

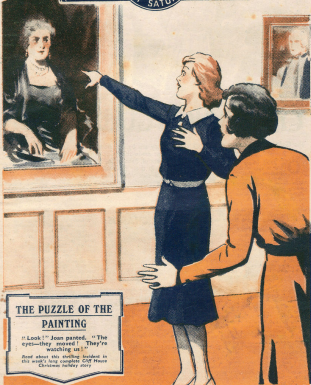
SPLENDID STORIES FOR CHRISTMAS READING

# THE SCHOOLGIRL

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EVERY 2<sup>D</sup> SATURDAY

Incorporating  
"SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN"



## THE PUZZLE OF THE PAINTING

"Look!" Joan parted. "The eyes—they moved! They're watching us!"

Read about this thrilling incident in this week's long complete CAT HOUSE Christmas holiday story.

## A Thrilling Complete Story of a Strange Christmas Mystery, Featuring Barbara Redfern & Co. at Mistletoe Manor



# ONE CLUE TO GUIDE THEM

### The Girl Who Couldn't Remember

"Oh, Joan, please do try to remember!" Barbara Redfern urged anxiously. "You see, we are only trying to help you."

"Why, rather, you know?" blurted out Elaine Brown.

"I saw guess you could clear up the whole mystery," Linda Carroll added. But the girl on the cottee in the raffered hall of Mistletoe Manor shook her head.

"Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry!" "But can't you remember your own name?" Clara Trevlyn asked.

"No!" "Can't you remember why you masqueraded as the ghost of the White Queen?" Doris Redfern, Barbara's younger sister, put in.

The girl, her white face bearing obvious traces of stress, scolded her bosom.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she said. "Did I play ghost?"

"Gawooks!" Joanna Garratt murmured. "Aha!" The group—what better tell her, Babs—the whole ghastly truth!"

Barbara Redfern looked despairingly at the face of her nine chums; at her grandfather, old General Redfern; at her mother and father, and the two frail old people, Mr. and Mrs. Lester. Every eye was directed upon the tragic face of the girl who sat now upon the cottee. In a semicircle, they faced her.

"Joan, listen!" Barbara pleaded. "We must, you, if you remember, just before Christmas. You were very strange then. You wouldn't give me your name. Don't you remember—I

BAFFLED though they are by the bewildering mystery which has made their Christmas at Mistletoe Manor so eventful, Babs & Co. have not abandoned their task. In their possession is the strange chart—a single clue which they believe holds the key to the solution of the puzzle.

By

HILDA RICHARDS

lost a parcel, and you can after me with it?"

The girl hit her lip.

"No." "Well, after that," Babs persisted, "we came here. You were here, too, being in the Manor, tapping about the walls. There was a ghost name, if you remember. We caught you dressed up as the ghost."

Again the large blue eyes surveyed her blankly.

"Then," Babs went on, "you were captured by somebody—a masked man. You were shut up in the Silent Tower. Yesterday—Christmas Day—we found you unconscious in the cellar. We brought you here. Meantime, however, somebody had furred a note in your handwriting, and had given it to me. That note said you had gone away. It was obviously meant to put us off the track because we were searching for you."

The girl's eyes clouded.

"Yes?" she breathed. "But tell me—what happened when you found me in the cellar?"

"We brought you here—to this room," Babs said. "You had hurt yourself when you fell in the cellar, and had lost your memory. We took off your clothes, and searched your things to try to find out who you were—because, you must understand, Joan, she asked gently, "we do want to help you. We all feel that there is some mystery surrounding you. We want to find out what that mystery is, and, if possible, help out the people who treated you so dreadfully."

A heavy silence. Joan gulped. Then she answered impatiently.

"It's! With a murmur" he interrupted. "Let me have my say. Non, young lady—!" And he frowned heavily. "Now, Barbara, don't interfere! I want to know," he stated directly. "What this is all about. I am not so inclined to take Barbara's point of view. You may have been badly treated by someone, or you may not. But I must say, young woman, you've turned my house into a real old bear-garden, with your tappings and your ghost-playing! And I want an explanation!"

The girl gasped.

"I'm sorry! I do not—!"

"You're sure," the general growled, added, "that lost memory of yours isn't just another story—just something to get our sympathy while you gain time?"

Joan's lips quivered.

"Oh, General Redfern, I do beg of you—"

"All right! All right!" he said gently. "I'm just speaking my mind to you! I want to warn you that, if you're still fooling, I'm not the man to go on having me long pained, that's all! I can't believe, though these girls seem to have such faith in you, that

you've been growing around the secret passages in this old house for the last week with any honest motive. Because, if your motives were honest," the general added absently, "why couldn't you have come to me in the first place?"

"Either day—" Mrs. Redfern said. "Well—"

The girl's eyes filled with tears. She bit her lip.

"Oh, please—please!" she almost sobbed. "Please, no! Don't judge me, please! I don't know, I tell you! I can't remember a single thing! I don't!" And then, apparently for the first time, her eyes fell upon Mr. and Mrs. Lester. She broke off with a start. "Who are those people?" she cried in a changed voice.

"They—they are my guests!" the general frowned.

"Yes, my dear. Do you remember it?" the old lady asked eagerly.

And, supported by her husband, she came forward, halting upon her stick.

Jean stared at her with frightened eyes.

"Because," the old lady went on softly, "you have seen us before, you know. We were here when you were brought up from the cellar, and you looked so white, so forlorn," she went on tenderly, "that my heart melted for you!"

The girl gasped. Just for a moment there had been a flicker of intelligence in the dark blue eyes. Now, as she hopefully sought her head, the old vacant expression returned to them.

"No!" she whispered.

It seemed hopeless. Marcelle Blythe shook her head.

"Oh, it is not she but she had enough!" she said feelingly. "Please let us leave her alone. Some time, perhaps, as memory returns unexpected, you'll see me! I have heard of such things."

"But, please!" Jean broke in. "No, Marcelle—no! Question me! Go on questioning me!" She pressed a hand to her throbbing temples. "I want to remember! I must remember! I have a feeling—" And then she paused, seeing Babe strangely. "Barbara, what is it I feel?" she whispered tremblingly. "Danger—peril! I seem to see a shadow—a paper!"

"Babe started. "You don't remember what was on it?"

"No; I don't remember that. It comes and goes before my eyes. Some- thing seems to be telling me that the paper is important. Barbara, do you know anything of a paper?"

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Clara.

They crowded around interestedly now. Babe's face had turned pale with excitement. She put a hand into her pocket.

"There is a paper," she admitted slowly. "We found it when we undressed you. It was hidden in the bottom of your shoes, and— But, here!" she cried eagerly, and produced a yellow strip of parchment. "None of us can make head or tail of it!"

She held it in front of her. The girl, with a wondering glance, took it. Her eyes fastened upon it. For one beautiful instant the light shined in them again. Her breath came with a sharp gasp. They all saw her fingers tingle sickly.

And, penetratingly, she stared at that strange parchment, as Babe & Co. had stared at it so many times since they had discovered it yesterday. It contained several lines of scribbled hand-writing beneath which was a slouch of a great elongated beam of wood which contained seven knots, one of which—the right of the sketch—was filled in,

as if an accident in the drawing. The lines, a classically wooded style, ran:

"William Penning is my proud name,  
May justice grant power to the name!  
My treasure, which you seek, doth rest  
Under the ground; in my oak-beam  
is hid."

A second line, four eyes may read. It contains in this dog's-foot script,  
Seek it out now, and, having sought,  
Compare, with care, the slouch I've  
described."

Tap there upon the seventh beam,  
And there are the riches of your  
dream.

"WILLIAM PENNING, 123-45,  
"MIDDLETON HOUSE, 67-68."

Underneath, stretching the whole width of the paper, was the drawing of the oak beam.

Almost breathlessly, the three watched. Old Mr. and Mrs. Lester shuffled forward. Every eye, intent, expectant, was on the girl. For a long, long moment she studied the plan—the plan which spoke of hidden treasure, of a clue most tantalizingly hidden in the seventh beam. Then, reproachfully, reluctantly, she shook her head.

"It seems—it seems—" and then she heaved a sigh. "No, I—I don't know anything about it," she added lifelessly. Spirits dropped. In dismay and disappointment they stared. Mr. Lester coughed.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "I may make something of it! Let me look at it, Barbara."

"Waste of time—waste of time," the general snorted. "Bah! Put it away! Just a bit of rubbish! If there is a treasure in Middleton Manor, why haven't I heard of it, eh? I'm the present owner of the place, aren't I? Well, well, what is it, Bronster?"—as the butler entered, holding a letter upon a tray. "What's that?"

"Please, sir, it's a letter for Miss Redfern!" Bronster said.

"A what—a what? Oh!" And the

general took it, handed it to Bonnie, who gave an excited blink at sight of it. Then she squeaked.

"Oh, wonderful! I say—yes, you girls, it's my own-er's remittance, delayed in the past. My father promised to send me a few pip-penny notes for Christmas, you know, and this is it?"

The chums grinned. They all knew the legendary nature of Bonnie's remittance. Although, to be sure, the fat one had been looking forward to this letter, and had been very disappointed yesterday when it had failed to arrive. With plump, sugar fingers, she slit the envelope open. And then she gave a squeal.

"Oh, I say—yes, you girls, look!" she cried.

And momentary attention was distracted from the girl on the settee as Bonnie held up a crisp one-pound note.

"My only giddy aunt!" Clara gasped. "Who said the age of miracles had passed? But what about the four pounds, Fatima? I thought you said that—"

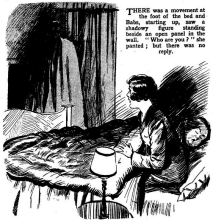
"Oh, the other four pounds will come later," Bonnie said loftily. "This—this is just an account, you know. I dare say, too," Bonnie added, strutting, "that my tax-titled relation, the Earl of Blunder do Blunder, will be sending me ten pounds or so, at the same time. That's the best of having such useful wealthy relations, you know, I say—"

And then Bonnie broke off with a yell. "Oh, gig-giggle!" What's happened to the light!"

For the room, without warning, was most startlingly plunged into darkness. There was a moment of consternation. Then suddenly a movement. In the darkness Babe saw a vague figure—whether a man or girl, it was impossible to discern. For a moment it loomed above her. She heard the living intake of breath. And then—

"Oh!" gasped Babe.

Just in the sick of time she snatched back the hand that held the plan. Just



THERE was a movement at the foot of the bed and Babe, starting up, saw a shadowy figure standing beside an open panel in the wall. "Who are you?" she asked; but there was no reply.

in the nick of time stepped aside herself. Clanking tappers grabbed out of the darkness, catching at her wrist. She felt the scrape of finger-nails against her flesh. Violently she jerked her arm back, staggering at the same time.

And their confusion! In the darkness girls cowered against each other. Babs found herself pushed aside. Out from Bessie went a loud howl. Up from the kitchen sailed Berenice, valiantly wielding the blunderbuss which was her pride. Then Mr. Redfern jumped for the lights. He switched them on. Radiance once more! Everybody blinked.

"I'm sorry!" hoisted Bessie, waving her arms.

"Who turned out the lights?"

"But, I'm sorry!" almost screamed Bessie Bunter.

"Be quiet!"

"I refuse to be quiet!" Bessie glowered. "Look here, I've been burgled, you know!" The fat face, quivering with indignation, blundered round at them. "When somebody put that light out, somebody snatched my letter out of my hand. Look!" And, to prove she no longer retained possession of that precious missive, she held out two podgy empty hands.

There was a pause. Everybody glanced quickly at the other, Mrs. Lester, who had sunk into a chair, gave a little moan, but in the general confusion, nobody noticed the old lady. But Babs' heart was throbbing as she looked quickly round, rapidly scanning the faces which surrounded her.

Her lips tightened.

She said nothing, then, of the suspicion which flashed into her mind. Some instinct warned her to hold her tongue. Somebody in the darkness had snatched at her plan; that somebody, in the confusion later, had grabbed Bessie Bunter's letter by mistake! Somebody, among those present, had made an attempt to steal the plan that related to the Pembury treasure!

