

EXTRA-SPECIAL CHRISTMAS NUMBER

THE SCHOOLGIRL

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EVERY 2^D SATURDAY

Incorporating
'SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN'

AGENT
THIS HOUSE TO LET



APRIL FOOLS ON CHRISTMAS EVE!

The carol-singing Cliff House Chums waste their efforts on an empty house!

See this week's delightful story of Babs & Co.

Magnificent Long Complete "Festive" story featuring Barbara Redfern

That Elusive Christmas

Strange New Friend!

"HERE we are! Pellabay!"
Barbara Redfern, captain of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School, breezily made that announcement.

"Grab your luggage, girls!" she urged.

There was a laugh from Mabel Lynn, Babs' special chum, as she reached up to the rack of the railway compartment.

"Please keep off my toe, old Bess!" she said. "It wasn't made to withstand your fourteen stone of avoirdupois!"

Fat, bespectacled Bessie Bunter, the lovable duffer of the Fourth, gave a plaintive blink.

"Sus-sorry, Mabs! Clara pushed me. I sus-say, you know, do you think we'll reach Pellabay Castle Hotel in time for dinner? I'm jolly well fuf-famished!"

There was a laugh at that; a hearty, jolly laugh.

Not, to be sure, that there was anything excruciatingly funny in Bessie's remark. The chums simply laughed because, at that moment, they were in a mood to laugh at anything.

And no wonder!

For here, at last, was their journey's end.

Ahead of them lay the Pellabay Castle Hotel, owned by Tomboy Trevlyn's aunt, and so the Christmas holidays could be said to have begun.

A jolly, happy party in very truth, even though the carriage was rather jammed with the whole nine of them frantically groping for various parcels.

For in addition to Babs, Mabs, Bessie, and Clara, the party included Leila Carroll, the American girl; Gwen Cook; that strange girl Jemima Carstairs, of the Eton crop and the monocle; Janet Jordan; and gentle Marjorie Hazeldene.

"Well, here we are!" gasped Babs. "Got everything, kidlets? Marjorie,

here's your handbag! Janet, isn't that Leila's umbrella you've got? Gwen" this to Gwen Cook—"would you mind opening the door? Jemima, you old chump, look out, you'll drop that case! Phew! Thank goodness you saved it in time! Where's Clara?"

"Adsum!" grinned Clara Trevlyn cheerfully.

"You'd better lead, hadn't you, as you know the ropes? I hope the cars are here!"

"The cars," Clara chortled, "are here! I can see 'em in the road outside the station yard. Tumble out, you Christmas cripples! Woof!"

"Oh crumbs! It's snowing, you know!" Bessie bleated.

Babs, half a dozen yards ahead, and laden with small parcels, most of which contained Christmas presents for her chums, exasperatedly turned and ran back.

"Oh, Bess, you'll be the death of me!" she cried. "Here are your spectacles—in the snow! There! Put them on! Now are you all right?"

"Y-yes, I think so."

"Then come on!"

And Babs, unaware that in helping Bessie she had dropped one of her own parcels, caught the plump one's arm and urged her along.

They reached the cars—two lordly Daimlers—into which the rest of the

Pellabay Castle Hotel, full of old-world romance and yet equipped with every modern comfort! No wonder Babs & Co. are thrilled, for it is there they are to spend their Christmas. What gorgeous fun they'll have! But almost at once mystery envelops them. They meet a girl who is playing a strange double role, and whose activities threaten to ruin all the chums' Christmas plans.

Snowing it was, though very gently, the soft flakes falling like white thistle-down in the glare of the station lamps. But nobody minded the snow, and nobody really minded the half-thawed slush on the station platform, though they were all glad to join in the race which the boisterous Clara immediately led towards the waiting cars.

"Here, I sus-say, wait for me!" Bessie wailed. "Don't leave the most important girl in the party out, you know! Bib-Babs—Ow, wow!" And Bessie yelped as she skidded alarmingly in the slush and only maintained her balance by a most terrific gymnastic. "Oh, woof! I've lul-lost my glasses!"

party were now tumbling. Grinning, Clara held the door of one open, and the gasping Bessie was breathlessly pushed inside. Then Babs gave a sudden, dismayed exclamation.

"Oh crumbs! Don't go! Wait a minute! I've lost one of my parcels!"

"Oh shucks!" cried Leila Carroll.

"I—I must have left it—in the train!" And Babs gazed frantically in the direction of the station out of which, at a fast accelerating speed, the train which had brought the chums from London was now pulling. "Oh dear—"

She shook her head. What a beastly bit of luck! Of all the small parcels which she had carried the one

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& Co. of Cliff House School, on holiday in Cornwall, and introducing—

Merry-Maker!

By **Hilda Richards**

Illustrated by **T. Laidler**

now missing was the one she had most valued. For that parcel contained Babs' Christmas present to her great chum Mabs—a little silver-gilt bracelet for which Babs had saved up half the last term.

A sympathetic silence fell. Leila Carroll shook her head.

"Well, if you left it in the train, I guess it's no good looking for it now," she said, climbing out of the car. "Best thing to do is to tell the station-master—"

She did not finish. For suddenly across the station yard there came a panting voice:

"Miss—miss—" followed by the sound of pattering footsteps.

While Babs started round, a girl, a small parcel in her hand, came running up.

"Miss," she gasped, "you—you dropped it when you picked up the fat girl's spectacles—"

Babs glowed. She looked gratefully at the girl—a rather pretty girl, of about her own age, whose half-averted head was covered by a red-and-black shawl, but whose coat was a worn and faded fawn macintosh. A poor girl, obviously.

"Oh, thank you!" Babs said. "Here, let me—" And she opened her hand-bag.

But just at the same moment there was a cry from the darkness beyond the lamplight. It was accompanied, in a man's gruff voice, by a name:

"Dot!"

"Oh dear!" the strange girl gasped. "Ex-excuse me, miss—"

"But wait a minute!" Babs cried. "Here, I want to give you something! I say, you haven't told me your name! Well, my hat!" she gasped.

For the girl, turning, had fled. For a moment Babs saw her swiftly running form in the lamplight, the soft snowflakes falling around it. Then the blackness beyond the light had swallowed her up.

"Funny!" Babs said, and shook her head. "Jolly honest of her to let me have my parcel back—if I'd lost that my





Christmas would have been ruined! But dash it, I feel I ought to give her something! Who was she, I wonder?"

And nobody, of course, could answer that question though everybody, relieved that Babs had rescued her treasure, was immeasurably grateful to the strange girl.

"Well, perhaps we shall meet her during the hols?" Marjorie Hazeldene, hopefully suggested. "Pellabay, after all, isn't such a big place. Anyway, we've got one clue," she added brightly. "Her name's Dot! Jump in, Babs!"

Babs, not without a longing glance at the darkness into which her little Good Samaritan had so precipitately disappeared, climbed into the car, kicking the clinging snow from the soles of her shoes as she did so.

Cautiously the two Daimlers set off—cautiously because the country road was very slushy and, in places, frozen over.

Through the still falling snow the cars purred while the chums, pleasantly conscious that this was the last stage of their long journey from Cliff House, settled down to enjoy the ride. The village of Pellabay was aglow with lights, its gay little shop fronts seeming to twinkle a welcome at the visitors as they passed through. Then once more out into the dark open country, until presently, they were climbing the long, slippery slope that led upwards to Pellabay Castle Hotel, which was set on a rocky eminence overlooking the wild Atlantic Ocean.

Presently they saw the hotel, perched like some fairy palace on the top of the hill—a vague, turreted shape, lit at innumerable windows, and with a series of floodlights playing on its facade.

"Nearly there!" Clara said cheerfully.

Nearly there—yes; and now they found themselves a-thrill with anticipation.

What a wonderful place Pellabay would be for all their Christmas plans—this frowning old castle, still looking as it must have looked in the days of the Middle Ages, still with its secret passages and its ghost-haunted wings; and yet, for all that, as modern and as comfortable as any 1938 building in the heart of London. For Miss Grace Trevlyn, Clara's aunt, had remodelled its ancient interior with a shrewd eye to the purposes to which it was now being put as an hotel.

Over the old drawbridge the cars rattled, under the portcullis, and finally came to rest outside the main hotel entrance in the courtyard. And at once Clara gave a whoop as she saw the woman who stood on the threshold at the top of a long, winding flight of wide steps.

"Aunt!"

"Merry Christmas, Clara!" Grace Trevlyn cried. "Merry Christmas, all! Welcome to Pellabay!"

"What-ho! Home at last, me hearties! And aren't we jolly glad to get here, what?" Jimma chirruped, as she and the chums tumbled out.

Miss Trevlyn, in that thoughtful way of hers, had ordered a special tray of warm ginger wine and hot Cornish pasties to welcome them.

"Yum! This is ripping!" Bessie beamed, her mouth full of succulent pastry. "I—I sus-

say—" she added, breaking off. "Who's that?"

For from a door at the other end of the hall had come a sudden sharp, irritable voice, and a striking looking woman appeared.

Very short she was; very prim, very stiff, very upright. She walked with little springy jerks, rather hen-like, and her sharp features were stuck out at an inquiring angle.

Miss Trevlyn pulled a wry face.

"That's Miss Wren—one of my Christmas worries," she said. "She's governess to a girl named Dorothy Eldridge—and, my goodness, what a life she leads that poor girl! But I daren't offend her."

"Oh, of course not!" Clara said.

"Because," Miss Trevlyn went on, "half the guests here this Christmas have come on the recommendation of her mistress—a Miss Kate Eldridge. Miss Eldridge herself hasn't arrived yet, but is expected any day now. She's a frightfully rich old lady. Frightfully particular, too, and swayed by what Miss Wren says. Er—yes, Miss Wren?" she added, as the little woman hopped up, fixing her with a pair of beady eyes.

"I am looking for Dorothy," she said fiercely. "Dorothy," she added, glaring at the Cliff-House girls, "is my ward, and she has gone out without my permission!"

"Poor old Dorothy!" murmured Leila.

The little eyes hardened.

"Please do not interrupt!" Miss Wren said tartly. "Children should speak only when they are spoken to! These girls, I believe, have just come from the village, Miss Trevlyn?"

"Yes, that is so," Miss Trevlyn agreed.

"Did any of them, by any chance, see my erring ward? She is a girl of about your own age; your own height. She was dressed in a pony skin coat with a beaver collar and one of those absurd modern hats."

"Then," Janet Jordan said, "most decidedly we haven't seen her."

"Thank you," Miss Wren's neck bent stiffly. "Miss Trevlyn, as soon as she comes in, send her to me," she said commandingly. "Instead of tea she shall be locked in her room with her crochet work."

And she nodded a good-bye glare at the girls, and rustled off.

"Dear little woman!" Jemima sighed. "So full of the old Christmas spirit, what? Don't wonder dear old Dorothy does the merry old bunk whenever she gets a chance!"

"Old cat!" Clara glowered.

"Now, Clara, please!" her aunt reproved. "Anyway, thank goodness you aren't poor Dorothy! My heart aches for that poor girl sometimes, though I must say she is a bit of a madcap—something like you," she added, her eyes glimmering fun at her tomboy niece. "Now what about seeing your rooms?"

And so, the truant Dorothy forgotten for the time being, the chums scampered after Miss Trevlyn. Through the lounge they passed, occupied by a number of bridge-playing guests, up the wide old staircase, decorated at every twist by enamelled coats of arms, and so to a wide landing, supported by curved arches, its walls of polished panelling, from which the grave portraits of past owners of Pellabay Castle stared down at them.

Miss Trevlyn pushed open a door. "Here we are," she said. "There are three rooms, all communicating. I have arranged three beds in each room, because, naturally, you'd all

like to be together, wouldn't you? You will find everything you want," she added. "And as soon as your luggage arrives from the station, I will have it sent up to you. Make yourselves at home, girls. Excuse me if I leave you. I'm rather busy."

And Miss Trevlyn hurried away.

"Well, here we are," Babs laughed. "And, I say, what ducky rooms! Bag this one, girls, for Mabs and Bessie and me. Look, an electric fire, too!" "And hot and cold water!" Clara enthused.

"And," Marjorie cried, "electrically heated bedclothes! And what a view!" she added, running towards the window. "Hallo, this window is unfastened! But look!" she added, as she slipped home the catch.

They all looked, glowing now. If they had required anything to complete their happiness, these rooms were surely calculated to do it.

And the view!

They were on the ground floor in the very front of the hotel, and before them was a glimmering vision of the road up which they had travelled, vague hills and folds receding into the blackness, and miles away, it seemed, a tiny cluster of lights which marked Pellabay village.

"Jolly nice!" Babs laughed. "And those slopes outside—what ripping places for tobogganning! Whoopee! Switch the fire on, Bess, and let's wash. After that—" And then she suddenly swivelled towards the window. "What's that?"

They all stared for the moment rooted and spellbound.

For at the window was a figure.

At least, it was the head and shoulders of a figure—the figure of a girl. A girl dressed in a small, fur-trimmed hat with an expensive-looking beaver collar pulled well up about her decidedly pretty oval face. From the other side of the window she was staring into the room, a rather dismayed and bewildered expression in her eyes as they rested upon the Cliff House girls.

"My hat! See who it is!" breathed Babs.

But in that moment they all remembered the girl, dressed differently from when they had last met though she was. It was the girl, shabbily dressed then, they had met at the station. The girl whose honesty had been the means of restoring Babs' precious parcel, and who had so precipitately fled when the unknown voice out of the darkness had called: "Dot!"

Holding Their Own!



EVEN as they stared, the girl outside, clinging to the sill, pointed frantically at the window-catch with one gloved hand, obviously signalling them to open it.

At that signal Babs' momentary stupefaction vanished. A welcoming smile glowed in her face. No longer need she be regretful at losing sight of her benefactor—the girl was here!

In three swift steps Babs was at the window, and pulled the catch open. The other girl, with a wave of the hand, climbed in.

"Whoosh!" she said, and laughed. "My hat, you scared me for a moment!" she went on, with a chuckle. "It never occurred to me that some time I might come back and find these rooms occupied. But

thanks for letting me in! Jolly good of you! And nice," she added, her eyes sparkling, "to see girls of my own age. Are you Miss Trevlyn's party, by the way?"

"Yes," Babs said. "But—" "Oh, good egg! Fun!" The other laughed, while the chums stared at her. "We'll have larks together—what?" she added eagerly. "My name's Dorothy Eldridge—Dot to my friends. But I say, have you seen my governess?"

"We have." "My hat! Does she know I'm out?" "She does," Babs said. "But, Dot, wait a minute. I want to talk to you. When we saw you at the station just now—"

The girl started. "You—you saw me?" "Well, of course we did!" "Oh, my hat!" For some reason Dot looked utterly dismayed all at once. "Well, for goodness' sake, don't mention it!" she said apprehensively. "But, Dot, I want to tell you—" "Then don't," Dot said. "Forget

may. "Miss Wren! Hide me, for goodness' sake!"

And, as a voice in the corridor outside was heard, she stared round.

The voice was certainly that of Miss Wren, and it was speaking in shrill, vibrant accents—apparently to Miss Trevlyn.

"I am sure that I heard Dorothy's voice coming from the room of your niece's friends!"

"Oh, great gollywogs!" Babs gasped. "Dot, quickly, behind the curtain!"

Just in the nick of time, the girl dashed behind the heavy curtain which was intended to be drawn across the windows at night. Then came a rattle at the handle of the door.

"Come in!" Babs said, at the same time making a frightful grimace at her chums.

The door opened. Miss Trevlyn entered, followed by the fierce Miss Wren, who stopped and glared.

"Where is she?" she demanded. "My charge, Dorothy! Where is she?"

"But, Miss Wren—" cried Miss Trevlyn.

"Please! Leave me to mind my business!" Miss Wren quivered.

"Dorothy, do you hear?" "Y—yes, Miss Wren." Dorothy shook her head. "But I want to tell you that these girls—"

"Go!" shrieked Miss Wren. And Dorothy, with a helpless, appealing look at the dismayed Co., went.

"Now—" And Miss Wren's bird-like eyes gleamed fiercely. "Miss Trevlyn, I shall want to talk with you," she said bitterly. "Meantime, you"—and she glared round at the Cliff House chums—"I will trouble you, girls," she added furiously, "to have nothing further to do with my charge. While you are in this hotel, Dorothy is a stranger to you. Good-bye!"

And slam went the door.

"NICE, SWEET, benevolent-like woman!" Babs said angrily.

"Such a lovely disposition! Well, are we going to desert Dot?"

"We are not!" Clara Trevlyn said emphatically.

"No jolly fear!" Bessie Bunter said stoutly.

"A real high-kicking Christmas

WELL and truly

Bessie hit the "joke" table-tennis ball—but with disastrous results. Flying hopelessly wide, it struck the wall above bad-tempered Mr. Blair, and he, blinded by confetti as the ball came apart, spilled his precious jigsaw puzzle! Now for ructions!

she'll have with that old hen pecking at her all the time!" Leila Carroll glowered. "I guess, kidlets, it's up to us to rally round old Dot!"

The chums nodded.

Miss Wren and her charge had gone now. So had Miss Trevlyn. But they were all angry with Miss Wren, and just as they were angry with Miss Wren, so were they sorry for her charge. They all liked the gay-hearted Dot, in spite of her mysterious escapade; they all felt they ought to back her up.

And especially Babs. For Dot, though so reluctant to discuss the meeting at the station, had done Babs a good turn, and to Babs' liking for the girl was added a deep sense of gratitude.

