

STARTS TO-DAY: A BRILLIANT SERIAL OF MYSTERY ON THE RIVIERA

THE SCHOOLGIRL

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EVERY **2^D**
SATURDAY

Incorporating
"SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN"



GHOST—OR GIRL?

Clara, as she flung the lasso, realized that in a moment they would know!

A thrilling incident from this week's fine long complete Clif House Christmas holiday story

2
 COME TO MISTLETOE MANOR WITH BABS & CO., AND SHARE THEIR

When the WHITE QUEEN WALKED



The Girl Who Ran Away

"YOU know, old Spartans," Jovina Chastairs announced, with an air of one who makes a profound observation, "it's amazing"

"Go on!" roared Timothy Clara Trevelyan. "You'll be telling us soon that it's Christmas next week! Hi, Bemie, don't speak that parcel, you dumpling! It's got those artificial flowers in it!"

"Oh, really, who's squashing your parcel?" Bemie Bunter puffed, an struggling with half a dozen packages she wedged her petty body through the doorway of a compartment of the train which had come to rest at Riverside's tiny station. "Oh! Why can't you collect your parcels yourself? Oh, I say, you g-girls, it's amazing!"

"Bright thing!" Lotia Carroll admiringly remarked. "What a loon is it to be a meteorological expert, Fattikins! I saw hand it to you for observation! But I say, Babs! Where's Mabel?"

"Hallo!" came a cheery hail from farther up the platform. "Oh, my hat! Hold on, my party! Doris! Where's that kid sister of mine? And Fay—Fay's Chatterer!" she called.

"How, Babs?" came Fay's merry voice from one of the glasses.

"In Marcell's with you?"

"Oh!" answered the shrilly scolded voice of Marcell's Bessie, the distinctive French l'air. "Here I am wit myself, and Marjorie Hasbrouck, too."

By

HILDA RICHARDS

But I cannot see you, my Babsie, because as train is one side of me, and big Clara Trevelyan and Bemie Bunter on other. Also, I have so many of so Christmas parcels that I am all bang on to like as Christmas-tree himself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And Mabel! Mabel! Where's Mabel Lorn?"

"Present!" merrily sang out the owner of that name, and Mabel, her pretty face all rosy with exertion, stopped into the radius of light thrown by the one solitary lamp which adorned Riverside station. "As large as life, and as merry as a schoolmaid! But, I say, it's amazing!" Mabel added.

"If anyone says that again I shall jolly well forget it's Christmas, and start things!" Clara threatened. "And young Doris, look here, if you trip over my feet again—"

"Oh, was that your foot?" impish Doris Redfern asked innocently. "I thought it was one of the railway sleepers!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Merry the peal of girlish laughter which rang out, joined in by all except Clara herself, who, rather sensitive on the subject of her large feet, reddened furiously under the rally.

Merry indeed were the spirits of that happy party—all girls from Cliff House School, and all on Christmas holiday bent.

What cared they for snow? Even though it was falling thick and fast, in this lonely mountainous district of Devonshire it had fallen steadily for the past three days.

This was Christmas! And Christmas came but once a year! Also, it was a Christmas they had promised to make memorable.

For was not this the very first time they had spent a holiday in such a

CHRISTMAS at romantic Mistletoe Manor! That was the glorious prospect which confronted Babs & Co. They looked forward to a time of revelry and festivity in that historic old mansion, little suspecting how their merriment was to be marred by a mystery so to be marred by a mystery as baffling as it was astonishing—the mystery surrounding the ghost of the White Queen.

romantic part of the world? Back at Cliff House School, they had done little else but talk about this prospect for the last week.

For in that week plans had been changed.

Originally, they had all been destined to be guests at Barbara Redfern's house-party, at Holly Hall, in Hampshire.

But while icy blizzards had swept the North of England, terrestrial rains had flooded the South, and Holly Hall was now almost surrounded by water.

A new place for the house-party had, therefore, to be found, and Babs' father had accepted, gratefully enough, the invitation of his own father, General Selby Redfern, to bring his party to Mistletoe Manor.

That morning the chums had spent in London, doing their last-minute shopping—evidenced now by the number of parcels with which they were all encumbered. All that day they had travelled, and now, in the midst of a raging blizzard, had arrived at their destination.

Mr. and Mrs. Redfern, together with Elna Stevens, Mrs. Redfern's personal maid, and little Reggie, Babs' four-

HOLIDAY FUN AND ADVENTURES IN THIS LONG COMPLETE STORY

year-old brother, were already at the Manor.

Two of them there were—all, with the exception of Doris Redfern and Fay Shandley, her friend, belonging to the Fourth Form at Cliff House School. Doris and Fay belonged to the Upper Third.

"Well, we're all here!" Babe announced, and cast an anxious eye along the unoccupied platoon. "But I don't see any sign of daddy! He promised to meet us, you know. Porter! I say, Porter!" she added to the military porter, who smiled by.

"Yes, miss?"

"Is there a conveyance outside?"

"Sorry, miss," he replied. "There ain't. No taxi, or trap, neither. Might you be the party for Musketeer Manor?"

"Why, yes," replied Babe.

"Then, miss, I was to tell you that the car has been delayed. There's big drifts between here and the Manor, and they must have got stuck up. A gentleman named Mr. Redfern, who sounds to be the old general's son-in-law, passed through half an hour ago to tell you he'd be half an hour late."

"Oh, crumbs!" muttered Babe. "Is there anywhere we can wait?"

"Why, yes, miss. There's a buffet at the other end of the platform. You'll find a fire there, and you can get a cup of something hot, too, I reckon!"

"Oh, whopper! Come on!" Doris cried joyfully.

That was enough. Spirits soared once again. Bessie, trailing a string of parcels, was the first to reach the buffet—a tiny apartment, in which blazed a cheerful fire, and whose lights were hung around with holly and garlands, in honor of the festive season.

A bright-faced assistant beamed welcome at them from behind the counter, and in the corner another girl, of about Babe's own age, was seated, sipping cocoa. She looked up as the chums entered. Babe's eyes fell on her at once.

She did not know her, had never met her in her life before. But there was something about her, a winful, forlorn air of loneliness that set a quick stab to her warm heart at once.

A pretty girl, Babe decided, though she did look rather pitted and wan, and she noticed a little shabby in clothes that, while being of good cut, had obviously grown too small for her. For a moment, looking up, she caught Babe's glance, flushed, and quickly turned her eyes away.

"Well, here we are, I guess!" Lolla Carroll announced. "Dinner room, sister! Treat 'em up! Tea, cocoa, coffee, or a nice hot brandyade, Babe!"

"Thanks, something hot!" Babe laughed. "Oh, what a relief!" And she dumped her parcels—there was a good dozen of them—on the table.

"Well, thank goodness for a chance to eat these out," I say, Doris!

"Well, what do you say?" Doris returned perkily.

"Where's the parcel with the gold stuffers in it?"

"You mean that present for grand-daddy?" Doris asked. "Well, you've got it. Look, rummy! There it is, hanging on to your little finger!"

Babe gasped. She had known an awful amount of panic. For the exquisite gold needles, purchased on Regent Street only that morning, had cost a lot of money, and was a special present from her father, himself, and her mother to her peppery old grand-daddy. If that had got lost—but there

it was, thank goodness! Babe put it down with a relieved sigh.

Coffee, tea, and cocoa were forthcoming now. Tables were drawn up, and in a jerry, shuffling group, the party sat down to refreshment, and to eat out their parcels, at the same time.

And what a heap of parcels those were!

"Yes, this is prime!" Doris Baxter beamed. "Though I wish you wouldn't keep digging your shins elbow into me, you know, Jimmy. I say, Babe, how far is Musketeer Manor from the station?"

Babe, happening to glance at the lovely girl as she appeared to stare at the mention of that name.

"Oh, about five miles."

"Oh, I say! Well, I'll have another cup of cocoa!" Bessie said.

"What sort of p-places is it, Babe?"

Babe laughed.

"Oh," she said. "It was built in the time of Queen Elizabeth, you know. There's a room in it called Elizabeth's room, where she was supposed to have slept. There are ghosts, too, though you mean's mention those to my grand-daddy. He's got rather a link where ghosts are concerned."

"You mean he doesn't believe in them?" Marjorie asked.

"Believe!" Babe chuckled. "You should just hear him on the subject! Just declares it's all a lot of humbug. But then," she added, "he's never seen one, though he's lived in the manor for the last three years. He hated it," she added, "from a family named Pembury." And again she wondered why the girl in the corner so quickly averted

her head. "It has been in the Pembury family ever since it was built."

"And what happened to the Pembury lady?" Jimmy inquired.

"I don't know, really. Daddy'll tell you more about it than I can. There was some big crash. They had to sell everything up, and the manor went with the rest. Oh, ho! Is that a car I hear outside? It is! It isn't! It is!"

It was. And in another moment the owner of the car himself appeared, cheerfully smiling, though his coat glistened with melting snow. Babe and Doris hung themselves upon him simultaneously.

"Daddy?"

"Daddy late than never?" Mr. Redfern said heartily. "Sorry, everybody! It's just a perfect beast out, though! Twice we had to dig ourselves out of the snow, coming along, and the road's filling up just as fast as it's cleared. All here, I see! Hallo, Babe! Don't know you'd brought an extra friend?" he added jovially, as his eyes fell curiously upon the girl in the corner.

The girl turned away.

"I'm sorry, but I don't belong to the party," she said.

"Oh!" Mr. Redfern looked a little embarrassed. "But haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I don't think so," the girl replied, in a constrained voice.

Babe eyed her curiously. Again she felt a little pang at her heart. What a lovely little thing she seemed!

"Perhaps," she gently suggested, "we can give you a lift. Are you going far?"

"No, not—not really!" the girl stammered. "You see, I—I'm waiting!"

She did not say for whom; for what,



"COME back—come back!" Babe called. But the strange girl paid no heed. Without a word she turned and began to hurry away through the snow—a forlorn and mysterious figure.

And she seemed very nervous of this questioning, though she tried to express her thanks for the offer by smiling at the same time.

"Mr. Redfern coughed.
"Well, I don't want to rush you, but I think the wisest thing would be to get going, girls. I'm rather anxious to get back before the snow's too thick. I've two cars outside. Babs, you'd better arrange travelling parties. Give me some of those parcels."

The parties were arranged; the parcels picked up. With a good-night and a "Merry Christmas" to the lovely girl in the corner, the party tramped off, to catch its breath in the whirling blizzard which made them as soon as they stepped outside. The storm, so far from abating, seemed to be growing fiercer.

Outside the cars stood—two big saloons, sufficient to carry all of them. Evidently they belonged to, according to remarks as they climbed over the foot-boards. The first, driven by General Redfern's chauffeur, started off. Babs' father slipped to the wheel of the second, while Babs herself, Ma's, Bessie, Clara, Trojka, and Marjorie Blackburn made themselves comfortable.

"Where! What a night!" gasped Clara. "But as a thing, kids—it's going to be a good old-fashioned white Christmas!"

"What-ho! Are we downhearted?" cheered Babs.

"NO!"
The car heated off, carrying its merry load, while the snow drifted against the windows, and the wind howled about them. In the glare of the headlights the road showed up as a shimmering sheet of white.

Then, without any warning, the car stopped.

"What's the matter, dad?" Babs cried.

"Nothing much. Snow's stopped the wiper working," Mr. Redfern answered. "I'll have to get out and clear the screen."

The door slammed as he hoisted himself out, and the flames shivered in the blast that whirled into the car, bringing with it a cloud of scurrying flakes. At the same time Babs gave a start.

"Oh, my goodness! The parcel!"

"Parcel! What parcel?"

"Grandpa's stockings!"

"My aunt!" Clara groaned. "You don't mean to say you've worrying about that again, you chicken! You had it when you left the buffet."

"I know!" Babs was looking anxiously round. "It was fastened to my little sledge. But look! It's not there now. I must have dropped it off when we scrambled into the car!"

A feverish hunt there was, then; but it was obvious that Babs spoke truth. The sledge never contained; placed to one side. Everybody rose, rummaging down the seats, but no parcel was to be found.