Who?



Someone in a Mask—

"BESSIE," you're nice!" Mabel Logan asked.

"Of *ill* course I'm nice!"

Bessie indignantly exploded.

"O.K. I don't like journal up,"

Leta advised. "Who was it?"

"Oh, naturally, how should I know who it was?" Bessie glowered. "Some beast beat on my foot, and then some other beast snatched at my hand!" She blurted indignantly. "If one of you girls did it for a joke—"

But the girls, one and all, shook their heads. It wasn't the sort of joke they indulged in, anyway.

"Look here! Somebody's taken it!" the general roared. "John or no John, I won't have these alarms and scares going on in my house! Who turned out the lights?"

No reply.

"All right!" the general's eyes glared. "Stand where you are, everyone! We're going to get to the bottom of this—here and now! Everyone here was in this room when those lights went out! Somebody here, therefore, must be responsible. I—oh—my—ham!"

He broke off as a little gasp came from Mrs. Lester.

And now for the first time attention became focused upon the old lady, who had collapsed, in a slumped heap, into

one of the easy-chairs. Her face was tinted with pain; she was holding a hand to her groin.

"My—my heart!" she gasped. "The—the sudden shock! Leta, will you take me to my room, please?" she asked pathetically, addressing her husband.

"Why, certainly, my dear." The old lady loyally rose. Tenderly her husband caught hold of her. Watched in sympathetic silence, the two looked across the room and only Babs noticed how queerly Joan shrunk back as they passed her. The general blew out his cheeks.

"Well," he said, "that's that! I hope—with a threatening frown—"that the jobber who caused this commotion is satisfied! But to get on with the inquiry. Now then! Who turned out those lights?"

A general shaking of heads. The old man looked fovee.

"Leta!"

The mystery girl started. "You were nearest the lights! When they went out you were seated. When they went up again, you were on your feet?"

The girl's cheeks turned crimson.

"Yes," she admitted, "but I didn't tamper with the lights, sir. Naturally, I jumped up during the confusion. You don't believe—"

The general breathed hard.

"Never mind," he said. "But, I want you all to understand this. I'm not satisfied. Somebody here—and again he threw a strewed, suspicious, sidelong glance at Joan, "did turn out those lights! Somebody at the same time snatched Bessie Bunter's letter! That somebody has so upset Mrs. Lester that she has had a heart attack! If it was a joke, I ask the jobber to own up now, and nothing more will be said. If it was not a joke I can only conclude that Bessie's letter was stolen! I am not making anyone, I have no proof, but I have my suspicions and I warn whoever started this business that if there is any more of it, I shall call in the police!"

The look he threw at Joan, showed plainly where those suspicions lay. Joan saw it. Her face whitened. Babs caught her breath. For a moment a gust of indignation stirred her against this obstinate-headed old man, who having once caught a suspicion or an idea so doggedly held to it. But experience had taught her that to argue with the general would be worse than useless.

One fierce, threatening look he bestowed upon them all again; then went out. Mr. Redfern with a shrug went out after him, and Mrs. Redfern, with a tenderly, encouraging smile at the silent Joan, followed. The girls were left to themselves.

There was a silence.

Babs gazed at them queerly.

"Whoever took that letter was not intending to take it," she said.

"Oh?"

"That was a mistake. Bessie's letter was grabbed in error for this!" And Babs held up the sheet. Then, while they all stared, she told them what had happened in the darkness. Justina murmured.

"Egad! The mystery thickens!"

"Somebody got into the room," Babs went on. "I'm not so sure now though, that it was somebody who was already here. Dash it all, we all know each other. None of us would play a trick like that! My own mother and father wouldn't have done it. Naturally the general is above suspicion. Mr. and Mrs. Lester are out of the question, too.

"We're all forgetting that the matter is hampershed with secret passages. We know that there are several passages leading off from this room as from others. My own impression is that the people who were after this plan dodged in through a secret panel, turned out the lights, grabbed Bessie's letter in minutes for that and then made off again!"

It sounded plausible, if startling.

"Pretty dr'prik, what?" Justina murmured.

"Veep," Babs replied. "And they must be feeling pretty sick now they've found what they've got! It's fairly obvious, despite the general, that somebody attaches great importance to this plan. There's no doubt that it refers to some treasure hidden in this manner and that being so the villains of the piece, wherever they are, are after it. Then the only way we can get to the bottom of this mystery and foil these people, and perhaps help Joan as she does time in to find the treasure ourselves. And that," Babs went on grimly, "is precisely what we are going to do. That is,"—with a look at the girl—"Joan doesn't mind."

"Oh, Barbara, you know I don't."

"Good!" And Barbara, going to the table, spread the parchment upon its surface. "Come on! Gather round, everybody! Let's tackle it together. See," and she pointed to it, while they all gazed round gazing at the thing with corrupted souls. "It should be easy enough to find."

"Oh, simple, Clara scolded. "Just as easy as falling from the top of a tree."

"It says," Marjorie pointed out, "that the clue to the plan is contained in the plan itself. The idea, it seems to me is to find that clue, and having found, compare it with the sketch underneath."

"That beam thing?" Justina Caroline asked, studying the sketch through her monocle. "I take that, old Sparrows, that's the seventh beam referred to in the old text, what?"

Not Justina added thoughtfully, "that it seems to get us much further!"

It didn't. Easy enough the thing seemed on the surface, with a tantalizing suggestion of simplicity.

"But, I'm sorry, you girls," Bessie eagerly exclaimed. "I've got it! Trust the brain of a Bunter to solve a problem like this! All we've got to do," Bessie triumphantly explained, "is to find the seventh beam."

Leta gazed at her pityingly.

"Well, now, isn't that just too simple for words! And where," she demanded witheringly, "do you look for the seventh beam, old Wood-to-the-Threshold? I've gone since this house is made up of nothing but beams. There are beams in every ceiling, beams in every wall, beams in every floor, and a beam in every bright and smiling eye!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But wait a minute," Babs cut in. "Here's another idea. Who was William Pembury? What sort of man was he?" Babs went on. "Why did he write this thing? Why, if there is treasure in the manner, should he have gone to such pains to hide it and make such a business of finding it? If only we knew something about the man himself, we might form an idea of how his mind worked."

"And that, considering he's been dead about twenty years, is just about as simple as getting an egg to grow a beard!" chipped in Doris Redfern.

"Is it?" Babs turned on her. "Well, don't be too clever!" she reproached her younger sister. "There's a book somewhere in this house—I've seen it.

"We got the Pembury family crest on the outside and it's written in manuscript. It's called 'History of the Pemburys.' If there's any details about a William Pembury, it'll be in that book. En, wait a minute! I know."

"What?"

"The book! It's in Mrs. Lester's room. I'll go and fetch it!"

The doors looked blank. It was obvious they hadn't much hope. But it was an idea, certainly. Any clue, however slight, they felt in the present circumstances, was worth examination.

Babs, without stopping to think, hurried out of the room. Up the stairs she raced; dropping into a slipper walk as she reached the corridor. She tapped in front of the Lester's door and tapped.

There was no reply, though the light in the room was full on. She tapped again. Still no reply.

Babs frowned a little. Perhaps the old lady was sleeping, she told herself. Well, she wouldn't disturb her! She knew exactly where the book was. It would take her less than a second to get hold of it. Quietly she opened the door; quietly stepped in. And then she blinked. For the bed in which she had expected to find the old lady sleeping, was empty and undisturbed! In the room there was no sign of any occupant.

"Error!" Babs exclaimed.

A little shadow of mystification crept over her face. Mrs. Lester must have recovered from her attack with remarkable swiftness, she reflected. And yet, if that was so, how was it that she had not seen her coming downstairs again, as she obviously must have done if she had left her room? For there was only one exit to those stairs, and that was in the hall itself. Had Mrs. Lester come down she could hardly have failed to attract the notice of one or other of the chums.

But there was the book—on the table by the bed. It was a heavy volume, vellum bound, the ragged edges of the parchment it contained black with the dust of ages. She took it up and slipped out of the room.

Then she went slowly downstairs—puzzled and thoughtful. She felt disturbed by the strangeness of Mrs. Lester's absence. Half way down the stairs, however, she stopped with a start. For suddenly, from the hall below, there came a loud, startled cry.

"Look! Look! Those eyes!"

"What?"

In a flash, Babs leapt down the remaining stairs. She was just in time to see Joan, her own eyes wide with fear, pointing quivering to one of the many portraits of the long-dead Pemburys which stared out from the panels of the wall.

"Well, I'm blast if I see anything!" Mike protested.

"Joan's gone now!" Joan shivered.

"But I tell you, I saw them. They were watching—watching as—looking at the plan on the table! They moved!"

"Oh, no, Joan! You must have been dreaming!" Clara Twitlyn said.

"But I wasn't!"

Babs had arrived on the scene then. With quick interest she looked up at the picture at which the mystery girl was still pointing. It was the picture of the sweet, mistle-toed Grace Pembury, from whose husband the general had leased the house. Babs stood and stared at it. For the second time within the space of three minutes she felt uncertain and shaken.

For on the screen of her memory flashed another picture—a picture of that first night at the manor, before Christmas, long before the arrival of

old Mr. and Mrs. Lester, whose car had broken down in the raging blizzard. She had been standing where Joan stood now. She, too, had been staring at that picture; and the eyes had moved!

A trick of her imagination, she had told herself at the time, and, rather self-consciously, had kept her experience to herself. Now, apparently, Joan had seen what she had seen!

Clear she approached the portrait, and peeringly gazed up at it. Life-like the eyes were but definitely painted.

Cromwell for Charles the First. A list of illustrious and famous Pemburys followed.

Then—and Babs bent eagerly forward. What was this?

"William George Pembury. Born 1810-1830. Died 1810-1830. Colonel in Duke of Wellington's army. Fought with honour at St. Sebastian and Waterloo. The richest Pembury of the line. William, upon his death, left a vast sum of money which he had in Mistletoe Manor, to be used in case of urgent family necessity. The key of the hidden plan is to be known only to the



IN utter consternation Babs and the others gazed at the wreckage of the room. "Who could have done it?" Clara gasped. Babs thought she knew; someone had been searching for that vital plan!

Had Joan made the same mistake as herself?

"I tell you, they were staring at us," Joan protested. "I distinctly saw them move!" She shuddered a little, reading the disbelief in the other faces. "I'm sure—"

And Babs, her eyes resting a moment on the chart, was sure, too!

At seven o'clock that night, with Bessie slumbering at her side in the great four-poster bed, Babs sat reading. The reading-lamp, on the Queen Anne table at her side, was alight, and peeped up on her knees was the vellum-bound book, which she had taken from the Lester's room that afternoon.

It was Babs' first opportunity of examining the book since she had borrowed it, although not for one single second had the quest been out of Babs' mind.

The book was fascinating enough, to be sure. What romances seemed to breathe from its ancient pages! Here was the record of Roger Pembury, who had fought with Drake; here was the history of that other bold Edward Pembury, who had fought against

oldest Pembury of the line, and, by order of William, handed down from son to son.

Babs' eyes were shining as she read on. She believed she had hit upon a terrible clue.

The key, handed from son to son, was obviously the plan which was now in her possession, and which, at this moment, was tucked safely beneath her pillow. But the plan had been found in the possession of Joan, the mystery girl, who, most certainly, was nobody's son! How had she come by it?

Babs read on. From that point, indeed, she read to the end of the book. In the very last entry she received another surprise.

Ralph Pembury. Born 1811-1831. Married Grace Neave, 1812-1832. Daughter, Joan, born 1814. Controller of several London companies, whose combined capital totalled several million pounds. In 1832—

Babs read on, her breath coming quickly now. Grace Neave, afterwards Pembury! That was the woman in the portrait downstairs—the portrait out of which both she and Joan had seen those burning eyes. But Joan—and a great light broke upon Babs. Joan, then— Was her guess right? Could

it be? That Joan was the daughter of this Grace and Ralph Pembury? That Joan's other name was Pembury, and that she was, indeed, the real daughter of the house?