But, as Marjorie pointed out, it was not going to be easy. In the first place, they had to consider their hostess, Clara's aunt. If they weren't responsible to Miss Wren, Clara's aunt certainly was; and there was no doubt, if she so willed it, that Miss Wren could make things decidedly uncomfortable for Clara's aunt.

They would have to be most careful. Rather hopefully, they looked for Dot when they went down to the tea lounge, but though Miss Wren was there, of Dot herself there was no sign. Obviously, the governess was keeping her threat

it. Let it be as if it never was. Please," she added, a note of entreaty in her voice.

The chums stared completely baffled for the moment. What an extraordinary girl! Why this feverish anxiety to deny that she had been at the station? And why, in the name of all that was mysterious, had she been dressed in a shabby macintosh and shawl when they had met her there—this girl whose clothes now seemed to exude wealth?

Just for one second Babs wondered if she had dreamed it. But, no! No possible doubt that the girl in the station, and this, were one and the same. This girl's name was Dot. Dot was the name she had answered to at the station. And if Babs required any confirmation that she was not dreaming, it was surely provided by the colour of the scarf which she spotted in that moment hanging out of this girl's pocket. For that scarf, and the one which the Dot of the station had worn over her head, were identical!

"Well," Babs began, "if you don't want us to mention it—"

"No, please!" Dot said. "It was something you just don't understand," she added feverishly. "Now let me go! Oh, whoost!" she gasped, in dis-



Babs gazed at the woman, her anger rising within her. Even if she had owed no debt of gratitude to the concealed Dot, she would have resented that demand.

"Oh dear! Have you lost her again?" she asked.

"Girl, do not trifle with me!" Miss Wren said fiercely. "I have asked you a question—Where is my charge? I demand to know—where is—"

And then all at once she stopped, a sudden glitter in her eyes, as her gaze reached the curtain which overhung the windows.

"Dorothy!" she cried, in a trembling voice.

Babs spun round, then stifled a gasp as she saw, sticking out from under the curtain, the toes of a pair of daintily shod shoes. Too late she moved to shut off that incriminating view.

Miss Wren strode to the curtains and, in a paroxysm of fury, dramatically flung them aside.

"So you," she choked, glaring at the crouching Dorothy—"you are hiding here—with these girls aiding and abetting you in your disobedience! Miss, go to your room!"



and confining Dot, tea-less, to her room.

The governess looked up frigidly as the chums came in, and then averted her head, suddenly becoming absorbed in the old and extremely cranky-looking little gentleman who, poring over an enormous tray as he sipped tea, was working his bushy eyebrows in a fiercely concentrated way over a jigsaw puzzle.

The chums winked at each other. Decorously they took their places at the table laid out for them. Two maids came up, bringing tea.

"You pour," Marjorie said; "I'll pass the bread-and-butter. Oh, Bessie dear, look, your favourite cream cakes!"

"And crumpets!" Gwen Cook cried. "Yum!"

"I sus-say, this is jolly nice!" Bessie beamed. "What time's dinner, Clara?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" The chums laughed. They were in a mood to laugh; perhaps over-ready to laugh by the nearness of Miss Wren's presence. But the more they laughed, the more freezing did Miss Wren's frown become. It was obvious that Miss Wren did not appreciate high spirits.

And neither, apparently, did her jigsaw puzzling companion. For suddenly he shot round. With a glare that brought his bushy eyebrows into a straight line across his forehead, he stared at them.

"Can't you make a little less noise?" he demanded.

"N-noise?" stammered Bessie.

"How the dickens, miss, do you expect me to concentrate?" the man blared. "For three days—three days"—and he flung out a passionate hand towards his puzzle—"I have been trying to get this confounded thing into some sort of order. Less noise, please!"

And having delivered himself, the little man angrily sat down again, leaving the chums looking rather ruefully at each other. Miss Wren smiled, however—a slow, acid smile. It seemed she had found something to amuse her at last.

But the chums did not smile. Resentfully, they glowered. None of them objected to the little man doing his jigsaw puzzle; but they did object to him trying to curb their fun.

More hastily than would have been the case otherwise, the chums finished their tea. After that, almost afraid to speak in more than a whisper, and vastly relieved to get out of the lounge, they went into the reading-room. It was there they encountered Miss Trevlyn again.

She looked just a little weary, Babs thought, though she smiled at the chums.

"Had a good tea, girls?" she asked brightly.

"Thanks," Babs said; "a very good tea. But, Miss Trevlyn, who is the old gentleman with the huge jigsaw puzzle?"

Miss Trevlyn glanced at her queerly.

"Oh! So you've come into contact with him, have you?" she asked. "That's Mr. Blair."



Frightfully touchy old man—especially about his silly old jigsaw puzzle! Steer clear of

him, if you can, girls; next to Miss Wren, he's about the worst-tempered person in the hotel."

"Cranky old freak!" Clara sniffed. "I must say, aunt, you know how to pick 'em! Any more in the hotel like them?"

Miss Trevlyn smiled a little.

"One or two—not many," she said.

"But cheer up!" she said softly.

"There are heaps and heaps of younger guests coming along—some already here. Now what about changing for dinner? Your luggage has arrived, and there'll be dancing in half an hour."

"Oh, whoopee!" Leila cried.

And off they scampered back to their rooms, the fire-eating Mr. Blair and the henpecking Miss Wren forgotten in that new excitement. There they changed, making now as much noise as they liked—which, in their high-spirited mood, was considerable. Arrayed at last in their loveliest clothes, they went down to the big ball-room, just as the band was striking up the first dance tune of the evening.

Here, at least, all was gaiety and joy. A dozen couples were already on the floor, the centre of which was occupied by a great Christmas-tree, covered with presents and gleaming ornaments, with a hundred fairy lights saucily winking in and out, and the walls gaily garlanded and decorated.

At once Mabs and Babs went off on a gay waltz. A boy of about eighteen, spotting Clara, came up.

"Miss Trevlyn, I believe? May I have this one?"

"You may!" Clara grinned.

"And," said another young man, smiling at Gemma, "may I have this one, sweet miss?"

"Sweet sir, you may. But first," Gemma warned seriously, "wrap the old corns in cottonwool!"

The boy laughed. Off he went with Gemma. Then others came up, until within a few moments, all the chums were dancing, with the exception of Bessie, who, having eaten far more than her fair share at tea, was in a decidedly comatose condition, and content to snooze with a box of chocolates on her knees.

The dance ended. Laughing and breathless, the dancers came back, Babs to be immediately commandeered by Clara's partner.

So off again—this time in a swift, brisk fox-trot. But now the hall was filling up. More and more people were coming in; some to dance, others to watch, still others just to chat.

Suddenly Babs, during her fourth dance, spotted Dot. And her heart knew a pang.

For Dot was in a corner occupied, for the most part, by the older people. Several of them were playing bridge, deaf to the band; two others were concentrating at chess. In the middle of that crowd Dot sat next to her governess—Miss Wren reading; Dot viciously stabbing her crochet needles into the piece of embroidery she was making.

"Poor kid, she's having a rotten time," Babs said to Mabs and Clara after the dance. "Dash it, I shouldn't think even Miss Wren can object to her having a dance. What about going and asking her?"

Clara pulled a face. "Well, what about it? Go on!" she challenged. "Don't fancy your chance, though."

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bessie, waking up.

"Hallo, porpoise, what's the cackle for?" Clara demanded.

"I've got an idea," Bessie said. "I sus-say, do you really want Dot to have a dance?"

"Well, nunny?" Babs asked.

"Well," Bessie gurgled, "what about a spot of ventriloquism? You know what a jolly ripping ventriloquist I am! I'll bet I could get the governess away."

"Bet you a doughnut to a shelled walnut you can't," Janet said.

Bessie sniffed. Then she turned, clearing her throat.

"Ahem! Miss Wren," a voice said behind that lady.

"Oh! What, Mr. Blair?" Miss Wren said, and her acid features melted amazingly into a smile.

"Would you mind coming along to the lounge and helping me with this jigsaw, please?" went on the voice of Mr. Blair.

"Why, Mr. Blair, no; certainly not," Miss Wren, suddenly beaming, flusteredly jumped up, then started as she looked for Mr. Blair and found him not. "Dear me, what an unusual man!" she said. "Dorothy, did you see dear Mr. Blair?"

"No, Miss Wren; but I heard him ask you to go to the lounge," Dot said, sharing her governess' surprise as she stared. "My hat, he's gone!"

"Ahem! I—I expect he went off," Miss Wren said, not very lucidly. "Dorothy, please remain here. Ahem! Ahem! Good-bye, Dorothy!"

"Shucks! It's worked!" breathed Leila, as Miss Wren hurried off. "Dot—" she called.

Dot looked towards them. Then down went her needles, and she scooted to join them.

"Miss Wren's gone!" she cried. "Mr. Blair wants her. Come on, let's bunk!"

"What about a dance?" Babs asked.

"Too risky; she might come back. Let's go to the games-room instead. There'll be nobody there before dinner. This way!"

With a chuckle she led the way; with a chuckle the chums followed her. Behind the bandstand Dot threw open a door, revealing a spacious, well-lighted room, absolutely deserted, with a table-tennis table set in the middle of it. Boisterously she caught up a bat.

"Bags it!" she cried. "And bags you for my partner, Babs!"

"And me!" Bessie cried excitedly. "I bag Mabs for mine!"

"Come on, then!" Dot sang.

Her eyes were glimmering with fun now. Rather significantly and mysteriously she winked at Babs as she served the first ball. Mabs caught it; sent a swift return. Babs returned that to Bessie, who lunged out, but, as usual, missed the ball by a mile, and, swinging round like a teetotum, cannoned violently into Gemma standing behind her. Gemma yelped. Dot chuckled.

"Watch!" she called to Babs.

And suddenly, in her hand, had appeared another ball; not one of the table-tennis variety this time, but one slightly larger, though it was white. Babs chuckled.

For she had seen those balls before. They were "joke" ping-pong balls—in two halves—filled, as a rule, with confetti, which was liable to burst without warning when the halves fell apart, after a few hits.

"Service!" Dot called.

She played the ball. Clara, unsuspecting, played it back to Babs. Babs, grinning broadly, sent it across the table to Bessie, and Bessie lunged again, just as the door came open.

In the opening appeared Mr. Blair, carefully balancing his jigsaw tray.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" Babs gasped.

"Bess—"

But it was too late then. Bessie had hit. Lustily and fiercely she caught the confetti ball full in the middle of her bat. But if the stroke was lusty

the aim was atrocious, for the ball struck the wall above the door and burst.

A billowing cloud of confetti seemed to jump out from the wall.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Clara, then froze. "Oh, mum-mum-my hat—"

For the two halves of the ball, coming apart, released the confetti contents, and for a moment Mr. Blair's astonished features were enveloped in a flying cloud of paper pieces. Small wonder, then, that Mr. Blair became unbalanced. The tray tilted forward and over its edges cascaded a shower of jigsaw pieces!

"You—you—you—" Mr. Blair choked.

"Oh, great goodness—" Dot ran forward. "Mr. Blair—"

"You—" Mr. Blair cried. "You—you—" In furious dismay he looked at the scattered puzzle pieces on the floor.

"Is there no peace, no rest in this bear garden of an hotel?" he raved.

"We—we're sorry, Mr. Blair," Babs stammered.

"Sorry—sorry!" He glared at them.

"Does that reconstruct the work of three days, which you have this moment undone? Look at it! Just look at it!



A Clever Scheme, But—

RUCTIONS, then! Such ructions, indeed, with Mr. Blair blaring and Miss Wren shrilly protesting that she had been tricked, that it was at least five minutes before any conversation became intelligible.

"These girls are behaving like hooligans!" Mr. Blair stormed. "I demand, Miss Trevlyn, that order shall be restored in this hotel. If not, I—" And he glared at the dismayed chums. "I shall pack my bags and go!"

"And I," Miss Wren quivered, "shall most certainly complain to Miss Eldridge when she arrives! These girls," she added, glaring at Babs & Co., "in some way tricked me into believing that dear Mr. Blair wanted me. And where," she added, now looking round fiercely, "is Dorothy?"

Miss Trevlyn bit her lip. In that moment the chums could feel sorry for her. She gazed pleadingly at Clara.

"Clara, where is Dorothy?"

"I—I don't know, aunt," Clara faltered.

the sort of life you lead when you run an hotel! But, Clara, my dear, please do go easy with Miss Wren!"

"I'm sorry, aunt," Clara said contritely, "but how the dickens did we know all this was going to blow up? We only felt sorry for Dorothy—"

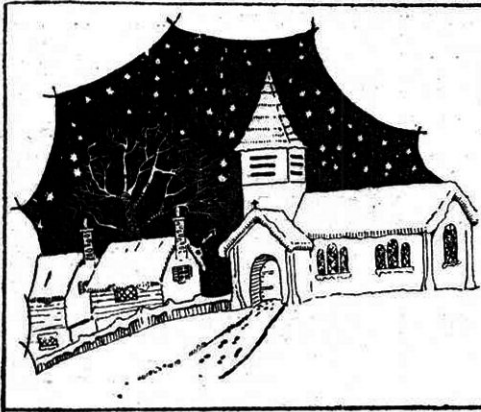
"I know," Miss Trevlyn shook her head. "I can appreciate that—and, well, perhaps even sympathise. I am not going to forbid you to have anything to do with Dorothy, but please, girls, do try to understand the extreme difficulty of my position. Whatever you do, avoid further trouble with Mr. Blair and Miss Wren. Now carry on with your game."

She went out—a sport of a woman if there ever was one, Leila Carroll heartily declared, but the chums did not get on with their game immediately. They had too much to talk about.

"You know," Babs said thoughtfully, "it was jolly queer—Dot dodging off like that. Who whistled?"

"And why," Mabs added, "should that whistle have upset her so much?"

They looked at each other, shaking their heads. Nice girl, Dot. They all liked her—immensely—but there could



*To all my dear readers
wishing you the old,
yet ever-new wish—
A Happy, Happy Christmas!*

Hilda Richards

I came here for a quiet and restful Christmas. I was having it until you turned up. But it will stop this instant!" he added determinedly, and touched the bell at his side. "Send the manageress here!" he barked at the servant who appeared.

The chums blinked at each other in dismay. While Mr. Blair stood there regarding his fallen pieces as though defying any one of them to pick them up, a silence fell.

Dot bit her lip.

"I say—" she muttered regretfully. "We didn't mean it, Mr. Blair, it was all an accident. Let me pick them up—"

"Don't you dare lay a hand on those pieces!" Mr. Blair savagely roared. "You've done enough damage as it is!"

"Oh but, really—" Dot protested.

And then, all at once, she started. For outside, very clearly on the night air, there came a shrill, sharp whistle.

Babs heard it, too, and instinctively turned towards the window. Then she jumped as she saw Dot, suddenly quivering speed towards the door at the far end of the room.

Quickly the door opened and shut, and Dot, in a perfect flurry of panic, disappeared!

Even as the chums stared at each other, wondering, mystified, there was a step outside and Miss Trevlyn, her face worried, came in, accompanied by a storming Miss Wren!

"But Dorothy was here!" Miss Wren insisted.

"Miss Wren—please!" Miss Trevlyn begged. "Clara, please answer! Was Dorothy here?"

"Well, yes, she was," Clara said smoulderingly. Clara was very fond of her aunt and it angered her to see her in so much trouble. "But she went out."

"Out? Where," Miss Wren rapped, "did she go?"

"We don't know," Gwen Cook replied.

"But you do not deny, I presume, that you tricked her away from me?" Miss Wren raved.

"Well, no—"

"There you are—there you are!" Miss Wren flung triumphantly upon Miss Trevlyn. "It is a plot! But I will find Dorothy," she vowed fiercely. "I will find her. And when I have found her—"

"Yes, madam, I know—you will have found her!" Mr. Blair snapped, straightening up, with his jig-saw pieces at last collected. "Good-night to you all, dash it!"

And angrily the little man stalked out, bearing his tray before him. Miss Wren, with one bitter glare at the Cliff House chums, flounced out after him.

Miss Trevlyn fanned herself. "Plaw!" she said. "Let me sit down! This," she added ruefully, "is

be no denying that she was behaving rather mysteriously.

"Well, it's not our business," Clara said. "And unless it does become our business, I don't see what right we've got to stick our noses in. Well, come on, let's go. No sense in sticking on here."

They drifted back to the ball-room. Neither Miss Wren nor Dot was there, but at dinner—a sumptuous meal—Miss Wren turned up. Dot again was not with her, however.

One of the bridge players paused at Miss Wren's table.

"Well, did you find your charge?" he asked.

"I did!" Miss Wren said severely. "I have sent her to bed!"

"Poor kid!" Babs muttered from the depths of her heart.

Poor kid, indeed! What a dreadful sort of life Dot led! This afternoon locked in her room without tea. This evening packed off to bed, probably without dinner. It was rather astonishing, in view of all these handicaps, that she was as cheerful as she was.

"Look here, we've got to do something about it for Dot," Babs said after dinner. "Surely there's some way in which we can get round Miss Wren?"

Nobody looked very hopeful. But, as it happened, it was Miss Wren herself who supplied the solution to the problem.

Somewhere about nine o'clock, she



came into the ball-room with a collecting-box in her hand, and the chums heard her talking.

"Yes," she was saying, and there was an altogether different expression on her face. "I do collect for the mission—in fact, it is my life's hobby. And do you know, Miss Wright, this year I have collected nearly two hundred pounds!"

"My dear!" said the elderly Miss Wright, with brow uplifted in admiration.