Babs bit her lip.
Her father, a blur of darkness against the glittering snow, clambered back, gasping at her outcries.

"Anything wrong, Babs?"

"The—the stockings!" she faltered. "I've lost it!"

"Oh, good gracious!" He gazed at her in consternation. "And I promised your grandfather he should have that as soon as you came! It was most—most—"

"What?" He hesitated. "What's that?"

Faintly, above the roar of the storm, came a voice.

"Step! Please—oh, please stop!"

They all turned. The voice—a girl's voice—came again.

"Please!"

Through the window at the back of

the car Babs peered. Then she gave an exclamation.

"Oh, I say, it's the girl who was in the buffet!"

Out of her lips, red-faced, she came up now, obviously having run all the way. Snow covered her from head to foot. In the glare of the headlights her parting breath escaped like steam from her lips.

"I—I had to come!" she gasped. "I heard you say you were going to Missions Manor, and I was hoping to catch you. Is the girl they call Barbara here?"

"That's me," Barbara answered.

"Oh, then, then you dropped this," the girl announced, and, to Babs' astonishment, handed up the tiny parcel which contained the treasured stockings.

"I—I found it outside the station, where the car stood."

Babs smiled.

"Well, thank you! That's very nice of you! But I say, you must have run a mile or more! Won't you let us give you a lift?"

"No, thank!"

"Well—Mr. Redfern coughed—"at least," he said, and drew his hand into his pocket, "let me give you a little present!"

The girl shook back.

"Oh, please, no! I don't want anything, really! Good-night!"

"But, no! I say, you can't go like that!" Babs cried, scrambling into the car. "Wait a minute, please! What's your name?"

And then she broke off, as the girl, with a strangely frightened glance, turned and darted away. Babs stopped after her.

"I say, come back!"

But only the sound of the snow crunching beneath Barbara's heels answered her command. As dramatically as she had appeared, the girl had as mysteriously vanished!



"The Holly Bough Hung on the Old Oak Wall"

COME in! Come in! Welcome to Missions Manor! Merry Christmas, everybody!"

"Merry Christmas, grandpa!" laughed Babs.

"And these are your friends, ah?" old General Redfern beamed with hearty gallantry. "And a very pretty and lively little crowd they are, to be sure! Well, well! Take of your wet things, girls, and come round the tree. I'll get Brewster to dish up something that will soon bring the roams back into your cheeks, my dears! And! Right—what?"

"Awful," Jeanina asserted solemnly, "is the word, general! When, then, Father! That's my tender trotter you're ironing under your society tea of supplicants!"—as Bessie had recently dished back upon her tea.

The girl groaned. General Redfern—half, fire-eating old soldier that he was—laughed heartily. Flashed he was to see him, and pleased indeed they were to see him. But perhaps, after that slow, adventurous ride from the station, more pleased, at the moment, to behold the stately hall of Missions Manor.

A great fire, built of blazing logs, crackled in the old oaken hearth. On the dais, and by the still-time looks of the mantel, a more white table, laden with mouth-watering delicacies, was prepared.

Behind it, in the shadows, shone with

coloured electric lights which streak glowing streams of light from the sides of polished mirrors, hovered a gigantic Christmas-tree laden heavily with all manner of delightful gifts.

Missions—then manifest for which the heavy old eaks of the celebrated manor were famous—was filled with brightly-lit holly and garlands for pomper placed in the festive decorations.

A real merry welcome it was. The first impressions of Missions Manor confirmed all their hopes of a really glorious Christmas.

Delighted, the old general with his bluff benevolence; sweet, too, was Babs' mother, who now came from some inner room with shy little Ellie Stevens, he-coming, to help them remove their wet outer clothes and bid them the compliments of the season.

And what wonderful! What a relief when, as last, dished of damp clothes, they all stood round the roaring fire!

"Well, well, here we are!" General Redfern beamed. "Make yourselves comfortable, girls! Oh, Brewster!"

"Yes, sir! Did you call?" a quavering voice asked.

A door opened. A thin, white face with abnormally large and staring eyes peered round the post. The face was followed by a waxy body clad in black, and held under one shaking arm glimmered a huge and ancient black-bow. Bessie gave a squeal.

"Wow! He's going to shoot!"

"Dad! Did you call, sir?" Brewster asked.

"Boy! Of course, I called! Barbara, too, man! Are you deaf! And why, the general spluttered, "are you carrying that piece of artillery around with you? Haven't I told you—"

"Please, sir, it's the ghost!" Brewster quavered.

The general sat up as if electrified.

"The what?"

"The girl-ghost! Perkins said he heard him knocking again this afternoon!"

Babs & Co. sat up with a jerk.

"Perkins!" the general spluttered. "You and Perkins!" he roared. "Haven't I told you there are no such things as ghosts! Perkins is a frightened fool, man! You're worse! Get out! And put that weapon away! Get on!"

And, Brewster—

"Yes, sir!"

"If I hear any more talk of ghosts in this house this Christmas I'll fire you!"

"Yes, sir! You said that yesterday! But there was a tapping, sir!"

"Get out! And— Hep, bring those candles!"

"Yes, sir."

Brewster disappeared. Then the general blew out his cheeks.

"Ghosts!" he roared. "Bah! Girls' stories! Don't be scared, children—"

"But we're not scared!" Clara Trojka eagerly spoke up. Her eyes were shining. "If there are any ghosts in the house, sir—"

"Well, there aren't, young lady?"

"Well, I was just going to say we'll have 'em up for you!" Clara offered.

"Well, be just terrified by a really good ghost hunt, wouldn't you, girls?"

"Yes, rather!"

The general pursed his lips.

"Young lady," he said ominously, "I like you! I like you all, but let this be understood. Whatever you see, whatever you hear, there are no ghosts in Missions Manor, and I won't have you fussing things that don't exist! You know better, and Perkins has heard the others in their own empty heads!"

The girls glanced at each other. Babs smiled, shaking her head with an "I told you so" significance.

"But there's a story, eh?" Mabel asked eagerly.

"A story? Hush! A dozen! There's the ghost of the White Queen—hah! There's another legend about a Walter Pembury, who was supposed to have been walled up alive in this very room, by the fireplace, there! That's what those lads think they heard. This fellow Pembury, dead two hundred years ago, is supposed to be still tapping his way out! I—"

"Dreadful!" breathed Babs.

"Her, what—?"

"Lions!"

And faces suddenly became startled as, in startled silence, the Cliff House chimes played at each other. For plainly, from the fireplace, came a distinct sound.

"Tap, tap, tap!"



Mysteries!

TAP, tap, tap!
One and all spun round, in stare in amazement in the direction of the fireplace. Then Bessie Hunter let out a quavering cry.

"Woe! Oh! Help! It's the ghost! Swear me, Babs!"
She was the first to react. In terror she dived beneath the nearest table. Unfortunately for Bessie that table was low. It was fragile and certainly not designed for the use to which Bessie now put it. Over with a crash it went, flinging its vase of flowers straight into the lap of Marjorie Hazledine.

Marjorie staggered west staggering back as Marjorie jumped up. From the general came a hoarse as the little French girl stepped back on his guests too. At the same moment there came an appalling crash!

The crash came from Brewster, who had just entered the room with the tray of glasses.

Brewster leaped. In sudden fright his tray went crashing from his grip, the start of goggle-eyed terror Brewster gave, and then dashed out into the hall. After a moment he reappeared, ferociously brandishing his blunderbuss.

"Just show me where it is!" he shouted valiantly.

"Back, idiot!" the general snorted.

"Girls!" he roared, for by this time Babs & Co. were all at the fireplace.

"Girls, come here!"

"But no ghost!" shrieked Marjorie vociferously.

"Haven't I told you there's no ghost?"

"But we heard—"

The general's eyes glistened.
"What you heard," he cried, "was a noise in the water-pipe or in the parlor! Don't I hear that every night of my life! Girls—please! Come here! What do you think you can do, anyway, hey, except tear the fireplace brick from brick? Bessie, child, get up! Brewster, put that artillery away and get that vase cleared up! Marjorie, you must change your frock. Now! the general blurted and strode among them.

The girl questioned down. But they looked at each other. That tapping had been no noise, or any other animal. It was too measured, too deliberate for that.

In the moment's silence that ensued nothing but the moan of the wind in the high gallery where the great hall was to be heard.

The general was upset. Marjorie's profuse apology had done nothing to alleviate the pain which was still stinging in his feet. Also one of the

legs of the table under which Bessie had dived—a fragile antique—was cracked.

Kind and easy-going was General Redfern when everything was going well; but he was inclined to bubble up with all his old military irreverence when they were going otherwise.

"Now, no more of this nonsense!" he growled. "Perhaps it's fun for you children, to hear things that aren't there. But I'm an old man, remember! I don't want my home turned into a 'bear-garden.'"

But the warm drinks were fresh-

men all there. There! And again the general (like their aunt through her). They had moved again—were looking directly at her!

Do were they?

She approached nearer to the picture, decouring it. And then she shook her shrouded head. Of course, now she saw it close to, it was easy to see the trick her imagination had played her. Still—

Presently, at the general's suggestion, the Cliff House party were shown up to their rooms. With her, laden with their



BESSIE uttered a piercing shriek as the timorous butler suddenly appeared, brandishing an enormous blunderbuss. "Ow!" she yelled. "He's g-going to shoot!"

coming them. The mysterious tapping was, for the moment, forgotten.

Good spirits and cheerfulness restored, the girls stood round the fire, sipping their drinks and talking.

From the parolled walls the painted faces of long-dead Pemburys looked down as if smiling at their Christmas happiness, and sharing with them the good will of the season.

One face these attracted Babs above all others. It was a comparatively modern portrait of a greatly smiling, white-lipped woman, whose features seemed doubly familiar. So familiar, in the truth the thought played, that it was actually alive.

Those eyes, for instance! How bright, how naturally they glowed! Then she gasped. Was it her imagination? Had they actually moved?

"Dad," she said to her father.

"Yes, Bessie?"

"Where is that portrait?"

"That?" He frowned. "That's Grace Pembury, the woman who covered this room before your grandfather took it over. Attractive, isn't she?" he added.

"And a fine woman, from all accounts. It really is a capital picture, Babs; you know a good thing when you see it!"
In hesitation Babs stared at it again. Those eyes! She could not take her

Christmas parcels, they were escorted by Babs' mother, Ellen, and two of the general's maids. Their own baggage had already arrived, and had been placed in the rooms they were to occupy. Five of those rooms there were, all next to each other, each paneled in oak, and each containing a large four-poster bed.

"The question is," teased Clara, "what's going to have old Bess! I don't mind sleeping through a thunderstorm or an air raid, but to sleep through Father's snooring—"

Bessie smiled. But Bessie, with her vision of that bright gleam on the table dominants, was in much too good a humor to be drawn by the bedding.

The matter was settled by Babs herself, who, somewhat heroically, elected to share the first room with her fat aunt, and so everybody was happy. Mrs. Redfern, however, lingered behind.

"Oh, Barbara?"

"Yes, mama?"

"Do be careful, won't you, dear! About your grandfather, I mean. You know how easily upset he is, and he really is touchy on this subject of ghosts. It was very kind of him to offer as Misses. Minor, and we must, of course, make allowance for him being an old man. You will, Barbara?"

"Oh, mama, of course!"

She went out, accompanied by Ellen, who dashed Barbara's curls as she closed the door.

Bessie, greeting as she stooped, was hearing through her language and Babs, looking around the room, became admirably interested. Outside it was still snowing. Beyond the openest avenue and gaining the wind whistled wildly. A strong, slowly room—a robin which looked as if it had a history, and which seemed to breathe the very spirit of the past.

The two girls dressed. Very pretty indeed Barbara looked when, in her new open silk and organdy frock, she presented herself before the mirror.

Very distinguished, too, was Bessie in the blue dress which Babs had given her just before they had left Cliff House, and which now was the last portion of pride and joy; although, to be sure, it had undergone considerable alterations in order to be made to fit her ample figure.

Together they tramped downstairs, to be greeted by the rest of the chaperons. Babs's eyes shone at sight of the table.

