haunted Room. Jimmy had fallen asleep thinking of Lovell, and he had dreamed of the Phantom Prior, fabled to walk in his old haunts when the Christmas snow was on the ground.

Outside the rambling old house the December wind raved and howled, awaking every echo, and drifting the snowflakes against the window-panes. The sound seemed almost deafening to Jimmy as he sat up in bed and listened.

Was it only a dream, or—
"Help, help!"

Loud and sharp, high above the howl of the winter wind, came that frantic cry.

It was the voice of Lovell—Lovell, who was sleeping alone in the Haunted Room at the further end of a deserted corridor!

Jimmy leaped from his bed.

Something was wrong with Lovell—something very wrong. Jimmy switched on the electric light in his room. A door from the next room opened, and Valentine Mornington looked in, with a startled face.

"You're awake, Jimmy! That's Lovell!"

"Something's up!" said Jimmy breathlessly. "I'm going to see. Come along, Morny!"

The night was bitterly cold, but Jimmy Silver stayed only to throw on a coat over his pyjamas. Then he opened

the door on the corridor and ran out, with Morny at his heels.

Raby and Newcome emerged into the passage from their rooms at the same moment.

"It's Lovell!" exclaimed Newcome. "The silly ass has got a fright! I warned him."

"He's dreamed of the ghost!" said Raby.

"Help, help!"

Louder sounded the frantic calling from the Haunted Room. The same thought was in the minds of all the juniors—that Lovell, awakening in the darkness in the Haunted Room, had lost his nerve, and was shrieking for help in an unreasoning terror. Jimmy Silver fairly raced into the next corridor, and along it to the old oak door of the Haunted Room. No light gleamed there; all was dark within. The corridor itself was dark. The electric light was not installed in that disused portion of the old house. Jimmy groped for the door-handle. Within, the wild cries of Lovell were incessant:

"Help, help, help!"

A flash of light came in the corridor. Mornington had turned on an electric pocket-lamp.

Jimmy turned the handle, but the door did not open. He wrenched at the big knob, but the door remained fast. It was locked on the inside.

"Lovell!" shouted Jimmy.

"Help!"

"Let us in!"

"What can have happened to him, with the door locked?" gasped Raby. "It's only fright. It can't be anything else."

Thump, thump, thump!

Jimmy Silver hammered on the door.

"Let us in, Lovell! Unlock the door, old chap!"

The juniors heard Lovell groping his way in the dark room, and there was a rattle of the door-knob, then a click of the turning key.

The door opened.

Jimmy Silver & Co. crowded into the room.

Mornington held up the light. It shone on Lovell's face—white, drawn, fixed with terror.

Jimmy glanced round him hastily.

The room presented its usual aspect. There was nothing alarming to be seen, apart from Lovell's terrified face.

Raby caught Lovell by the arm.

"What's the matter, old chap?"

"Did you see it?"

"What?"

"Did you see it?" panted Lovell.

"Did we see what?" asked Newcome.

"The ghost!"

Lovell covered his face with his hands, as if to shut out a terrible apparition. The chums of the Rookwood Fourth stared at one another. They had wondered what would be the result of Lovell's reckless temerity in sleeping alone in the Haunted Room—whether in the dark hours of the night he would be seized with sudden fright. Apparently their misgivings had been justified.

Jimmy led Lovell to the bed, and Lovell sat down on the edge of it, trembling in every limb.

"My hat!" murmured Raby, glancing round him uneasily. "He—he thinks he's seen something!"

"I did see it!" muttered Lovell huskily. "Don't you fellows think I fancied it! I saw it!"

"What did you see?" asked Jimmy Silver quietly.

"A figure in white. It was in the room when I woke up!" said Lovell, with a shudder. "It—it stood beside my bed, pointing—"

He broke off, shivering from head to foot.

"You were dreaming, old chap!" murmured Newcome. "There's nothing here!"

Mornington was lighting the lamp. The light filled the room, and showed up the canopied bed, with glimmering old oak furniture, the almost extinct embers on the wide hearth. But it showed nothing to account for Lovell's terror.