Yes, wouldn't that have accounted for the necessary knowledge she had shown of Minstrel Manor and all its secrets? She read, gulping now. And there, included, were the details of a story of which she had already vaguely heard. Details she did not understand, details of the financial crash of that Ralph Pembury's company in 1932, his fight, the warrant issued for his arrest.

There was, however, a doubt about it all. It was not certain, even now, that Ralph Pembury was guilty of the embezzlement charge which had been leveled against him. All the same, the warrant issued for his arrest in 1932 was still in force. But Ralph Pembury had, apparently, been swallowed up by the earth itself.

Babe put down the book. She felt her brain throbbing. Joan was the daughter of the mining and bankrupt owner of this house! Joan, by some strange means, had come into possession of the plan, which was supposed to have been handed down from Pembury son to Pembury son! With that plan in her possession, she had hidden herself in Minstrel Manor. Why?

Babe knew the answer at once. Because, obviously Joan had set out to find that treasure of which William Pembury spoke. That explained her mysterious earnings and goings in the secret passages, her hopless, unavailing fight against those two villains, who were obviously on the same track.

And those villains, only this afternoon, had made a desperate effort to get hold of the plan.

Babe's lips compressed. That money, wherever it was, belonged to Joan's father. If Joan's father was dead, as this record seemed to suggest, then the money was Joan's.

No sense in telling her grandfather this, of course. He would only goob-boss the thing as a fairy tale, and—

Then, with a quick start, she sat up in bed. Instantly she reached out towards the light, changing the room into darkness, save for a single moon-beam which filtered in at the window. She tossed.

Hark!

A shuffling sound. A soft tap-tap! It seemed to be coming from the panels at the foot of the bed. Then a faint click.

Babe sat still—tingling. She sensed, rather than saw, that someone else was in the room.

She remained tense, and suddenly there came a soft, smiling grunt.

The footstep shuffled across the floor. Between herself and the window Babe caught a glimpse of black, hunched shoulders silhouetted against the light. She saw the figure bend over the dressing-table. A grey flashlight's beam lit the glass. She heard the scrape of a drawer as it was pulled out.

And then she knew! These secret corners of Joan were at work again! Instant on finding the plan, they had invaded her bed-room.

Babe's lips compressed in the darkness, her whole frame stiffened. Here, now, was her opportunity to lead the men on out once and for all! From the dressing-table came soft mutters. Babe's hand stretched towards her lamp. Her fingers, steady as steel, found the switch. Bracing herself, she pressed it. Back! The room was flooded with light!

"Step!" she cried.

There was an exclamation from the

dressing-table. Like a panther the figure leapt round. Babe had a glimpse of it, dashed from head to foot in a long, shaggy garment. She saw a pair of velvety eyes gleaming from slits that were set in a black mask. And she noticed, all in that moment, that one of the panels near the foot of the bed was open—a black, square cavity in the smoothness of the polished panels.

Only a second did Babe waste in taking in the situation. Next moment she had leapt from her bed and rushed to the panel. If only she could prevent the intruder from escaping that way she might raise the alarm and succeed in getting him caught.

But the figure reached the panel at the same time. As Babe darted forward it turned and thrust out a vicious hand. Babe caught it on her shoulder and reeled. One moment she fought for balance, and then tumbled back, to fall with a crash against the bed-post. A shattering light flashed before her eyes—then blackness.



The Secret of Nine

W... Babe came in, the room seemed to be full of people.

All her senses were throbbing.

Her father was there. Her mother, bending over her, was there, too. And the general, his hand fastened firmly upon the shoulder of a frightened, neighborhood Joan, was there as well.

"Caught you, best?" he was saying fiercely. "Caught you practically in the act! I told you, my girl, that you were up to no good! This proves it! Why did you attack my grand-daughter?"

In a moment Babe, pushing her mother aside, was out of bed.

"But, grandpa, she didn't!"

"But?"

"It wasn't Joan!" Babe cried. "Oh!"—and she pressed her hand to her throbbing head. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" she cried distractedly. "I can't think! There was a figure—a figure dressed in a long cloak. It came into the room from a panel there."

The general's mustache bristled.

"Barbara, run get back to bed," he advised. "You are just dreaming! There was no figure. I found your CRASH and Bessie's as well. I dashed into your room, and here was this girl standing over your bed, dressed as she is now."

"Joan?" breathed Babe.

The girl's face whitened.

"Babe, please—"

"But how—how did you come to be here," Babe asked, "at that moment?"

"I don't know," Joan was almost weeping. "I remember nothing until I suddenly found myself here, with the general pulling me back and you lying there. I had a dream. I don't even remember what the dream was, but I know that in the dream I was seized by a frightful agency to see Barbara. I knew nothing else until—"

"Get it!" cried Joanna.

"Well, doesn't it explain that?" Joanna crowsed. "Nifty old trick! I have when it's in working order. Joan was dreaming of Babe. Joan wanted to see Babe, and without knowing it came to see old Babe, walking in her sleep!"

Joan had sat still. But it seemed Joanna had hit the nail on the head.

Babe gave a sigh of relief, and Joan smiled with boundless gratitude. But the general still frowned.

"Tight! It sounds all right," he said. "All the same, it's queer." He stared fixedly at the girl. "Yes, I'm not convinced. That doesn't explain why every time there's an upset in this house you should be on the scene. I'll have to see into this. Now get to bed."

The general turned roughly away. Joan, her face white, wretchedly shook her head and slowly walked out of the room. In silence the others watched her go.

"Innocent," announced the general, as soon as Joan had disappeared, "she's going away!"

Babe stared blankly.

"Going away? But, grandpa!"

"She's going away," he said doggedly. "I'm having no more upsets!"

Babe faced him desperately.

"Grandpa, please listen to me!" she cried. "Oh, please! Supposing—supposing"—and she gulped—"supposing I was in that girl's place, would you turn me aside, without money, without clothes, without even a friend? Oh, I know you think I'm talking nonsense, but, grandpa, for pity's sake—"

The general looked dubious.

"And if I let her stay," he said, "what guarantee have I that we shall have a repetition of all this?"

"You'll have your guarantee!" Babe said.

"You!"

"Yes, I believe in her. Grandpa, I can't tell you yet why, but I want Joan to stop here. Even you might be glad later on that she has stopped! You can't let her go now—or, at least, until she's recovered her money. Grandpa, let me look after her!" Babe entreated.

"Let me be responsible for her good behavior and her good conduct. I promise nothing else shall happen. She can share my room—"

A pause.

For a moment the old man did not reply; then—

"Very well," he said gruffly, "that's a bargain, Barbara. I leave her in your charge. From this moment you are responsible for her good behavior. If nothing else happens, all well and good; if it does, and she is connected with it—then, sentiment or no sentiment, she leaves this house. Is that understood?"

Babe nodded.

"Yes, grandpa."

"All right," he said. "Good-night!" He and Babe's parents went out, leaving the girls alone.

Joanna turned, making a move as if to follow him, but Babe plucked her by the arm.

"No, Jimmy! Just a minute!" she said quickly. "Just a minute, all of you! There's something I want to say to you about Joan." And she told them, while they all listened in startled amazement, what she had discovered in the book. "Naturally," she added, "it's all theory at the moment, but I've got a hunch that we're on the right track. In the meantime, our main job is to keep this chert from the people who are after it, and get to the bottom of the mystery ourselves."

They nodded; they were all very quiet now.

"And just for safety's sake," she added, "I'm going to hand the chert over; it'll put those villains off the scent, whoever they are. We'll draw lots for it."

It was a good idea. There and then they drew lots, Babe remaining out. The responsibility for the plan's future custody fell upon Leta.

"Right!" Babe said. "Then there it is. But guard it, old thing, as you'd guard your life. Well, good-night!" she whispered. "Maajjra, you turn in



**SLOWLY**, yet with unflinching steps, the deep-seater passed on down the passage. And just as silently, yet with fast-beating heart, Babe followed.

From Clara came a shout. "Oh, my giddy aunt! Who's been in here?"

"Clad!" Marcelle shrieked, from next door. "Some whic-wid has been in my room! Look! He is all turned terry-tappy."

"And what sort of filthy system," Justina inquired from her doorway, "has passed through here while I've been away? Fustlerks and fiddle-sticks! Look at it!"

But Babe, with Clara behind her, was staring at her own room door. Wide, horrified her eyes; angry the expression on her face. The room was in a state of terrible disorder. Drawery had been wrenched out of the chest and the dressing table. The wardrobe door swung wide. Oldinetta strewed the carpet. The contents of her cases ruthlessly up-ended on the floor. Even the carpet had been torn up at one corner.

"Well, my hat!" she gasped.

"What vandals' been in here?" came a yell from Clara's room. And out came the screaming "Tuesday" brand!

"Babe—!" She broke off as she saw the disorder. "My only hat! You, too? Who the dickens has done it?"

Who, indeed? Babe's lips set. She thought she knew. The plan again! Having failed in both their previous attempts, the unknown villain had ransacked every one of their rooms while the chance had been away.

with Bessie; I'll go along and keep Jean company, as I promised."

There were no further alarms that night; and in the morning, after breakfast, Babe proposed a walk.

Naturally, the proposition did not meet with Bessie's approval, who, still ferociously miserable since the loss of her one-pound note, clung to her in the house and hank for it—Bessie's idea of looking being to see herself in front of the morning fire in the hall, with chocolate on one side of her, a bowl of fruit on the other, and some macaroons and almonds within reach.

A fine, crisp morning it was, with the snow crackling underfoot, and a keen, frost-chilled wind springing up. Clara walked in to fetch, for there was a promise of ice and skating to-morrow.

Babe led the way. Four miles from Middleton Manor, in a dell between two hillsides, she halted.

"Now," she said, "let's look at the chart again. You've brought it, Lella—haven't you?"

Lella had. Babe took it, and again the chums crowded round, shaking their heads as they read the mysterious verse. Babe moved up by her eyes, her pulses quivering; then suddenly she gave an exclamation.

"My golly! Those dates on the chart!"

"The dates?" Justina murmured puzzledly.

"Look!" And Babe pointed to them. "See the first? William Pembury, 1834-41. That means 1838, of course. And that year was when he died; also, the year he wrote that."

"Well, I sure guess that's no astonishing discovery, my Babe," Lella said, with a peevish frown.

"Of course not. But look at the next date," Babe cried. "If he died in 1845, he could hardly have been alive at the time of the other date—1822. Yet it's written by him."

"Clad!" breathed Marcelle.

It thrilled fanaticism they all stared again at the chart.

"Obviously, then, William Pembury

had some reason for writing that second date," Babe said. "But what reason could it be? He must have had some purpose; some guide, perhaps—some clue."

Again they stared. Jean, her face eager, took hold of the chart; then she uttered an exclamation.

"Oh, I say!"

"What?" the others chorused.

"Look again! Don't read the figures as dates this time. See, they run consecutive figures. '123456789.' From one to nine." She stared around at the faces of the chums.

"Phew! We are getting warm!" Justina gasped. "Scilly—Jan no, nonsense!"

The others crowded closer, peering at the chart. Babe had an excited feeling that they were touching the verge of the solution to the mystery at last. Why should those dates, so far apart, appear on the same chart? Why, unless it was the nearest accident, should the figures these dates made run in such precise progression? Solve the secret of those figures, and the march-marched clue would be in their hands, she felt.

It was Babe who made the next suggestion—that the nine figures might refer to nine words in the rhyme.

A hint was made for those words, without any great success.

Tantalized, it was. All sorts of twists and combinations they gave the words and the figures, but nothing would make sense; nothing seemed to give a clear hint.

It was twelve o'clock by the time they decided to go back to the manor and have another attempt after lunch.

Bessie was curled up in the armchair when they got back, comfortably asleep. Mr. and Mrs. Lester, the old couple, smiled at them from the cozy logbrook. "Had a good walk, girls?" Mr. Lester asked.

"Yes, thanky—lovely!" Babe smiled. "Do you feel better now, Mrs. Lester?"