"Oh, I say, have we not got to eat all that?" she cried. "Thank-thank goodness I'm hungry!"

For what a vision of joy that table was! How it presented under the good things which had been prepared for their delectation! Mince pies, tarts, cold chicken and venison, Bessie's favourites—an immense pork pie! Jellies, cakes, blancmanges and cream! Oh, great goodness, what wasn't there?

The general, already in his place at the head of the table, and armed with carving knife and fork, beamed.

"Sit down, girls!" he cried jovially. They sat down. Gay the chatter, played the spoils which were round. While the logs spluttered and crackled in the old hearth and the wind howled in the great old chimney and sang the snow against the windows.

Babs suddenly paused, her fork poised.

"What was that?" she cried.

"What was what?"

"Listen!"

They listened. Then, all at once, in a hall of the striking pale, came a forbidding voice.

"Hallo! Hallo!"

"Somebody outside!" the general announced. "I pity them on a night like this! Brewster, go and see who it is!"

"Yes, sir?" answered Brewster.

A sudden gust of cold air rushed into the room as the door was opened. Outside there were voices. Brewster re-appeared, a look of relief on his face.

"Please, sir, it's only an old man and an old woman. They've run out of petrol."

"Well, get them some?"

"But the old lady's ill, sir!"

"Oh!" The general immediately rose to his feet. "Excuse me!" he said to his guests, and went outside.

In another minute they heard his voice, booming even above the roar of the storm.

"Hey, what's that—last year was it? And so I should think on a night like this! You can't go on, sir! Brewster, tell my chauffeur to put his car in the garage."

"Here, sir, let me give your wife an arm! This way, madam!"

"Victims!" murmured Babs.

Interestedly the chaperons twisted round. Nam, through the doorway came the general. He supported a lady on his arm, dressed from head to foot in black, and whose mild eyes glistened through the lenses of a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. She carried a stick in one hand, on which she leaned

heavily, and frequently paused, gasping for breath.

Behind her followed a white-haired old fellow, pinched and blue with the cold.

Mrs. Redfern rose at once.

"My dear?" she cried.

The old lady passed.

"Thank you!" she said anxiously.

"It's very nice of you—very kind of you, I'm sure! We have had a really warm and bright—everything here! And what a merry party of children! May I warm my hands, please?"

"Madam, the warmer it gets!" the old general said gallantly.

The old lady smiled—such a sweet, kind smile it was. The old man, taking off his hat, shook himself, and smiled forward, beaming anxiously at the group.

"I trust," he said gently, "we do not intrude?"

"Why, of course not!" smiled Babs.

Later, when the meal was finished, they passed the newcomers round the fire. Their names, they learned, were Mr. and Mrs. Lester. They had been on their way to visit their daughter, who lived at Mallock, and who was departing for the Continent to-morrow.

Mrs. Lester, never very strong, had been taken ill on the journey. That, and the fearful weather conditions, added to the fact that the petrol had entirely given out, had rendered the remainder of the trip impossible.

"Well, in that case," the hospitable general said, "the best thing you can do is to stop here until the weather clears again. Plenty of room. Never, six, and you, madam, can we get you something to eat?"

"Yes, please. Let us get it for you," Babs volunteered eagerly.

The old man smiled.

"Thank you, my dear. That is sweet of you. But, if it's not asking too much, I would prefer that my wife went to bed. Perhaps she could have a glass of milk then, later, general?"

"Why, certainly—certainly! However, make a note of that, will you? Sylvia—let Mabel mother—will you show them to the room next to the Wall Tower? And—"

He paused again, suddenly bristling. "What was that?" he rapped.

But there was no need to ask. For again—set near the fireplace this time, but from the opposite side of the room—

Tap, tap, tap!

The chaperons, holding their breath.

"The gig-gig-gig!" smiled Bessie.

The general glared.

His tapping stopped. Babs caught a hurried look from her mother, and passed it on in the shape of a reassuring shake of the head to her anxious-to-do-something-aunt. Thrilled, electrified, they stood, each face alive with sudden excitement, but no one daring to move under the heavily threatening gaze of the old soldier. Mr. and Mrs. Lester, apparently, having heard nothing, were already mounting the stairs.

"Well, here we see!" the general said jovially, though the glance he flung round very plainly associated that un-remembered name with tapping ghosts and with their heraldic up against it. "Now, would that herald up against it—"

"No, I'm as his Christmas—"

"I'm as his Christmas—"

"What would you like to do?"

"Hugs it?" said Doris at once.

"Craves and laments?"

So strange and innocent was decided upon, Clara heading one team, Babs the other; though Doris, who made a

heroine of Clara in secret, took good care to get on the Tommy's side. For half an hour the old hall echoed with girlish laughter and the merry chattering of "Chop, chop, chop!" and Bessie, mimicked girlishly when caught, commencing herself a haughty-a-decided with which Clara Terlyn agreed with bottomless heartiness.

And what shrieks and gurgles afterwards, during the tug between the girls when Bessie, the warmest person, was finally fastened under the weight of her white team and set up glowing wrathfully and looking like a lioness decidedly squashed!

Everybody was happy then—except Bessie.

The general moved quietly in his own corner, in spite of the noisy merriment which was at its height, when—

"Look!" cried Margorie Hamilton, in a suddenly thrilled voice.

At once everyone stopped—still and silent. Margorie, with a quivering finger, was pointing to the dark Mystery Gallery, which ran, high up the whole length of the hall.

For one moment there was a tense, breathless silence. What was happening up there—what was that white, faintly luminous figure they all saw?

Yell, gasp it was, glowing with a soft, unnecessary light in the gloom. It was dressed from head to foot in white, and on its head was something that looked and shimmered in the dim rays of the light that expanded their brilliance

collapsing.

"The ghost!" cried Babs.

"The ghost of the White Queen!"

"Come on!" shrieked Clara suddenly. Ghosts were forgotten. The general's warning, too! A ghost! A real ghost in the hall! No intangibly mysterious tapper!

As one the doors swung towards the staircase that led to the gallery.

And then—

Without warning the lights went out. And for a moment they saw the Thing—outlined vividly in the pitch darkness which had now descended, dressed in shimmering white, it stood, a white crown glittering upon its head. Motionless it remained—and then, with an abruptness that made their feet

hesitate to rub their eyes, had vanished!

Babs broke the spell.

"After it!" she shouted.

Three at a time—thump, thump, thump—the girls pelted up the stairs. Clara and Babs racing a neck-and-neck race. They reached the gallery.

Then—

"Clank! Clatter, clatter!"

"Oh, my hat!" yelled Clara. "I've bumped into a suit of armour!"

"Look out!" shrieked Babs. "It's coming down the stairs!"

"Clank, clank, clank! BANG! Came a thunderous explosion, mingling with the clatter at the suit of armour, disintegrating at every fresh step, headed on voraciously down the stairs. Then suddenly the lights went on. General Redfern, crimson with wrath, stood by the vestibule.

"By god!" he spluttered. "Look!"

To let the too-enthusiastic ghost-hunters passed—the late—and with other dismay surveyed the wreckage. The stairs were strewn with pieces of armour. Bessie, his face an awful party colour, was lying flat on his back, almost stunned by the recoil of his own Manchester, which had gone off while he was least expecting it.

Bessie, a quivering heap of palpitating, set, wedged firmly in the locker by the fire. But of ghost or

trace of ghost there was over a vestige.

"A moment's dreadful, nerve-shattering absence. In that moment Babs saw something at her feet, and, swiftly stooping, picked it up.

"Then the general—

"Come down!"—he roared.

Stagnantly they descended.

"What were you doing up there?"

"Well, I guess it was the ghost—"

retorted Letty Carew.

"What?" His eyes seemed to catch fire. "That contemptible, that dreadful nonsense—again! What have I told you, boy? What have I told you? If there was a ghost, why didn't I see it?"

"Well, father, you were asleep," Mrs. Bessie told him.

"Asleep! Asleep!" His cheeks blew out.

"Who said I was asleep? If there'd been any ghost, I should have seen it, shouldn't I? Well, I didn't—because there aren't such things! And you girls, if you don't give up, are going to be taught that you can't turn this house into a battlefield! I'm sorry; but we're going to have some sort of discipline—yes, even if it is Christmas time! And just to punish you, you can go to bed!"

"Oh, grandpa?" Babs faltered.

"Yes, indeed?"

"Then go! Go, this minute! And remember, you feel, pink yourself up! Now be off with you all!"

Babs caught an appealing look from her mother. She flushed a little, but bowed her head.

"Yes, all right, grandfather!

Good-night!"

"Good-night!" he answered gruffly.

And again—almost on tiptoes, they went in a body. But they did not go to bed. They passed in Babs' room, and there Babs, shoving them the thing she had picked up.

It was a scrap of paper, written in a strange hand. It contained two lines:

"Next stairway to Well Tower,

3 up. Kick step where worn."

They blinked.

"Well, what does it mean?" Clara demanded.

Babs' face was pale with excitement.

"Don't you see?" she breathed. "The Well Tower is at the end of this corridor—next to the room occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Lester. The novel staircase is the old spiral staircase which runs round it. 3 up—that means thirteen steps up—"

"They all stared at her.

"And what happens, forsooth, if we kick the step?" Jamaica demanded, screwing her nose into her eye.

"That," Babs said, "amounts to be seen."

Whomsoever played ghost in the Mystery Gallery to-night left this behind. Now, wait a minute!" She threw a quick look towards the door.

"My grandfather doesn't believe there is a ghost—or anybody playing ghost. Well, we're going to prove it to him."

"How?"

"Well—and Babs' face set in grim, determined lines—"we've got to find out the truth—find out if it is a ghost; or, as we suspect, someone playing tricks."

"And just supposing" put in Jamaica casually, screwing her nose into her eye more hardy, "that the merry old ghost objects to all this?"

"Don't bother, Jamaica!" Babs cut in. "I want to know now we're going to begin."

Babs' eyes glimmered.

"By finding out first what this '13 steps' means. Now, what's going to join my ghost-hunting party at midnight to-night?"



Sometimes Seven, Sometimes Eight

THERE was no lack of volunteers for that exciting adventure.

Bessie, of course, Babs re-

turned; Marjorie Handford,

governor by nature, was not enthusiastic;

Ray Chandler, though she most desperately wanted to come, had developed a slight cold, so she, too, was ruled out;

but all the rest—Babs, Babs, Doris, Clara, Letty, Marjorie, and Jamaica—were gone.

And so the ghost-hunt in the Well Tower was arranged.

"Midnight!" Babs whispered.

"Eight!"

"They parted. Tingling with expecta-

tion, Babs climbed into the big four-poster bed with Bessie.

Bessie, as usual, was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow;

but Babs lay awake, her mind running back over all the strange things that had happened this day. That girl in the buffet who had run such a desperate race to restore to her the parcel she had lost; such a nice girl, so sweet, so lonely, so pathetically furtive somehow.

Why had she run away when Babs had asked her her name?

And then those mysterious tappings, twice heard, and—with a shiver Babs remembered it—the eyes in the picture in the panel; finally, the presence of the ghostly visitor in the gallery.

What did it all mean?

She lay for a long while, drowsily gazing over it, until a church clock began to chime.

Long, long, long—

Midnight!

Silently Babs rose. In the darkness

she dressed herself, slipping on her dressing-gown. She added protestations against the draughts which blew through the nooks and crannies of the ancient house. From her drawer she took the torch, flushed it once to make sure it was in working order, and stepped outside. Doors were softly opening and shutting along the corridor, which was filled with the shadowy figures of her guests. A whispering voice reached her.

"That you, Babs?"

"Yes. Everybody here?"

"What?" Jamaica breathed. "Forward, old Spartan! Lead us to the scene of action!"

Babs nodded. For some reason her heart was beating with unaccounted excitement as she led the way up the corridor.

On three steps they went, groping their way in the darkness. The large door which gave on to the Well Tower was reached. Babs pushed it, and it was open with an appalling squeak of weathered hinges. On the other side they passed, listening.

"All clear, I guess," Letty Carew

breathed.