"I wasn't dreaming!" said Lovell in

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a broken voice. "I saw it! I tell you I saw it!"

"But——" said Raby.

"I saw it, I tell you!"

"What is the matter?"

Mr. Silver, in dressing-gown and slippers, looked in at the doorway. His face was very grave.

"Lovell thinks he's seen the ghost, sir," said Newcome.

"I saw it!" repeated Lovell.

Mr. Silver fixed a curious look on the white-faced junior, sitting shivering on the edge of the tumbled bed.

"It was foolish of you to occupy this room, Lovell," he said gently. "I was wrong to allow it. I am afraid you are to blame, Jimmy, as you made the arrangement with Lovell while you were at Rookwood, and I did not wish to disappoint your guest. You must remove to another room for the remainder of the night, Lovell."

"I—I want to," murmured Lovell faintly. "I—I wouldn't stay here alone for anything. But it wasn't a fancy, sir. I saw it—saw it quite plainly."

Mr. Silver did not reply to that. It was obvious that the old gentleman attributed the whole affair to nerves.

Lovell gave a haggard look at his chums.

"You fellows think I've been scared about nothing!" he muttered.

"Well, old fellow——" said Jimmy.

"There's no such thing as ghosts, you know," said Raby.

"I don't say it was a ghost—now," said Lovell. "I—I thought it was when I saw it. But I saw it, ghost or not."

Mr. Silver's brow grew stern.

"Surely one of you boys has not been playing a trick!" he exclaimed.

"No fear!" answered Jimmy. "Besides, the door was locked when we got here. Lovell had to unlock it to let us in."

"Then no one can have entered the room," said Mr. Silver. "Come, you had better return with Jimmy to his room, Lovell, at once."

There was a footstep in the corridor, and Eustace Spencer, Mr. Silver's secretary, looked in. His fat face had a startled expression, and he was blinking through his big spectacles with a look of scared inquiry.

"I thought I heard a call for help——" he began.

"Probably you did, Spencer," said Mr. Silver dryly. "Lovell has been frightened, and he awoke all of us. Jimmy, you will see that Lovell does not remain in this room. Good-night, my boys!"

And Mr. Silver departed with Mr. Spencer, still polite, but obviously a little cross—to call a reassuring word through Phyllis' door, and then to acquaint Mrs. Silver with the fact that the alarm was due to nothing more than a foolish boy's fright. Lovell's white face reddened as the old gentleman went; he could read Mr. Silver's opinion easily enough.

"Come on, old chap," said Jimmy. "You can bunk in with me for the night."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Watch in the Night!

VALENTINE MORNINGTON was roaming about the Haunted Room, looking into corners, and making a keen examination of the room. The other juniors hardly heeded him. Jimmy and Raby and Newcome were gathered round Lovell, upon whose face there was a far from pleasant expression.

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"Jimmy's pater isn't pleased," said Newcome. "Dash it all, Lovell, you oughtn't to have camped in this room. You can't say we didn't tell you so. You were bound to get nerved when you woke in the dark."

Lovell's eyes gleamed.

"You think it was just nerves?" he asked.

"I know it was."

"I tell you I saw——"

"Oh, rot!" said Newcome impatiently. "You saw some dashed shadow, or a flicker from the fire. What's the good of spinning us ghost stories?"

"Look here——"

"Be reasonable, old fellow," said Jimmy. "Now, there's a light, and we're all here; you must know there wasn't a ghost."

"I know there was something!"

"Only fancy!" said Newcome.

Lovell's brows contracted.

"Well, let's get off to bed, anyhow," said Jimmy Silver amicably. "No good freezing here. It's beastly cold, ghost or no ghost."

Mornington looked round.

"You chaps don't feel inclined to sit up for the ghost?" he asked.

"What rot!"

"You believe I saw something, Morny?" exclaimed Lovell.

"I think you must have," said Mornington. "You're rather an ass, but you're not a funk. You wouldn't have yelled out for nothing."

"Oh!" said Lovell, greatly comforted by this unexpected support. "You're not an ass, anyhow, Morny."