"Yes," Miss Wren gushed on. "I am hoping, between you and myself, to make it a full two hundred. If," she added, with rosy-cheeked softness, "I achieve that, Miss Wright, the society will present me with a special silver medal! That is why I have brought the box down to-night. I was wondering, Miss Wright, if you—"

"Oh dear! Do excuse me," Miss Wright said hurriedly. "I have forgotten my bag!" And she jumped up in such a hurry that Miss Wren scowled, obviously under no illusion as to the real cause of her would-be victim's exit.

The chums chuckled, but all at once Babs' eyes gleamed.

"My hat!" she cried excitedly. "Well, what's the matter with your hat? In any case, you haven't got a hat on!" Bessie said indignantly.

"I've got it!" Babs went on. "The wheeze to help Dot! Stop chuntering, Bess! Listen to this, everybody! It's pretty certain Miss Wren is dead nuts on getting her two hundred little jimmies. Well, supposing, first of all, we make a slight contribution—"

"That thaws her, see?" Babs went on eagerly. "Then comes the rest of the wheeze. We suggest to her that to-morrow we go and sing carols in aid of the mission—taking Dot with us, of course, to act as the collector."

"Phew!" Leila Carroll whistled. "Good wheeze?" "Jolly good!" "Then," Babs chuckled, "get your sixpences ready. Come on, let's go and tackle her."

Miss Wren, collecting-box in hand, was surveying the rather dubious bridge-playing party, who seemed far too grim to be disturbed, and the expression on her face suggested that she had not much hope.

Babs approached. "Oh, girls, look!" she cried. "Miss Wren is collecting for the mission!"

"No, never!" cried Jemima in astonishment. "Well, well, and bucket, bucket! Ahoy, Miss Wren!"

Miss Wren turned. "I wonder," Babs murmured, "if—if we might be allowed to give a small donation, Miss Wren?"

Miss Wren stared. "You?"

"Oh, please!" Jemima begged.

"Well, well," Miss Wren murmured. "Ah! Well, well, as it is an extremely good cause—ahem! Well, thank you," she added, as Babs dropped a shilling in the box. "That is—very generous of you."

"And me!" Jemima said jovially, dropping in half-a-crown.

"Here, don't stop me, I guess!" Leila Carroll exclaimed.

Miss Wren's eyes shone as the coins dropped one by one into the box. That sour, acid expression on her face was transformed now into one of radiant joy.

"Thank you!" she gasped flusteredly.

"I—I hardly know what to say! This—this makes the total one hundred and seventy-nine pounds three shillings and fourpence farthing."

"You don't say!" Babs exclaimed in admiration. "But I say, that's only twenty pounds off two hundred! Miss Wren, it would be ripping, wouldn't it, if we could make it two hundred?"

Miss Wren glowed. "Really," she murmured, "I—I hardly expected to find such understanding—"

"And," Babs said, "we will make it two hundred—that's if, of course, dear Miss Wren will let us do some of the collecting. Now"—and she frowned at her chums, warning them not to reach the point too eagerly—"how can we raise twenty pounds?"

"I know—carol singing!" cried Gwen Cook.

Miss Wren blinked. "Carol singing!" Babs repeated eagerly. "Why, that's a lovely idea! Miss Wren, let us take the box down to the village to-morrow? We shan't get twenty pounds, of course, but we should get quite a bit, I should think. Don't you think that is a good idea?"

"I think," Miss Wren glowed, "it is an excellent idea!"

"But," Babs put in slowly, "there are only nine of us. We must have ten. Now, who can be the tenth? I know, Miss Wren, let Dot—er—Dorothy join us!"

The old freezing expression came back immediately to Miss Wren's face.

"Dorothy," she said stiffly, "is in disgrace."

"But—but just this once?" Babs urged. "Miss Wren, you wouldn't deprive her of the satisfaction of working for such a noble cause, would you? And—and we'll look after her," Babs added eagerly.

The governess visibly swallowed.

"Well," she said, and looked Babs full in the face, "I—I might be persuaded to agree. But only on condition, Barbara, that you take full responsibility for her. Which means that I expect her to return with you—and in the meantime, of course, no mischief. If you will give me your word of honour—"

"Oh, yes, Miss Wren, we will, of course!" Babs said, and glowed. "Then—then it's fixed up!"

And fixed up, to the chums' immense satisfaction, it was, Miss Wren so far unbending as to allow Dorothy out of her bed-room to spend the rest of the

evening with them. Fortunately there were no further untoward incidents. Dot was in high feather. It seemed, at last, that harmony was restored.

Happy to bed went the chums that night; happily they got up in the morning. To be sure, Miss Wren was immensely bucked, and in a very good frame of mind. Afternoon came, and with afternoon many busy preparations. They had to have a lamp, of course, and carol-books; and last, but not least, the collecting-box.

It was growing dark when finally they were all ready, and Miss Wren joined them in the vestibule. She had the collecting-box, empty again, in her hand.

"Dot, I entrust you with this," she said warningly. "See that nothing happens to it, and please," she added sternly, "behave yourself! Barbara, I have your promise—"

"Certainly!" Babs said. "Very well; go, and good luck!" Miss Wren beamed. "I shall wait with anxiety for your return."

In gleeful, high spirits the girls left, wending their way over the drawbridge and down the steep slope that led to the village.

"Coo! What a break!" Dot laughed.

"You lot were cute."

Babs chuckled. "Well, here we are," she said. "The plot worked. But no mischief, mind!" she added warningly. "And no dodging off. Let's start at the big house here."

"Yes, rather; they might invite us in for a feed!" Bessie said eagerly. "I say, what about me singing a solo? I nearly know 'A tisket, a tasket' all through, you know."

"This," Babs frowned, "is a carol-singing party, chump!"

"Oh, really—"

"We start," Babs decided, "with 'Good King Wenceslas.' Now don't make a row! Shush!"

She pushed open the gate. In a body they walked up the drive, and the carol-singing books were produced.

"Now, 'Good King Wenceslas,'" Babs said. "Follow me. 'Good King Wenceslas looked out—'"

"On the merry old feast of jolly old Stephen," Jemima blathered. "With the old melting old snow lying crisp and round about, and the old moon shining bright that night. Ahem! Who's messing up the words?"

"Dummy!" breathed Clara, as the carol came to a sudden stop.

"Jimmy, for goodness' sake be serious!" Babs said wearily. "Now, start again!"

They started again, with more success this time. Then suddenly the door opened. A butler appeared.

"Will you please go away?" he asked.

"You've given mistress a headache. She sent you this"

"Sheer bribery and corruption—what?" Jemima murmured, as he handed over two half-crowns. "Next pitch, coves! Forward, the nightingales!"

Forward the nightingales went, perhaps a bit dashed by the result of their first effort, but very, very grateful for the five shillings.

But all at once Dot gave a cry of dismay.

"Oh crumbs! I say, I've lost the collection-box!"

"What, with the five bob in?" shrieked Clara.

"Yes."

"Oh crumbs! Better go back and look for it!"

Back they went. A full and fruitless half an hour they spent in searching.

"Oh gracious, Miss Wren will be annoyed!" Babs said ruefully.

Can YOU STAK-A-STIK?

You know what Stak-a-Stik is, of course—that ingenious game which has just become the craze of America and the Continent. Well, it is now obtainable in this country, in the following ranges: 1s., 2s. 6d., 7s. 6d., and 10s. 6d. You'd adore it. And you'd adore SPELLING-BEE, too. It's a most exciting spelling game in which any number of people can take part. For 2s. 6d. you can buy two sets of Spelling Bee cards—112 in all—and they'll give you hours of fun. Ask your newsagent or local toy-shop to let you see them to-day.

Miss Wren would; but, as Gwen pointed out, it was no good crying over spilt milk. Best thing to do was to get on and collect such a heap of money that Miss Wren would be too delighted even to think of complaining about one collection-box!

They went on. At the next house they had better luck, but not much. A small boy came out and gave them three new pennies.

By this time the carol-singing party had got into its stride. Really tuneful was their rendering of "While Shepherds Watched." Then, suddenly, in the middle of it, a sharp, shrill whistle sounded from down the village street.

Dot, next to Babs, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Oh, great goodness!"

Babs stared at her, faintly astonished to see the agitated expression on her face in the glow of the lamp.

"Was that for you?" she asked.

"Babs, yes!" Dot grabbed her arm.

"I—I must go—must go!" she said anxiously. "Oh, I know you promised Miss Wren and all that, but—but I'm not dodging, Babs. Let me go, Babs. I—I won't be more than ten minutes," she said.

"But your governess—" Babs began.

"I'll be back—honest. Babs, Miss Wren needn't know! Look here! Meet you outside the church gates in ten minutes. All right, Babs?"

Babs nodded, though not without misgiving. Dot only required the nod, for as soon as it was given she was speeding off into the darkness. The chums looked at each other.

"Funny!" Mabs said.

Funny it was. Mysterious, too. Still, it was Dot's own business, though Babs did feel rather anxious. They finished their carol and Clara was going to knock at the door when Jemima gave an exclamation.

"Tut, tut! Where're our spectacles!" she cried. "Look!"

And she pointed to a notice just above them, which said: "This House To Let."

"Oh, we're crackers!" Leila said disgustedly. "Come on; next pitch."

They ambled off to a few houses farther down. There they struck up again—earning a shilling. But time was getting on now, and Babs, at least, was more anxious for the safety of Dot than the success of the carol-singing party.

"Dot's been gone eight minutes," she said. "Come on; let's push off to the church gates."

Rather anxiously they started back. At the church gates they halted. But there was no sign of Dot.

"Not here," Leila said anxiously.

"Oh, she'll come!" Babs said.

"Hallo! Is this her?"

For up the street on their right sounded the pattering of feet. Dimly, in the darkness, they saw the outline of a figure. Then, as that figure came full into the glow of the lamplight, they each sent up a sigh of relief. It was Dot. And yet—

"My hat! She's jolly well changed into that idiotic disguise again," Clara breathed. "What the dickens—Dot!" she called. "Dot, buck up!"

But Dot did not buck up. As she heard her name she stopped dead. For a moment they saw her face, wild, white-checked, in the lamplight. They saw her stiffen as her eyes fell upon them. Then suddenly, amazingly, she turned and raced away.

"Come on!" Clara snapped. "We're going to stop her little game, whatever it is!"



"Hi, Dot! Buck up!" Clara called. But to the chums' amazement their new friend turned and bolted. Clara's face set fiercely. "Come on!" she snapped. "We're going to stop her little game." And she raced in pursuit.

And off Clara pelted, the chums angrily following.

But they did not catch the fugitive. The streets of Pellabay were not too well lighted. At times they saw her; at others they followed only the sound of her running feet. Presently they lost even those sounds.

"She's gone!" Clara cried furiously. "Oh, great goodness! What are we to say to her aunt?" Marjorie asked in consternation. "Per—perhaps she's gone back, though?"

Not in the best of tempers, the chums set their faces towards Pellabay Castle again.

The floodlit exterior of the castle came into view, and they began the long toil up the hill. Then suddenly Clara paused again, looking swiftly towards a clump of bushes to her right.

"What—" Babs said.

"Just wait!" Clara said, with a glimmer in her eyes.

To the chums' amazement, she broke away. In a dozen great strides she had reached the clump of bushes and plunged among them. There came a cry, a wail, a fierce "Got you!" in Clara's voice, and then she loomed into sight again, grabbing by the coat collar a girl.

The chums yelled as they saw her.

"Dot!" they cried.

For Dot, in the faded old fawn macintosh, with her shawl about her head, it was!

Left with the Blame!

"PLEASE, please let me go!" the captive cried entreatingly.

"Not this time,"

Clara said, and in her strong, muscular grip the other girl was helpless. "Leila, grab her other arm. Quick march!"

"But, please, please—"



Dot cried. "Where are you taking me?"

"Well, where do you think, nunny?" Babs glowered. "To the hotel, of course! Come on!"

"But I—I don't want to go there! I won't! Let me go!"

With Dot protesting and struggling every inch of the way, they went on. Babs, staring at her, frowned, wondering again at the mystery of this girl. If Dot had disguised herself and run away for a joke, why, now that the joke had fallen flat, did she not accept it with good grace and cave in? And why was she looking so frightened?

All the same, explanations could come later. They had her; that was the main thing, and they soon reached the vestibule, which, as it was tea-time at the hotel, was fortunately deserted.

"Well, here we are," Clara said. "Now, you giddy bag of mystery, you can jolly well explain!" And then she yelled again: "My hat, she's off! Babs, stop her!"

But Babs did not stop her. The frightened Dot was haring like the wind for the door. Too late Babs hurried forward. With a wild swerve the fugitive was past her, had caught the door, flinging it open.

"After her!" yelled Clara.

"Oh crumbs, listen!" gasped Mabs.

For from the other side of the door, which led into the ball-room, came a sudden crash.

The crash was caused by a small table which Dot had overturned. It was the table on which Mr. Blair's beloved and almost completed jigsaw puzzle had been laid out. The tray was now under the table, and the jigsaw pieces scattered far and wide.

"Dot, you fool!" shrieked Babs.

Dot, her face startled, turned for a moment, still running hard. There came a fresh shriek from Jemima.

"Dot, you nunny! Look out!"

But the damage was done even as the words left Jemima's lips. The fugitive had cannoned straight into the



Christmas-tree. That tree, a little top-heavy with the weight of the presents on its bowed branches, heeled over. Just in time Babs jumped back as it crashed down in the middle of the floor, sending a shower of lights, presents, and earth scattering towards them. Then Dot was running through the door on the far side of the room. Desperately Leila spurted in pursuit; but it was too late. Dot had escaped, locking the door on the other side.

Then—"Hey, hey!" came a furious voice. "Upon my word, who's done this—!" And through the door leading to the vestibule Mr. Blair, flaming with passion, came tearing, to stop amid the wreck of his priceless jigsaw. "You—you hooligans!" he choked.

"And look at the Christmas-tree!" shrieked the voice of Miss Wren.

"Oh, great goodness!" "What has been happening here?" To the chums' dismay, the ball-room seemed to be invaded. Startled guests, disturbed by the noise of the two crashes, came streaming in through the door, and agitatedly following was Miss Trevlyn herself, her face a picture of consternation as she surveyed the damage done.

"My puzzle—my puzzle!" wailed Mr. Blair. "My puzzle! Miss Trevlyn!" he boomed furiously. "Look at this! The work of the holiday—undone—and I was within six pieces of completely finishing it!" he wailed.

"And the beautiful Christmas-tree!" Miss Wren cried. "Oh, you wicked girls! Barbara, where is Dot? Is she in the hotel?"

"I—I suppose so!" Clara said. "Then I am thankful—greatly thankful," Miss Wren said, "to see that she had no hand in this dreadful disturbance! Ahem! Ahem! How—how much did you collect, girls?" "One and threepence," Jemima said dubiously.

Miss Wren froze on the spot. "One and threepence," she repeated. "Oh, good gracious me! And I was expecting—Where is the collection-box?" she fired out then.

"Oh, kik-crums! We—we lul-lost it, you know!"

"Lost it?" Miss Wren's eyes seemed to shoot sparks. "Lost it? My girl, do you know how much those collection-boxes cost?" she quivered. "They cost one shilling and threepence each!"

"Madam, dash your confounded collection-box!" Mr. Blair stormed. "Look at my puzzle! You, girl! You are the ringleader of this irrepressible crowd"—he glowered at Barbara Redfern. "Which one of you did this?"

Babs bit her lip. She looked at her chums, standing angrily, if dismayedly, still now. Mr. Blair, purple with fury, continued to glare. Miss Trevlyn was shaking her head, and even she, this time, looked disapproving. "Clara, who did it?" she asked quietly.

Clara flushed. She felt angry, annoyed. Dot had done it. The whole misadventure of the afternoon had been caused by Dot. Yet Dot had run away, leaving them to face the music!

"Well, none of us did it!" Clara protested.

"What? You expect us to believe that?" Miss Wren cried.

"And then, before she could answer, the door came open again, and this time it was Dot who entered—Dot, who had divested herself of her macintosh and scarf and was now arrayed in the same afternoon frock in which she had set out with the chums on the unfortunate carol-singing expedition.

Her eyes were wide with surprise as she blinked at the scene in front of her.

"My hat!" she said. "Girl, do you know anything about this?" hooted furious Mr. Blair.

Dot shook her head. "What should I know about it? I've only just come in!"

The chums stared at her. Each of them had a sensation of being robbed of breath. That Dot, the creator of all the mischief, could so barefacedly tell and act that lie!

Clara's face hardened. "So," she said, staring deliberately at the other girl, "you don't know anything about it?"

"Why, no—" Dot said. "I don't understand—"

"I don't think," Mr. Blair barked, "there's any need for you to understand. You're not trying, are you, to make it appear that Miss Wren's charge is to blame, because if you are, that's treacherous as well as cowardly! Miss Trevlyn, I tell you for the very last time—if these girls do not soon leave this hotel, I shall!"

"But—but—" Dot stammered. "I think," Miss Wren said acidly, "that you will come with me, Dot. Apparently I made a big mistake in entrusting you to these girls. And I shall certainly complain to Miss Eldridge when she arrives!" she added, with a challenging glare at Miss Trevlyn. "Dot, come!"

And Dot, with a blink at the chums, suffered herself to be led away.



Dot Must Be Found!

NOT a very happy evening, the one which followed, in spite of the splendid tea, the still more splendid dinner, and the cosy, snug atmosphere of the Pellabay Castle Hotel.

For Babs & Co. were in disgrace.