Babs took the door; then she flushed on her torch. They found themselves in a small brick-walled chamber, from which the novel stairway ran up to a spiral towards the first landing. Just for a moment Babs flushed her glance over her party, and then suddenly frowned; she uttered a quick exclamation.

"Hold on! Who's here that shouldn't be here?"

"Nobody," Babs said.

"But—" And Babs blinked again.

A moment ago she had mechanically counted her followers and had discovered, to her surprise, that there were seven, instead of the six who had originally agreed to join the ghost-hunting party. Now—counting them



BESSIE took one terrified look at the ghostly figure, then turned to help. "Help!" she yelled. "3—give me! Keep it off! I'm being haunted!" In a moment the house was roused.

again, however—the discovered that there were only the original six.

"Fanny!" she said. "I was more than— But, still, never mind! Come on, kids—and no noise, mind! I'll lead the way, counting the steps as I go up. One, two, three, four—"

On a tip-toe of expectation the party followed their leader. Ten steps led them on to the last landing; here the rough bricks had given way to paneled walls once again. Two doors jutting between ornately carved columns led off from it, and above them hung a chinking rusty chain that obviously once served as a pendant for a lantern.

Babe pained. "All here?"

"Dad! Let us go!" Manette shivered.

Babe flushed her torch. On the wall, carrying as she ascended.

"Eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, thirteenth—"

And then passed, for some reason catching her breath, as she focused the beam upon the next step.

"Here it is!" she breathed.

"Then jolly well kick it!" Doris Redfern asserted.

Just for a moment Babe turned to glare at her sister, then again she started. Dim in the gloom her chosen stood, each on a step below each other, but— And Babe's chin tremed as nervously she counted. There were no longer six; there were seven!

"I say, who's playing tricks!" she cried.

"Tricks! Why? What's wrong?"

"But there are seven of you!" Babe protested.

"Shush! I guess you must be counting your own shadow!" Leta shrieked.

But Babe wasn't. Her eyes were filled with mystification as she gazed over the group again. She left her wickered; for again there were only six.

Babe compressed her lips. She made no further comment, however. Somebody was playing a trick!

She stopped. The sixteenth step, like the others, was of stone; but, unlike the others, there was a cavity on its upright face, which was smooth and warm.

Her breath came sharply. There, without thought, was the step referred to in the document she had found.

She tilted her foot.

"Hiss!" breathed Jennina. "Watch, Bessie!"

"That!"

The sound as the foot collided with the cavity disturbed faint colors; nothing happened.

"Try, try, try again!" Jennina chanted. "If at once you don't succeed, you know— Woe! What's happening!"

As one they stopped; as one turned round, eye agape, as they saw a portion of the panel sliding towards.

"A secret passage!" breathed Doris Redfern.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!"

Swiftly Babe shone her torch into the cavity. While the others watched she stepped-in, disappearing a moment later.

"O.K.?"

"No boggy men!" Jennina asked humorously.

"Oh, come on! But be careful. Don't close the panel. If you do, goodness knows how we shall get out again!"

They scrambled through. Babe shone the torch around. They found their way in a spacious room, its floor laid with rough tiles. Green stone walls surrounded them. There was no window, no ventilation.

"Well, here we are," Jennina announced complacently. "A real old home

from home—what! Talk about Bunter Court! Whoa, there, Mabel! Don't peek, you rough thing!"

"Eh? I'm not peaking! I'm here," Mabel said, from the other side of the room.

"Oh, beg your pardon; but someone—"

And then Jennina jumped.

"Whoa!" she breathed softly, and stopped back to guard the party. "A moment, children," she said—"just a moment before you take another step!

Babe, I take back all the horrid things I said."

"Why?"

"Because!" Jennina explained softly, "there should be seven girls in this room, and now there are eight. Sit still—everybody! I'm going—"

She broke off with a gasp; for suddenly there came a cry from Babe. In the gloom a hand reached out and, descending with swift violence, struck the torch out of her hand, plunging them all in darkness.

And in the middle of commotion which ensued there was a soft, rattling sound, a sudden click behind Jennina. Babe, groping, found the torch, and flashed it on.

Dimly the girls blinked at each other.

"What was it?"

"Stand still!" Babe cried.

She snatched them quickly. Then her lips set.

"She's gone!" she announced.

"Gone, Jennina added cheerfully.

"Having by some mysterious means, closed the passage old parcel. Sparta, I hate to break the old news, but we're shut in!"

—

Bessie Sees It

"Help, help, help!" she followed faintly. "Keep it off—keep it off! I'm being haunted! Run—run!"

The figure halted. While Bessie looked again it had disappeared!

But the alarm was raised then. Doors banged open and shut along the corridor. Voices babbled in sudden confusion. There came a roar in the general's voice; the thin irvils of Rowland, anxiously inquiring who had pinched his thunderbolt. The corridor shook as General Redfern, accompanied by the others, came thundering along.

"Hey, hey, hey!" the general roared. "Hey! What is this? How my soul, Bessie, what's the matter, girl? Have you gone mad?"

"I'm sane!"

"How sane?"

"The ghost!"

"Rubbish! You were walking in your sleep!"

"But I wasn't sleeping in my walk! I mean I wasn't— I saw it, you know! A fearful thing, with flaming eyes, and a dud-draggy's tongue! It was in this passage—"

The general's eyes almost popped out of his head.

"By gad! That wasn't a ghost; it was a nightmarer! What were you doing out of bed, anyway?"

Bessie blinked.

"We-well, I lik-come to look for Babe, you know."

"Oh, certainly, she's—she's nowhere!"

Bessie muttered, realising that in her usual blundering way she had let the cat out of the bag. "She's in—in bed, you know. You don't think," she added, with desperate indignation, "she'd have gone ghost-haunting in the old Well Tower at this fat-tine of night! I thought she might be doing stunts, you know, and that's why I came—"

—

Two o'clock in the morning!

Bessie Bunter, with a little shiver, awoke.

It was not usual for Bessie to awake once she had dropped off to sleep, and she realised a certain astonishment in so doing.

She granted possibly, turning over.

Outside the wind sighed softly, and the waves, still falling, carried the little diamond-shaped pinnac with ghostly fingers. Bessie, in turning over, became suddenly aware that Babe was no longer there.

Then she remembered the ghost hunt. She was alone.

Babe, she muttered shakily.

Thoroughly awake now, she sat up in bed, staring apprehensively towards the wardrobe, where the luminous hunch of the clock showed her the hour. Two o'clock! And Babe wasn't back yet!

Babe! Where was she?

Bessie groped for her spectacles. Fortively she peered round the room. Some presentation of disaster gripped her then; for it was not like Babe to have been away two hours. Bessie rose agitatedly, and peered on the light. She shivered a little, becoming aware of the cold. Ugh! How draughty it was! Where should she do?

And then a new thought came.

Downstairs in the lounge, on the table, was a generous portion of lovely pudding, and a whole decanter (all of home-made ginger-wine. The log fire would still be bright. The candle of that would prevent her from feeling

dimly. In any case, any place was better than this room without Babe.

So Bessie, screwing up her courage, got into her dressing-gown and slippers, and started painstakingly towards the door. There she paused, and, shoving her eyes, stole into the passage.

Three-four locking steps Bessie took alone in. And then stopped, the hair bristling upon her head.

For some-where behind her, in the direction of the room she had left, came a sound.

Tap, tap, tap!

Bessie gasped. Her feet (she turned white. One terrified look she flung back—to see nothing, of course, except the dark shadows that filled the corridor.

Tap, tap, tap!

There it went again, obstinate, insistent, as if someone were trying to hammer away through the walls.

Bessie gave one choked squeak, and in a frenzy of terror fled.

Her feet having almost reached the end of the corridor—

As abruptly as if an invisible hand had reached out, arresting her progress, the fat one stopped. For one fearful second she felt her knees trembling, jelly-like, beneath her. Far—horror of horrors!—what was this?

Something moved in the darkness—something tall, white, ghostly, luminous.

Bessie's tongue clung to the roof of her mouth.

Slowly the thing advanced. There came an ominous creaking sound. Then Bessie saw it plainly—a tall figure in white robes, glowing eerily in the gloom, a glimmering crown perched upon its head.

Bessie fled—and as she did so, found her voice at last.

"Help, help, help!" she followed faintly. "Keep it off—keep it off! I'm being haunted! Run—run!"

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Bessie Sees It



"There came a crash of feet up the corridor, and Brewster, armed with his blackthorn thumped up.

"Where is it? Where is it?" he panted. "Stand aside, sir! I'll save you!"

"Hi! Don't you level that thing at me!" the general spluttered. "Confused you, now, get back to your room. Well— And he jumped as there was a step behind him. "What the— Oh, it's you, sir!"

It was frail old Mr. Lester. He blinked mildly.

"What is the matter? Is there anything I can do?" he asked anxiously.

"Thank you, no, sir. This stupid girl is talking to her sleep. Pick that Brewster, get out of it! Pick that thing through the window. Mr. Lester, please sit up to bed," he added kindly. "I can't have you catching cold. Now, young lady— and he glanced at Bessie sternly—"perhaps you'd explain yourself. What is this about Barbara ghost-hunting in the Well Tower?"

Bessie blinked.

"Oh, excuse! I— excuse said that, did it? This isn't in the Well Tower, you know."

"Then where are they?"

"They're gone to London!" Bessie said wildly.

"Bah!" the general snorted. "John," he cried, "come with me! Brewster, Brewster!" he roared after the aged butler, who turned round, jerking his blackthorn in the "ready." "Behave you, man! Don't shout me with that infernal thing. Get me a tooth!"

"Yes, sir,"

"And now," the general said, "come with me to the Well Tower."

He strode off, torch in hand, Brewster, shaking at the knees, followed behind Mr. Bedford. The door at the end of the corridor was flung open. The general glared up the stairs, and then:

"What was that?" cried Brewster, quaking.

From above came a muffled thumping.

The thumping came from Babe & Co., who, having traced successfully for two hours to find some hidden spring that would release the secret panel, were, in final desperation, trying to attract attention to themselves. The general's nostrils twitched faintly.

"Where are you?" he roared.

"In here!" came a faint voice.

"How did you get there?"

"Through a secret panel."

"Well, confound it, can't you get out through the secret panel?"

"We're sorry, but we can't find it!"

The general snorted. There was nothing for it, it seemed, but to smash down the wall. Brewster was bristled off for an act of sense.

In the room, Babe & Co. heard the crashing blows, and staggered.

"Mindboggling! I'm in a room-crowded softly. "There's going to be a spot of bother!"

A spot of bother there certainly was. They were released finally through the smashed panel, to find the general's whisper in ears. He looked, as Leticia remarked, ready to rat them.

"You girls, go to your rooms!" he thundered. "Barbara, you'll come with me!"

"Poor old Barbara!" murmured Jimena.

"Hey!"

"I said," Jimena remarked blandly, "it's Christmas—what! Merry old season of good will, and all that sort of phenomena, you know."

"Hump!" the general grunted.

"Well, get to bed!"

They hurried off. Babe, with a sigh,

followed her grandfather to his own room. Mr. Bedford, scowling trouble, unostentatiously pushed his way in after them. The general glared.

"Barbara!" he rapped.

"Yes, grandpa!"

"I just want to tell you, for the last time, that I didn't invite you and your friends here to turn my house into a bear-garden. For the last time, I warn you, there are no ghosts in Mistletoe Manor."

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Mason, and I won't have you stacing ghosts in Mistletoe Manor! Has that sunk in?"

"Right, your grandfather."

"Right! That remember it. I make you responsible for the good behavior of your party from now on," he said sternly, "and if you don't behave—" he glared—"I shall take steps! Now get off to bed!"

"Yes, grandfather," Babe murmured meekly.

And, realizing the futility of argument, she went. But she was worried. She was puzzled.

Whether there was a ghost in Mistletoe Manor or not, there was something very mysterious and threatening, and Babe, despite her grandfather's warning, was in no mood to let it alone.



Whispers in the Dark

"S KATING!" said Clara Trevlyn, her eyes glancing. "There's a fine old frock, and the snow's stopped at last!"