"But it's all rot!" said Newcome impatiently. "Look here, I'm jolly well going back to bed!"

"Same here!" said Raby.

And they started. It was cold enough in the Haunted Room, and there was a bitter draught through the open doorway from the corridor. Raby and Newcome were fed-up.

Lovell rose from the edge of the bed. "Come on!" he said.

Jimmy slipped his arm through his chum's as they left the Haunted Room. He could see that Lovell was still very much shaken. He took Lovell to his own room, and then, perceiving that Mornington had not followed, he went back along the corridor.

Valentine Mornington was standing in the middle of the haunted room looking about him with a keen, thoughtful face.

He nodded and smiled to Jimmy.

"Going back to bed?" he asked.

"Yes; I'm turning in with Lovell. You don't want to hang on here, I suppose?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes."

"Morny!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Come in and shut the door," said Mornington quietly.

Jimmy obeyed, in astonishment. Morny knelt by the old hearth and began to relight the fire. The captain of the Rookwood Fourth eyed him.

"Look here, Morny, what's the game?" he asked. "You don't want to dig in this room, after Lovell's been nearly frightened out of his wits."

"That's exactly what I want," answered Mornington. "And I want you to stay with me, Jimmy. We'll have the fire and keep the light on; and as we'll be together we can handle the giddy ghost, if he comes."

"But there's no giddy ghost!"

"There's something."

"Bosh, old fellow!"

"Lovell wasn't yelling for nothing," said Mornington quietly. "He saw something—and I don't believe in

ghosts, so I believe it was a trick of some sort."

"But it's rot," said Jimmy. "The door was locked. There's no other way into the room. The walls are solid stone behind that oak. You're not thinking of a secret door, or such rot, I suppose?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Mornington did not reply for a moment.

"Besides, who could have played a trick?" said Jimmy impatiently. "Not one of us, and there's nobody else in the house, excepting the pater and mater and Phyllis, and the gent with the barnacles, and the servants. Do you think one of them has been playing the ghost?"

Morny gave him a very curious look.

"I won't tell you what I think, Jimmy," he said at last. "I don't think anything very clearly yet. But I'm suspicious. It's a jolly odd coincidence that this ghost alarm should happen just now."

Jimmy stared at the dandy of the Rookwood Fourth.

"Where does the coincidence come in?" he asked.

"It's only a couple of days since there was a robbery here, and your father's picture, the Rembrandt, worth two thousand pounds, was cut out of the frame in the library and pinched."

"Well, what on earth's that to do with this?"

"Nothing, probably; and perhaps something," said Mornington coolly. "At least, it's a coincidence that the two things should happen about the same time."

"Blessed if I quite see it. Where's the connection?"

Morny did not answer.

"I'm staying in the room to-night," he said, after a pause. "Stay with me, Jimmy, and if what I expect to happen does happen I'll explain."

"What do you expect to happen, you ass?"

"Wait and see."

"I believe you're as big an ass as Lovell," said Jimmy, laughing a little impatiently. "But, anyhow, it will be a joke on old Lovell to stay here and show that there's no giddy ghost. We'll stay."

The log fire was burning up now and the two juniors wrapped blankets round themselves and sat up in two deep old armchairs on either side of the cheerful blaze. Neither felt disposed to turn into the bed.

Jimmy, in the warmth of the fire, soon nodded off to sleep, but Valentine Mornington did not close his eyes.

Jimmy awakened suddenly as there was a sound in the room. He glanced at Mornington, whose gaze was fixed on the door.

Jimmy followed his glance with a start. But he smiled as he saw the fat figure and glimmering spectacles of Eustace Spencer in the open doorway.

The secretary stepped in.

"Hallo!" yawned Jimmy drowsily.

"Trot in, Mr. Spencer!" said Mornington.

"May I ask what this means?" said the secretary, rather gringly. "Mr. Silver is under the impression that you boys have gone back to bed."

"No doubt," assented Mornington.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for the ghost."

"What nonsense!"