Even Miss Trevlyn, Clara's aunt, was not too pleased with them. The bearing of the other guests was one of marked coldness and hostility.

For even though the more fair-minded ones were willing to make allowance for the high spirits of youth during a festive season, there was, they said, a limit.

Mr. Blair, absorbed in his jigsaw puzzle again—three pieces of which seemed to have vanished for good—glared furiously every time his eye lighted upon them.

Dot, white-faced and miserable, was held such a close prisoner by her governess that there was no chance of talking to her, even had they so desired—which they didn't. Dot had let them down badly.

It was almost with relief that they went to bed that night, still rather sore, still smouldering under a sense of injustice.

And yet Babs wasn't so sure. Somehow, Babs, though she had shared the first hot flush of anger with her chums, couldn't altogether believe that Dot was the sneak and coward she appeared.

Dot had been given no private opportunity of explaining. Babs felt sure that when Dot had set out with the carol singers she hadn't had the

faintest intention of doing anything but play the game.

It had all started with that mysterious whistle—the whistle they had heard the night previously in the games-room. Why had Dot bolted so hurriedly in answer to that whistle? Why, when they saw her again, had she been dressed as a poor girl? And why, in the name of all that was puzzling, had she bolted when they had dragged her back to the hotel?

Insoluble those problems seemed. Turning them over in her mind, Babs went to sleep. In the morning she and Mabs and Leila and Clara, rising earlier than the others, went for a brisk walk, returning just before breakfast. The first person they met in the vestibule was Dot herself.

Rather hesitantly she eyed them; rather grimly, for a moment, the chums stared back. Then she came forward.

"Babs—" she faltered. "Well, Dot?" Babs asked; and, in spite of her chilliness, felt her heart melting at the look of misery on the other girl's face.

"Babs, I—I'm sorry for what happened—"

Clara sniffed. "It's a pity you couldn't tell that to your governess!" she retorted.

"But—but I did get back," Dot went on. "I did it just on the ten minutes, but you'd gone."

"Say, what are you talking about?" Leila asked.

"Last night. I promised to meet you at the church."

"And a pretty wild-goose chase you led us!" Mabs put in.

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. But when I turned up there, you'd gone."

"Oh, Dot, chuck it!" Clara protested, with impatient scorn.

"But—"

"Anyway, never mind!" Babs put in hastily. "It's all blown over now. We—we were a bit upset, naturally," she said. "After all, it's Christmas, and as long as Dot gives her word not to bolt in future, I vote we all be chums again. All right, Dot?"

Dot gulped a little. "Well, thank you," she said. "But—but, Babs, can I have a word with you?" she asked beseechingly.

"Why, sure!" And Babs nodded to her chums, who, taking the hint, vanished through the door.

"Babs, I—I want you to help me," Dot said nervously. "Oh, I know I have no right to; but, Babs, you—you must trust me this time! You'll have to! There's a kiddie—a kiddie, Babs, whose life is in danger. I—I can't explain now, but I'll tell you everything when I come back. But, Babs, Miss Wren doesn't know, and—and I daren't tell her. After breakfast—at ten—I've just got to get away. You understand?"

"And you want me to help you?" Babs asked.

"Yes, Babs, please! If you can only get Miss Wren out of the way for half an hour—I'll be back in that time."

Babs paused. Should she? But there was such earnestness, such entreaty in Dot's voice, that somehow she couldn't refuse her. And a kiddie's life in danger—

Babs nodded, though to be sure she had just a qualm of misgiving.

"But how—" she began. "Well, if—if you could think up something else in connection with her mission," Dot said hopefully. "She's

just crackers on that, Babs. Will you?"

"I'll try," Babs promised, and Dot gave a relieved sigh. But they had to part then, because through the windows of the vestibule Miss Wren could be seen approaching.

Babs rejoined her chums. To be sure, they were not enthusiastic when she mooted the idea, but as Babs had more or less given her promise to Dot, they all agreed that they must stand by her. And Babs, in ten minutes, had the idea.

"I've got it!" she said. "What about this? A Christmas Day auction for the missionary funds. If we ask Miss Wren to be the auctioneer, she'll freeze on to the notion like anything. And just for a start we'll collect some of our own things— together and invite her to inspect them."

And so there was the scheme; but getting Miss Wren interested in it was a different matter.

Miss Wren's attitude towards the chums was, to say the least of it, icy. But when Babs saw her sitting in the lounge alone, she and Mabs started a loud-voiced conversation on the subject of the Christmas auction, in aid of the mission. Before long there were obvious signs that Miss Wren was listening.

"The only thing is," Babs said thoughtfully, "who shall be the auctioneer? Of course, Miss Wren would fit the part beautifully. But she doesn't like us, does she? We daren't ask her."

"Ahem!" said Miss Wren mildly, and rose from the depths of the armchair. "I—I am sorry," she said, with some confusion. "I did not intend to listen to your conversation, but—ahem!—may I venture to put myself forward?"

Babs inwardly chuckled. Mabs hastily averted her face. After that it was the easiest thing in the world to induce Miss Wren's mild enthusiasm to a bubbling point of excitement. Meantime, the rest of the chums had been busy in Babs' room sorting out various articles of clothing and other oddments. Then Babs suggested, just on the tick of ten, that Miss Wren might like to inspect them. "I shall be delighted," Miss Wren announced. "It is an excellent idea."

Off they went, winking to Dot, who, seated some little distance away, was anxiously waiting the signal to know if the plot had succeeded.

In Babs' room Clara & Co. had laid out a set of articles. There was a film album, contributed by Leila Carroll, three or four books by Gwen Cook, a really beautiful piece of needlework from Marjorie Hazeldene, and a pair of woolly gloves from Clara; a silver watch from Jemima, and a purple sash from Bessie Bunter, with a box of dominoes from Janet Jordan. Babs, knowing very well that she had another set coming as a Christmas present from her mother, had contributed a box of celluloid stencils.

"Oh, my dears!" Miss Wren squeaked, at the sight of those treasures, her face fairly beaming. "How lovely of you!"

Snatching up Bessie's sash, she moved closer to the light to examine its texture. Then she jumped.

"Good gracious, there is Dorothy—going out!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Babs, and goggled at the figure hurrying at that moment through the gates.

Down went the purple sash. Quick as thought Leila, nearer the door,

turned the key in it, and slipped it out of the lock.

Then Miss Wren strode towards it, with Babs running after her.

"Miss Wren—" "Wait, wait!" Miss Wren quivered. "My duty comes first, and my duty is to see that that wicked, wilful girl does not disobey my orders. I will have her brought back!" she vowed. "I will punish her! I—" And then she paused. "This door is locked!" she cried.

"Say, somebody must have taken the key!" Leila said, in pretended dismay.

"The key—" Miss Wren's eyes flashed. Suddenly she reached out, making a snatch at Leila's hands, in which the end of that key, unknown to its hider, was showing. "You—you wicked girls! You have tried to lock me in! This is a plot—another plot!" she cried furiously. "You have deliberately sought to detain me in order that Dorothy can escape!"

"Oh crumbs!" Babs said flusteredly. "You—you see— Oh dear! Miss Wren, don't worry!" she begged. "Dorothy will be back in half an hour. She gave me her word of honour."

"Traitor!" Miss Wren bit out.

Remember December 22nd

because on that day—
next Thursday—another

SCHOOLGIRL

will be published, instead
of on December 24th.

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And clink! went the key into the lock as she stormed out.

"Oh crumbs! This is what comes of your bright idea!" Janet Jordan groaned. "Now we're in for another packet of soup."

"And Aunt Grace," Clara said. "Poor old aunt! Come on!"

Crestfallen, the chums went out, to find a real old row in progress downstairs. Miss Wren, livid with rage, was violently protesting to Miss Trevlyn. Mr. Blair, almost purple with fury himself, was glaring up from his jigsaw puzzle, and several other guests, looks of profound disgust on their faces, were gathered round. Suddenly Mr. Blair rose, banging his fist on the table with a force that made the puzzle pieces leap.

"Miss Trevlyn, I am sorry. I have stood enough of this. This hotel is nothing better than bedlam—thanks to your precious niece's friends, and this wretched woman's charge. Get the porter to pack my bags and look up a train. I am going!"

"Oh, please, please!" Miss Trevlyn pleaded. "Clara!" she cried, seeing her niece.

"Oh crumbs! We—we're sorry, aunt, but Dot's only gone for half an hour," Clara said. "Why all the fuss?"

Nevertheless, there was fuss. Lots and lots of it. In the middle of it, fortunately, a telegram came for Miss Wren; and, quivering, she read it. Then she turned with a flash of triumph.

"Miss Eldridge, Dorothy's foster-mother, is coming this afternoon," she said. "And I most certainly shall

complain to her," she added, flouncing off.

Miss Trevlyn, with a sigh, sank into a chair.

"Clara," she said, "Dorothy will have to be found. I may be able to pacify Miss Eldridge if Dorothy has turned up, but if she has not, then—I fear the worst. More than half of the guests here are friends of hers, and she will probably pack off when she has heard Miss Wren's complaints, taking the whole lot with her. You're sure, Clara, she said only half an hour?"

"Sure!" Babs put in.

But when the half-hour was up no Dot had arrived. In an hour's time she had not arrived. Lunch-time came, with the sky overcast, and the first bleak flakes of a new snowstorm beginning to fall, and still there was no sign of her.

After lunch, Miss Trevlyn was frantic.

"Clara—Barbara, please, go and find her!" she cried. "Bring her back!"

"Come on!" Clara said grimly. "And this time," she added furiously, "is the very, very last time she lets us down!"

Intensely and bitterly angry with Dot now, they all dressed; in a flurry of snow, stepped out. Though it was early the sky was becoming dark, and with a swift wind howling in their faces speech was almost impossible.

The falling snow had already covered the road as, fighting for breath, their heads bent to face the gale, Babs & Co. staggered on. Bessie, as usual, was in the rear, but she was so occupied with the task of keeping on her feet that she did not even miss them until, with a sudden sensation of being alone, she looked round. And then she jumped.

Not a light in sight. No footprints. No sign of Babs & Co. Only pitch darkness, out of which came a stinging shower of snow.

"Oh d-d-d-dear! I'm lul-lost!" Bessie quavered.

But presently she saw ahead of her—how far ahead she did not know—a steady, gleaming light which marked a habitation of some kind.

Bessie cheered a little. Any port in a storm was Bessie's motto, and feeling somehow compensated by that light for the absence of her chums, she made towards it.

A few tottering steps brought her near enough to recognise it as an old thatched farmhouse, with various out-buildings in its rear.

Bessie marched up to the door, taking a peep through the window as she did so. The window was lighted and unblinded, and two people were plainly revealed in the room which lay beyond it. One was a woman whom Bessie had never seen before, in the act of helping a girl into a warm-looking tweed coat, trimmed with soft beaver collar.

Then, as the girl turned, snatching up a scarf, Bessie almost cried out.

For the girl was Dot Eldridge!

At the same moment, in a lull of the storm, a voice, faint and far away, floated to the fat girls' ears.

"Bessie! Bessie! Where are you?" It was Babs.

Continued
on
page
14.





As this is the Special Christmas Number of THE SCHOOLGIRL, there is only one possible way in which your Patricia can open her letter to you this week, and that is by wishing you all, every single charming reader,

A Happy and Joyful Christmas.

I would love, as I think you must know, to send you my greetings personally, but as that isn't possible, please accept them in print, knowing that they do, most sincerely, come from my heart.

Since Christmas itself is not until next week I shall, of course, be "wishing" you all again then—for I don't think we can have too many wishes for happiness, do you?

Now I want to get down right away to helping you with any last-minute suggestions for Christmas—for, next week, we shall be cutting out all seriousness on these pages and just let ourselves go recklessly gay.

● A Christmas Custom

It's quite likely that at the moment you and your chums at school may be a spot worried as to whether to give an end-of-term present to your schoolteacher or not.

Well, first I must ask you what is the custom in your school? Do the other teachers receive gifts from their class? If they do, then you must certainly not be any different!

Just supposing, though, that the rest of the school does not, as a rule, give presents to mistresses, even at Christmas—this is no reason why you should not.

If your own class teacher or Form-mistress is a perfect darling, then I'm sure that most of the girls in her care would just love to contribute towards a gift, however small, for such a special and joyous occasion.

And your mistress, I am sure, would adore it.

It is up to the Form captain to collect the money, and she should have another girl to help her to keep a written record of all sums handed to her.

When it comes to choosing the gift it is a good idea to write down one or two suggestions and pass these around the Form.

Ask each girl to put a tick against the present she thinks would be most suitable, and then buy the one that has the most ticks. (This will make sure that it is the choice of the majority and, in addition, keep the whole scheme a secret from the mistress.)

Now here are some suggestions for gifts. If you have collected about five shillings to seven-and-six, I suggest: Book ends.

Out of School Hours

Filled with helpful, Christmas-y suggestions is this letter from your friend Patricia, who writes of all those things so near and dear to a schoolgirl's heart.

A propelling pencil. Some bulbs growing in a pretty bowl. A photograph in a frame. An address book, or a luxury box of chocolates.

If you have collected ten shillings: A writing case. A brief case (this is something like a music case, for carrying papers and thinnish books). A desk clock. An ink-well with a silver lid. A nicely bound book by her favourite author. A small table lamp. A cut-glass vase or an attractive waste-paper basket. There, I hope that will help.

● Jolly Cards

I think Christmas cards are prettier than ever this year, don't you? We've received tons at home already—and they're still coming in by every post.

Small brother Heath and I, your Patricia, have already filled the mantelpiece, so that even the clock is hidden, and now we're decorating the top of the bureau with them.

Mother and father always select a special card each year and have it printed to send around.

But I'd much rather buy mine separately, for I just adore choosing cards.

It's so much more fun, I think, to wonder who this one with the old stage coach shall go to, and who shall have this other one with the very futuristic design. (My taste, you'll notice, varies from ye olde worlde to ye very modern!)

My favourite card—I bought six of them—has a cute Christmas stocking on the front. It's made of net, or something, and looks very real.

You open the card and then find that the net is only on the front part, while the toys and contents are on the back part, so that they show through as you first look at the card.

Then I have another of a Scottie, with a bow of real tartan ribbon round his neck.

● Like Barbara Redfern's

Many of you were sweet enough to write about that little feature which Miss Hilda Richards and I plotted out between us—"Babs & Co.'s Winter Dresses"—and lots of you said you thought Babs' bolero jacket was a really good idea, and how you wished you had one like it.

So I thought I'd repeat the idea here, just a little differently, telling you how to make one to wear over a pretty frock to give it that good-time look.



A summery, silk frock of your own that has grown too tight can very quickly be turned into this attractive little garment.

Cut the skirt part off (which could be saved) just above the waist. Cut off the collar, if any, and make an opening right down the front. Bind these raw edges with pretty ribbon, and the jacket is complete.

You'll notice, too, that there is no need for the edges of this jacket to meet across the front, so can show as much of your pretty dress beneath as you like.

A coloured bolero over a plain dress would look sweet—and it's just the thing to slip on when arms get chilly.

● The Newest Collar

Now here's the very smartest, wide collar you could make for your best dress to wear over Christmas.

You'll require a strip of silk measuring about six inches by eighteen, or even more.

Make a hem along one edge, then work French knots around the other edges. Now thread pretty, narrow ribbon through the hem, gather it up and tie it around the neck of your dress.

It would look very pretty worn over a velveteen frock—as you can see in the picture, for it would add just that touch of lightness to the neckline which is so attractive and so youthful.

And for Christmas Day itself, you might wear a ribbon round your hair to match the bow on the collar.



● The Special Pudding

Our stack of Christmas puddings looks so exciting in the larder at home—there are eight of them in all!

And guess how we know in which pudding the lucky charms are? (For we didn't slip in sixpences, after all.)

We tied most of the puddings with white string around the pudding-cloth, but the one with the charms in was tied with red string—to make sure that that is the one eaten on Christmas Day.

It's such a simple idea, but quite good, I think—as long as big brother Brian doesn't take it into his head to change over the strings!

Bye-bye now, my pets, until a very exciting next week—when your SCHOOLGIRL will be on sale on Thursday—two whole days early—in honour of Christmas.

Your friend,

Patricia

GIFTS THAT CHARM

Last minute gifts that would be received with cheers—and some hints on wrapping even the tiniest present.

WITH Christmas so very near, I can just imagine you rushing around in excited circles, wondering what on earth to buy to complete your Christmas present list.

I know I have already given you loads of suggestions, but even thousands are not always enough, are they? And quite often, I know, you will be asked by other people—perhaps with more money to spend—if you have any bright ideas to pass on.

So first I'll tell you some of the lovely presents I have seen that would bring oops and whoops of delight from the youngsters.

FOR THE YOUNGSTERS

I'm not going to suggest that you buy the dolls' house which had a garage attached—complete with car, but I knew you'd like to hear about it. (I'd have liked it for myself!)

But doll's furniture is always a joy to the youngster who owns a doll's house, and this can be bought in "suites" from sixpence upwards.

Doll's bath-rooms are fascinating, complete with a tank for holding water, taps that turn, and even a shower and bath-room cabinet. For about a shilling you can buy a "bath-night outfit" for a doll. There is tiny soap, face flannel, sponge—and even a wee tube of tooth-paste and inch-long tooth brush.

"Shops" are grand fun—especially sweet shops, and these can be bought for little as well as for much.