"Oh, quite, thank you, my dear!" They went on to their rooms, and then—



She Who Walked  
By Night



**N**O clue to the identity of the vandals was found.

The general, unexpressed and eager, had the whole of the stuff re-examined, one by one. But no one could throw a light on the mystery.

And a mystery it remained all that day. The rooms, invaded again by the maids, were put to rights.

Street fell in the afternoon, and the chums forced themselves continued to the house. Tea came; dinner followed, and after games the household, yawning, went up to bed.

Babe, true to her promise, was sharing Jean's room now. Very quiet and very tired-looking, however, was Joan

as she undressed. The events of last night, the upset during the day, seemed to have shaken her quite considerably, and Babe, seeing that she would rather be left in peace, forbore to make conversation as they climbed into bed. Just a gentle "Good-night" and she rolled over on her side.

But not Babe to sleep. If her body was tired, her mind was very much awake. The events of the day with their attendant problems passed and re-passed in her mind. The plan! That raid upon the rooms. That containing, comprising 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9! In those figures, she felt, was the solution to the puzzle of the plan. But how did they fit in?

Heads she must have laid there, grappling fresh with all the problems which so worried her. Downstairs she heard the clock chime eleven, half-past, twelve.

Then, surprisingly, Joan spoke: "Are you cold?" "Why no?" Babe said. "Are you?" "Oh course I'm not, father!" And Babe jumped. "I'm young—able to stand the cold—but you here—in this wretched hotel. And look at the fire. Oh, father, if only things would come right for you again!"

Babe caught her breath, for she realized what was happening now. Joan was talking to someone in her sleep—and that someone her father.

Her father! That father was the Ralph Fenwick who had disappeared from human ken for the last five years—the man against whom a warrant had been issued.

Babe lay perfectly still. Joan's voice, low and compassionate, came again.

"No, father, not yet. But I feel I'm getting nearer the truth. It's difficult, with so many people in the house—"

Again Babe breathed heavily. What was Joan talking about? What hours? What was the wretched hotel to which she referred, and in which, in her dreams, she was talking to her father. It came as a little shock to Babe when she realized what must be going on in Joan's mind. That Joan, the girl with the best memory by day was, by some queer trick of subconsciousness given back that memory while she slept, and lived again the life she had lived before her accident. The Joan Babe knew remembered no father—remembered nothing at all.

Not for a long time did Joan speak again. She moved restlessly in her sleep, however. Babe lay on, tingling, sans alert.

All was quiet, very still, in the room. Then all at once, by Babe's side, there was a movement. It was Joan. Babe half-awakened, half-startling out a hand, and then, as she realized what was happening, withdrawing it with a quick intake of breath. For, very deliberately, Joan had thrown the bedclothes aside; stiffly was sitting up in bed, jerkily stepping out of it.

Babe's heart missed a beat. "She's walking in her sleep," she told herself.

Then, abruptly, was what was happening. Upright and rigid Joan walked round the bed. Her eyes were closed, her arms held out before her. Towards the door she moved, opened it, and passed through. In a moment Babe was out of bed, had slipped on her dressing-gown.

She must follow. Supporting Joan slipped—

Down the corridor the girl went. Babe, creeping after her, held her breath as she reached the head of the

stairs. Unfalteringly, unhesitating, however, Joan stepped down them, swept across the wide hall towards the cold window, and there, stoopingly, waited. No motion was she that she looked in her white nightdress like a figure carved from ice.

Babe, awed and wondering, crept towards her.

She did not speak. She had heard somewhere that it was dangerous to awaken sleep-walkers. But she looked at her, a little startled to observe the strained, concentrated expression on her face.

Outside the moon, in full glory, shone like an illuminated disc in the heavens, filling the grounds with blue shadows and gleaming stars.

A chill draught swept through the hall, bringing a shiver to Babe's frame. Joan, however, seemed not to notice it.

And then sharply Babe swung round. Outside there came a sound—a faint tapping noise like the beating of a stick upon the ground. Again she gazed wildly at Joan. Her features had changed. There was a softness, a sort of eager expression on her face. For just a moment a quiver of joy seemed to run through her frame.

And then as Babe gazed into the moon-bathed clearing came a figure, bent, moving with a shuffling gait, and tapping the ground softly with a stick as it came. Something like a line came from Joan's lips. For one second her face seemed radiant. Slowly she lifted her head.

And tap, tap, tap! Three times her knuckles made contact with the window-pane.

Babe held her breath. It seemed uncanny, somehow.

Then she saw the man outside. He was lifting his stick. Tap! it came upon the ground, and still again—tap, tap! Joan, amazingly, turned upon her feet, and, as if content, moved stiffly away.

But this time Babe did not follow.

Her eyes were glued to the figure outside. As Joan had turned, so he now turned, and, tapping his stick to his feet, made off towards the dense thicket of shadows that marked the shrubbery.

Then the shadows swallowed him up. Babe turned—only in the moment of turning, to half again.

What was that? Back she flattered towards the window. For, from the direction of the shrubbery, came a shrill scream. Just once it rang out upon the night air.

With every atom of concentration Babe moved, now pressed against the pane. Silent and motionless was the shrubbery. No life, no movement, there seemed to be. She laughed a little shakily at her own nervous fears, telling herself that she was a little fool to upset herself so.

Should she investigate?

For a long, long time—until she found herself shaking in the cold—Babe remained there. But nothing ever happened. All was still.

When she again coughed her room Joan was back again in bed, sleeping peacefully, a happy smile upon her face.

"But I mean, you girls—"

But nobody was paying any attention to what Elizabeth Gertrude Hunter had said to say.

For it was next morning at Missions Minor. And what a morning, to be sure! A sprinkling of powdered snow lay on the ground, which had frozen hard and solid in last night's temperature. A weak and watery sun, smiling benevolence, poured from behind a bank of heavy cloud.

The mystery of the disordered rooms was forgotten for the while. Sitting, as Clara Trevina said, was the order of the day. Off with a rush they went to find their seats, leaving Hattie Hunter—who really only wanted to know if her one-pound note had been found—to waste her sweetness upon the dowry air. Hattie, at least, had no idea of sitting. Hattie was "broken," and Hattie very badly wanted to go into the village, if only to spend the one-pound note she hadn't got.

"Cats!" she muttered.

She drifted disconsolately to the scene. The "cats" meaning, happy, merry, and bright, were disappearing to their rooms. Babe went with Joan—Joan, who really looked much brighter on this gloomy morning, although there was still that strained far-away look in her eyes. Babe had said nothing of what had happened to her last night. Neither had she said anything to her class. To have done so would have seemed, somehow, like breaking a confidence.

"Happy, Joan?" breathed Babe.

"Oh, Babe, you! You're all so brightly kind!"

Babe laughed again. She found her seats; found, too, a pair for Joan. Down the stairs the merry party clustered, ruffled, gloved, and coated. In the highest of spirits, and with breath condensing in the crisp air, they set off for the lake which lay beyond the shrubbery, which had an engaged Babe's attention last night.

The shrubbery was reached. Jertily they bent into it. Clara, with a bestirred "Here you all!" set them off on a merry scamper towards the lake which lay at the other side, and off they went. Babe went with the rest.

Until—

"Oh!" she gasped. "You chimney! What for were?"

But the "chimney" were tearing away along the path. Babe, spread-eagled, her feet having caught against a projection in the ground, sat up breathlessly.

And then, as she raised herself, she caught sight of a stick. A white walking-stick it was, with a silver knob at one end. She bent towards it. The stick, half frozen in the ground, told her at once that it had been there for some time. She picked it up.

"A blind man's stick!" she breathed.

A blind man's stick it was. The white ferrule told her that much. She turned it over, examining the queerest little thing as she handled it, recognizing it again as the stick she had seen last night—the stick which had belonged to the man to whom the sleep-walking Joan had signalled. And then, once more, she turned round. What was that?

A cry—somebody to her right!

Some impulse urged Babe to go forward. She plunged into the woods. A rabbit scuttled from beneath her feet. But she could see nothing. She heard nothing. Good! She was just imagining things.

Still—the stick! Would Joan recognize it if she showed it to her? Might it not help in bringing back the memory she had lost?

She moved on towards the lake. The



"Father!"

44 **R**IPPING for skating!"  
"What's he?"  
"We'll take a turn on the lake!"  
"You've said it!"



chairs were there, putting on their shawl. Babe looked around for the mystery girl.

"I say," she said to Babe, "where's Joan?"

"Joan?" Babe shook her head. "I thought she was with you."

"Well, does it look as if she's with me?" Babe asked and stared again.

"Hain't nobody seen her?"

"I saw her in the shrubbery," Denis put in, "just before we started the race, but I haven't seen her since. Call her?"

Babe turned. She lifted her voice. The cry rang vibrantly among the trees, but no answering hail came.

The chairs looked unobtrusive at one another.

"She wouldn't have gone back to the manor, do you think?" Babe asked uneasily.

Babe shook her head. She felt vaguely worried.

"Well, never mind," she said. "There may be nothing at all to worry about. In any case, just to make sure, I'll slip back. Won't be long!"

She waved her hand. Off she trotted, the stick in her possession. In ten minutes she had reached the manor. There she learned the worst. Joan had not come back. Joan, apparently, had vanished!

**A**T THAT moment Joan was in the power of her enemies.

Easy enough it had been for them. Just before boisterous Clara had raised her challenge, Joan had seen a lurking figure in the trees. Joan had halted. She had seen a hand beckoning toward her; had heard her own name softly uttered.

No thought of danger had been in Joan's mind as she had left the party and curiously gone forward. Next moment she had been seized, bound, and blindfold. She had been taken to a room—a dark, unwindowed room, whose ponderous stone walls were like those of a prison. Now two people were with her—a man and a woman. The man spoke.

"Where's that plan?"

Joan stared.

"What plan?"

"The plan those girls are working on!" the man hissed. "One of those has it—which one I don't know. But you, as their friend and helper, must. Who has it?"

"I don't know."

"Don't tell him!"

"But I tell you," Joan cried. "I do not know!"

The man and the woman looked at each other. The woman bent forward.

"You go speaking the truth?"

"Yes."

Again she glanced at her companion. The man bit out a savage exclamation.

"You're their friend?" he challenged.

"Yes," Joan retorted spiritlessly. "I am their friend! But I don't know which of them has the plan. And I wouldn't tell you if I did!"

The eyes through the slit glared at her. Then suddenly the man took a step forward. Roughly, almost savagely, he caught at her wrist, jerking her to her feet.

"Show her!" he snapped at the woman.

The woman nodded. She strode to the wall. Some secret spring she touched; there came a faint whirring sound. One great slab of wall, about a foot square, swung as open an exit, disclosing a walled chamber.

"Look!" the man hissed.

And Joan, looking, stood for a moment like a girl warned to stand. Far at the other side of that chamber, lying on a pile of sacks, was a man—

a man whose face was prematurely pitted with deep, criss-crossing lines of worry; a man whose eyes stared back at her—dull, glazed eyes; eyes that could not see; eyes that were not even aware of her presence. A bowed, bent, broken figure, terribly smothering one side of his face with long, delicate fingers. Joan stared; for a moment she swung upon her feet. What was this? What—

Some huzzar seemed to be beating in her head; some groping, invisible hand seemed to be searching among the fibres of her brain. And then suddenly it happened.

In one staggering flash she saw! That shabby memory which had seemed for ever gone came flashing back. She took one staggering step forward.

"Father!" she cried.

The trap shut, blocking out the view.

"No," the man said, "your memory's gone, but you recognized him—oh, Joan Pembury! You know who he is, and you know," he added threateningly, "that he is wanted by the police!"

Joan's lips quivered.

"How did he come here?"

The man laughed.

"My business!" he said. "But here, Joan Pembury, he is going to stop! For five years he has dodged the law! For five years the police have held a warrant for his arrest! Well, there he is—in my power, to do as I like with! Now, then, Joan Pembury, listen to this! Find out who has that plan and hand it over, or I give your father up to the police!"

Joan stared. She was shaking.