"Well, that's right, Mr. Spencer," said Jimmy Silver. "It's all rot. But Mornington has a fancy for it, so I'm giving him his head. No need for you to stay up."

"You had better go to bed at once, as your father supposes you have done, Master Silver!" snapped the secretary.

Jimmy sat upright and looked at him. Jimmy was an easy-going fellow, but he had no intention whatever of being dictated to by his father's secretary.

"I shall please myself about that, of course, Mr. Spencer!" he said.

Eustace Spencer looked at him. He seemed about to make an unpleasant rejoinder; but he restrained himself, and quitted the Haunted Room, closing the door after him.

Jimmy smiled at his chum. "The dear old man's ratty at being woke up at night," he remarked. "But, I say, Morny, you were waiting for something to happen, you told me."

"That's so."
"Has it happened?" grinned Jimmy Silver.

"Yes!"
"Wh-a-at?"
"I'll tell you about it in the morning," the dandy of the Fourth yawned. "Let's go to sleep now—there won't be any more ghosts to-night."

And Valentine Mornington closed his eyes, and in a minute, or less, was fast asleep. Jimmy stared at him in amazement. But he was too sleepy to waste much thought on the matter. He followed Morny's example, and was very soon sleeping as soundly as his comrade.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. A Startling Discovery!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL looked very sheepish at breakfast the following morning. It was Christmas Eve and the snow was banked up round the old house, and a bitter wind howled round the roofs of the Priory. But within all was merry and bright. Only Arthur Edward Lovell did not succeed in sharing the merriment and the brightness. He had expected to be chipped about his ghost adventure in the Haunted Room, and in that he had not been disappointed.

The Rookwood fellows felt that on this occasion Lovell had fairly asked for it, that he wanted it, and that if he got it so much the better. And Arthur Edward "got it" in large and generous measure.

He had persisted, against the advice of his pals, in sleeping in the Haunted Room. That was swank, his chums considered. The least Arthur Edward could have done, in the circumstances, was to keep his nerve, after taking on an unnecessary task out of bravado.

Instead of which he had been frightened, and had awakened and alarmed the whole household.

It was really too thick. Lovell's chums agreed, and they let Lovell see their opinion with unmistakable distinctness.

Lovell was certain—quite certain—that he had seen that ghostly figure, with pointing finger, at his bedside. But he remembered, too, that he had been dreaming of the phantom prior, and had awakened in darkness, with the eerie associations of the Haunted Room thick upon his mind. Was it possible, after all, that he had fancied that fearful apparition?

Be that as it might, Lovell had no intention of passing another night in the Haunted Room. Wild horses would hardly have dragged him there after nightfall. Indeed, if he had desired to

repeat his experiment, Mr. Silver certainly would not have allowed it. One midnight alarm was quite sufficient, in the opinion of Jimmy's father.

Smiling faces round a cheery breakfast table were quite in keeping with the joyous season of Christmastide, but to Lovell it seemed that there were far too many smiles—his noble self being the object of most of them. Only Mornington did not join in the general merriment at Lovell's expense, which was

cousin Phyllis through the snow, and as Miss Phyllis tactfully avoided the sore topic of ghosts, Lovell enjoyed his morning very much.

Jimmy Silver and Raby, and Newcome and Mornington repaired to the Haunted Room.

It looked bright and cheery enough now, with the shutters flung wide back and the wintry sunshine streaming in at the high deep windows.

"No giddy ghosts walking this morn-



LAYING THE GHOST! Silently Mornington sat bolt upright, watching. A sudden flash of light broke the gloom, and the junior grinned. The "ghost" had turned on an electric torch. Morny rose to his feet, his hands grasping a heavy cushion from the chair. Whiz! Crash! The cushion struck the bending figure in the corner. (See Chapter 4.)

rather unexpected, as Morny might have been supposed to welcome such an occasion for his satirical humour. But Morny, at least, refrained from chipping; a circumstance that considerably increased Lovell's estimation of the dandy of the Fourth.

After breakfast the Haunted Room was a centre of interest. That morning Inspector Stanson came over from Denewood to see Mr. Silver on the subject of the stolen Rembrandt; but he had no news, excepting that there was no news.