I have seen the cutest little puss-cats that you wind up, and then they wag their tails and "mew" most pitifully. There are model aeroplanes that turn somersaults, model farms, dolls' brush-and-comb sets, and a variety of cuddly animals that would make even the Zoo look under-populated.

The schoolgirl who quite enjoys a spot of knitting or sewing, can very quickly make the most charming presents for a small girl.

Imagine a knitted doll's bed cover, for example—in pink, with a bow of blue ribbon in one corner.

Knitted doll's clothes are very fashionable in the doll world, and take only the tiniest amount of wool to make.

FOR SCHOOLGIRLS

For chums about your own age, the shops are selling magic toy typewriters, toy telephones, baffling boxes of conjuring tricks, and fascinating toy sewing-machines.

Among the inexpensive suggestions, I'm quite sure the modern toilet-bag designed like a handbag would be loved by any girl. And of course you can certainly never go wrong with such games as "Stak-a-Stik," "Over She Goes," and "Spelling Bee."

Books are never-failing successes; you have only to look on page 22 to see every girl's favourites.

Pencil sets, a collection of good paint brushes, a geometry set, school purse to sling around the shoulder, "over-sock"



for winter hiking—any of these make really useful gifts.

For the girl—or boy—who loves theatricals, nothing could be more exciting than a stage "make-up" box, complete with "disguise" outfit.

A vivid scarf or some cosy bed-room slippers would certainly be well used.

A new bicycle bell or lamp, table tennis balls or bats—these would be appreciated by the sports-loving girl—or boy.

FOR THE LADIES

"Something for Beauty," is always appreciated by the "lady-grown-ups." I have seen a hankie for threepence that is half red and half black. "Pour le Rouge" is written on one side, intended for dabbing at lip-sticked mouths so that no stain shows. The black part is for patting mascara-ed eyes in smarting winds.

A packet of coloured bath-cubes, or bath-petals, fancy soaps—all are "beauty" presents that are luxurious as well.

Brass toasting forks, wood butter dishes with a tiny knife to match, table mats, lemonade glasses with numbers painted on (such a bright idea at party time), egg-timers, and spill-holders are more practical presents that should delight the home-lover.

FOR THE MEN

Ties, with hankies to match, in a box have made even the difficult art of present choosing for the menfolk quite a simple business these days. (Select navy or deep red spotted ones for safety, if you're not quite sure.) Tobacco pouches, jars, brass cigarette boxes, stamp wallets, magnifying glasses, shaving soap, soap shaped like golf-balls—you couldn't possibly go wrong on any of these.

PRETTY WRAPPINGS

But do, please, save just a few pennies from your spending money for buying pretty paper for wrapping your gifts. Even the tiniest present is more exciting to open if it is packed attractively.

Wrap it first in white tissue paper, and tie this round with silver or holly-patterned ribbon into which you should tuck a pretty greetings card.

Then wrap the gifts again, in gay, Christmasy paper and tie around with coloured string.

If the gifts are going through the post, a box is well worth the extra cost, but you must still use plenty of tissue paper and some of the fancy tie-ups to make it look gay inside when the lid is removed.

Brown or green wrapping paper should cover the outside of the gift-to-be-posted, but the string can be as vivid as you like, providing it is strong.

Lots of intriguing little gummy labels pasted on the outside make the parcel look more exciting, even if no one does take any notice of the instructions "Not to be opened till Christmas Day."



A very personal present for a far away relative.

Cover a piece of cardboard with coloured paper or pretty material. Paste a favourite snap-shot of yourself after colouring the white border, on one side, and a calendar on the other.

Inscribe what words you like above this, and finish with a bow of pretty ribbon threaded through two holes at the top for hanging up.

BABS & CO'S WINTER DRESSES

This week: MARJORIE HAZELDENE

THIS deep-red velvet frock is Marjorie's favourite, for she loves things that are softly feminine—and she is wise, for they suit her.

You will notice the rather close-fitting bodice, which is so fashionable this year, especially when the skirt is just the opposite, rather full.

Marjorie actually made this frock herself—from a pattern, and with a little help from Miss Charmant.

The neck is square, but slopes gently on the shoulders. Different collars can be worn with it, but Marjorie likes a coffee-coloured lace one best.

That in the picture is merely a strip of lace, which has the ends hemmed, and is tacked in place, not covering the front of the neckline, you'll notice.

The sashes Marjorie changes from time to time. If she is going somewhere special, she wears the sash shown, which is royal-blue silk on one side, and deep red on the other.

The puff sleeves, I think, are particularly sweet on Marjorie, for they give her extra width across the shoulders—a tip for you who are rather narrow there.

With this dress, Marjorie wears silk stockings in a shade known as "nutria." Her shoes are black "patent."



Continued from page 11.



The Queerest Puzzle of All!

BABS & CO. were, of course, looking for their fat chum, whom they had just missed.

"Bessie!" Babs anxiously called, for the fourth time.

"Listen!" Clara exclaimed. For, some distance away, came an answering cry.

"I sus-say, you girls—" "It's Bessie!" Mabs laughed. "Oh, thank goodness we've found her! Come on—but here, wait a minute!" And Mabs, who had a torch, suddenly flashed it into the snow, pulling out something which showed just above the surface. "Hallo!" she whistled. "Somebody's lost a scarf—and a jolly good one, too!"

A scarf it was. Babs shook it free of snow. Then she jumped.

"My hat! See whose it is? Dot's!" They stared. Most certainly it was Dot's, the same scarf which Dot had worn during the first encounter at the station; the self-same scarf which, later, Babs had spotted in her possession when she had climbed through the window of the hotel. Then Dot had been this way. Dot—

"I sus-say, you girls—" Bessie puffed, panting up. "Oh, really, you know! Fancy losing me! But I sus-say, I've seen Dot!"

"Dot! Where?" "In the farmhouse over there. She was dressing up in her coat." And then Bessie spotted the scarf which Babs now held. "Oh crumbs! I say, she was wearing it!" she cried. "How did you get hold of it?"

"But how," sniffed Clara, "could she be wearing it? We've just found it!"

"Wait a minute!" Babs exclaimed, and her face wore a strange expression. "We're jolly well going to look into this. If Dot is in that farmhouse, then that's the place she uses for disguising herself. I vote we go and find out!"

"And I vote"—Bessie shivered—"we go back to the hotel. I'm persuaded!"

"Same here!" Gwen Cook said. "Blow Dot!"

"Well, go back!" Babs said. "I'll go and have a peep round on my own. Mabs, will you come with me?"

"Yes, rather!"

"And I, what-ho!" Jemima beamed. But the others did not look enthusiastic. They were rather fed up with the whole venture. It seemed obvious now that Dot was just playing one of her silly games again.

And so, leaving Clara & Co. to tramp back, Babs and Jemima and Mabs went off.

Clara & Co., in a thoroughly exasperated mood, wended their way back, fully expecting, when they got there, to meet Dot. But they didn't. All they did encounter at the hotel was a rather frantic and apprehensive Miss Trevlyn.

"She's not come back," she said in answer to Clara's question. "And her governess has gone off now to meet Miss Eldridge. They will be back in less than half an hour. Oh, Clara, what shall I do?"

"Crumbs!" Clara said blankly and unhelpfully.

"But she'll come," Gwen said. "She's bound to come."

"Then all I

hope," Miss Trevlyn said, biting her lip, "is that she arrives before Miss Wren and her foster-mother."

Restively Clara & Co. hung about the vestibule. Ten—fifteen minutes went by; then suddenly Clara gave a start.

"Hallo!" she cried. "Car coming!"

A car was coming, approaching slowly owing to the chains which had been slipped on its wheels to give it a grip up the hill. Eagerly the chums started out as it arrived at the hotel door and stopped. Next moment Clara shouted:

"Dot—Dot, you wash-out!"

For it was Dot who got out of the car; and following her came a well-dressed, middle-aged man in an overcoat.

"Dot, who—" Clara began.

Dot gulped. She looked unaccountably nervous, Clara thought.

"This—this is my uncle," she said in a rather tremulous voice. "And—and now will you please excuse me, girls? I—I've got something that uncle wants to see in my room."

And while the chums fell back, vastly relieved, but very, very puzzled—for where had Dot's uncle sprung from in the last few hours?—she hurried past them, leading her relative towards the stairs.

"HAL-LO!" BABS breathed softly. "Did you hear that?"

Halting, she stared towards the farmhouse.

She, Mabs, and Jemima were still **MANY, MANY THANKS**

for all the delightful
XMAS CARDS
you have sent me,
I really do treasure them.
YOUR EDITOR

some distance from that objective, its welcome light still glimmering, and they had paused, because a few seconds before a car, rapidly driven past them with no lights, had disappeared into what was apparently the farmhouse yard. Now, as they stood, they heard a faint wailing cry.

"What was it?" Mabs breathed.

"And why," Jemima asked keenly, "did that merry old car drive with no lights on? But—whoa! There are more developments," she whispered.

More developments there were; for at that moment the car came chugging out of the yard again. This time its lights were full on, and it stopped in front of the farmhouse door. Hardly had it halted, however, than out of that door stepped the well-groomed figure of a man, followed by a girl. Babs & Co. jumped as they recognised her.

"Dot!" breathed Mabs. "Hi—" "Mabs, don't shout!" Babs hissed fiercely. "Watch!"

They watched. Now they saw the man and girl clamber into the car. The car drove off. Jemima and Mabs stared at their leader, who was frowning.

"Something fishy here!" Babs said. "Did you spot Dot, wearing a scarf the same as the one we've just picked up? And that cry we heard—if that wasn't a girl's voice I'm a Dutchman! I think, girls, before we do anything else we'll take a peep into the farmyard. I don't like this. Come on!"

The chums thrilled now. Making a wide circle in the darkness, they crept towards the farmyard. Babs paused outside a shed.

"Here we are," she breathed. "This is where the car stopped and turned round. Mabs, keep cover, will you?"

Reaching up, she lifted the heavy wooden socket which clamped the door from the outside, and, while Jemima cautiously shone her torch, flung it open; then she jumped.

For in one corner, bound and gagged, was a girl.

"Dot!" Babs cried. "Oh dithery doodles!" Jemima chattered. "Then there are two of them!"

Two of them obviously there were; and now a great light broke upon them. Swiftly Babs rushed forward; swiftly she cut the bonds that bound the trussed Dot, and removed the gag. Dot, panting, but without hat or coat, got to her feet.

"Dot, what's happened?" "I guess what's happened is that I've been a fool!" Dot said ruefully. "But come on; let's get away from here! That beast Pickard robbed me of my hat and coat, and then trussed me up like this!"

"Pickard?" Babs questioned. "But, Dot, wait a minute! Who's the other girl who went off in your scarf just now?"

Dot stared blankly.

"Other girl? What other girl?" "The girl wearing your scarf—or, at least," Babs said, "a scarf like yours. Like this!"

"That?" Dot stared at the scarf Babs held up. "But I lost that hours ago," she said, "when Pickard grabbed hold of me, and I struggled in the snow. But come," she added. "I'll explain as we go along."

The girls did not linger after that. Running back through the farmhouse gate, they scooted into the snow.



Face to Face!

"CAN'T make it out!" Clara Trevlyn, in the lounge of the Pellabay Hotel,

said puzzledly. "Why the dickens has Miss Wren never mentioned Dot's uncle? But, I say," she added, as the sound of wheels came from outside, "I believe that's Miss Wren and Dot's foster-mother."

It was; for clearly they heard Miss Wren's rather squeaky voice.

"This is the place, dear Miss Eldridge. We are here at last!" "Humph!" came the retort. "And I hope Dot is here to greet us. Has my luggage arrived?"

"Yes, dear Miss Eldridge, it arrived two days ago, and is in your room now."

"And Dot," Leila whispered, "isn't here to greet her. Shucks—Hallo!" she added; and cried out: "Dot!"

For Dot—or the girl they thought was Dot—had arrived at the head of the stairs. She paused as she heard her name, starting violently.

"Dot, you ninny!" Clara yelled. "Come on! Miss Eldridge has just come in, and she's expecting you to meet her. Come on! Well—" And Clara glared. "My hat! She's buzzed off again!"

For Dot had abruptly turned and scurried back the way she had come.

"Well—" Clara gasped; and then jumped up. "Come on!" she said. "If that ninny's playing some new game she's not getting away with it! It's about time her jolly funniosities came to an end!"

Up the stairs Clara pelted, along the corridor. And then a voice came from the room next to Miss Wren's—the room which had been reserved for Miss Eldridge and in which her luggage had already been placed

It was Dot's voice, hoarse, throaty, alarmed. And it was shouting.

"No! No, you shan't do it! You shan't steal it, I tell you! You shan't—Oh!"

There came a crash; a muffled gasp. Clara, running as she had rarely run before, reached the door and crashed it open.

She was in time to see the window flung up; to see Dot's uncle jump over the sill and disappear into the night; just in time to see Dot, her hand to her mouth, from which the blood was streaming, reeling back against the wall. Miss Eldridge's big trunk, standing in the middle of the floor, had its contents jumbled all over the room.

"Dot!" Clara cried.

Dot gulped.

"He—he's got away!"

"Your uncle?"

"He—he wasn't my uncle!" Dot turned. "He—he—oh, what shall I do now?" she cried. "And I—I am not the girl you think I am! I—I never thought there was any harm in coming here with him! He—he said—"

under his arm. One fleeting instant he gazed round, and then jumped.

And from Dot—

"It's Pickard!" she cried. "Oh, my hat! And that box he has under his arm—those are my aunt's jewels! Quick, head him off!"

She herself ran forward. The man, alighting, was staggering now. In the glare of the floodlight he stood, plainly revealed. Then, as a cry came from the window above him, he turned furiously. Dot, followed by Mabs and Jemima, tore towards him in the darkness.

"Stop!" Babs cried.

The man heard, blinking bewilderedly in the floodlight. But he heard, and hearing, dodged away in the other direction—all unknowing that Dot, in that same instant, was heading towards him. Before he saw her, she saw him. Out in a flash went Dot's foot, and with a cry the man dropped the box and went reeling head over heels down the steep hill. Breathlessly Dot grabbed the box up.

"Quick!" she gasped to Babs & Co. "To the hotel!"

"I think," Babs said, "that you will find this is Dot!"

"Then this girl—"

"I—I am also called Dot!" the strange girl tremulously answered. "You—you see, my name is Dorette!"

"Dorette!" Miss Eldridge quivered. "Dorette! Dorette who, may I ask?"

"Dorette Jenkinson," that girl quivering replied; and blinked at the extraordinary look on Miss Eldridge's face. "Oh dear! I—I didn't mean any harm," she said with a gulp. "Mr. Pickard told me that—that he was only going to give you a surprise. You see," she added, and while Miss Eldridge dazedly stared, she broke into her story.

And that story, in all truth, was pitiful. Left an orphan, she had been thrown upon the world and taken into a home. She had not liked the home, and had run away.

"And—and then?" Babs asked.

Then, Dorette said, a few months ago she had come into contact with the thief, Pickard, and his wife. They had one child of their own, and had offered her a home. Gratefully she had taken it, and had been treated well. Then, on the night that she had been at the station—

"It—it was you, then, who found my parcel?" Babs asked.

"Yes. And—and Mr. Pickard called me before I could talk to you. He said then that you were connected with the home from which I had escaped. He told me I was to have nothing to do with you. That—that's



AS Dot strolled upon the scene of destruction, the furious Mr. Blair swung round to her. "Girl, do you know anything about this?" he demanded. "What should I know about it?" was Dot's astonishing reply. "I've only just come in." Babs & Co. gasped, for they had just seen Dot do the damage.

why I always dodged you, and—and why I bolted after you'd caught me in the bushes yesterday. I—I'm awfully sorry for the damage I did, that—that Christmas-tree and the puzzle."

"That's O.K., now," Clara grinned. "And then—"

"Well, yesterday evening Mr. Pickard told me Miss Eldridge was an old friend of his, and that he wanted to give her a pleasant surprise by greeting her in her room. He asked me, because I was so like this girl Dot, to help him to get into the hotel so that he could meet you in your room when you came, Miss Eldridge."

"I see," Miss Eldridge nodded curiously. "But go on."

"Well, we—we came here," the girl went on, "but in this room he sent me away. I was scared when Miss Trevlyn called out to me, and I ran back—just in time to see him ransacking your trunk. I tried to stop him but he hit me across the mouth and jumped out of the window."

"The rotten cad!" Babs burst out indignantly. "But he didn't get away with the jewels, did he? But who," she added, "was he?"

Miss Eldridge looked at the real Dot. Her brow was a ²/₂ ⁶/₆ cc.

"Pickard," she said, "was my butler years ago. He evidently remembered that I always pack my jewels with my

She broke off as the door came open again. This time Miss Wren, with an extremely stiff-looking old lady at her back, stormed in. They both stopped, stupefied at the scene which met their gaze. Then—

"Dorothy!" shrieked Miss Wren.

"Dorothy!" Miss Eldridge said in a quivering voice. Her eyes flashed back to her topsy-turvy luggage. "Dorothy, my jewels were in that luggage, and you—you have helped someone to steal them!"

"MY HAT!" cried Barbara Redfern. "Look at that!"

She, Dot, Jemima, and Mabs were toiling up the hill back towards the hotel.

They were, at that moment, some hundred yards from the floodlit exterior of the hotel, and they all stood blinking in amazement at the alarming spectacle which burst upon their eyes. For suddenly a window on the first floor of the hotel had been flung violently open. On to the sill sprang a man, a black box

"Hi!" yelled the man. "Stop!"