It was the next morning at Mistletoe Manor. An exhilarating morning, in all teeth. Crisp and white the snow stretched in an unbroken sheet, that terminated only in the haze grey shapes of the Pennines, in the far distance. The chimes, after breakfast, went out

for a morning stroll in the grounds. Bessie was not there. Brown, rather laudly preferring to make up the sleep she had lost last night, was loafing in front of the fire in the old hall.

They had come suddenly upon the lake. It was that which provoked Clara's suggestion.

"Skating?" the idea ("Jimena, admirably remarked. "How Clara thinks of these things, warden! But to skate." Jimena cast an thoughtfully, polishing her eyes with her thumb and finger of her hair-lined gloves, "we require the necessary implements!"

Babe laughed.

"Well, that's soon settled. There are logs of skates in the cellar of the old Well Tower?" she cried merrily.

"Who'll come back with me and collect them?"

"I?" cried Babe, at once.

"Then come on?"

Cheerfully the two of them turned back, crunching the crisp, untrampled snow underfoot.

The Well Tower, the scene of last night's adventure, loomed before them. Babe, pushing open the door, stepped in. In the distance, she knew, was a whole pile of skates, and skin and alpenstocks, for the general was a keen winter sports enthusiast, despite his gouty toe.

"This way!" she cried. "Back your head, Babe!"

Mabe obediently ducked. A narrow set of stone steps wound spirally into the cellar below. Babe jerked down the lantern which swung from a beam, leading the way. She went on halting the lantern in front of her. All at once she paused.

"Babe, wait a minute!" she whispered.

"What?"

"Listen! There's somebody down there!"

Mabe glanced quickly at her stem, but she stood perfectly still. Babe, in strictest sympathy the lantern behind her, peered down, noting, with a quick thrill, the glow that came up from the cellar, showing undoubtedly that someone was in occupation. As they halted a voice reached them. A man's voice, whispering, but close.

"Once that happens, it's easy," it said.

"Get those girls into enough bother and they'll be next packing. Once they are out of the way we can work in peace—"

His voice broke off. And no wonder! For suddenly there came a yelp from Babe, who, straining forward in her eagerness, had accidentally put her hand on the top of the lantern.

Downstairs came an exclamation. Immediately the light went out. Babe gasped.

"Oh, Babe, you idiot— But come on!"

Down the steps she flew. She reached the cellar, Babe treading after her. There she held up her lantern, so that its beams illuminated every nook and cranny. But of sight or sign of the people who had been in occupation a moment ago there was no sign.

"Fancy!" murmured Babe.

She stared again. "Who was the voice? It was a voice, to be sure, she had not recognized, but a voice, plainly enough, which had been plotting against them.

Grim and bare the walls surrounded them. Except for one tiny ventilator high up in the wall there seemed to be no outlet from the place whatever.

"Well, I'm a Dutchman!" Babe gasped. "Did I hear voices, Babe?"

"If you didn't, I'm a Dutchman, too," Mabe retorted grimly. "And— Babe, look!" she cried.

With a start, Bala twisted round. She almost dropped the lantern as she saw—

Behind her a portion of the apparently solid wall was swinging open softly, noiselessly, as though running on oiled springs. They caught a glimpse of a dim, shadowy figure in the darkness beyond.

"Oh, my hat! Come on!" Bala cried. Through the hole they looked in, and then they saw a narrow tunnel-like corridor. Swinging the lantern, Bala rushed on, guided by the sound of beating footsteps in front of her. Dust rose to meet their nostrils as they hurried to under their hurrying feet.

"Somebody's there!" gasped Bala. Somebody was. Now and then she saw dimly a dark outline in the lantern's feeble rays. A man's outline, it seemed. But, by Jove, that man could run!

The thrill, the excitement of the chase had them in its grip now. Fit, pat, pat, pat! There suddenly Bala pulled up. "Hanging as she held up the lantern. They found themselves in a little hall, grimly stone-walled, into which several other passages converged. Three of these passages ran directly in front of them, and down which saw their quarry had done it was at that moment impossible to tell.

But for the moment there was something else, a something which momentarily commanded Bala's interest in the unknown fugitive, that lay in her path. A shoe! A girl's shoe—small, shapely, of a marvellously good quality, but pathetically the wrong for wear. She picked it up.

"Whose is it?" she whispered. "Bala's!" "Bala's?" Bala asked more precisely. "Has the man gone to the Bala, listen!" "What is their fancy, or was there a movement in the passage directly in front of them? Bala held the lantern in front of her, but could see nothing.

And then, as they stood, something happened. From a distance off, it seemed, there came a faint sound. It was in the passage. Forerunning they stared, and as they did so a long, long way ahead there appeared a small square of light, followed in the darkness. Bala caught her breath.

"Bala, I believe that's the exit to this passage," she whispered.

"And the man's disappeared through it!"

"I don't know!"

"Well, he's had out! Come on!" Without thought now they raced, expecting any moment the panel to close again, Bala tightly hugging the shoe which she had found. No need for the lantern now. The squares of light, haring them on and growing larger with every step, was sufficient guide.

"Hurry!" gasped Bala. Hardly necessary that, in fact! Bala was running as hard as she could go. And then suddenly she gave a gasp, halting. Forward and striking a wall. Bala at the same time. The shriek came too late! Bala, on her knees, went bowing over, even as Bala had bowed over. The two, tripping over an unseen step, crashed in the passage simultaneously, and, unable to stop themselves, went alighting and bowling towards the square, accompanied by a hideous clanking as the lantern followed them.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bala.

"Bala—"

But Bala at that moment required all her breath. Beyond the step the passage dropped in a steep decline towards the distant opening. Underneath there were boards as smooth and

slippery as ice. If they had been on a better shelter they could not have travelled forward ~~so~~ quickly, or with greater velocity. Possession to help themselves, they slipped on—this!—

swayed in a cloud of dust. The opening loomed before them. Bala had a breathless glimpse of furniture—

"Bump!"

As one they shot through the opening. As one sat up, with a breathless gasp. They had landed up in a furnished room in which a coal fire burned brightly and in the centre of which stood a desk, at which a man sat writing. Apparently he had been unaware of the quiet arrival of the two ghost-hunters.

Now he jumped. The ink splattered from his pen over the paper on which he had been working. While Bala and Bala, dazed and bewildered, stared in stupefaction, his chair went back with a crash. He bang round.

And Bala almost faintly when she saw his face, when she realized the second nature of the room into which she and Bala had so startlingly intruded. For this was General Radford's study. And the man—

General Radford himself!



A Trap to Catch a Ghost

"NONSENSE! Nonsense!" the general roared. "Nonsense, Barbara! All imagination!"

"But, grandpa, I tell you that—"

"Bala!" He glared at them. "You have always something to tell me!" he barked. "Always an excess! Who could have been plotting in the cellar of the 'Well Tower'? Why should they have led you a dance through secret passages into this room? My room!" he spluttered. "And look at my work—work as arranged contingencies of his hand towards his blasted shoes. 'Look at that!'"

"No shade the general was in a rage! Bala and Bala hardly had a chance to say a word in self-defence."

"But, grandfather, please do listen!" Bala begged. "I tell you I had an intention of ghost-hunting—"

"Then why did you, hey?"

"Because," Bala explained, "we heard voices."

The general blew out his cheeks. "Somebody was in the secret passage; we followed them," Bala went on. And then suddenly she became conscious of the thing which was in her hand. "And we found that!" she cried.

"A shoe?"

"Yes, grandpa, that's it. But he took it. The man he dragged."

"Well, what does that prove? It's one of your own friends, I expect."

"But it's not," Bala cried. "Look at it! The maker's name is in it. That shoe comes from a firm in Derby. None of the Cliff House girls has shoes from Derby."

"Well, it must be one of my servants!" the general roared. "Oh, don't look like that, Barbara! Those secret passages in the 'Well Tower' are not as secret as you think. Everybody knows about them. The 'Well Tower' is known to all secret passages—how many even I do not know. But this is going to stop from this moment," he added grimly. "Listen here, Barbara."

"Yes, grandfather!"

"I'm going to give orders—see-for

every entrance and every exit to the 'Well Tower' to be locked up. That tower from this moment is out of bounds to you and all your friends. You hear that?"

"Yes, grand—"

"And if," he said, his eyes glinting, "I catch any of you in it again—well, Christmas or no Christmas, guests or no guests, I shall have to ask you to go. I've told you before that I don't believe in ghosts, and you must allow me, as your elder, to know what I'm talking about. If you want excitement, you can find it in some other and less unpleasant form. Habel, you may go! Barbara, remain!"

Bala bit her lip. Bala, with a despairing sigh, went out.

"I feel," the general went on, "that you are in need of a little discipline, Barbara. Apparently, they do not give you enough of it at Cliff House. Your own parents, as I have observed on previous occasions, are far too lenient with you. To-night, just to help you to resist any further temptation to ghost-hunt, you will go to bed incredibly late after supper."

Bala's face flushed crimson, but, realizing how useless it was to argue with the room. Nothing, it seemed, would convince her grandfather that for once, at least, he was in the wrong.

Not many, either, did General Radford get over his creations. There was a marked oddness in his attitude towards Barbara at lunch-time. In the afternoon, while they all went skating and sliding on the ice outside, he disappeared.

For cause is a rather oddball atmosphere. After tea there were guests, played over by Mr. and Mrs. Redfern, with the kindly-faced old Mrs. Loner and her husband watching smilingly from the log-creek. Then dinner.

"Barbara!" the old general rapped immediately they had risen from the table. "Bed!"

"Oh, grandfather!" Barbara faltered.

"Bed!" the general repeated sternly.

"But, pater—" protested Mr. Redfern.

"Father, dear!" Mrs. Redfern put in crossly.

"Yes, general, I mean, you know," chimed in Bessie Barber.

But pleas, protests, cajolings, would not move General Radford. He had made up his mind. His orders must be obeyed. Bala, leaving her cheeks, trailed lamely to her room.

But she did not go to bed. There was a fire in the room, and in its glow she sat down to think things out, debating herself to the purple of gloom which came from below, where her friends came enjoying themselves. Reverie embraced her. Her mind began to work with feverish activity as she sought for a solution to the mystery.

That shoe, now. Whose was it?

Bala's knees came down in a frore. Fancy, thinking of that shoe, that her mind should revert to the mysterious girl she had met at the railway buffer. That girl who had been so strange, who had refused so obstinately to give her name.

That shoe, Bala mused, would have fixed her. And was, if not that girl, had joined her ghost-hunting party the night before, and had had them in the secret room? But that was silly, of course. Just idle conjecture. In any case, the mystery girl was a nice girl, a good sort. Not one to take part in any underhand plot to scare the quarters of Missiee Blosser, and acquaintance every-

body's Christmas happiness! But suppose—

Then Babe sat bolt upright, gazing towards the window.

All was quiet in the starry, crisp, frost-laden atmosphere outside. Not even a breeze. Downstairs, where the chimes were ringing in an interval of peace, no sound. The crackling fire, which was the only noise that disturbed the peace.

And yet—
Hilda listened again, galvanized into life. Crunch! Crunch! The sound

Tall, they were; the man just a little taller than his companion. In the shadow of the trees, from which the ghost had faded, they halted.

Who were they?
As clear as she could make out, they were utter strangers to Hilda.

Below, there was no sign of the girl. She watched. A startling beam of moonlight cut through the snow-laden trees, rendering the pair vaguely visible. She heard them talking in low undertones, which, however, did not carry the words distinctly. Then suddenly she saw the man raise his hand, pointing, not to the Wall Tower, but to the Watch Tower, which flanked the opposite end of the building. She caught one word:

"You did bring your larrik, didn't you?"

"Well, of course!" Clara nodded. Rope-throating was a hobby of Clara's.
"O.K.!" Babe nodded. "Well, listen! If you point yourself in one corner of the gallery, you can reach any part of the gallery with that rope, can't you? I want you to stand there. If the ghost appears, then you know what to do; but make sure of your aim, and don't let him or her get away. You others," she added, "will watch with me at various points about the gallery." When Clara across the great—

It occurred a good scheme. Clara, who prided herself upon her skill with the larrik, was wholeheartedly approving. Boris, to be sure, was sceptical; but then Hilda always was.