The interview did not have a cheering effect on the old gentleman, who was beginning to despair of ever seeing his masterpiece again. By that time, he feared, it was in the clutches of the unscrupulous collector, who had doubtless commissioned the thief to purloin it, and the recipient of the stolen Rembrandt was certain to keep it well hidden. It needed all Mr. Silver's self-command to keep up a cheery and smiling aspect for the sake of his son's guests. He would not allow his own trouble to cast a shadow over the festive season.

While Mr. Silver and the inspector were talking in the library, the juniors visited the Haunted Room.

Lovell did not accompany them. He had had enough of the Haunted Room, and he was fed up with chipping.

Lovell went out for a tramp with

ing!" chuckled Raby, "Poor old Lovell! He's getting quite waxy about it!"

"About time we gave him a rest," said Jimmy Silver, smiling.

"Oh, rot!" said Newcome. "Lovell shouldn't swank! Sleeping in the Haunted Room, and then yelling out the alarm and waking up the house is rather too thick!"

"Yes, rather!" said Raby.

"What the dickens is Morny up to?" asked Newcome, staring at the dandy of the Fourth.

Mornington was making a close examination of the old oak walls. Jimmy watched him with a smile.

"Looking for a giddy secret door?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Mornington, without turning his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Raby and Newcome.

"This is a jolly old house," said Mornington. "You've told me that there are secret passages in it, Jimmy."

"Yes; but they're well known," said Jimmy Silver. "Nothing of the kind in this room. If you tap all the panels, you'll find some solid stone behind."

"It looks like it!" confessed Mornington.

"Let's know what you find, Morny," grinned Newcome. "I'm going out."

And Newcome went out with Raby.

"What about skating, Morny?" asked Jimmy Silver. "The lake's frozen over."

"I'll join you later, old chap. I'm amusin' myself in my own way, you know."

"Oh, all right!"

And Jimmy Silver cheerfully left Morny to his own devices. He preferred skating himself, but Morny was welcome to potter about the Haunted Room as long as he liked.

And Mornington did potter about till it was close on lunch time, and then he was interrupted. Mr. Spencer looked in.

"Hunting the ghost in the daytime?" the secretary asked, with a smile.

"Just that?" assented Mornington.

"Isn't that rather absurd?"

"Little things please little minds, you know," said Mornington, unmoved. "I find it amusin'."

"Your friends seem to be enjoying themselves on the lake," said Mr. Spencer, eyeing the junior curiously.

"I'm glad of that."

"You are not going to join them?"

"Not at present."

Spencer nodded and smiled and walked away. Mornington smiled, too, when he was gone, and resumed his pottering. But he desisted at last, and came to a halt in the middle of the room, his hands driven deep into his pockets and a wrinkle marking his handsome brow.

"Nothin' doin'!" he muttered. "There's no secret way into the room, that's a cert! Floored in that direction! But Lovell saw somethin'—though they're chippin' him almost into believin' that he didn't! But how could that dashed somethin' have got into the room?"

He glanced from the window.

Below was a sheer drop of thirty feet, without even a rain-pipe to be seen. And the shutters, which had been closed overnight, were heavy and strong.

"Nothin' doin'!" said Mornington again.

He whistled softly.

"Fool!" he ejaculated suddenly.

That complimentary epithet was addressed apparently to himself. He crossed over to the door, and drew the big, heavy key from the old-fashioned lock.

He took the key to the window, in the clearest light, and made a minute examination of it.

Then his eyes glittered.

On the end of the key were two little marks. The key itself was an ancient one, of massive make, and a little rusted. But on the rusty end showed two clear marks, as if the metal had been gripped in a pair of fine pincers. "By gad!" muttered Mornington.

He knew now how the locked door had been opened. It was no ghost that had visited Lovell—ghosts would scarcely require to unlock a door; a bodiless phantom would not be stopped by a door or a lock. The door had been unlocked from the outer side, by means of a pair of powerful tweezers that had gripped the end of the key—such instruments as burglars use.