But the chums did not stop. The box in their possession, they headed for the floodlight. Now they were in it; now running desperately towards the hotel. They reached the drawbridge, unpursued, just as Miss Trevlyn came out. She jumped as she saw Dot, the box under her arm.

"Dot, I thought you were upstairs? Your aunt is there—"

"Come on!" Dot said.

And up the stairs she went, leaving Miss Trevlyn gasping. With Babs & Co. on her heels, she reached the bedroom door, and the four of them burst in.

Dot's double, as white as a sheet, was facing the quivering Miss Eldridge, watched by the mystified Clara & Co.

"And what, Dorothy, do you mean by it?" Miss Eldridge was demanding. "Why such an act of treachery after I have done my best for you? What—?" And then, seeing the second Dot, she literally jumped. "You—you with my box!" she cried. "Bless my soul! Am I dreaming, or what? Which one of you is Dot?"

other belongings. It is quite easy to see his idea now. I dismissed him eight years ago from my service because he attempted a similar theft. Dorette, sit down," she added, with smiling kindness. "I shall have something to say to you presently. But now, Dorothy, what about your share in all this?"

Dot shook her head ruefully. "I'm sorry, Miss Eldridge! I'd no idea Pickard was a—a thief."

"Tell me, how came you to be implicated?" Miss Eldridge asked sternly.

Dot told her story then, clearing up the mystery to the last link. As a child she had always liked Pickard. She had always felt sorry that he had been sacked, in spite of the fact that both Miss Wren and her foster-mother had forbidden her to have anything to do with him. When, a week ago, she had arrived at Pellabay, it was to meet Pickard again—Pickard, who had told her he was on the verge of starvation, that his kiddie was ill, and begged her to go and see him and his wife.

"And the kiddie," Dot went on, "was ill—dreadfully. She took a fancy to me, and—so Pickard said—just pined away all the time I wasn't there. I gave her things—my duplicate scarf among them. I suppose Pickard handed that to Dorette. Naturally I daren't say anything about this to Miss Wren, but I couldn't stop her, knowing that poor kiddie wanted me so badly. And so—"

"And so," Miss Wren said angrily, "you dodged off whenever you felt so inclined?"

"Yes. And sometimes when the kiddie took a turn for the worse, and Pickard called for me. What you heard, Babs, were his whistles."

"And we, poor simps, never even guessed anything like that!" Babs said. "Oh, Dot, I'm sorry! But—but what's going to happen to Dorette?" she cried, with a pitying glance at that girl.

"Dorette," Miss Eldridge answered, and suddenly her face became very soft

and very tender—"Dorette, my dear, cheer up!" she said. "You have found your home at last. You have found another start. Dorette Jenkinson, do you know who you really are?"

Dorette blinked. "You are," Miss Eldridge went on softly, "the twin sister of Dot!"

"What?" cried Dot.

"When you were both babies in the orphanage I adopted Dot," Miss Eldridge went on. "I did not know until afterwards that she had a twin sister, and then it was too late. All these years, Dorette, I have been longing to meet you—offer you the same sort of home which Dot has—to bring you up together. And now, my dear, the choice is with you. Would you like to share Dorothy's home—and her life?"

But Dorette's answer to that was a happy sob, as she put her face on Miss Eldridge's shoulder. And Dot, her face beaming, trembling with the joy which was hers, glowed at the chums.

It seemed that it was going to be a happy Christmas at Pellabay, after all.

And that prospect was strengthened later.

For when the news got round, what a change in the attitude of the guests towards the Cliff House chums and the newly united twins, especially since the irascible Mr Blair had packed up, taking his uncompleted jigsaw puzzle with him!

And what cheeriness there was when, next day, Richard Pickard was run to earth, and Miss Eldridge, in the true spirit of Christmas, forbore to charge him, stipulating only that he and his wife should leave the country forthwith, but taking upon her own shoulders the task of caring for their child, in which she was ably assisted by Dot.

Simultaneously the clouds and the mysteries were banished, and Babs & Co., heroines of the hour, could look forward to the happiest Christmas ever!

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

From
Hilda Richards



to You

Elsewhere in this issue Hilda Richards sends Christmas Greetings to all her reader friends, as you have probably seen. Here, our popular author answers just a few of her many correspondents.

CHRISTINA ANDERSON (Perthshire).—Thank you so much for another long, newsy letter. Muriel Bond, of the Fourth, is aged 14 years and 7 months, my dear. There are now 35 girls in the Fourth. Yes, your cousin is quite right—Nancy Bell has been expelled from C.H., for her misdeeds. You may certainly write to Miss Doris Leslie at this office; I know she'll be delighted to hear from you. Your Cliff House suggestion I passed on to the Editor, Christina.

ELVIE SMALLACOMBE (Melbourne, Australia).—Only Jean Cartwright and Gwen Cook occupy Study No. 8, my dear; there is no other occupant. What an awful shame you lost all your pet birds! I do hope you managed to recover them. Bye-bye for the present. But write again some time, won't you?

"MOLLY AND LORNA" (Aldershot, Hants).—Your favourite Fourth Form, Clara, has chestnut-brown hair, my dears, which she wears in a bob. (Usually a rather windswept bob!) She is, I think, very popular with most of my readers. Next time you write you must tell me all about yourselves, you know. Bye-bye until then.

BETTY (Woking, Surrey).—So glad you finally decided to write, Betty. Yes, Marcia Loftus was expelled from Cliff House some time ago. I haven't any birds as pets myself, but I think they must be very charming. Many thanks for your story suggestions—I'll certainly keep them in mind.

ELIANE CAMILLERI (Malta).—Thank you so much for another of your nice little letters, Eliane. I haven't a full list of the Sixth Form studies, but I'll have to get one typed out some time. Several girls have been captain of the Fourth at different times; Marjorie Hazeldene held the position first, you know. Write again, won't you?

DIANA CLARK (Perth).—Delighted to hear from you again, Diana! I certainly hadn't forgotten you. I think the very best plan for disposing of your old copies of our paper is to take them along to your local hospital. (Especially if it's a children's hospital.) I do hope you are quite better now, Diana.

"GRACE" (Bathurst, N.S.W., Australia).—Many thanks for your charming little letter, Grace. You'd be in the Lower Fifth if you went to Cliff House, and your friend would be in the Fourth Form. Thank you both for your suggestions for stories—you may be sure I shall not forget them. Write again, won't you?

RUTH MAUNDER (Taunton, Somerset).—How lucky to have both a pony and a dog of your very own! I'm sure they're both sweet pets. Yes, I shall be featuring the Cliff House pets in future stories, you may be sure. You must tell me all about yourself next time you write, Ruth—I shall look forward to your letter.

BESSIE GEORGE (Victoria, Australia).—It was very nice to hear from you again, Bessie. Congratulations on doing so well in your exams! I hope you will be just as successful next time. But I don't suppose you will be thinking much of exams at this moment. You'd write again when you have time, won't you?

THE PHANTOM OF PELLABAY CASTLE!



Frightened one moment; friendly and helpful the next. In fact, so far as Barbara Redfern & Co. were concerned, quite—

THE QUEEREST GHOST WHO EVER STALKED A DARKENED CORRIDOR!

And thanks to this extraordinary spectre, the Christmas of the Cliff House Chums at Pellabay Castle was not only the merriest, happiest of their lives—but the most exciting and bewildering.

You must read Hilda Richards' thrilling festive story. It appears COMPLETE in next week's issue—which is, of course, on sale two days earlier than usual. Book YOUR copy now!

There is Romance and Glamour Galore in this unusual story.

Princess to Save Leiconia!



FOR NEW READERS.

PAMELA COURTNEY, an English girl living in the romantic little Balkan kingdom of Leiconia, is asked to impersonate the Princess Sonia. Sonia must go abroad in order to save the country—but nobody except Prince Alphonse must ever suspect that Pamela has taken her place. Thrilled beyond measure, Pamela agrees. She is so like the princess that a wig makes her Sonia's double. Her chief adviser is the Grand Duke Bernard, who does not know of the masquerade. She learns from a young Leiconian, **PAUL NALDI**, a secret helper of Princess Sonia, that the duke is plotting to disgrace her in the eyes of the people, and then seize the throne. The grand duke discovers that Paul is helping Pamela and sends soldiers to arrest him. Pamela warns Paul, and they ride off to a hide-out in the mountains. They reach a cave, when suddenly Paul falls unconscious. One of the soldier's bullets had hit him!

(Now read on.)

By

DORIS LESLIE

And as she stumbled anxiety urged her onward. She knew she would never be free of anxiety until Paul came round: until she knew, beyond all doubt, that he was well enough to be left.

It wasn't only because she was afraid for him in his present injured condition. There was something else—something that might affect the mission they had both undertaken to save Leiconia from a traitor.

Serious enough that the scheming Grand Duke Bernard now knew that Paul was her ally, and had forced him to become a fugitive, to be arrested on sight, and, if he offered resistance, to be shot, as had happened to-night. That made things so much easier for the duke; helped him in his scheme to turn the Leiconian people against her and seize the throne for himself, for she was now virtually alone against her enemies.

But it would be almost completely disastrous to her hopes of success if Paul was more badly hurt than he seemed. If he was helpless and in need of nursing, constant attendance, what ever could she do?

"I've got to get back to the palace," she thought, as she groped through the darkness. "They'll have missed me already. They'll wonder where I am. They'll be getting alarmed, thinking all sorts of things, and the grand duke—"

Bitterly her thoughts continued. The grand duke's hand was strengthened by every minute of her absence. For all she knew he might even now be turning it to his advantage.

Reaching the mouth of the cave, she studied the mountainside. There was a little pool not far away. She scrambled up to it, tore her handkerchief into two strips, plunged them in, and then rushed back to Paul.

On her knees, she cleaned and bathed the wound with one portion of soaked cloth. Strips of shirt served as bandages. Then, her rough surgery completed, she squeezed the other piece of handkerchief over Paul's face.

Holding her breath, Pamela watched, and then, all at once, her heart leaped. "Paul!" she whispered.

He stirred, groaned, and then, opening his eyes, blinked about him in bewilderment.

"Where on earth—" he began, then winced. "My arm. And—and you," he went on, looking at Pam's suddenly radiant face. "Why, I—I remember now. I buckled up, didn't I? And you did this?"

"Um," Pamela said, nodding. "But don't talk, please—rest. You'll be fine presently, but you oughtn't to—"

Paul managed a wan, but characteristic grin.

"I'm fine now," he declared. "Look!" He struggled to his feet. "There you are, as right as rain," he said, then seized her hand. "Thanks a whole heap for doing this, Pam! You're a—you're a gem! Yes, I feel tons better now. Old arm hurts a bit, but my head's clearer, and the old legs aren't so wobbly—"

Then he broke off, suddenly concerned. "Pam, I was forgetting! You ought to be at the palace. There'll be an awful row. You'd better dash off right away, old thing."

Pamela nodded, gloriously happy to find him his old self again.

"I'll go, but I'll try to smuggle you some food and stuff," she promised.

"Grand! But, Pam"—his face was thoughtfully serious—"there's one thing I want to know—how did the grand duke find out that I was helping you, and that I was at the inn?"

Discovered After All!

PAMELA stared in horror at Paul as he lay unconscious at her feet in the fire-lit cave.

"Paul—Paul!" she cried, in a frenzy of dread.

Paul did not stir.

Pamela's courage nearly failed her as, trembling, she knelt beside him and examined his bloodstained arm. She had never seen a bullet wound before. She expected something—something frightening. It was almost frightening, but she was hardly aware of it because of the relief that surged over her.

Although the ripping open of Paul's shirt showed that the underpart of his arm, near the shoulder, as well as his side, was coated with blood, Pamela saw at once that the wound was only a flesh one.

The bleeding had stopped now, but it had already taken its toll. That was why Paul, weak and dizzy, had fainted.

Pamela rose, very white. But there was unmistakable resolution stamped on her face. Water—that was what she needed. On their scramble up the mountainside, she had noticed little cataracts of clear, crystal water tumbling down to the lake far below.

With a glance at the unconscious Paul, a momentary hesitation, she turned and groped her way through a succession of other caves towards the exit.

The Meeting of the Traitors!

And, in secret, Princess Pamela is there, hearing every word her enemies say.



"Well," said Pamela, "it was like this."

And she explained how she had written him a note, saying she would be late for their appointment, and given it to Juanita to deliver.

Paul eyed her keenly.

"Juanita, eh? I might have guessed it. I never did trust her."

Quite bitterly he spoke, but Pamela was almost amused. Dear old Paul! Juanita was the one bee in his bonnet. Why, she was a topping sort, as loyal and true-blue a friend as one could desire.

That was how Pamela viewed Juanita. She would have been staggered if she had realised the truth—that Paul's instinctive dislike of the girl was thoroughly justified; that Juanita was actually the grand duke's niece, brought to the palace to spy upon her, and that she had not been compelled to hand over the note to the duke, as she had so glumly confessed to Pamela, but had given it to him as soon as possible. For her mission at the palace had been to discover who Pamela's helper was!

"I'm sure you're wrong about her, Paul," Pamela declared. "But don't let's argue about it—please!"

"We'll forget it for the moment then, Pam," Paul agreed quietly. "There's something else I wanted to say. It's about the peasants. You've got to find out how they feel about this, Pam. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," said Pamela, her face hardening.

For Paul meant that the grand duke had cunningly blamed her for his plight. It was in her name that orders for his arrest had been given.

"That encampment of peasants in the valley may be only a tiny part of the populace, but it's a vitally important one—for this reason," Paul resumed.

And he went on to give swift, concise explanations. There were scores of wandering bands of peasants dotted all over Leiconia. The valley encampment was one of them, and they were united by many common ties, of origin, relationship, and politics. What one did or thought, all the others did and thought. And Paul was personally known to each of them.

Within a few hours they would have learned of his plight, and know that she, their princess, was held responsible.

"However one party feels, the rest will feel, and that means more than half our people—your people, Pam," Paul concluded, unable to disguise his concern. "I hope they're not fools enough to believe all the lies the grand duke's agents will spread about you. You'll find it difficult enough now you're on your own, without more trouble from the people. But if there is any rumpus—well"—he shrugged, winced, and then forced a grin—"well, you won't find me here very long."

"If," said Pamela quietly. "But not unless, please. Remember the grand duke has spies amongst the peasants. You mustn't be seen."

"It's a bargain," Paul said. "Now off you run, young lady."

In that slightly bantering vein they said good-bye, and Pamela, insisting that Paul did not stir from the fire, but sat there, resting, started off on the long, arduous trek to Tolari Palace.

Quickly she went on across country, through the forest, and to the hollow oak, which was the entrance to a secret passage leading to Tolari Palace. She was not afraid, even if her heart beat swiftly when, some half an hour after climbing into the oak, she stepped through the secret panel into the art gallery of the palace.

All still and silent, shrouded in moon-gashed darkness. Everyone had retired, apparently. And soon she would have retired, too, and no one would know when she had returned. In the morning she could pretend that she had been back much sooner than this.

The grand duke might suspect, but he could not be sure.

She was tiptoeing towards her boudoir when—horrors! She halted, heart pounding, hands clenched.

A figure was coming down the passage. A tall, familiar figure, whose identity was accentuated by the glitter of a monocle in a stream of moonlight.

"Well, Sonia, what is the meaning of this?"

The grand duke himself!

A Duel of Wits!

DAZED though Pamela was at this encounter, she soon recovered her composure. There was only one thing to do—bluff, for all she was worth! Even if the grand duke suspected everything, she mustn't give him an atom of proof.

With a smile of mild but innocent surprise, she faced the traitor.

"Where have I been, uncle?" she repeated. "Didn't anyone tell you? I arranged to go off with the chief of the peasants after the garden party to see his little girl."

And, without actually telling a deliberate falsehood, she gave the impression that she had done nothing else worth mentioning.

"No where else, Sonia?" he asked gently.

"Well, I passed a lot of other places on the way, naturally."

"I didn't mean that," snapped the grand duke. "I was thinking of"—he paused—"of the White Deer Inn. You did not go there, by any chance?"

The White Deer Inn was where Paul had been staying. Pamela thought quickly, and then decided that the franker she was, without actually giving herself away, the better. It could only make the grand duke more chagrined, and hamper his scheming.

"It's funny you should mention the inn, uncle," she said, with a twinkle in her eyes, "because I paused there



Your Editor's address is:—Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Please send a stamped envelope if you wish for a reply by post.

Between Ourselves

MY DEAR READERS,—I'm sure there is no need for me to tell you that this is our Special Christmas Number, because you must have realised that as soon as you spotted it. Of course, it IS rather early, with Christmas still a week away, but we all wanted to put you in festive mood in preparation for the great occasion.

By "all," I mean, of course, my staff and I, and all the authors and artists, who join me in wishing you

The Happiest, Merriest Christmas You Have Ever Known!

Hilda Richards has sent her own wishes in the form of a special card, which is actually reproduced—in her own handwriting—on page 7, and your very popular friend, Patricia, also sends you seasonable greetings in her own way.

I do hope you enjoy all the good things in this number.

And now, having created the atmosphere of Christmas—and, of course, that means Christmas presents, too—I must tell you about those likeable twin sisters who live next door to me—you know, Iris and Veronica, as like as two peas except that Iris has a few freckles on her nose.

Every year I give Iris and Veronica a present each. This year, as always, I began to ponder: "Now what CAN I give them?" Then—a knock at the door, and the twins themselves solved the problem.

They came to ask my advice about schoolgirl Annuals, as two of their uncles wanted to give them something. That removed my worried frown. Iris and Veronica were frightfully keen on having books, and so I've decided that I'll also give them each an Annual.