"But how—"

"How is your affair?" the man told her grimly. "I want that plan! You're their friend. They trust you; they'll confide in you. Once you know, get hold of it; and when you do, leave the rest to me! Well, now you can go! Blindfold her!"—to the woman.

Joan stood still, her mind reeling. Gingly her breath was coming and going, her mind tearing with a million thoughts. Her father! Her father here, in the power of enemies!

One intention and one thought only was dominating her as, blindfolded, she was led away—that was to rescue her father as soon as possible.

In silence and misery, she suffered herself to be led. Twist and turn, twist and turn! Then at last she was halted; the handgags removed.

"Now go!" the man said grimly, and put a torch into her hand. "Take the tunnel immediately facing you! And don't forget!" he added threateningly.

He and the woman retreated.

Joan breathed deeply. She flashed the torch around. She was still underground, still in a secret passage—rather, at the junction of half a dozen of them. Ahead—a long, long way ahead—at the end of the passage but perpendicular had pointed out, she saw a pale glimmer of light.

But Joan gave it no more than a curious glance. She walked until the footholds of her capotes had died in the distance, then deliberately she turned, plunging into the maze of passages to her rear.

She was going to rescue her father!



Behind the Portrait

**N**O look!"

"No!"

"What are we to do?"

Very worried were the expressions on the faces of Barbara

Beffern & Co. as, after lunch, they foregathered in the hall of Marlinton Manor.

The whereabouts of Joan was still their problem. Joan now had been missing over four hours.

Lancel had come and gone. Tom was almost blue. High and low they had searched, with increasing uneasiness. Of Joan there was no sign, however.

Even the mystery of the plan had taken second place in the guests' anxiety for their absent chum.

Only the general, indeed, was unaffected. Heavily he was relieved. Blandly he said that he did not trust the girl. Blandly he declared that she was up to no good. He went so far as to decline to believe in her loss of memory, and suggested she had gone off on her own accord. But Babe was filled with uneasiness.

Something had happened to Joan! She had fallen into the clutches of her enemies again!

"I believe," she said now, "that Joan's come to some harm. No; wait a minute, everybody! Listen to me! It's pretty certain, isn't it, that somebody is working against us—that somebody is also working against Joan? Joan wouldn't desert us of her own accord. And how could she go anywhere, not knowing who she is even? I've told you about that spy I thought I heard in the shrubbery. From that moment, apparently, no one's seen Joan. What does it seem to indicate?"

An uneasy silence.

"Well, I sure figure it seems she's fallen into the hands of her enemies again," Lella Carroll ventured, after a silence of some seconds.

"Exactly."

"But how," Marcella wanted to know, "does that help us?"

Babe sat her lips. Significantly she flung a glance towards the picture of Clara Pembury.

"I've an idea," she said. "It's not a great one. I haven't told you girls yet, but I'm going to now. You remember yesterday, when Joan said that she saw an eye looking at her from that picture? I, too," Babe stated quietly, "have seen that eye!"

In incredulous amazement, they stared at her.

"It's quite certain," Babe went on, "that three or four people are up to us. How often they spy, I can't say. On the other side of that picture, there must be some sort of secret passage?"

Mabel caught her breath as she divined the intention in her leader's words.

"And you suggest—"

"I suggest," Babe said, "that we find that secret passage, here and now! Once we find it—by then we've had got to arrange to keep watch. Sooner or later, the people who use that passage are bound to come along again. Then—"

"We collar them?" Clara decided, with satisfaction.

"That's the idea!"

And thereupon a hunt for the secret passage was frantically embarked upon. Fortunately, the hall was empty save for themselves. Babe, climbing on a chair, examined the eyes of the picture intently. Gingly she felt over the face; pressed her fingers on the painted eyes. Then she gave an exclamation.

"I see!"

"Well!"

"The canvas under the eyes is harder than the rest. It feels—"

Babe broke off. And then, suddenly seized with an idea, she pressed her fingers on one of the eyes, sliding it sideways. The eye disappeared, disclosing an almost-giddy slit.

"Oh, my giddy Aunt Euphemia!" gasped Clara.

If anyone had any doubt about Babe's story then, that doubt was once and for ever squashed.

But they did not find the secret passage which ran behind the panel. It took them another hour to discover that, indeed, again it was Babe who found it—Babe, remembering the labyrinth that ran from the secret panel in old Mr. and Mrs. Lester's room, and still carrying a vague plan of them in her mind, first entering the labyrinth by means of the panel in the Lecturers' room—the Lecturers, most fortunately, being out—and then tracking back. By the simple method of leaving the eye-glass open, so that the light would filter in through the darkness, and as guide chess, the passage was explored at last.

"Well, here we are!" Babe exclaimed as she peered through the slot into the hall. "Now, wait a minute!" And, seized with a sudden thought, she ran her hand over the woodwork, thrilled as she found a depression in the panel and pressed. The doors started as a section of the wood quietly telescoped inward into the wall.

"Go!" Another secret entrance!" Lella breathed.

Another secret entrance it was, leading directly into the hall, just by the side of the Grace Penning picture. Babe closed the aperture. In the darkness the chimes, heralding with excitement, stood.

"Well, what now?" Clara began to inquire, to be interrupted immediately by a warning, "Hush!" from Mabel Lynn.

"Hush!" Somebody's coming!"

"Go speak!" thrilled Marcella.

"Wait for 'em and collar them!" Clara controlled.

"Hush!"

Then, in pitch darkness, they stood. Babe, breathing quickly with excitement, stepped forward to the panel again, and, as she did so, struck something with her foot, which gave out a faint metallic ring. She stooped. Thinking, in that moment, that it was something she herself had dropped, she picked it up, and swiftly peeped it into her pocket. Then, with her finger on the depression that opened the secret panel, she waited.

The chimes held their breath.

For that moment was coming, there could be no doubt, for now, along the corridor, they heard steps, a voice. The voice of a man! And another voice. A girl's. Then, from far off, they saw a flickering beam of a torch flash on, close, twice. Blackness again! The footsteps came on!

"Get ready!" Clara whispered.

Suddenly they waited. Babe was thrilling. In another moment, she told herself, the mystery would be solved, at least, as far as the secret picture of Missions House were concerned. At last they would have the answer to one series of riddles that had perplexed them.

With strained ears, hardly daring to breathe, they stood.

Now! Now and nearer! Everything was very, very still. Again just once the torches flashed, a circle of pale yellow, which showed that the battery was on the point of springing. Through the panels Babe heard the general's suspicious voice, heard her own father's voice whispering. Then—

"Now!" cried Clara.

And in a moment—upstart!

With one accord, Barbara & Co. launched themselves on the two who had huddled into their midst, and in a moment the secret passage was a scene of terrific confusion.

Thus came a gasp, a scream. Quick as thought, Babe flung open the secret

panel, and the general, wheedling voice, gave a start that almost overwhelmed him. Then Clara and her chums launched themselves through the panel.

"We've got 'em!" Clara howled.

"Hey! Hey! Got 'em? Who have you got?"

"The spider—the schemer, sir."

"What? What?"

"We—we laid in wait for them in the passage," Babe gasped. "We—"

And then she turned, and with the general, gazed at the straggling swatches of humanity that poured through the panel.

"Egad! Egad!" he gasped. "Wh—dash it, girls, let them get up! Let them get up!"

The girls parried breathlessly. Two figures, gasping and breathless, dazedly tottered to their feet. One was an old man, shabby and shaken, his lips working, his long, wavy hair and beard in disorder. He gazed at the air with a penitent, helpless motion, proclaiming his blindness.

But the other—

Babe felt her cheeks turn white, felt herself swaying on her feet as she beheld her.

For the other—dismal, her eyes brimming in her white and tragic face, quivering in every limb—was the girl they had hoped to save. The girl to whose account they had risked so much. It was Jean!



Triumph for Babe

"JOAN, have you nothing to say?"

Babe asked breathlessly.

Jean's lips compressed.

"Nothing, beyond what I have already said," she answered, in a low voice.

"And you expect us to believe that?" the general roared. "You expect us to believe that you were kidnapped by some mysterious ruffian? That you found this old man, and, having got lost in the passages, you were trying to find your way out again?" He glared. "Too thin—too thin!" he said. "I don't believe it! I don't believe a word of it! However, go and fetch the police!"

Jean gulped.

"Oh, sir, please, no!"

"However, do as you are told!" the general roared. "Take the car. And you miss—" And in the hall he faced Jean grimly. "I don't pretend," he went on, "to know the nature of the game you've been playing, but, as you won't tell me, you'll tell the police. For the last fortnight you've haunted this house. You've scared my guests. You've made yourself a nuisance! Your starvin', if they discovered any sense, never took me in for a moment. And at last we find you, practicing a new game, with this old man as your accomplice!"

There was a breathless, damaged silence. Babe gazed helplessly, hopelessly, at the wretched girl. Very still, very upright, Jean sat, her face as white as the cloth which had been laid on the table for tea. Her father, though nobody knew his identity at this moment, sat beside her, a broken, tragic figure, old beyond his years.

It wasn't Babe's fault they had come to this. Babe had only tried to help. But, oh, goodness, Babe was thinking, if only she and her chums had acted with less impetuosity. The real villain, whoever they were, were as far

from being discovered as ever! The name of the girl they were trying to help, if named, was ruined. Who was the old man? Why did Jean refuse to speak?

"Oh, help!" groaned Clara, when the chimes had forgotten in Babe's room. "Of all the brain waves! Yet, what the diabolical was she doing in that secret passage?"

"And who," Lella wanted to know, "is the old boy?"

Babe did not reply. Without thinking, she had plunged her hand into her pocket. It fumbled upon something cold, hard, metallic. Abstractedly she pulled it out, abstractedly she gazed at it. And for a moment she stopped dead, staring at it.

A brooch—a little gold filigree brooch—not with a single enamel. But she knew it! She recognized it! And all at once the truth burst upon her in a flash of blinding light, sending a rush of flaming colour surging to her cheeks.

"That brooch! It was not Jean's! It did not belong to any of the chimes. Yet it had been found in the passage, behind the picture, and had obviously been dropped there by someone—some former visitor to that secret passage. Babe tingled.

She said nothing to her chums at that moment. She felt she wanted time to think things over. Next time, she told herself, there must be no mistake, no mistake at all. Outside there was the sound of the wheels of a car. The chimes looked at each other.

"The police," breathed Clara.

But Babe smiled.

"Don't worry," she said. "No, wait a minute. I've a feeling that things are going to come all right, and we've going to get them right. And—"

As they all stared at her, she turned to Lella. "Lella, have you got that plan?"

Lella handed it to Babe.

"I'm working on something," Babe said quietly. "Listen! We all believe that Jean told the truth as far as it goes! Now, wait a minute. The people who are after this treasure are afraid we might stumble upon the clue and get there ahead of them. Well, I've got an idea. If it pans out, it should lead us to the discovery of the real villain. Now, supposing," she added shrewdly, "these people felt we had discovered the secret? Supposing they knew that we were going to search for the treasure, say, at midnight to-night. What would they do?"

"Well, not being blessed with my nimble brain, Barbara, but working it out just as an ordinary human being, I should say they'd try to get there before us," Clara said.

"Exactly," Babe smiled. "That's all!" And by their beaded exclamations she unfolded the plan again. "Now, all we've got to do is to solve this mystery," she said as she studied it. "And—here, wait a minute! Wait a minute!"

"What?"

"I think," Babe breathed, "I've got it." Suddenly, Babe was sinking with excitement. "See the numbers—come to—see! See the number of lines in the verse—ten. Just one short. Now,"

Babe said, "take the first letter of the first line."

"Well, that's 'W,'" Clara said.

"Exactly."

"Now the second of the second line."

"A."

"And the third of the third line—"

"T."

They blinked.

"Don't you see," Babe breathed, "It's coming out. Now the fourth, 'E'!

Now the fifth, 'R'!"

"Why, it's a word, 'Water'!" shrilled Fay.

"Now the next. Please! 'T,' then 'O,' then 'W,' now 'K.' Water (you—Water Tower." Babs almost shrieked. "That must refer to the old Well Tower. You—look—'R' is the tenth letter in the sixth line, too!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"They blinked."