Morny's eyes fairly blazed over his discovery. He replaced the key in the lock and sauntered away. There was a smile on his face when he turned up at lunch.

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THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Th Mstery of the Night!

"SO the Spencer-bird is postponin' his holiday?"

"Is he?" said Jimmy Silver carelessly.

"Isn't he?" answered Mornington.

"Blessed if I know."

"You didn't know I was a giddy thought-reader, did you?" asked Valentine Mornington, with a smile. "Now I'm givin' you a proof. Your pater mentioned to us the other day that Mr. Spencer was goin' away for Christmas, an' startin' on Christmas Eve."

"That's so," said Jimmy. "He hasn't gone yet, but I suppose he's going."

"Two to one in mince-pies that he doesn't!"

Jimmy stared at the dandy of the Fourth. He could not make out in the least what Mornington was driving at.

"He may have changed his mind, Morny—blessed if I know or care whether he has or not," said the puzzled Jimmy. "But, anyhow, I don't see how you know anything about his plans. Are you talking out of your hat?"

"I'm a giddy thought-reader."

"Rot!"

"Well, just inquire, and you'll learn that the Spencer-bird isn't flyin' away to-day," said Morny.

"Bosh!" said Jimmy.

Jimmy Silver was puzzled and a little curious, and, in order to settle the point, he made an inquiry of his father on the subject. Mr. Silver shook his head when the inquiry was made.

"Spencer has caught a slight cold," he said. "He is putting off his departure till Boxing Day."

In great amazement Jimmy Silver returned to Mornington. The dandy of the Fourth met him with a grin.

"Well?" he asked.

"He's not going till Boxing Day," said Jimmy. "But how did you know?"

"Perhaps a little bird whispered," said Mornington; "or perhaps I got the tip from the ghost."

"The ghost?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"The ghost that Lovell saw in the Haunted Room," explained Mornington. "Catch on?"

"I suppose you're trying to pull my leg," said Jimmy. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're driving at, Morny. Suppose you explain?"

"All in good time, old chap. I've been doin' a lot of thinkin'," said Mornington, his handsome face becoming serious. "Your father is no end out up about losin' that jolly old Rembrandt, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so," said Jimmy ruefully.

"He's been thumpin' decent to me," said Morny. "What a rippin' idea if a chap could bag that stolen smudge and hand it back to your pater as a Christmas present!"

"I jolly well wish it could be done," said Jimmy. "But as it can't, it's not much good talking."

"Who knows," said Mornington. "Stranger things have happened. When ghosts walk in a house jolly soon after a robbery, it makes me suspicious. Jimmy—to come back to the ghost—are you game to sit up in the Haunted Room again to-night?"

"I'm afraid the pater wouldn't like the idea after the terrible fuss Lovell made last night."

"He won't mind if there are two or three of us together—and we'll keep the light burning," said Mornington. "I've got a fancy for that room. I've given the jolly old maid the glad eye, and she's keepin' up the fire there."

"You ass!"

"I'm going to read the "Holiday Annual" there this afternoon, while you others are leading the strenuous life out of doors."

"What rot! Better come out and skate! What do you want to stick indors for?"

"Mr. Spencer's caught a slight cold—"

"What has that to do with it?"

"No reason why I shouldn't catch a slight cold, too. Havin' a slight cold, I'm stayin' in for a bit."

And Mornington walked away whistling, leaving Jimmy Silver in a state of the most profound astonishment.

Mornington spent the afternoon reading by a big log fire in the Haunted Room. He received no visitors there, except that Mr. Spencer looked in for a few minutes. Mornington chatted to him cheerily, and asked after his cold, and confided to him the fact that he had a slight cold also—just about as bad as Mr. Spencer's.

The secretary did not stay long. After he was gone, Mornington winked into space and resumed his entertaining perusal of the "Holiday Annual."

When, at a rather late hour, Jimmy Silver & Co. came up to bed, Jimmy looked Mornington up.

"Enjoyed yourself?" Jimmy asked, rather sarcastically.