At eleven o'clock, when the mayor had retired for the night, six girls



THERE was an awful moment of silence. Then: "What's the meaning of this?" muttered General Rodiers. Babe could have guessed about. What a disaster and to their ghost hunt!

came from beneath her window. The sound of footsteps treading the frozen snow.

It stopped.
"Who is it?" breathed Babe. Silently she rose. In three soundless strides she had reached the window. Through the frost-coated pane she peered out. Moonlight bathed the ground in silvery light, throwing great black shadows where the trees grew. For a moment she saw nothing. She frowned.

Then she started. What was that? A slight, girlish, hauntingly familiar figure crouched across the moonlit patch right in front of her. For a moment she glimpsed the moving silhouette against the brightness of the snow, as it sped towards her, it disappeared and became one with the black shadows that grew thickly at the feet of the wall.

Smothered—
From the direction of the Wall Tower, on Babe's right, the sound of other footsteps!

Babe thrilled then. Instinct told her that she was at grips with something. Silently she stepped down the entry which fastened the window. Silently she crept her like a blur, carrying a sudden shiver to pass through her frame. In her excitement she was nearly conscious of it.

Now—
Now, into the moonlit patch came two figures—dark figures, this time. One was a man, the other a woman.

"To-night?"
"To-night!" the woman replied, in her tones.

To-night! They were planning something for to-night! And Babe started as, at the same moment, she realized something else. This woman resembled her vaguely of the strange figure of the White Queen, which had flitted across the Minstrel's Gallery last night! Was it she? Was it she who had played the Street?

Excited, busy with a hundred thoughts, Babe waited until her change came up. Then, in Clara's room, she told them what had happened.

"Something faky is going to happen in the Watch Tower to-night," she said. "Remember the ghost in the Minstrel's Gallery last night! The Minstrel's Gallery runs in front of the Watch Tower. Obviously, there must be some secret way of getting in and out of it from there. Look!"

"I guess I'm all ears!"
"And you, Babe! You, Clara! You, Jessica! And you, Doris! Are you all game for an adventure?"

"And that, insooth!" Jessica quizzically inquired.
"Just this. To-night, when everybody's gone to bed, we wait. We watch," Hilda said. "If we see nothing, well and good. If we see the ghost we'll jolly well take good care to nab it. No! But wait a minute. There's going to be no mistake this time. Clara—"

The Towney stared at her, dressed in their neat Sunday frocks, as she to blend with the sooty darkness of the Minstrel's Gallery, stole out. In the gallery there were whippers, a false shuffling of feet, as Barbara passed there in their positions. Then silence. They waited, shivering and cramped. "Twelve! Eleven, ten, nine!" Clara, in her corner, shifted restlessly.

"Hut!" breathed Babe, in a scarcely audible whisper.
"Tap, tap, tap!"
"Go, like come!" Marcella delivered.
"Tap, tap, tap!" The sounds came again.

"Ready!" breathed Babe. From the other end of the corridor, where Jessica was stationed, there came a click. Then a faint glow. A shuffling footstep sounded. The glow grew brighter.

Then suddenly, in front of them, it stood—eyes outstretched. A white vision, dressed in shimmering garments, a crown glittering on its head!

With an intake of breath Clara's arm went back.

Whizz!
Along the corridor the caps whizzed. The hooped and dropped—flop! From Jessica came a step!

"Bathhouses and bathhouses! You're caught! see, you beauty!"

"Above her!" advanced Doris. She was the first to jump to her feet. Breathlessly the five watched. Doris, with a shriek, flurried herself on the figure. Just by an inch her fingers

missed the dress. From the guest came a very hoarse gasp.

"And then—confound it! Marcello, rushing forward, tripped over the rope. Babs, slipping herself in concern after Boris, cascaded into the screaming Jemima.

"Off went the ghost, shooting down the stairs and into the hall. After it went Mabel and Lalla. Babs, picking herself up and helping up Jemima, joined in the chase.

"After her?" shrieked Doris. "The chase was up now. As last they had got the ghost away from its petting! Along the hall it went, a roared lecture in its shattering down. Up the stairs at the other end it skittered. After it, in a body, preceded the Cliff House chimes, Jemima with the larrikin rope still trailing behind her.

Along the gallery the ghost skittered. Flittingly it looked back. Marcello was only five yards behind them. As if suddenly making up its mind, the ghostly figure opened a door on its right, turned the handle, and entered.

But before it had closed, Marcello had flung himself at the door, repeating in hot breath: "The chase pebbled after her in their excitement, bounding her into the room. There— Crash! Bang! Crash!

"Waters!" Marcello shrieked. "We have found it!"

"One more another the chase pebbled, the rope involving matters still further as they tried to flee.

But somewhere in that welter of struggling humanity was the ghost!

The lights went on with a click.

In the centre of the room seven figures were helplessly straggling. As the lights went on, faces turned. A furious figure, a monument of towering fury, confronted them. His eyes seemed to start fire as he glared at his elder grand-daughter.

"Babs!" he thundered.

"Oh, help!" And Babs for a moment knew a pang of sickening dismay as she realized that this was the general's bed-room. Then, recovering, she gasped: "Look, grandpa!" she cried. "The ghost! We've caught the ghost!"

The chairs fell apart. The general blinked. And then, from the noise came a figure—a figure dressed in a white costume of many years ago, upon whose head was a lacy denton crown. The white mask which had covered her face had been torn off, and lay somewhere, trampled underneath.

A pair of wide, horrified eyes stared helplessly at Babs from a white, sinister face, in which the pale lips trembled. Babs gave one look at her.

"The girl in the buff?" she breathed.

AND, UNMINDINGLY enough, in spite of all their triumph, Babs in that moment felt a shiver.

The ghost was laid—but what a ghost!

The general glared at her.

"So you are the ghost!" he said. "The girl's lips quivered.

"I'm—I'm very sorry!" she said.

The general snorted:

"Dash it, I don't want your apologies any!" His countenance brightened. "Among my ancestors—" he thundered, "or, dash it, I'll send for the police!"

The girl's face whitened. Something like a sob broke from her lips.

"I—I'm sorry, sir, I—I can't tell you."

The general's lips tightened.

"Very well," he said, and passed. "But still, as it's Christmas I'll be lenient. Now see, I'll give you half an hour to think it over. I'm going to sleep you up in this room for that time. If

you can't—or can't—explain when I return I shall send for the police. Is that clear?"

"Y-yes, sir!" the girl gasped. "Very well!" And the general, steering the girls behind him, went out. Carefully he locked the door and followed the chimes down into the hall.

Babs shook her head. If only she could have had a talk alone with the girl! How she would have liked to help her!

THE END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

CHRISTMAS THRILLS AT MISTLETOE MANOR

In next week's Christmas number of THE SCHOOLGIRL, there will appear the second of a grand new Cliff House holiday series, by Hilda Richards, entitled:—



Babs & Her Christmas Quest

you—twenty—twenty—two minutes wait be. Presently the general, consulting his watch, snapped it in.

"Time's up!" he announced sternly.

The girls jumped almost as if the announcement had come as a shock. Then anxiously they followed him up the stairs.

Babs held her breath as the massive door was opened. The curtains were billowing in the breeze. The room was as they had left it.

But of the girl there was no sign!

"Golly, she's escaped!" gasped Jemima. They all blinked round in amazement, their eyes resting on the open window in understanding.

They stood there, awaiting the general's command.

But, strangely enough, it did not come; he looked almost relieved rather than furious.

"Well, well, that's that," he said gruffly. "There's the end of the ghost—and the end of the mystery of the manor. I hope, I'm glad, in a way, that's the case, because I'm bothered if I should have known what to do with her. It couldn't have kept my word and given her over to the police—not at Christmas."

Babs gazed his answer gently.

"I only hope, wherever she is and wherever she is, that she has as happy a Christmas as we're going to have, grandpa," she said softly.

At which the general smiled.

BUT as Babs had only guessed the truth! The mystery girl of Mistletoe Manor had not escaped!

In a bare room, high up in a stone-walled tower, she sat, her head buried in her hands. In one corner of the apartment a smoky oil-stove flared; through a tiny, glassless slit the outer world shined, bringing with it a flurry of snow.

Over her stood two figures—a man and a woman. Both were masked.

The man spoke at last in a harsh undertone:

"Well, are you going to tell us?"

The girl's answer came, low-voiced:

"No!"

"You know what it will mean—for you!"

The girl's bloodless lips tightened.

"Very well." The man moved away impatiently. "Here you are," he exclaimed brutally, "and here, until we let you go, you will stay. Those kids—everybody—think you have gone away of your own free will. They're not likely to search. It goes on our word, if you can. Don't understand"—his voice was a susurrus—"you don't come out of this until you've told us what we want to know."

Something like a sob escaped her lips.

"Oh, here you are pity!"

"None," the woman answered viciously, "while you remain such a fool. Your fate is in your own hands. Tell us what we want to know, and when we've got what we're after you can go."

"And that I never will," the girl asserted, with a sudden flash of spirit.

"Very well."

The man jerked his head, and then together he and the woman crossed the room; the man hooked a spring in the stone wall, and a solid slab swung slowly inward. They passed through the opening, and the stone slid back with a heavy thud.

The girl was alone.

For five—ten minutes she sat still and silent—chewing in the letter draught which shined through the slit. This served as window in this cell-like room.

Then suddenly she rose to her feet. Three quick paces took her to the nearest entrance. She found the spring, and pressed it. But nothing happened.

She pulled and pressed again, her fingers raw with contact with the hard stone. But still the panel remained closed.

Then suddenly she seemed to lose control of herself. Turning, she beat her clenched hands against the cold stone, clawing at the crevices until her finger-nails were torn, hissing wildly, feverishly.

"Let me out! Let me out!" came her agonized screams. "Let me out! I won't stay here! Oh, please, somebody, come!"

But there came no reply. Only the bitter wind, rising in a sudden gust, howling through that tiny slit, so that the oil-stove flared and crackled.

Sudden reaction to that wild outburst rashed over the girl. Thrusting from the wall, she flung herself on the pile of socks, while the bitter hairs curled down her pale cheeks and her body shook with sobs.

Heck! What was that?

She raised her head to listen.

The bells! Faintly on the snow-laden wind came the distant chimes.

Christmas Day. The day of good will and happiness and peace. Those bells were heralding it already—ringing out their message across the silent fields.

But for her, helpless and alone, the Christmas bells seemed but a cruel mockery. For what a hopeless and unhappy Christmas it seemed destined to be for her!

FORBIDDEN TO GO TO SWANLAKE: Dramatic Chapters of This Brilliant Mercove School and Mystery Serial



HER SECRET AT SWANLAKE

By MARJORIE STANTON



FOR NEW READERS.

PAM WILLOUGHBY of Mercove School has become a day-girl in order that she may have time to get to school on

CLAIRE FERRELL, a girl who, after living all her life on a steep station in America, has come into a fortune. Until she is able to settle down in England she is to stay with the Willoughbys at their steady home—Swanlake.

VIVIANE MURDO, having heard of Claire's fortune, wishes to take her place. She meets Claire and tells a plausible story to the effect that the fortune is wanted by the police. She persuades herself of all sensible detectives and plans to hide Claire in the West Wing at Swanlake until she can clear her name. There comes and Viviane arrives at Swanlake by the welcome of the real Claire Ferrell. But

BETTY HARTON, one of Pam's Mercove friends, is at once suspicious of Viviane. Viviane, realizing this, leaves Betty's room at Swanlake. She carries off a change which brings disgrace upon Betty and her class, Polly London, with the result that they are forbidden their attendance to visit Swanlake.

(How read on.)

For and Against

A BOW ON!

The whole Ferns could tell, directly Betty Harton and Polly London came back to the classroom, after being sent for by the headmistress.