"Now read it again! See!" Babs cried eagerly. "The seventh beam. That must refer to the old Well Tower itself. The well is underground, so it can't refer to a beam of the roof or wall. You strike upon the seventh beam. And look again! See—one of these knots is filled in—that must be the place we tap these things. Girls, we've got the secret! The old Water Tower! The seventh beam!"

"Hush!" she added suddenly. And she wheeled at the door opened and said old Mr. Lester peered in.

"Ahem!" He blinked over the assembly. "I hope I'm not interrupting," he said, "but, well, the general wants you! You seem very excited!" he added, glancing curiously at the chair in Babs' hand.

Babs laughed excitedly. "And we've reason to be," she returned. "Oh, Mr. Lester—Marjorie, shut the door, will you? Oh, my goodness, I'll burn if I don't tell you the news! But it's in strict confidence, mind!" she added authoritatively. "We've found the secret of the plan."

"How my dear! You really believe in that document?"

"And you mean to say you really know where the treasure is?"

"We do—" Babs laughed gaily, while her cheeks flushed, vaguely reminded at her mood. "In the Well Tower—in the old well shaft," Babs added. "But not a word, Mr. Lester, please. We're going to search for it ourselves—to-night, at midnight, just to prove to the general that he's all wrong! And—she passed breathlessly—"we were hoping you would come with us!"

He laughed a little.

"That's all very interesting, and I must thank you for the compliment, my dear. But you forget my age. I am afraid that I really must decline your invitation, well except, though it is. Well, the general is still waiting. Will you go now, Miss Barbara?"

He smiled around and nodded at Babs, smiled, too. Clara smiled.

"Well, of all the first-class cheek! What do you want to go and spill the beans to him for? And fancy asking the old chap to come—"

But Babs, for answer, merely wished one eye.

They went below to find the old general pacing the hall and moodily frowning. There was no sign of Joan and the old blind man.

"Ahem! Ahem!" The general fingered his collar. "Well—well, well, they've gone!" he said dejectedly.

"Yes, grandpa, I see that. But you don't seem pleased!"

"Pleased! Pleased, dash me!" He blew out his cheeks. "And what chance have I to be pleased!" he muttered. "I'm just a dot! A fool! I didn't intend the police to clap them in gaol. I was fed-up with that girl Joan and I wanted her removed from my premises. Now—his shoulders drooped—"I've sent her and her father to prison."

"The father—?" Babs cut in quickly. "The father—yes, Ralph Pembury," the old man started. "Joan was Joan Pembury, his daughter, the people who really own this manor. That dashed detective-inspector who came here recognized the old man at once as the

Ralph Pembury for whom a warrant was in existence. How was I to know that when the fool girl wouldn't open her lips!"

The chairs stared at him in wide-eyed silence. Babs found herself thrilling. So she had been right! That was Joan's secret!

Now the general knew the story, there was not a more remarkable man in all the world. The girls listened in the deepening dismay as he told them how Ralph Pembury had been stricken with blindness; how, for years, he had lived in a tumble-down cottage on the edge of his own estate; how Joan had ministered to him and had attended him; how, in the hope of finding the treasure of William Pembury, she had hidden herself in the manor, Harrowed—with General Redburn the most harrowed among them. Privately he had always maintained a belief that Ralph Pembury was not guilty of the charge levelled against him.

But now, he asked with a groan now, could he prove that? Everything that Ralph Pembury possessed had gone in his financial smash. To fight his case in the courts would have required many—thousands of pounds. He hadn't got the money. His one and only hope of getting the money was to find the Pembury treasure.

"You believe Joan now then, grandpa?" Babs asked him.

"Her? Oh, yes."

"And you believe," Babs asked, "that there are other people after this treasure?"

"Hush, hush! Yes, I suppose so!" "Then—" And here Babs threw a quick glance round. "Grandpa," she asked seriously, "will you do something for me. I don't think, even now, that all is lost, and I've got an idea we may kill two birds with one stone. You'd

like Pam and her father to have this money and bend out their accounts at the same time?"

He stared at her. "Well, how is that—?" "Will you do as I ask?" "If," he said gravely, "it will help those poor wretches, I'll do anything." "Then," Babs said, while he frowned in punishment, "bring Brewster to the Well Tower at half-past ten tonight. I think," Babs added quickly, "that this time I can promise you a real surprise. All you others—except Bessie—will you come along as well? That's all!"

"Well, what is this surprise of yours coming off, Barbara? Egad, we've been here half an hour already!"

"Patience, grandpa," Babs counselled severely.

The general granted. Brewster, hugging his blindness—fortunately not loaded—Babs had seen to that—diverged. It was very cold in the Well Tower; very dark, too.

There was silence. The general muttered beneath his breath. But Babs was tingling. In the darkness her eyes were shining with the tumultuous excitement that possessed her. Under her feet the boards which now covered the well of other days cracked as she moved.

In a corner of the tower, screened by a wall of old stone behind which they had hidden, she and the general and her chosen stood. In Babs' hand there rested a powerful torch, her finger trembling on the button. For another five minutes there was silence. Then from Lewis:

"Say, somebody's coming!"

Somebody was. In the darkness they all heard distinctly a soft rattle, accom-



"JOAN!" Babs called at the top of her voice. "Joan—where are you?" But there came no answer, Joan, the mystery girl, had disappeared—suddenly, strangely.

paried by shuffling footsteps. Now, from the passage in front of them, they saw the swarming beam of a flashlight, caught the sound of a grating voice.

"Hull!" Babe breathed.

She stood rigid, the blood beating in her ears. The footsteps approached—nearer, nearer. Now they stopped. For a moment the torchlight swept the cases behind which they were ambushed. Then a voice:

"All right, I think. Let's get to work. The wall's under these boards. Give me that lever!"

Came the sound of rapping woodwork. A grating gasp. Then a woman's voice:

"Go on, Gregory!"

"By god!" breathed the general.

"That voice!"

Everybody was quivering now. From Browne came a low "Crash!" And another heard was wrenched from its moorings. At the same moment:

"Stand still!" cried Babe.

And out of her hiding-place, with a bound, she sprang, flashing her torch into the faces of the two figures who stood in the tower.

Two startled exclamations sounded as one. Quick as thought the general sprang to the opening of the corridor, blocking it completely. Out came Clara's torch. The treasure-hunters, caught by surprise, faced round. A man and a woman they were, both dressed in long black cloaks, each wearing a mask.

"Stand still!" the general barked.

"Breaster, cover them!"

And while Brewster, shaking at the knees, waved his bell-mouthed and empty blunderbuss in their direction the general stepped forward. His hand went up. The mask disappeared from the face of the man. Simultaneously everybody gasped a shriek.

"Mr. Lester!"

Mr. Lester it was—no longer the bent and stooping old man, but an alert, muscular-looking figure deprived of his spectacles and the gray wig he had

worn. In a moment Babe had stepped forward; had plucked the mask from the features of the second figure.

"Mrs. Lester!"

But a new Mrs. Lester! A Mrs. Lester, whose white wig, partly dislodged by the jerk of the mask, had slipped aside. The general heaved a deep breath.

"So," he said, "this is how you have been abusing my hospitality, is it! This is why your car broke down so conveniently outside my house before Christmas—so that you two could get admittance to fool and fall and deceive me! You were after the treasure all the time, were you! Trying to rob Joan Pembury and play ghosts at the same time?"

"Barbara," he added, "I congratulate you. Are these the victims you expected?"

"They are," Babe smiled.

"But how did you know that they would come?"

Babe laughed.

"That," she replied, "was easy enough. As soon as I was sure they were the real villains—and a brooch of Mrs. Lester's gave me that clue—I just dropped a broad hint to Mr. Lester where the treasure was. There's nothing else to explain, I don't think—except, of course, that the Lesters are not the villains they made out, and, in their anxiety to appear that treasure before us, just fell blindly into my trap. The only other thing," Babe went on, "is to find out now whether there really is treasure under these boards—a fact, I think, which we will establish at once!"

And while the scolding villain, caught out at last, went tied together and gruffly guarded by the general the search for the treasure began.

It was not a long search.

The remaining floorboards were ripped up. The old wall, with its square-mouthed entrance, was disclosed.

Steps had been driven into its sides at intervals, and down these Babe & Co. descended, noting, with a thrill, that as Babe had expected, the walls of the well were built of solid oak beams alternating with layers of heavy stone. At the seventh door Babe passed, flashing her torch upon the beam.

In the right-hand side was the knot—exactly, as indicated in the plan. Three times Babe tapped upon it—once, twice, thrice. Then:

"Oh, my giddy aunt, look!" breathed Clara.

They watched fascinated, holding their breath. There came a rattling sound. Then, as they all stared with goggling eyes, the whole beam fell forward, dropping, with a clank, the length of two great rusty iron chains and clattering with a hollow echo against the wall. A great oblong cavity stood revealed. In that cavity sat an old oak box.

"The treasure!" Babe cheered.

THE TREASURE it was—and what a hoard! Hundreds of gold pieces, several priceless pieces of jewellery, a necklace that must have been worn a king's ransom—a whole heap of uncut and cut diamonds, rubies, and emeralds!

And also a letter, stating that this hoard was left as a legacy, to the Pembury, who should need it, by its owner, William Pembury.

After that—what excitement! What a buzz when the police came for the plotter-in-transit, and when Mrs. Lester, as he had called himself, his real name was Gregory Green! had, during the days of his success, been confidential secretary to Ralph Pembury, and through his association with the mining business had learned the secret of the mine. When, later, Gregory Green and his wife were taken off to goal by the police the general went with them. He came back in an hour—but not alone.

He returned, triumphant, with a shaking and joyfully bewildered old Ralph Pembury, whom he had baited out, and a reluctant and transferrable Joan. That night there were celebrations in Misses Mason's.

And heartiest among the celebrators was the old general, who declared himself, after many apologies, his waning friendship for the real owners of his own home. Unremitting and unlagging in his zeal was the general in the case which came before the Court later—a case which, aided by the Pembury hoard, Mr. Pembury won, stepping out of the court at last a free man, without a stain upon his character. And the general it was who found him the specialist who later restored his eyesight. The general who, most heartily gave up the manner, though his lease had still many years' run. By every means in his power he endeavored to make up for the past.

"Oh, he is wonderful—your grand-father!" Joan happily told Babe. "I adore him for all that he has done for us. But you and your friends, Barbara—"

She suddenly shook her head. "Oh, if I could only tell you what I feel about you!"

But Babe & Co. laughed. They needed no telling. As happy as Joan Pembury were they—happy in the knowledge that she had been restored to her rightful fortunes; happy in the knowledge that they had played so large a part in bringing about justice and at the same time solving the mystery of Misses Mason's.



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## The Morcove Chums' Suspicions of Claire Ferrand Lead Them Into New Adventures in These Exciting Chapters



# HER SECRET AT SWANLAKE

By MARJORIE STANTON



### FOR MY READERS.

**FAM WILLUGHBY** of Morcove School has become a skit-girl in order that she may have time to act as housemaid.

**CLAIRE FERRAND**—a girl who, after being all her life on a sheep station in Australia, has come into a fortune. Glad she is able to settle down in England she is to stay with the Willoughbys in their stately home—Swanlake.

**VIVIANE MUNRO**, having heard of Claire's fortune, schemes to take her place. She meets Claire and tells a plausible story to the effect that the letter is wanted by the police. She represents herself as an amateur detective and offers to help Claire in the red wing at Swanlake until she can clear her name. Claire consents, and Viviane arrives at Swanlake to be welcomed as the real Claire Ferrand. But

**BETTY STANTON**, one of Pam's Morcove friends, is at once suspicious of Viviane. She and another chum—**POLLY LINDY**—persuade Pam to let them stay a night at Swanlake, unbeknownst to Viviane. (See end of.)

### Waiting—and Watching

"**BETTY!** A sudden idea—"  
"What, another, Polly?"  
"Yes!"