"Lots!" answered Mornington, with a cheery nod. "Mr. Spencer looked in for a few minutes, otherwise I've been on my own, enjoyin' my own fascinatin' society no end. The fellows gone to roost?"

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"Lovell doesn't want to sit up for the ghost?"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"I fancy Lovell's had enough of ghosts," he answered. "But if you're keen on it, I'll stay up with you, Morny. I think it's rot!"

Jimmy stretched himself on the bed; Mornington sat in the deep chair by the fire. The lamp was put out, and the fire burned low. The deep and steady breathing from the bed soon announced that Jimmy Silver was sound asleep.

But Mornington did not sleep.

His eyes never closed for a moment. The theory that Morny had formed in his mind, and which he had not explained to a soul, was a startling one, and more than enough to keep him very wide awake through the long watches of the night.

He leaned back in the chair, his eyes open and unwinking, waiting and watching with the patience and fortitude of a Red Indian.

Iron-nerved as he was, Morny was glad that Jimmy Silver was with him. If there was danger that night, it was not from ghosts—and he knew it. But he was glad that he was not alone.

Midnight had long passed, and the night was still, save for a faint whine of the wind among the chimneys. The fire died lower, till all was dark save for a faint red glow in the sinking embers.

Mornington did not move; but he breathed harder as there was a faint sound at the door. The door swung open, and a chill draught penetrated from the gloomy corridor.

In the darkness there was a glimmer of white.

Several moments passed—long moments to the still, watching junior.

The white figure moved at last.

It advanced soundlessly into the room. For a second it hovered near the bed. The steady breathing of the sleeper there went on, calm, uninterrupted. Then, for another moment, the ghostly

figure hovered in the dim glow of the fire over the still form of the junior in the chair.

Mornny's eyes were closed now; he breathed deeply. Only when a faint rustle of trailing garments moved farther away did Mornny's eyes reopen. Still he did not move.

His eyes were fixed on the glimmering patch of white in the darkness of the great room. The ghostly figure had flitted from him, and was now in a corner of the room by the window—bending low.

Silently, Mornnington sat bolt upright, watching. A sudden flash of light broke the gloom, and the watching junior grinned. The "ghost" had turned on an electric flash-lamp in the corner!

Mornnington rose to his feet, still without a sound. His hands grasped a heavy cushion from the chair.

Whiz! Crash!

The cushion struck the bending figure in the corner, and the light of the electric lamp was instantly blotted out. There was a sharp, startled cry in the darkness.

The next instant a glimmer of white raced across the room, and the door closed. The ghost was gone!

Mornnington laughed softly. From the bed came a startled exclamation as Jimmy Silver sat up and stared about him. The crash of the falling cushion had awakened him.

"Mornny—what—"

"Hallo, old top!" yawned Mornnington.

"What—what's happened?"

"Lots of things; but the jolly old happenings are over for to-night. Go to sleep, my little piccaninny," said Mornnington airily. He stirred the fire, piled on logs, lighted the lamp, and grinned at Jimmy Silver's startled face.

Jimmy stared at him. Mornnington laughed lightly.

"Don't worry!" he said. "And if you want something pleasant to dream of, dream of my givin' your pater his jolly old Rembrandt back as a Christmas present in the mornin'. What?"

"But—"

"Good-night, old bean!"

But before Mornnington slept he locked the door and dragged a heavy table against it. Then he settled down for the remainder of the night, with a smile on his lips that remained there when he slept. In his own peculiar way, Valentine Mornnington was enjoying his Christmas holiday.

THE END.

(There will be another long complete tale of this strange mystery at the Priory next week, entitled: "Shown Up!" in which Val Mornnington plays a prominent part.)

A COMPLETE NATURE STORY WITH A BIG THRILL!

BY F. ST. MARS.



THE vast forest lay under its mantle of snow in the chill, thin evening sun.