What Annuals?

Well, that problem is soon settled. Annuals selected from the four world-

famous volumes about which I've already told you—and which, by the way, are shown elsewhere in this number:

THE SCHOOL FRIEND ANNUAL, 3s. 6d.

THE POPULAR BOOK OF GIRLS' STORIES, 2s. 9d.

THE GOLDEN ANNUAL, 3s. 6d.

THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN ANNUAL, 6s.

The uncles are being asked to give "The Golden" and "The Schoolgirls' Own"—so I shall give Iris a "School Friend" and Veronica a "Popular Book." Not that it will make much difference who has which, for they'll naturally swap, and so have all four! Lucky twins!

Why not take a tip from them and decide on an Annual as one of your gifts—either for yourself, or for you to give a chum?

Thrills and excitement for the Cliff House chums next week; and that means thrills and excitement for every reader of THE SCHOOLGIRL.

"THE PHANTOM OF PELLABAY CASTLE!"

That is the title of next week's magnificent COMPLETE Babs & Co. story—still in Christmas mood—and I don't think I need tell you more about it except to say that it is packed with all the ingredients of a story that intrigues, thrills, and amuses in turn, and the phantom of the castle provides a very big surprise at the end.

Next week's number—out December 22nd—will also contain further chapters of "Princess to Save Leiconia," and "Guests at Mystery Manor," as well as more of Patricia's Bright and Useful Pages. Now, in conclusion, let me again wish you the very best of Yuletide Greetings.

Happy days!

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

to examine those quaint knockers on the different doors. They're so original. But why did you think I might have gone to the inn, uncle?"

There was a pause, during which the grand duke held Pamela's gaze. Finally, he shrugged.

"Oh, I just wondered, that's all—you were gone so long!"

Pamela thrilled. He was on the defensive. Now was the time to drive home her advantage. Certain matters had got to be brought into the open, or all her pretended innocence would be useless.

"By the way, uncle," she said quietly, "why did you take that note of mine?"

Plainly disconcerted, the grand duke schemed to gain time. With considerable fuss, he lit a cigarette.

"Well, Sonia, you may as well know the truth now," he said, as if in a sudden burst of confidence. "You'll know it sooner or later. This friend of yours—this young fellow Naldi—"

"Yes?" said Pamela, as he paused again, and her heart seemed to stop.

"I am afraid, my dear child, he has been deceiving you. He is"—the grand duke barked the words—"a traitor!"

Pamela affected to be horrified.

"A—traitor!" she cried. "Paul? Oh, but, uncle, that's absurd! He isn't! Paul, why—why, he couldn't be—couldn't possibly—"

The grand duke laid a consoling hand on her shoulder.

"I'm afraid he is, my dear. Only too cleverly did he blind you to his real motives in seeking your friendship. You have been harbouring an enemy, a spy, an anarchist! Thank goodness I discovered things in time! Of course, I gave instant orders for his arrest!"

Pamela's appearance of bitter disillusionment was equal to the grand duke's well-feigned condolences.

"And now—now—" Pamela's voice broke. "Now he is in prison?"

"Not quite, my dear, not quite," said the grand duke, and for the first time a note of menace crept into his voice. "But there is another point. You see, he has an accomplice—"

Pamela held her breath, eyes upon the grand duke.

"An accomplice?" she said.

"Yes." The grand duke nodded; he was smiling now. "A girl, Sonia. Just fancy that—a girl, little more than your age, I believe, who has been helping him in his treacherous plans! He has escaped. But the girl has not. She cannot! I know where she is to be found. All we have to do is to watch her, Sonia, and she is bound to give them both away! You understand, my dear?"

Pamela understood very well. Paul's accomplice in his story was—herself! Confident of his ultimate victory now that Paul was no longer able to help her, the grand duke was boastfully mocking her, warning her, taunting her.

But Pamela, steeling herself, fought down her inward tremors.

"Poor things!" she said, and sighed. "Oh, well, it's their own fault, I suppose. Tell me as soon as they're caught, won't you, uncle? I shouldn't like to learn about it days afterwards. Good-night!"

And, leaving him to nurse a scowl of mingled chagrin and uncertainty, Pamela walked on to her boudoir.

"GOLLY! THAT'S an idea! A picnic! A picnic, with a hamper large enough to hold everything he needs! Nobody'll ever guess the truth!"



IT was something new in Tolari Palace for the princess personally to supervise the packing of a picnic basket! But, unknown to anyone, the contents of that hamper were actually for her secret helper—now a fugitive in the mountains.

And Pamela was so rapturously elated by her own inspiration—even though she had not uttered those words aloud—that she clapped her hands. Whereupon the dutiful, self-effacing Rowena, her chief maid-in-waiting, gave a little squeal and showered powder all over Pamela's frock.

"Oh dear! Your—your Highness, I'm so sorry! I'm afraid I've upset the powder. Forgive me, please. It was so careless of me!"

But Pamela, with a gay laugh, shook her head.

"Careless of me, Rowena," she corrected. "It's all right. A little powder won't do any harm. I'll brush it off."

Rowena was horrified. The princess brush her own clothes? Good gracious, it would be unheard of! No, no, no! That was her duty.

So Pamela, not wishing to enter a politeness contest, gave way.

It was the following morning, and Pamela was dressing. Ever since waking she had racked her brains for some means of visiting Paul, and taking him food and things he would need, without arousing suspicion. And the idea of a picnic had solved the problem.

She had forgotten the existence of Juanita, but as Pamela descended the first flight of red carpeted stairs on her way below, that fair-haired girl appeared as though by magic.

"Oh, hallo, Sonia!" she greeted, hugging Pamela's arm in the most friendly manner. "I've been waiting to see you. I say"—and she looked very contrite and concerned—"I hope I didn't cause a lot of bother last night, letting the grand duke get hold of that letter. I'm terribly sorry!"

Pamela smiled. Poor old Juanita, still worrying about that!

"Oh, not much," she said lightly. "Please don't worry, dear!"

Arm-in-arm, they descended to the vast main hall, past saluting Civic Guards and curtsying maids.

Of course, Juanita's contriteness was sheer pretence, affected to build up further the illusion that she disliked the grand duke and was Pamela's dearest friend.

Pamela, with not the slightest inkling of the truth, did all she could that morning to make things up to the apparently remorseful girl. And she really enjoyed herself. She loved tennis, and they played four sets; she adored swimming and they disported themselves in the warm, sun-bathed waters of the lake for over an hour; and she worshipped flowers, so the time spent in gathering choice, fragrant blooms from the gardens was a sheer joy that almost made her forget Paul.

But not quite. The moment lunch was over, she slipped away. She went down to the kitchens, much to the fluttering excitement of the staff, and personally supervised the packing of a large picnic basket.

Then, when one of the footmen had carried it to her boudoir, she added to the vast store of eatables a few important items she had gathered herself from different parts of the palace. A revolver, with plenty of ammunition; a knife, some blankets, matches, and many other necessities.

"That's the lot!" she said excitedly, and closed the lid. "I'll lower this over the balcony, and then slip down the secret passage. I'd better not—oh, golly!"

And she frantically fastened the straps of the hamper as the door opened, and, peeping around the edge of it, appeared the head of—Juanita!

"Hallo! I just wondered—" she began, and then spotted the hamper. "Why—you're not going for a picnic, are you, Sonia?"

Pamela managed to hide her dismay. "I had an idea you'd gone riding," she said.

"Oh, no!" said Juanita, round-eyed. Then her face filled with longing. "A picnic!" she breathed. "How gorgeous! Oh, can I come, Sonia? Do say yes—please. I'd just love it!"

Pamela's reply came after the barest hesitation.

"Why, of course, Juanita!" But when they rode away from the stables, with the contents of the hamper transferred to the saddlebags of Pamela's horse—done while Juanita was changing—she was thinking furiously.

Juanita had got to be tricked. It might be unkind, but it must be done. Somehow, she must give the girl the slip. But how—how?

Pamela was still desperately pondering that problem when there occurred a disturbing little incident. It took place on one of the country roads as they approached Tolari Forest, where the picnic was—so Pamela had suggested—to take place.

Without any warning, a child ran in front of Pamela's horse. By a sudden tug on the reins that made the animal rear wildly, almost unseating her, Pamela avoided the little one, then sprang down and gathered it into her arms as it burst into terrified tears.

"Shush, dear!" she whispered. "It's all right. Mr. Horse didn't mean to hurt you. Why, he wouldn't hurt anyone. He—"

There came the patter of feet. A woman, poorly clad and with dishevelled hair, hurried upon the scene, seized the child, and wrenched her out of Pamela's embrace.

She said nothing. She just drew back, halted, holding the child on one arm and turning the other side to Pamela, as if to keep her little one as far away as possible. And on her face was an expression of cold scorn.

"Why," Pamela began, "I—I'm sorry—"

But the woman, with a toss of her head, hurried away.

"What ever was the matter with her?" Juanita called, from her mount.

"Oh, just—just felt like it, I suppose!" said Pamela. She sprang back to the saddle. "Come on."

But she was not so indifferent as she appeared. She knew the significance of the peasant mother's attitude. Paul's outlawing was being blamed on to her. That's what it meant. The peasants' affections were once more turning to hatred—thanks to the grand duke!

A sense of desperation stole over her. She must see Paul after this. But first—to free herself of Juanita. And she had thought of a way at last.

"Race you to the forest!" she suddenly challenged gaily. "The winner to have first choice from the hamper."

"Done!" Juanita agreed at once. "Ready?"

"Go!"

As though propelled by the same force, both horses leaped forward and went galloping towards the forest!

Sensation in Room No. 10!

WITHIN five minutes Pamela's ruse had succeeded. Although not the fine rider that Juanita was, Pamela had a far superior horse, and she reached the forest a good thirty yards ahead of Juanita. And that was more than enough to enable her to get to a thick cluster of trees and bushes in a little dell, and conceal herself.

Juanita went charging past, keeping to the forest path. As soon as all sounds of her had faded, Pamela emerged from her hiding-place, patted her horse's neck, and, with a smile of triumph on her face, rode away in the direction of the mountains.

Half an hour later, having tethered her horse at the foot of the mountains, she was breathlessly carrying the saddle-bags into the cave.

"Paul!" she cried, and her voice echoed eerily. "Pa-a-a! It's me—Pamela! Coo-o-o-o-o!"

He came hurrying to meet her, carrying a flaming torch, and her heart welled with relief and gladness at sight of him. His bandaged arm was still

tucked into the opening of his shirt, but didn't he look better? There was healthy colour in his cheeks again.

"What a pal!" he greeted her jovially. "Hi, let me have one! You take this." And handing her the torch, he took over the bags. "You're a giddy little marvel. Anyone suspect?"

"No I kidded them all. But you're tons better, Paul," she added happily. "Oh, I'm so glad! How is the arm?"

"A bit stiff you know, and hurts when I move it. But it'll soon be O.K." He glanced up at her. "How did you get on last night?"

Pamela drew a deep breath.

"I'll tell you, Paul," she said. And in a serious tone that reflected both their feelings, she told him everything that had happened since she had returned to the palace. Paul's face darkened as she recounted the incident with the peasant woman.

"The very thing we were afraid of," he muttered. "It's a pretty grim look-out, old thing, if the others feel the same as that woman. If only I wasn't cooped up here I could speak to the peasants myself—try to convince them that the grand duke is behind all this."

"I know, Paul; but you can't. It's too risky. You mustn't leave the caves."

Deep in thought, Paul pressed a clenched fist to his cheek. Almost immediately he exclaimed excitedly:

"Got it! A note, Pam—a note written to the chief, telling him the truth. You can deliver it. Quick!" Impatiently he waved a hand. "Pen—paper!"

Eagerly Pamela rummaged in one of the bags. A stroke of luck she'd decided to include writing materials! Paul, scratching away quite furiously, soon finished, dried the ink by the fire, and then, with quite a triumphant gleam in his eyes, handed the note to her.

"There!" he cried. "Take it at once. Every minute's pretty valuable, old thing. That'll help to put you right with the peasants. Only make sure the chief gets it. Don't give it to anyone else—too many spies," he added significantly.

Pamela did not waste a minute. An hour later she reined in her horse on the outskirts of the village. Leaving it tied to a tree, she dodged behind some bushes, removed her conspicuous black wig and then, thrusting it into a pocket of her riding-jacket, boldly strode forward.

The building where she would find the chief was the largest of all, dwarfing the low cottages and single-storied dwellings which surrounded it. In some respects a club, its rooms could be hired by anyone for quite a small charge. The peasants often used it for conducting business.

In response to her enquiry, the old caretaker muttered "Room ten," and vaguely gestured towards some stairs. She found Room No 10 along the first landing. The door was ajar. Not a sound came from inside, and when she peeped in she saw that it was deserted, although a large table, surrounded by chairs, with paper, pens, and ink set out before each, assured her that this was the room.

"Better wait," she decided. But scarcely had she started towards one of the chairs than there came a tramping of feet upon the stairs.

She checked herself, drawing in her breath to a little gasp of dismay. She had recognised one of the voices. It was that of—the grand duke!

"Oh golly!" Pamela gasped. She looked up about her wildly. She could not conceive any reason for the traitor's presence here. But—she must hide!

There was a cupboard on the far side of the room. Frantically she tore across to it, and she had just squeezed in and drawn the door to when the grand duke himself strode into the room.

"Gentlemen, be seated!" A rustle, a scraping of chairs. Then, to the ears of the palpitating Pamela, came the duke's voice again.

"And now, gentlemen, to business. I will hear your reports, beginning from left to right. You first, Luigi."

Holding her breath, Pamela listened. Every word, every murmur, was clearly audible. And the more she heard, the more startled, appalled did she become.

The grand duke's purpose here was perfectly apparent, though she was yet to learn that the caretaker had sent her to the wrong room by mistake, and that the peasants, by a queer twist of fate, were actually meeting on another floor of the building.

These men in front of her were the duke's hirelings, his spies and agents, paid to stir up strife and discontent, and blacken her name.

One by one they were reporting the progress of their activities; what the feelings of people in different parts of the country were. And Pamela's blood went icy cold as the last speaker summed up the impressions of them all with the exultant words:

"The time is nearly ripe for rebellion, your Excellency. In another week, maybe—a fortnight or three weeks at the most—we can strike. In a dozen parts of Leiconia revolution will blaze out. Nothing will be able to stem it. The princess will be forced to flee. You, your Excellency, will find it easy to seize power."

Pamela heard the grand duke laugh. "Splendid, my friends! You have all done well, though—"

How it happened Pamela hardly knew. but in some way her fingers, gripping the edge of the cupboard door and holding it to, suddenly slipped. The door swung outwards. There was a screech of rusty hinges, followed by the clatter of chairs as everyone in the room twisted round.

And Pamela, white-faced, stood fully revealed to the plotters!

Seconds passed—seconds of electric stillness. No one moved; no one spoke. She saw the grand duke staring at her, penetrating incredulously.

He felt incredulous, too. On first seeing Pamela in the dim cupboard, he had thought—the princess! But as he regarded her more keenly he started. This girl was not the princess. True, she was dressed as the princess often was. She was the same build, had the same cut of features, the same eyes.

But the hair! Such a vivid contrast! Light, golden, whereas Sonia's was raven black, sleek, and straight. It wasn't Sonia. It was someone else! An impostor! Incredible, though—fantastic! Oh, it couldn't be right! And yet—

"Who are you?" he ejaculated. The spell broken, Pamela forgot her terror—forgot everything. Recklessly she hurled herself out of the cupboard and tore across the room.

The grand duke's chair crashed on to its back as he leaped up.

"After her! Don't let her get away. She's got to be caught. A thousand crowns for the man who stops her!"

THE grand duke suspects! Even if Pamela does escape now, what will happen when she comes face to face with him at the palace? Next Thursday's chapters contain thrill upon thrill.

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HILDA FARREL, with her chums, **BERYL LORIMER** and **JUDY BROUGH**, and her clever dog, **MARCUS**, go to **Hawsley Manor** for a holiday as paying-guests. The manor is owned by the father of **LAVENDER MORTIMER**, with whom the girls become friendly, and is the Mortimers' means of livelihood. A strange woman is "haunting" the house, using secret passages, in one of which the girls find a paper referring to hidden treasure. A woman detective, **THELMA HARKNESS**, arrives to solve the mystery, and soon has Hilda & Co. under suspicion. The chums are sure the mystery is connected with the old mill near by, which can be reached from the manor by a secret passage. There is also a tunnel to the mill from outside. A guest, **MIRANDA BATES**, learning of the treasure, accidentally sets fire to the mill, but the chums save the building. Lavender is kidnapped by a hooded woman and kept in a secret room. The chums rescue her, but she has lost her memory. Later, Hilda & Co. capture the mystery woman in a dark corridor. Suddenly the light goes on!

(Now read on.)

woman employed in the house to catch the "ghost"! It was she they had trapped!

"Golly!" said Judy softly.

"Oh, my word!" gasped Beryl.

"How thrilling! And she's in there! But can she escape?"

"No. Unless there's a secret panel!" said Hilda.

"Judy," she added, "stay here! Beryl, come with me to see Mr. Mortimer!"

They ran to find Mr. Mortimer, and learned that he was in the study. The

detective! You remember I said she was a fraud, a fake?" said Hilda, in thrilled tone. "She came here to find the treasure—and keep it—"

Mr. Mortimer stiffened. "Please—please what are you saying?" he protested sternly. "I cannot hear those wild accusations—"

"Wild? Oh, but they're true!" said Hilda urgently. "Why, she's in one of the rooms now, locked in. She is—"

Mr. Mortimer gestured to the left, obviously meaning Hilda to look that way. So Hilda, puzzled, looked in that direction. So did Beryl, who uttered a squeal.