They were alone together in the bed-room at Swanlake, under whose ancient roof they would be passing the whole wintry night, unbeknownst to that tricky girl who was only a room or two away from them.

It had struck ten o'clock, and now all the servants had gone to bed. With the master and mistress of the place at present abroad, early hours were being kept at Swanlake. Pam had come upstairs a minute ago, but had gone straight to her bed-room.

She, who was a party to this queer plan of Betty and Polly's spending the night in secret at Swanlake, had wisely refrained from giving them another look-in. But, if they needed her, or she needed them, at any time during the night, contact could be instantly made.

"Here's my idea, Polly," whispered Betty, in the dark bed-room. "We know for a fact that Claire Ferrand is in her

room now. We have heard her giving a faint cough now and then—"

Betty softly interrupted.

"And soon likely the coughing is a hint to Pam, a few doors off, that she—Claire, I mean—did have a cold to-day?"

"Come it is," Polly breathed, in great scorn for the girl who was their suspect. "Oh, she's so artful as they make them! And we're only here to-night because we want, desperately, to find out the reason for all the aridness there has been. So, to make quite sure that we get warning, if she does any creeping out of her room later on, I'm for arranging a little gadget—simple as A B C!"

Betty was glad to have the assurance that it would be as simple as that. She would not have liked the idea of anything complicated.

"All we need to do," Polly explained, "use a reel of black cotton. Tie one end of the cotton to the curtain hook of Claire's door, then bring the thread along to our door and pass it through our keyhole. Then we tie a white towel to one end of the cotton—white, so that it will show up in the dark. The towel will be hanging almost to the door—"

"And when it goes up, we shall know that Claire has opened her door to creep out!" Betty gleefully inferred.

"Splendid, Polly. But where's our reel of cotton to come from?"

They had faint hopes of finding one in this bed-room of theirs, and in any case they did not care to risk clicking on a light, or even using a candle, to enable them to search. For a matter it would be for one of them to creep down, now, to where they knew a needlework basket of Mrs. Willoughby's could be found.

Betty did this, and within five minutes she was back.

"Here we are," one of Polly's ears received the whisper. "Has anything happened whilst I've been away?"

"No. Another cough or two—your dear!"

Polly was very cynical about the suspect's "cough."

After a moment or two of keen listening, the chums opened their door again—just wide enough for one of them to slip out. Another minute, with the

whole great house remaining as silent as the grave, then Betty slipped away.

Her chum, putting her head beyond the doorway, watched with eyes that had become accustomed to the darkness. Betty got to the suspect's closed door, and, without even the faintest sound, tied the cotton-end about the knob.

She came creeping back, paying out the cotton as she took each stealthy retreating step. Breaking the cotton, she threaded the required end through their keyhole.

Then she and Polly closed their door and soon had the cotton drawn in, and the whole covered suspended by it.

Expecting to have thrilling reasons for being about during the night, they had kept on all their day clothes. But now that such a clever signalling device had been rigged up, they felt they could afford to let upon the bed.

The keeping awake and on watch for something to happen—no happen they felt it would—left Betty and Polly with a queer sense of the content to which they were now expecting the girl they knew as Claire Ferrand. Suspecting her of what? To that question they and their chums who were sharing the suspicion could only have answered, unconsciously—

"We don't know!"

All they did know was that Claire Ferrand, whilst making her home at Swanlake, should not have turned out to be the "twister" that she seemed to be.

She, an orphan girl, who had come from Australia in consequence of her being bound to be entitled to a vast fortune, should surely have practiced no deception upon them all. Yet, from the very first, she had failed to ring true.

Steadily the evidence had accumulated against her, of being up to what the chums could only call, "Some game or other!" And what exactly the game was, they were most certainly entitled to find out—if only they could!

Suddenly the white towel began to rise.

Betty and Polly saw it, and instantly

they were off the bed, coming silently foot to foot.

Their hearts beating fast with excitement, on tiptoe Betty and Polly glided across to their own door. The manner had come for action that must be governed by great caution. Above all, there must be—silence!

That shifty girl was on the move now, when she should have been still in bed and even fast asleep. It was a chance to find out, at last, what the trickery was that made her do those things. But, even one too-hasty movement, during the "scenting" after her, and this night's detective work would be more than frustrated.

If the girl found out, now, that she was being kept under observation, then she would be all the more on her guard in the future.

Betty was the one to appreciate her ally's clue and her close night's work the chance. When, unperceived, a few moments later, was all for a creeping out, because she felt certain that the next part had hurried away to the distant east wing, Betty still kept their door shut.

And it was a good thing she did so. Contrary to expectations, Swanlake's youthful guest had not pushed up the bed-room corridor, to go round into that other passage which led to the east wing.

She was even now creeping past their bed-room door. She was tiptoeing towards the main staircase—perhaps to creep first to Pam's door and listen there!

Would she come creeping by again, after satisfying herself that Pam was fast asleep? That was a possibility with which Betty and Polly had to reckon. So they must still wait, and yet—they must not wait too long, or they might miss their chance of tracking the girl during her mysterious activities.

"Oh, gosh!" Polly humed. "Oh, go on now, Betty, anyhow; just an inch or two—"

"No," breathed Betty, still keeping the door shut. "Wait!"

But in the very next moment Betty herself was thinking: "Now!"

She had heard the faint creak of an oak board, somewhere below the landing. The girl had gone—downstairs.

And why she should be doing that, at dead of night—creeping down into the inhabited part of stately Swanlake, instead of to the east wing—it was up to them to find out.

### Vivienne Lies Awake

BETTY quietly opened the door. On tiptoe she and Polly went the way their suspect had gone.

So, in the darkness, they came to the first-floor landing, near which Pam had her bed-room.

Should they go in to her, to have her with them as they creep downstairs?

What with the need for haste, and the dread of making a tell-tale sound, Betty and Polly decided not to touch Pam from her room. They started to go downstairs, taking care to tread away from the centre of each stair, so as to reduce the chance of a board creaking under their weight.

No light had been switched on down below by the girl who was padding in secret about the house. The chimes turned the hall-landing, and then, with the last light to descend, saw the general hall only faintly illumined by the dying light of the fire.

It was like the scene of a play, as viewed from a balcony seat.

Clatter—crash—came a sudden great noise from the kitchen region, and

the two chimes were instantly at a standstill. They gazed at each other in perplexity. No doubt, now, as to what had become of their suspect. She had just knocked over something accidentally in the kitchen! But what, having done that, was she likely to do next?

Polly must have quickly decided that they had better rush down to the hall and hide behind some piece of furniture. But Betty's shrewd mind could think of a big reason for a hasty return to the bed-room. She tagged at Polly to get her to slip back upstairs with her.

"But why?" Polly protested, as soon as they were behind the closed door of their room. "We could have hidden ourselves down there, and then, when the girl had—"

"You're forgetting the servants!" Betty quickly whispered. "Half a dozen of them may go down, wondering what the noise was about. And if one of them, whilst looking around, had blundered upon us—then Claire would have had to prove that we're in the house to-night!"

"Gosh!"

Very evidently, Polly had not thought of that.

After a moment they heard "Miss Tricky" coming upstairs again, with no attempt at stealth. Her footfall was audible; then it ceased, and they heard her speaking outside Pam's door.

"You're awake, Pam, dear?"

"Yes, Claire—why?"

Pam was answering quite calmly, as if she attributed the recent noise to some innocent cause.

"It was bound to disturb you, of course," Betty and Polly heard their suspect speak again. "So sorry, Pam! I went down to get some lemon-juice for my tooth, and in the kitchen I fell over the cat."

"Can I do anything, Claire?"

"Oh, no, thanks! Hope you get to sleep again. I expect some of the servants are awake, too—noisy luck!"

Polly nudged Betty, who gritted her teeth. No doubt it was the very worst luck for Miss Tricky that she had come to grief like that, downstairs. Not again, this side of midnight, anyhow, would she be able to venture down.

They heard her pad past their own room, and then all was silence again.

After a couple of minutes, Betty whispered her claim:

"You try to get some sleep now, Polly. I'll keep awake. There'll be nothing doing for a long while yet, so we can afford to take turns and turn about at keeping watch."

VIVienne MURDER, the girl who was daintily posing as Claire Ferrand, took her stand at the window of her bed-room.

Nothing more to be done this side of midnight, at the earliest. So she was waiting, fowels calling herself a cherry fool for having made such a loud disturbance downstairs.

Pam, too—she might lie awake for a good while; and she slept in a room quite close to the staircase-landing. Madam, to try again until after midnight.

But the suspense! To-night she had the real Claire Ferrand under lock and key. It had come to that at last. That girl had reached the conclusion that she was being tricked, duped, and it had been quite impossible to persuade her to stay in hiding any longer.

She would even have been showing herself to Pam and the servants hours ago, only there had been the chance to

serve her treacherously, and that chance she had seized.

What was the girl doing now, knowing herself to be a locked-in prisoner, in that crypt-like place under the raised chapel in the park?

Vivienne Murmur's anxious eyes were vainly trying, in the darkness, to make out that crumbling mass of masonry which had offered itself as a fresh hiding-place for her days, when that girl was still willing to stay out of everybody's way at Swanlake.

Nothing of the vain could Vivienne see now. Standing at her window, she had only a mental picture of the place—so perfectly suited to the purpose to which she had put it at last!

The real Claire Ferrand was a spirited girl. It she had proved, in the first instance, rather easily glibly, that had only been because she had never before encountered villainy.

She was a straightforward, good-hearted girl, who expected others to be just the same. The moment she knew for certain that her confidence had been abused, and that she had been wickedly victimized—in such a moment she must have become ready to put up a good fight for herself.

And that beautiful moment had come—only a few hours ago.

It had been all very well for her, Vivienne Murmur, to speak through, reassuringly to the doped girl, directly the crypt door had been treacherously closed upon her and locked. But would her victim submit tamely to such treatment?

"Sorry, but you needn't be afraid," Vivienne had said. "I'll not let you come to harm. Only you must stay there for a bit—"

By these words, she had implied that she would do everything for the comfort of her imprisoned dupes. Food and warmth would be supplied. Yet the fact remained: Claire Ferrand was likely to make desperate attempts to get out.

At any moment sounds might shatter the night silence, to be heard by many a wretched inmate of the mansion.

Claire Ferrand was shut away in a place at some distance from the house, and between her and freedom there were two oak doors. There was an inner door, at the bottom of some steps which led down to the wash-kitchen chamber under the picturesque ruin;

then there was the outer door at the top of the steps. This latter was much decayed, being exposed to the weather, but at least it still served to deaden any sounds made by anybody in the crypt.

Even so, imagining Claire Ferrand to be desperate enough—and she was almost bound to be that—she might be heard trying to get out.

Vivienne Murmur sighed hard to herself, turning away from the window at last, with some idea of lying down for a little while.

"If only I could have gone out to her last now—it might have made such a difference!" So the schemer's glibly mind was running. "My sitting here—bringing her plenty of food, and more spirit for the store—yes, it might have served to keep her quiet. I could have told her again not to have the slightest fear—"

But there had been that disastrous falling over the cat—the wretched creature! To think how carefully one had gone downstairs, how well one had seemed to be getting on, and then—that cat in the dark kitchen.

Vivienne threw herself upon her bed, to lie there in constant dread of a sound in the night that would surely

mean the end to all her audacious scheming.

Fifty pounds was all that she had gained, so far, as the result of her clever stepping into the road Claire's shoes, down here at Swanlake.

Let the imposture last a couple more days and nights, and then there could be a getaway with the Ferrand jewels, and they were worth thousands! The lawyer up in London was going to get them from the bank and have them sent down to Swanlake.

But everything, now, hang by a hair. It was not even necessary for the road Claire to escape, she had only to be heard, trying to escape, and then—

"Prison for me, for a coat," Virginius Mearns moodily realized, lying upon her bed in the dark bed-room. "The police will have me up for it, sooner or later. I know what the police are!"

In spite of her state of dread, she dozed at last. It was a thing she never could have done, at such a time of crisis, but here had been broken nights ever since she started the risky life of deception. On the verge of absolute sleep, she was feeling at once thankful and surprised that complete silence did continue.