And Pam Willoughby, for one, only hoped that this fresh spot was not going to prevent her chance from going over to Swanlake with her after school. Nothing could be explained by Betty and Polly, even in whispers. So there was a glancing at the school-room clock, and much covert thankfulness that "Dismiss" was due in half an hour from now.

But, oh, that last half-hour's work in class! What an indignity it became! To look at Betty was to see her frowning, biting a lip. As for headstrong Polly, she was obviously in a terrible

Well, girls, looks away, and then

you may guess!" came Miss Bernard's bang-for order at last. Then, above all the extra loud Harry, she called out: "Stay back for a moment, Betty; you do well, Polly!"

Many girls, as soon as they had got outside the classroom, were inclined to hang about for the couple who had been detained.

But Pam and other members of the "classroom" went straight up to Study No. 12. They guessed that they were likely to hear the best account behind a closed door.

In came Betty and Polly only a minute later. Whilst Polly angrily boomed the door shut, Betty led off with a regretful: "Sorry, all, but we can't go to Swanlake. You, Pam, will just have to go off without us."

Pam, so much distressed as any by the news, took it quietly. The rest were loudly used in their own different ways. To many a scowled: "What-a-ut!" was added Paula Croft's: "Howevers?" and Nancy's shrill: "Swoodle!"

"Why it is," Betty hushed on. "Miss Somerset found this study all upside down an hour ago. The litter all seemed to her to be because we were in a hurry to be off to Swanlake after school. Now she's saying that we can't hold our rehearsal at Swanlake."

"She says," Polly raged out, "no more going over to Swanlake! But Betty and I say we must go!"

"But how did Miss Somerset come to look in here during the afternoon, to find the place tidy?" clattered Betty Trevor. "She's always with the Sixth, in class!"

"Oh, she was put up to it—Betty and I can guess how," Polly stamped. "The whole thing is a plan! At first I thought it must have been done by some girl in the Form who was jealous of our getting up the play. Then Betty said—"

"Never mind for the moment what I said," tumbled Betty struck in. "Er—Pam, dear, the cat's waiting at the porch. I suppose, to run you home to Swanlake? I'd like to go down with you."

"But I'm not going home before I've

seen Miss Somerset," was Pam's severe announcement.

And calmly she walked out of the study, where a fresh tangle of talk at once started.

Betty, after a moment or two, went out, and Polly followed her. The other girls had crossed a domain on the part of Betty and Polly to have word with Pam above. This seemed strange, but so offense was taken.

They remained in Study No. 12 whilst captain and madcap, finding that Pam had outsped them in the corridor, went straight downstairs to await her at the porch.

One of Swanlake's haughty Hoplers was there, with Charlotte Jennings at the wheel. He saluted Betty and Polly. Pam wore looking a malicious Grouse to jump over the wall, and, as soon as Pam turned up, go with her after all!

Then Pam came flying out to them, halted and cooed, and with an "art" and "howling" in the breeze.

"Can't shake her!" she said of the headmistress rashly. "Never knew her to be in such a mood!"

"I know whom I'd like to shake!" came through Polly's clenched teeth.

"Claire Ferrell," said Swanlake; "Oh, you may shake Pam, but you don't know what the girl is! Betty and I—we've been suspicious for days now, but we've not said anything in you. Now you've got to be told. There's something dreadful about Claire Ferrell. She's sneaked over to Mercove this afternoon to make trouble for us. She made the study look so disgraceful—yes, she did!"

Such a wild outburst had already caused Pam, who hated scenes, to turn to Betty as being one likely to speak sense.

"I'm responsible for this idea, that it is all Claire's doing," Betty calmly stated. "For the simple reason, Pam, that Polly and I have suspected the girl of not wanting us to spend so much time at Swanlake. We're in Claire's way over there."

"But I haven't found Claire to be—"

"No, you haven't, but we have!" Polly burst in. "To you, she is a nice, straightforward girl—"

"Yes, well, remember, I see more of her than you do."

"That, Pam, you haven't noticed as much," Betty gently argued. "Fast as Pam, the last time Polly and I were over at Swanlake, we came to the conclusion that Claire had somebody—we can't imagine who—is hiding at Swanlake."

"What? Oh, come—"

"All right, think it crazy, but several queer things had led us to that belief, even before we chanced upon that secret passage. And what happened there—a voice answering from the darkness that did not seem to be Claire's and yet the voice said: 'Yes, I'm Claire Ferrand,' and—"

"We had, you see, Pam, called down into the darkness, wanting to know if Claire were down there—"

"Well, and she answered—"

"That we're talking you," Polly fumed. "It was like the voice of some other girl! Claire did not up a few moments later, in the passage. All the same, there could have been some other girl there. Don't you see? Betty and I were unable to go on searching. There were no time, were there?"

"Oh, I understand all that," Pam said, with every sign of wanting to throw this matter out. "Only, after you two girls had gone away from Swanlake, I took Claire down into those passages. The first passage branches off into two—"

"Yes—"

"We searched wherever we could, and only came to dead ends."

"But," Polly argued, "by that time, of course, any girl who had been in hiding down there could have slipped out and hidden somewhere else! It would have been a different matter if we had all explored at once. And just remember, Pam—those missing bicycles! We played that game, and if it wasn't Claire Ferrand—wanting to compel Betty and I to go off at once, on foot!"

Pam considered this, then shook her head.

"Oh, I think, somehow, you must be—I mean, girls, I know it all seems to me strange, but it simply doesn't tally with my opinion of Claire."

"I realize," Betty said, very guardedly, "either Polly and I are doing the girl a most terrible injustice, or else—Claire Ferrand must be a dangerous girl at Swanlake to have about the place."

"Yes—well, I suppose my parents were to be treated to know!" Pam equally submitted.

"Then take no notice of what we've said, that's all!" Polly exploded. "Betty and I are good! All I know is, for certain, one girl doesn't have another in hiding about a house where she is only a guest, for any good reason!"

"For certain," you say, and even then you may be wrong, Polly!"

"All right, then, I'm wrong!"

"But it might—mightn't it—have been for a most innocent reason, that there was another girl the other afternoon? Just supposing for a moment that there was; I can imagine Claire having become acquainted with some girl, who, perhaps, she didn't want any of us to know about."

"That's rubbish!" Polly asserted.

Pam did not become pulled. "You think so, Polly?" After all, Claire's a very sensible girl now. I'm sure she's good-hearted. So I can

easily imagine her doing some other girl good by stealth. What I just can't imagine is that she should arrange some visitor out of sight at Swanlake for a bad purpose. Oh, no!" Pam insisted—and turned to get into the car. "Still, I'll think about what you girls have said."

"I wouldn't!" Polly's usual wildness made her say. "I wouldn't give it another thought! Go home to her now, and—"

"Bye, Pam dear," Betty interposed, wanting to atone for the headstrong one's very state. "It all seems more looking into—"

"More thinking about, too? Yes, well"—Pam smiled up to them both from the car—"I shall think about it—in guise of your advice, Polly!"

The car door came round with a gentle clasp and Pam Ferrand's day girl was off again—back to Swanlake.

Polly, staring after the departing motor, was tight-lipped, fume-eyed.

"Oh, hang, Betty! None of us going with her—and that will just suit Claire Ferrand's book; of course it will! But I'm surprised at Pam!"

"I'm not," said Betty. "She's as sensible and true, and what we said was bound to sound crazy."

"But it isn't!"

"No!"

"What are we going to do, then? What are we going to do? Just nothing more!"

"Is it likely?"

And Betty, as she gave that quiet answer, turned to go indoors again briskly, as if she knew of something to be done—at once!



At Dead of Night

HALF-WAY home to Swanlake in the car, Pam suddenly sat upright on an upholstered seat that was meant for very-minded

lolling.

From the moment the car had set off with her, she had been thinking about all that Betty and Polly had said, and she just couldn't see any reason for sharing their mistrust of the girl who was Swanlake's guest!

And then— Pam's mind was suddenly disquieted. She felt half-inclined to get Chauffeur Jennings to turn back, so that there could be another talk with Betty and Polly at once.

It had occurred to her, all in an instant; Claire Ferrand's meeting there as rehearse at Marcoro, not at Swanlake! Oh, and there was another thing—the affair of the missing bicycles! Now, that trick could have been played by Claire, of course. And, after all, she could have played it far exactly that reason—to compel Betty and Polly to leave earlier, because they were having to wait.

These second thoughts of Pam's left her feeling a bit unhappy.

Not only had she flouted the well-meant warning of such good charm as she had in Betty and Polly. She would get indoors presently to be in as "engaged" state—towards a guest! Horrid, that!

But her chums' theory was definitely not so crazy now. Perhaps, if Polly had said less, and Betty more, it would not have seemed so crazy at the time.

In the waning light of the winter afternoon the car turned in at Swanlake's (believed) gateway, and ran smoothly up the winding avenue to the mansion porch.

Some school books under arm—for

Pam had prep to do at home every week-night—she jumped out, and was next moment indoors.

The girl whom the most new regard as suspect came out into the hall, exclaiming:

"Hallo, you've got back alone, then. Pam! I thought Betty and the rest were to come over again this afternoon!"

"Perfectly genuine surprise; so it seemed to Pam. And her spirits went a little lower still. Really, it was not nice to be, as it were, cut the look-out now to catch this girl tripping.

"Miss Scornfield just a stopper as their coming over—for good and all, Claire."

"Never! Oh, what a shame!"

Pam was taking off her hat and coat.

"When did you get in, Claire?"

"Oh, not ten minutes ago. Eester was as fascinating as ever. You know that fine shop near the cathedral, Pam? I got myself such a pretty frock there this morning. At least, I think it's pretty."

"I'd love to see it, Claire. After tea you must show me."

"Oh, it won't be here until the morning! I leave parcels, so I got them in sent it by post, and I had," lied the girl, who had ordered that frock through the post, "the most delicious lunch in Eester. I only wished you could have been with me!"

Violence Maize, posing as Claire Ferrand, sat down on the opposite side of the fire to Pam. Tea was being brought in.

"But how about the play, then, Pam?" came in a very concerned tone.

"I can still be in it. I'm as keen! I'll be able to attend rehearsals at your school."

"That moment—the ring-ring-ring!"

It was the telephone call in the hall. Pam, simply because the parlourmaid was occupied with the tea-things, bounded up, and ran from the room to answer the call.

Violence Maize could not help wondering, in a guilty-minded way, who it was had rung up Swanlake. But she could not overbear Pam's side of the conversation without going as far as the dressing-room doorway; and the parlourmaid—dash her!—was still fiddling with the tea-things.

Now she was turning to the fireplace to throw on another log. It ended in the parlourmaid going away at last, just as Pam came back.

"Grand news, Claire! That was Betty."

"Oh, was it?"—with a delighted smile; while she thought to herself: "That Betty—again!"

"Yes, Betty's made everything all right by going to see the headmistress and taking a strong line. Betty offered to bring a dozen girls to my that Study No. 12 was not in a disgraceful state just before afternoon school."

Pam was feeling very jolly now; the news was so good. But it gave her a nasty jar to realize that she was watching her companion as closely as before. Getting into a habit of doing it—oh dear! But still—

"What's more, Claire, Betty asked Miss Scornfield how she got so know that the study was empty, and it seems that an anonymous note was the cause. I think Betty must have tackled the Head about that—she would, you know, if she felt entitled to! That's Betty all over. Anyway, Miss Scornfield seems to have said that it was the first time she'd taken any notice of an anonymous note, and it will be the last!"

"Well done, Betty!" cried Violence Maize, but at least she was being her

more than ever—that spirited, capable Fern captain, too clever by half!" And so Pam, the girls will be over, after all! How jolly!"

"To-morrow!" Pam said staidly. "Your tea, Claire?" As the cup and saucer changed hands schoolgirl and respect smiled at each other. "Trust Miss Rosenfeld, when she thinks she has been unfair, to make them make up for the injury. Betty and Polly, anyway, have permission now to sleep here to-morrow night, if I want to have them out of school. I'll love to!"

"Sleep at Swanslake!"

"Yes," Pam said, wishing to see if this girl's hand were shaking as she set down the cup of tea. But no—quite steady! "Took, Claire!"