Then through the maze of iron-hard tree trunks there came a beast—a remarkable beast. He was smaller than a bear, and larger than a wild cat or badger; his black-brown coat looked like a mat that had been attacked by the moth; his bushy tail was ragged; his short head held jaws of great power for one of such size; his teeth made one open one's eyes; his nearly white claws were not the claws of an innocent animal, and his general appearance was bear-like and morose. He had also an extraordinary way of getting along, like a dog that is ill, moving with his back arched and his legs dragged along anyhow. Moreover, his appearance was not misleading, for every man had named him the glutton. That was his real name, indeed—glutton!

Suddenly he pulled up and sat up on his haunches just as you will see a rabbit do in our fields at home here, only he was fifty-four inches long from nose to tip of tail.

Then he ran on, once or twice dropping his head, hound fashion, as if following a scent trail, and one was amazed at the pace with which this clumsy-looking creature could get over the ground. No man could hope to follow him. He seemed to be built for snow.

Presently, however, his manner changed. He became stealthy. He peered from behind each tree before he ventured to glide to the next. His advance became a series of tree-to-tree glides. And at last he stopped. And well he might!

Bang in front of him, not twenty yards away, a fur-clad man was bending down, doing something—as a matter of fact setting a trap, the last of a long line of traps that he had been putting down all day for that most valuable of fur-bearing animals, the Russian sable.

I think the man must have felt that something was watching him. One

nearly always does so in those vast, frozen forests of the North. Anyhow, he looked up sharply, and looked straight into the horribly cruel, glaring eyes of the glutton. But eyes are common in the forest as darkness approaches, especially when snow has fallen. The man could not tell whose the eyes might be, and put them down for those of a fox or marten, or even—and this reminded him that he would do well to get home before dark—a wolf. If he had known who really was the owner of those eyes, he would not only have pulled up the trap he was then setting, but as many more of those he had set during the day as the darkness would let him.

In a minute or two the man went away. The glutton followed him stealthily from tree to tree to a village.

Before the man had reached the village he was also followed by two wolves, but, though hungry, these did not attack, being only two, in place of a pack.

Then the glutton turned silently and shambled off back on his own trail to the trap. The wolves had not seen him.

Once, on the way, he came to a clearing, where a number of white hares were playing in the light of the newly-risen moon, but they saw, or scented, him—he had an objectionable smell about him—and darted off like shadows.

Then he reached the trap, and set to work in a careful and businesslike fashion that was rather amazing. He broke into the trap from the rear, not the front, turned it over gingerly with a wary forepaw, sprung it in consequence, dragged it up, ate the bait, and carried the now harmless instrument of destruction to a thicket, where he hid it.

But that was not all. This odd creature of unprepossessing appearance who seemed to have an understanding far beyond that of most wild creatures, now followed the man's back trail, the trail he had made since the morning, and, of course, soon came to another trap. The trap was carefully hidden,

but not enough to deceive the glutton. He treated it in a like disrespectful manner to the first.

Again, when, he turned to the back trail, slouching along now with as great a show of excitement as he ever permitted himself, except when angry. The third trap was not so hard to find, because there was something in it that struggled. The captive was none other than a beautiful dark sable—nearly black was this sable, with a coat worth much gold coin. But the glutton did not care. He seemed to take a fiendish delight in destruction.

There was no need to approach the trap carefully from its harmless end this time, but he did so, and speedily put the sable out of its pain with a single crunch of his terrible jaws. He tore the dead animal from the trap and fed upon it, eating only a portion, but rending the rest to tatters, and strewing these on the snow. The trap also he treated in similar fashion, and started again on the back trail—apparently insatiable.

The fourth trap held only bait, which was duly consumed, after the trap had been put out of action by sheer cunning that was almost uncanny.

Then on again—always on the back trail.

Trap number five contained also a sable, who was forthwith slain, partly eaten, and in small pieces scattered all over the place with the remnants of the trap.

All this took time, of course. There had been many intervals of inaction to let a silent foe go by, or to listen to possible watchers. Moreover, the siege of each trap took time, too, for even as clever a beast as a glutton knows full well that playing with traps of any description is a ticklish business, and not to be accomplished in haste.

It was, however, just after he had left the fifth trap, and was on his way to the sixth, that the glutton heard something which really checked his onward shamble—one cannot call it