And then, suddenly, she lifted herself upon an elbow, heart in mouth. Oh, what was that!

That sound, at last, coming not from the chapel ruins in the park, but from the east wing!

**Found!**

"S. V. Polly—wakeup, dear!"  
"Hi! Yes, I know," Betty's excited whisper was answered by her chum, in a whisper as deep.

"A noise—"

"From the east wing, Polly!"

"Gosh! Sort of falling-about sound, wasn't it!"

"Yes! Yet I don't say how it can be Claire, away from her room again. Look, the towel hasn't lifted again!"

Betty, more than an hour ago, had crept out to set the "alarm signal" once again, by means of the towel and curtain.

She and Polly got off the bed quite quietly, and as they did so—the towel jerked upward.

"See that!" Polly breathed. "Then Claire has this very moment come out of her room! But since she's been in her room up till now—who made the noise in the east wing?"

"Somebody else," Betty gave the obvious answer, adding:

"As there has been somebody else—all along! We thought so; now we know for a fact. Come on!"

There was never any need to say "Come on!" twice to Polly. Now she simply dashed across, with Betty, to their bed-room door. Both drama felt it to be a time for lightning-speed action.

Never mind if they did have to disclose themselves to their servant. They must get after her! For, wasn't it curious! Lying awake in her room, she also had heard that strange sound just then, and had taken alarm. She knew its meaning, as they did not—and so now she was fitting away to the east wing.

She knew nothing of their presence in the house to-night. But she would be expecting Pam to come away from her room in weariness at this midnight disturbance.

Betty whipped open the bed-room door, and she and Polly rushed forth. They had switched on a light, and sufficient of it leaked from the doorway

to relieve the darkness of the long corridor.

Their eyes flew the way they intended to set off at a run—up the corridor, to get to the east wing.

And then they saw—"Miss Tricky," looking back in a frightened way as she herself ran in that direction.

"Stop!" Betty called out sharply.

She stopped—as if a shot had been fired to bring her to a standstill.

At the same instant, Pam came out of her bed-room. There were electric switches, wiring the corridor, back there at the landing. Pam switched them on—suddenly.

Then she was with Betty and Polly, saying not a word, but smiling as she went with them up the corridor to confront Miss Tricky.

That girl was wild-eyed, and her lips moved as if they were trying to emit cursing words, but not a syllable came.

Fully dressed, as were the three Mornings, she stood looking at those girls in an "at-bay" manner.

"Yes, well, Claire!" Pam spoke, after a moment of most dramatic silence. "I think the lawyer will have to be told about you. My people are away, and—"

"What do you mean! I—I don't understand you, Pam! Talking as if I were to blame for—for this midnight upset!"

"So you are!" Polly burst in hotly.

"But we're not going to hear about. There's someone in the east wing—"

"Then it's a burglar, as you'd better be careful," was Miss Tricky's panted warning. "Keep back; let some of the servants—"

"You weren't inclined to keep back, just now," Betty caught her up deily. "I seemed to be in a great hurry to get there first!"

"I didn't know what I was doing, after being waked out of my sleep. And the girl whom they know as Claire Ferrand. I suppose you ought to be careful, oughtn't we! This is a lousy house, and—and—" She paused, as if fighting for breath. "Anyway, I'd like to know how you two girls came to be sleeping at Swanlake to-night, when I saw you go away with the others! Is it some trick or what? Don't push past me—"

But they did, feeling that not a moment more must be given to talk. It had become their fear that some unauthorized person in the East wing had even met with an accident, hence the alarm just now.

Betty had been in possession of a pocket torch during the night's strange vigil. She fished it from her pocket and thrust it on whilst scurrying with Polly and Pam to that remote, unused side of the house. "Miss Tricky" was following them—swathed.

Not another sound was heard in the east wing. Nor had they yet heard any voices or noises from the servants' quarters. It was just possible that nobody, belonging to the staff, had been disturbed.

"Try the lumber-room first, Betty!"

"That's the idea, Polly!"

Pam, just behind her (two doors, looked round to see how Miss Tricky was making these remarks. Pam, like Betty and Polly, was remembering; prying and suspicious conduct on the



"LOOK—look!" Polly panted wildly. "There's someone down there—a girl!" And even as she spoke the torchlight shone upon that figure, lying so still at the foot of the steps.

part of this girl had first been noticed in the lumber-room.

It occurred to Pam as if Swanlake's sixteen-year-old guest was lighting hard to enormous fright.

"Sorry, Pam," the girl panted, with a forced smile that was ghastly, "but this old house has rather got on my nerves to-night. W-w-what do you think caused the noise?"

"We're going to find out!"

And Pam faced to the front again, treading after her two chums as they passed into the lumber-room.

Then Betty strode across to the great cupboard which was built into one side of the room.

Whilst she shove the torch into the cupboard, either hanging wide its front doors, Betty stopped inside. She eagerly watched that sliding panel at the back—the one which had been their sensational discovery of a few days ago.

"Now—hark!"

CONCEALED, FOR APPROXIMATELY sake, to stand mute and still whilst her three companions listened eagerly, Vivienne Murray was quaking with dread.

She knew that what the chums were thinking was that the secret passage had been in use to-night, and was being used at this very moment.

They were listening at its uncovered slit in the cupboard, for any sounds that might be audible, caused by somebody bounding away below, who wanted to avoid being discovered.

But for her part Vivienne knew that there would be nobody trying to get away. Just the other way around. If there was anybody at all down there in the secret passages, it would be the real Claire.

And it would mean that she had escaped from the chapel crypt by means of underground passages which linked up with those over here at the house.

Not a sound came up to the listeners, however—and so Vivienne could breathe freely again. Perhaps, by a miracle of luck, she was not to be found out over everything! The noise, just now, had had nothing to do with one's victim, after all!

"You won't go down into the passages, will you?" she suggested, with desperate composure. "Don't stir the wires from somewhere more about the house? Why not take a look at all the other rooms—the attic?"

"You can, if you like," Betty curtly responded. "Go back to your room and get a candle to help you. But we three—we're going down!"

"Rather!" Folly agreed, and at once stepped into the torch-lit room. "We don't know of a way out down below, but—somebody else may?"

"Steps, somewhere—very steep."

That was Pam, as she became the third girl to wriggle into the room.

Again she looked around given a shoulder to poor at "Miss Tricky." That girl was intending to follow; but she would have to wait a moment or two. There was no room for her until Betty and Folly had started to descend the narrow flight of steps.

Warily enough, even though they had the torch to light the way, those two juniors went down. To miss one's footing was to pitch headlong most likely, for the steps were as steep as a scared ladder.

Suddenly Folly gave a horrified cry. "Oh, look—look! There's someone—why, it's a girl—see her!"

"Yes, my goodness!" Betty gasped. "Injured?"

For, the girlish figure which their dawn-shining torch had revealed to them was crouching upon the dank stone floor, at the foot of the steps.

Vivienne, who had quivered aside to let Pam hurry past her, could not bear

to look about the good things that await you next week in *The Schoolgirl*.

Miss Richards begins a new series of long magazine Cliff House Detectives, and I can just assure the readers when it is the most original character in this latest serial—*Who do you think?*

Diana Reynolds-Clarke! Yes, the famous *Friendship of the Fourth* in this new serial, in one of the finest tales Miss Richards has ever written for you. If I don't want you to make it—and that I imagine one of you will! I'm sure you'll all be much too interested to know what Diana is up to now.

Look out for this great New Year's treat under the title of:

"FROM COUNSEL SCHOOL TO CLIFF HOUSE."

Our two serials will continue to thrill you next week, and, of course, there will be another very readable tale starting that indelible character, *Thompson-Looker Lark*.

Patience is starting the New Year in the stric, and you'll love her for my page. So don't miss all these treats. Ask your messenger to keep *The Schoolgirl* for you every week!

#### TWO BRIEF REPLIES.

Miss Richards has passed on to me a letter from an admirer of her stories who signs himself "J. H. Thompson." He regrets that he could not answer the letter through the post, as, of course, it was immediately addressed.

With regard to your query, J. H., you will find the subscription rates of *The Schoolgirl*, and its companion papers at the foot of the last page. The subscription rates to *The Schoolgirl*, are 12s. per annum and 3s. 6d. for six months.

Another letter to which Miss Richards was unable to reply was signed "Captain." Miss Richards thanks you very much for your letter and for your comments. She was delighted to learn how much you enjoy her stories, and she says that she will certainly bear in mind your suggestion regarding the *Four Captain's* leads.

With best wishes

YOUR EDITOR.

to remain on hand down here. She had seen the probable object for which the three Maccosians were going to do their best, and it was Claire—of course it was!

So now the game was up! Unconscious at present, the victimized girl had only to be brought back to her senses, and then she would speak—make a statement.

"I may be more useful, if I go with Pam," the panic-stricken scholar looked at Betty and Folly, as a means for going away.

But she took care not to go up lightly enough to overtake calm Pam, who was running to Miss Swanlake's capable housekeeper, Vivienne, a minute later, was back in her own bed-room, with the door closed—and locked.

In her guilt-stricken state, she could think of only one thing to do now. Flight!

She must be ready to get away by the window, letting herself down by knotted together bedclothes.

There was only half an hour at most, she reckoned, before someone would come knocking at her door, ordering her to come out.

So she must make the best use of what little time she had. The better her preparations, the more things she contrived to take with her—the greater her chance of keeping out of the hands of the police.

Soon, whilst her own feverish, stealthy activities went on, she heard the victim being borne past, in the corridor, to be taken to some room where she could receive further attention.

Now, too, a ear was going away in the night. *Clairifere Jennings* had been sent to fetch the nearest doctor, who could not be rung up at this hour.

The house quieted down after that, but Vivienne felt certain that Pam and her chums, like many of the servants, had no thought of going back to bed. They must be wondering at her having deserted them like this.

Suddenly the bed-room door was tapped gently.

"You in there, Claire?"

Her heart gave a big leap. "Claire!" Then it was not known just that she had no right to that name.

"Yes, Pam, but I'm in bed," she glibly lied. "Can I do anything?"

"Oh, no; but I thought you'd like to know. That poor girl is still unconscious. Mrs. Greddon reckons there's concussion, in which case it may be hours before we find out who she is!"

"Well, I don't know anything about her! I'm afraid I feel a bit hurt, Pam, by the way you and your chums have behaved towards me to-night. That's why I felt it best to go to bed. I've a splitting headache now."

"Yes, well; we'll see you in the morning, then."

"Will you?" Vivienne Murray said to herself, as she heard Pam's going-away step.

And next moment she was at her bed-room window.

Setting it wide open, she threw out the tied-together sheets and blankets, meaning to go whilst the going was good!

**FLIGHT!** A daring bid to escape—to get away in secret before the truth is known! But unexpected developments arise which threaten to upset all Vivienne's daring plans. What happens? You must not miss next week's exciting chapters of this shocking school and mystery serial.

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#### BETWEEN OURSELVES

**M**Y DEAR READERS—Although the Christmas Number of your *Schoolgirl* was on sale last week, this issue will also reach you before the Great Day, and so I'm going to say, all our congratulations, that you'll have the happiest possible Christmas, with a whole lot of good presents, lots of laughing fun, and the most exciting parties and all the fun to the world!

I'm afraid that these good wishes will reach my Colonial readers rather later in the day; but, of course, we shall be thinking about spring—and even Easter—before this Christmas Eve issue of your paper arrives in such distant countries as Australia and New Zealand.

By the way, I do want to send very special thanks to my Colonial readers for their Christmas cards.

I've had lots and lots from countries as far apart as Canada, New Zealand, and even China! Some of them came by air mail, and I've arrived with a most exciting collection of the Christmas cards. "Oh, Richard," one was from a town in Japan, and the other came from China.

Oh, now, I couldn't personally answer these cards before Christmas, but my readers will be glad to know that my greetings arrived safely, after such long and hazardous journeys.

#### A NEW DIANA SERIES.

Even in the midst of all the excitement of Christmas I'm sure you can spare a moment