"Thanks, Pam. But that's better than even, isn't it, about the play? After the other girls have gone back to-morrow evening you and I will still be able to carry on with Betty and Polly. I am so glad!"

She took a refreshing hit at the side of latticed tones.

"Lovely fit, Pam! But about the play. You'd better you and I, some time this evening, go up to that lumber-rooms and do some sorting over of the things we see all making use of, for stage dresses and so on? It would be nice to be really ready for the girls when they come over to-morrow."

"Certainly!" Pam agreed.

They talked on, and there was something so very enthusiastic in all that the much older girl said, her manner was so at ease and straightforward. Pam felt greatly reassured. How could there be anything, after all, in all that Betty and Polly had said!

If—if Claire Ferrand really had been visited by some other girl in secret, then there must have been only a creditable reason for keeping her out of the way.

It had always to be remembered—so ran Pam's mind again—that Claire Ferrand had suddenly come into a great fortune. What more natural than that her head should be slightly turned, and that she now liked to feel it possible to wave a magic wand over the heads of less fortunate girls?

There had been less work or two in London before she came down to make her home at Swanslake. She might have seen pity upon some poor girl who was adrift in the world. If so, it was easy to imagine the rest; that girl following Claire to Swanslake to obtain further help, and Claire being willing to do so much for her—but it must all be done in secret.

A heartless, perhaps foolish, undertaking, but a generous nature accounted for it, and Claire, after all, was old enough to be credited in a certain freedom of action.

But that night, after Pam had gone to bed, she fell—awakened!

At this late hour she had to realize how awful it would be if the girl who was making Swanslake her home had been up to some trick or other for no good reason.

Except for the servants, she, Pam, was alone with Claire Ferrand in this lovely country house—alone, unless, indeed, the girl still had someone secretly sheltering within its ancient walls.

Was there—was there someone still? Some other girl, even to-night—under the roof?

Pam could not get to sleep. Not nervousness, but an anxiety to have an end to the wretched dwelling of the girl who occupied a near-by bed-room kept her wide awake.

And at last—nearly midnight, it was—she sat up in bed, threw back the

coverings, and came foot to floor without making a sound.

Keeping her room in darkness, she put on a warty dressing-gown, thrust her feet into slippers, then took candle and matches from her dressing-table. There was, unfortunately, no electric torch at hand.

Notably she opened her bed-room

door as thorough, and yet so unproductive of anything to warrant even the faintest doubts about Claire Ferrand's being there.

"Dear! that settles it, so far as I'm concerned," Pam said to herself, as she scurried down to bed again. "When I get to school in the morning I shall tell Betty and Polly. They can think what



BETTY looked wildly alarmed as she dashed down the steps. "Let's be off!" she panted. "At once—or we'll be stopped!"

door and crept out into the corridor that also served the other girl's bed-room.

With the candle as yet unlighted, Pam stole along to the door of that bed-room in which slept Swanslake's guest.

Was she in there now—was she?

Think!

Yes, Pam, as she listened outside the door, even heard a faint cough. It came a moment after there had been sounds of a turning over in bed.

Pam padded away—not back to her own room, but to the far end of the corridor, and so round into another passage. There she struck a match and lighted the candle.

Oh again, after that—in the next wing!

Now or Never!

KNOWING never a moment's fear, although she was alone and the hour midnight, Pam searched around by candlelight, and searched in vain.

The long-faded attic—everywhere she searched.

Even that secret passage leading down from the lumber-room did Pam explore again. And still—no one, and no trace, either, of anyone having been in hiding there.

There was the striking of a grandfather clock on the main stairs when at last the same tapping back to her bed-room.

One in the morning! A full hour she had been away upon a search that had

they like about the girl, but they just couldn't try putting me against her."

That this right led to a "bust up" between herself and two of her best chums Pam could not believe. They'd agree to differ, that was all!

On the other hand, it was a huge relief to feel that one could go on treating Claire Ferrand as a Swanslake guest who was, at the same time, a fine friend to have. Pam could sleep now!

And she awoke, when one of the maids gave the customary half-past-seven tap at the door, feeling "full of beans." Her love of fair play made her want to be particularly nice to Claire Ferrand, at breakfast, as attendance for her evening's untroubled mood.

But that mistrust was to return—directly Pam was joined at the breakfast-table by Swanslake's youthful guest.

"Oh dear, Pam, I've just known, I've got a nasty cold coming on!"

Winifred Mann, peering at Claire Ferrand, was wiping watery eyes as she came to the breakfast-table. Then she coughed.

A nervous! Pam, without waiting to do so, leaped forward suspecting instantly. A race, this—to keep Betty and Polly away from Swanslake today!

"Better get someone to phone for the doctor," Pam suggested. "To make sure."

"Oh, it's not as bad as that, dear! But—uh—uh—I'm just wondering, Pam. Ought the girls to come over here this afternoon? I mean, if they should catch my cold, and take it back, and spread it all through the school?"

"Moscow girls don't catch colds," smiled Pam, going on with her breakfast. "The thing will be, if you feel worse during the day, just keep to your room."

"You don't think you ought to mention it to the French-mistress, just in case she finds—"

"No, I don't!" said Pam, helping herself to marmalade.

Nor did she mention it—except to Betty and Polly, directly she got to Marcove.

Pam told these two girls, and told them that it was the one thing that had decided her to share their interest. They had declared that it must have been Claire Ferrand who "stuffed" them yesterday. And now, this morning, the girl had started a cold, with the object of starting a war!

"If I thought it were influenza," Pam quickly added, "then, of course, I'd be bound to report it. But she hasn't even a real cold. She coughed once in the night, but that, I'm now certain, was simply to let me know that she was in her room."

"Why?" Betty asked, looking startled. "You hadn't allowed her to think that you were in doubts about her?"

"I don't think she can have guessed that I was—well, suggesting her right up till bedtime. But she may have heard me when I crept from my bedroom, although I'm sure I was as quiet as possible."

"She may have been out of her bed—on the point of creeping out of her room—unless you opened your door," Polly excitedly suggested. "In that case—obvious thing for her to do—step back into bed, and then let you know by a cough that she was there!"

"But if she were going to do any creeping about the place last night," Betty said, with a hard-thinking frown, "then she's still got someone of Swanlake to report to."

"Yes—well?"

"Wasn't you amazed?"

"No, I don't know that I was."

Polly chuckled. She was in great spirits at the prospect of her and Betty spending a night at Swanlake.

"You'll have us two to-night, Pam. Good, Betty, what a chance it means—at last!"

There was no time for more. Pam had not got to school until just before nine, and saw the bell for class was ding-ding.

But at the mid-morning "break," and again at the twelve o'clock dinner, the talk amongst Pam and her chums of Study No. 12 was all of the visit to Swanlake by Monday.

Polly had pushed on with the play overnight, and it was nearly finished. Machines, parts could be got by hand—as far as they had been taken.

There could even be a kind of post-rehearsal, after tea at Swanlake, with copied-out lines to aid faulty memories.

Then there would be one or two songs, for which Madge had already composed the music. They could be "tried out" even.

Even Polly, who could be a bit unreasonable over what she expected at the hands of fate, went into class feeling that nothing more was needed. Yet something came to her, during class, that made the prospects roser than ever. An idea!

"Good, Betty," she whispered to her

chum at the next desk. "It's just flashed upon me! Nor let Claire know we're to be at Swanlake all right!"

"But," Betty whispered back behind a hand. "But she knows already. Pam said her yesterday!"

"Yes, but—here's the idea, Betty! We can pretend we're not going to stay after all. Find some excuse—perhaps a bit—a quarrel with her. I could work that nicely! So we shall leave with the rest of the girls, and then—go back in secret. Got me?"

"Pam would be in the know, of course," Polly whispered again. "So would our other chums. They've already been told that we—"

But now Miss Edward was looking this way from her desk in front of the class. Did Polly, the still look inquired, wish to go to Swanlake after school, or would she prefer to be kept back, for talking in class? Polly subsided. She and Betty exchanged not another whisper.

Nor did they resume discussion of the great idea when, at last, with the rest of the Fives, they were set free. Plenty of time for talk during the run in the car!

It was waiting for them, and to the coat-room they hurried for their outdoor things. Betty, whilst buttoning a winter coat, asked her chums to go in advance of her to the car.

She was feeling she ought to pop along, and, if possible, see the head-mistress, to thank her for the handsome way in which she had made up for yesterday's disappointment. The whole thing should not take two minutes, then Betty would be with her chums in the car.

But she was with them even sooner than that.

She came dashing out to them in a changed state of spirits. Instead of the jollity of a merrymaker or so ago, there was now wild dismay in her look.

"Let's be off!" she panted, scrambling into the already crowded car. "Pam, get Jennings to drive away, sharp, or we'll be stopped!"

"Slam!" Betty pulled the door shut, and then remonstrated, whilst Pam—keeping quite calm—tapped upon a glass pane to give the "Right-away!" to the chauffeur.

"I didn't go in to Miss Somerfield," was Betty's breathless explanation. "I did! I heard her on the telephone with Claire Ferrand!"

"Never!"

"Yes, Claire had just then rung up Miss Somerfield, and I was bound to hear what it was about. Her cold's worse—it's influenza, she says. And Miss Somerfield was thanking her for letting her know. The message had come just in time for her to cancel our plans."

"Oh, to goodness!" came Polly's anxious yell, as she still looked through the back window. "Miss Somerfield has sent a dozen girls tearing across—to try to catch us on the road. They're breaking for the boundary hedge, hoping to get through and out to the road in time."

The car slowed, to go out by the main gateway. It swung round, had the open road before it, and instantly gathered speed.

"But look!" Betty suddenly exclaimed. "Two of those girls through the hedge, and Jennings may easily see them—swearing to him to stop!"

to Swanlake and so achieve their longing to read next Saturday's *Moscow School* serial, so do order your copy of the CHRISTMAS NUMBER of THE SCHOOLGIRL at once.

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BETWEEN OURSELVES

MY DEAR READERS,—I feel like exhorting Patricia's opening remark this week: "Isn't everything smiling?" It certainly is! The Christmas spirit seems to have captured everyone and everything.

On the way to the office this morning I passed some of the big stores—and how attractive and festive they looked, with their gay decorations and Yuletide goods in the windows!

I expect lots of you will be coming up to town to do your Christmas shopping—or, at least, accompanying mother when she comes! So you'll have an opportunity to see all the lovely things that are being displayed.

But I do hope that, in the midst of all this excitement, you won't forget all about your favorite SCOTSMAN. I want you to make a special point of securing your copy of next week's issue—which, let me add, is an issue on Friday, December 12th, instead of on Saturday—because it is our extra-special

CHRISTMAS NUMBER.

From cover to cover it's packed with good things—including lots of really seasonable dramas. You'll revel in the topping, long complete Christmas story, featuring Babs & Co. on holiday at Moulton Manor.

Baffling though the mystery is, they are determined to solve it, and in next week's tale you will be thrilled by the adventures into which they are plunged as a result of their daring activities in trying to learn more about the mystery girl.

Look out for this grand story in next week's SCOTSMAN, under the title of:

"BABS & CO.'S CHRISTMAS QUEST."

By Hilma Richards.

Happy-Go-Lucky Lulu is spending Christmas at school. And what an adventure it proves you will see when you read next week's merry complete story.

Further thrilling chapters of our sensational new serial, "MIDNIGHT MYSTERY OF CARNIVAL LAND"—do write and tell us how you like this novel feature, won't you?—and of "HER SECRET AT SWANLAKE" will give you hours of enjoyment this Christmas.

And last, but certainly not least, Pat's sparkling pages. Pat is having a grand Christmas party (in print, of course!) in next week's issue, and altogether her four pages will be delightfully bright and seasonable.

So now that you know what treats await you next week, I do hope you will all rush off and order your copies—before it's too late! There's one more to be a big demand for the Christmas SCOTSMAN—so don't delay.

With best wishes,

YOUR EDITOR.

WILL they do it? Can they get vital purpose? You'll be dramatic chapters of this fine new year copy of the CHRISTMAS NUMBER of THE SCHOOLGIRL at once.