Hilda did not speak. She could not. She was paralysed for the moment. Sitting in the corner of the room

Innocent or Guilty?

IN the darkness a light shone. Hilda, Judy, and Beryl, grappling with the mystery woman, had seen only that she was dressed in a black-hooded cloak, that she carried a jingling chain, and something filmy and luminous under her arm. Then the torch had gone flying, leaving them struggling in the darkness.

But Hilda had quickly recovered, to clutch at the mystery woman's cloak and rip it. And it was at that instant that Judy switched on the light.

Swift as thought, the mystery woman clapped her hands to her face, and rushed through the girls into the room opposite, the door of which Hilda had opened.

Hilda had opened it in the hope of pushing the woman in there, and trapping her. But the key of that door was on the inside, so that it was turned, not by Hilda, but by the woman herself, the moment she slammed the door, shutting them out.

There was no need for them to follow her to discover who she was.

"My golly—you saw—that costume?" gasped Judy.

"Those shoes!" babbled Beryl.

"Thelma Harkness!" blurted out Hilda, aghast for all that she had anticipated it, and suspected the woman.

Thelma Harkness, the detective—the



Ordered from
the Manor
in Disgrace



other guests did not know that he was the owner of the manor house, but supposed him to be the butler.

Hilda rapped on the study door, and he called out to her to come in. "She went in with Beryl just behind, both of them panting and gasping. Mr. Mortimer stood with his back to the fire, and, realising that they had some exciting news, took a step forward.

"Lavender—she has recovered her memory?" he exclaimed. "She can tell us who the mystery woman is?"

"No—at least—I've heard nothing further," said Hilda. "But there's no need to worry her. We know!"

"You know?" he cried. "You've caught her? But this is splendid! Wonderful! The woman playing ghost?"

"Yes; complete with hood and cloak!" said Hilda excitedly.

"Then who is she?" he demanded. "Thelma Harkness, the woman

behind the door, in a deep chair, and now turning to look at her, was Thelma Harkness, the detective, a cold, grim smile on her lips!

"Why—why, you escaped! You got through a secret panel!" cried Hilda.

"Yes—oh, we should have guessed it!" said Beryl, in despair.

Thelma Harkness rose and surveyed them.

"I see. I escaped," she said. "I slipped away from the clutches of you smart girls. And when did all this happen?"

"Two minutes ago—three!" said Hilda. "Only the time it took us to run along the corridor to here!"

Thelma Harkness laughed softly. "How long have I been talking to you, Mr. Mortimer?" she asked.

He looked at the clock. "Fifteen minutes," he said.

There was silence, and Hilda looked at Beryl. Mr. Mortimer could not possibly be suspected of lying—there



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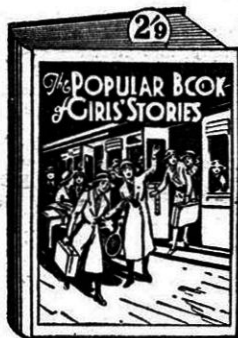
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was no possible motive for it, anyway. Therefore, astounding though it was, this could mean only one thing. It had not been Thelma Harkness dressed up as the mystery woman, after all!

"Oh!" said Hilda, bitterly disappointed. "But she had your clothes—at least, clothes you have often worn."

"So that's it. Someone playing at being my double, leading you foolish, thoughtless girls to false conclusions!"

Hilda looked dismally and ruefully at Beryl. They had failed completely, and made duffers of themselves into the bargain. In fact, they had given Miss Harkness a fine chance to crow.

"I think," said Mr. Mortimer severely, "that you owe this lady an apology. You have insulted her in her own hearing, accused her of coming here to steal the treasure!"

Hilda went crimson, and Beryl looked down at the carpet.

The way Mr. Mortimer expressed it certainly did suggest that they had been reckless, and brought unfounded charges. And yet, even though all the evidence suggested they were wrong,

Hilda had not lessened her suspicion against the detective one degree.

"I'm sorry, Miss Harkness," she said, "but we are keen to solve the mystery, and everyone is under suspicion. After all—you suspect us. That is insulting, too!"

"If unjustified, yes!" said the woman detective grimly. "But is it unjustified? Are not these wild accusations attempts to divert suspicion from yourselves?"

"It's not true!" Beryl said indignantly. "We've done all we can to help Lavender and Mr. Mortimer. We're even helping with the housework."

"Helping? You mean helping to drive the guests out by increasing their discomforts!" sneered Thelma Harkness.

Hilda put her chin up.

"In that case, we won't help any more—or we wouldn't but for poor Lavender being ill. When she does get better it will worry her if things are at sixes and sevens!"

"Perhaps it won't worry you," said Beryl to Miss Harkness.

Hilda tugged Beryl's arm.

"Come on!" she said.

As they opened the door, Hilda saw how perplexed and worried Mr. Mortimer was. Even though he seemed to be taking the detective's side, seeing her point of view rather than theirs, Hilda felt sorry for him. His was a most difficult position.

"Oh dear, what now?" said Beryl dismally. "What an awful flop—just when we thought we'd caught her!"

"But wait a bit," said Hilda suddenly, as they crossed the Hall. "If it wasn't Thelma Harkness in that room—then it's someone else, and she's still there!"

Marcus Makes No Mistake!

JUDY, outside the locked door, had listened carefully for the slightest sound suggestive that the woman in the room was escaping by a secret panel; but no such sounds had come.

Marcus stood on guard, too, behaving like a four-footed vacuum-cleaner. Every now and then he inhaled deeply from under the door, and then sneezed.

"Quiet—quiet," said Judy. "How can I hear what's going on in there when you make these grampus noises?"

Marcus regarded her in quiet scorn, and settled down on his forepaws like a mouse before a hole.

But he wheeled suddenly as he heard Hilda's running steps, and barked.

"Well," said Judy, "is Mr. Mortimer coming? She's still here!"

"Good!" said Hilda, and then in dismal tones explained about Thelma Harkness.

Judy whistled softly.

"My word! That mystery woman just borrowed Thelma Harkness' clothes to diddle us!"

"But never mind that!" Hilda cried. "Who is the woman in here? And how are we going to get her out, or get in to her?" she exclaimed.

"Don't know," admitted Judy. "She's cornered unless there is a secret way out."

"Funny that Thelma hasn't come along," frowned Hilda. "Unless she's sure that the woman has escaped, or—she doesn't want to catch her!"

There was a step in the corridor, and they all turned. It was Bertram Robinson, the scientific-looking boy—the most recently acquired paying-guest.

He halted as he saw the girls grouped by the door.

"If you ask me," he said, "you're up to something. It's you girls who are playing ghost here, and this has something to do with it. My mother is nervous, and I owe it to her to find out!"

Hilda, eager to get the thing settled one way or the other, decided to take Bertram into her confidence.

"Listen!" she said. "You can keep a secret?"

"I can," said Bertram.

"Very well; there's someone locked in this room," said Hilda. "And someone who has been playing ghost, we think. How are we going to get in, or get her out? There's no key!"

Bertram studied the door.

"A crowbar would force it open, or a keg of gunpowder."

"Pass the gunpowder, Beryl," said Hilda. "Or have we run out of it?"

"Failing gunpowder," mused Bertram solemnly, "we could send a fairly harmless stifling gas through the

door, like tear gas. I made some tear gas in the lab at school last term."

Hilda breathed hard. For Bertram was obviously a prize idiot.

But before Bertram's leg could be pulled further, Thelma Harkness came into view.

"Quick—quick!" she cried. "The dog—send him this way!"

"Miss Harkness—the woman's in here!" called Hilda.

The detective took a step forward. "Pah! She'll have escaped by the panel ages ago. She'll be nearer here if anywhere. Send the dog!"

Hilda sent Marcus down the corridor to the detective, who ordered him to sniff at a part of the wall; then, leaving him, Miss Harkness hurried along to the girls.

"Is this the room the woman locked herself in?" she demanded.

"Yes," said Hilda. "But we can't get in."

To her surprise, the detective, seizing the handle, opened the door without any trouble, glanced into the room, and laughed.

"Unlocked—and empty," she said. "You seem to take me for a complete fool—and Mr. Mortimer, too. I refuse to believe a word of your story. There never was a woman in this room."

Hilda and her chums were completely shocked, not knowing what to think for the moment.

There could be no question that a mystery woman had shut herself in here. But where was she now? How had she escaped? By a secret panel?

It was Marcus who solved the problem for them just as they were closing the door.

Marcus, growing tired of seeking he knew not what at the end of the corridor, came charging past them into the room. Instantly, his ears pricked up, and darting to the bed, he ducked underneath it.

Someone screamed. And with good reason; for Marcus' nose dabbed the mystery woman full in the face. She had been under the bed the whole time!

"The Treasure!"

"SHE'S there! Marcus has got her!" cried Hilda, wheeling.

"Hold her!" She thrust open the door again; and there, standing beside the bed, was the mystery woman. And still she was a mystery; for the counterpane, snatched from the bed, was held over her face.

She could not see, but she could not be seen.

Thelma Harkness fairly jumped into the room, pulling something black from the pocket of her tweed coat.

"Don't move! I've got you covered!" she snapped. "Move, and I'll fire! Quick! Run and get Mr. Mortimer!" she shouted. "Hilda! Judy! Beryl!"

Hilda turned and ran like the wind; for this was the moment of triumph. Judy went with her; and only Beryl loitered.

"Beryl, hold the dog! There's no need for him now; I've got her covered!" cried Thelma Harkness.

Beryl dragged Marcus back, while Bertram, a little pale with excitement, polished his glasses to see better.

Suddenly the mystery woman made a jump forward. With a mighty push she sent Thelma Harkness staggering back, to trip and fall heavily; then, before Bertram or Beryl could sufficiently understand what was happening, she was gone—gone down the corridor at

speed—tearing the counterpane from her head.

"After her, Marcus!" yelled Beryl, releasing him.

Marcus flew forward. But it was no good; the mystery woman was nowhere in sight—she had got away completely.

In the room Thelma Harkness picked herself up, still holding the "gun"—which, as Bertram and Beryl now saw, was only a morocco pipecase.

Before they could speak Hilda and Judy returned with Mr. Mortimer.

"She got away," said Beryl blankly. "Bolted!" said Bertram.

Hilda could hardly believe it. "She got away from three of you—and one with a revolver?" she said.

"Pipecase!" said Bertram in scorn. "Pipecase—" Hilda echoed, and looked at it, frowning.

"Mine," said Mr. Mortimer. "We agreed that it might pass as a gun, and that the mystery woman or other practical joker might be afraid of it.

"A bluff that failed," shrugged Thelma Harkness.

Hilda measured her. Her mind was clearing and she saw things just as they were—or she thought so.

"A bluff that worked frightfully well, you mean, Miss Harkness," she said.

"Marcus was called off so that he should not sniff her out—only he came back too soon. And then you pretended to have a gun, so that we thought the woman couldn't escape. But she knew that it wasn't a gun; so she just pushed you, and you fell—or you may not even have been pushed. In any case, we trapped her; and you—you let her get away!"

Hilda's voice had the ring of anger; and the woman detective was for a moment taken aback.

"Then she flared up in rage.

"Is that so?" she cried. "Well, I've had enough of it—quite enough! Either these girls go, Mr. Mortimer, or I go!"

Mr. Mortimer was worried and distressed.

"Oh, but, Miss Harkness, please! It was such a near thing. We know now the woman is here; she was so nearly caught. Perhaps we can capture her in a few minutes. You have done wonderfully well."

Thelma Harkness fixed Hilda with a look of unmistakable hatred.

"I am having no more of this nonsense!" she said. "Once and for all, if these girls interfere, then I am going!"

Mr. Mortimer looked in appeal to Hilda.

"Please!" he said.

But Hilda was grim. She was not a girl usually given to losing her temper, but there was a limit.

Her mind was made up. Thelma Harkness was a crook, and it infuriated Hilda to think that she was pulling the wool over Mr. Mortimer's eyes.

"I stand by what I said," she insisted, her arms folded. "I am a paying-guest here, and, although I don't want to be horrid about it, here I stay until I get a week's notice at least that my room is wanted, but I'm not."

She put her chin up; and Beryl stood beside her.

"Hear, hear!" said Beryl. "It really does look as though you'll have to go, you know, Miss Harkness, because if Hilda stays, I stay—"

"And I!" added Judy.

Hilda, inwardly amused, tried to look very serious. She was amused because the detective's bluff had been called, leaving Thelma Harkness either to be a woman of her word and to march out—or else to make herself ridiculous by saying in effect, "Oh, very well, I'll stay after all."

She was cornered; or so Hilda thought. But Thelma Harkness appeared not to have heard what they said. She was listening to something, and flapping her hand at them for silence.

"You hear that?" she asked in tense tones.

They fell silent, listening.

"What was it?" Mr. Mortimer asked anxiously.

"A groan. I think that woman must have fallen. Perhaps she is trapped inside one of the panels," Thelma Harkness answered. "Wait here; I will go and see."

She hurried off, and Hilda made to follow her, but with the utmost politeness, Mr. Mortimer detained her.

"No—please!" he said. "Leave this to Miss Harkness."

Hilda, disappointed though she was, stood back.



"THELMA HARKNESS is a fraud, and we've trapped her in her room!" Hilda declared. Then she broke off as Mr. Mortimer, with a scornful gesture, pointed to a chair. Hilda and Beryl gazed at the occupant in amazement. It was Thelma Harkness herself!

"Very well, Mr. Mortimer," she said. "But, please, please be on your guard. If she does find the treasure, I know that she will clear out with every piece of it, and never come back!"

But Mr. Mortimer ignored that. "I think we can now go our ways," he murmured. "The excitement is over for a while."

He set the example by going off, but Bertram did not follow. Looking intensely solemn, he chose to remain.

"Is that woman a detective?" he asked.

Hilda did not hesitate. "Yes," said Hilda. "And listen—you keep quiet about what you have just heard, young Bertram. It's nothing to do with you."

"And judging by what I heard—

"Certainly."

"Then solve this riddle," said Hilda. "And if you can, you ought to be able to find the treasure."

Bertram took out a notebook and pencil.

"Come on, then. I'm good at riddles," he said.

Hilda measured him, her eyes glimmering.

"What is it," she asked, "that separates two ears, is a void, and yet solid as a block of wood, although useless for hammering in nails, but thrives on clumps?"

Bertram wrote it down.

"An anagram, or an acrostic?" he mused.

"A whatter?" asked Hilda, looking terribly dense.

she pulled up in excitement, for Marcus was running towards them, shaking all over with triumph, and wagging his tail in something like frenzy.

"My golly—look—in his mouth," said Judy.

"What ever is it?" exclaimed Hilda. Marcus slithered to a halt and put the object in his mouth on to the ground. One glance was enough to tell them what it was.

"Gold!" said Hilda. "A gold cup—" babbled Beryl.

"And half melted—in the fire—the Old Mill fire!" gasped Judy. "We were right—it's at the mill! We've found the treasure—"

Hearing footsteps, Hilda snatched up the cup and sped off to her bed-room, followed by her friends, all of them eager to examine that fine old chased gold cup before asking Marcus where he had found it, and trying to get him to show them.

But hardly were they seated when the door was whipped open.

Thelma Harkness strode in, pulled up, and stared.

"Give me that!" she cried. "My word, you little cheats, so you have found the treasure—you've found it, and not said a word! You're nothing better than thieves. Mr. Mortimer—here, please!" she called.

Aghast, the chums sprang to their feet, facing Mr. Mortimer as he walked into the room.

"You see?" cried the woman detective in triumph. "They know the hiding-place of the treasure! Where is the rest of it?" she demanded.

Mr. Mortimer, grave and stern, looked at the three silent girls, and although they met his gaze unflinchingly, his sternness was unabated.

"You must give me that cup, please," he said in quiet, tense tones. "And then—the best thing you can do is to pack your things as quickly as you can—"

"After being searched—" added Thelma Harkness.

"There is a train in half an hour's time," said Mr. Mortimer.

Then, not waiting to hear argument or defence, clearly astounded and hurt, he went from the room.

"But—but—" Hilda began, momentarily bewildered by the suddenness of everything.

Miss Harkness did not argue. She closed the door with a bang.

"Well?" said Judy, turning to Hilda. "Do we go or stay?"

"Go? And leave the treasure?" asked Beryl. "Oh, Hilda—no! Surely not? And besides, it's right on Christmas!"

But Hilda, deep in thought, suddenly laughed—albeit grimly.

"Go?" she said. "Of course we're going—quick as we can. If we don't we shan't have a Christmas at all. We're going—but not far—not out of these grounds," she added more softly. "Now—get the idea? Quick—pack!"

And she rushed to the wardrobe and opened the door to get busy.

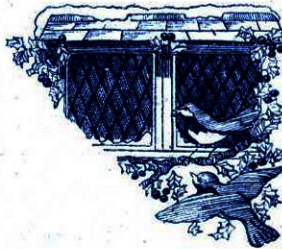
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No. 660.

nothing to do with you," he pointed out triumphantly. "The trouble seems to be that you girls are muddlers. Of course, I don't blame you—"

"You don't?" asked Hilda with assumed eagerness.

"No; you see—"

"He doesn't blame us," said Hilda, leaving a sigh and clasping Judy.

"Oh thank goodness," said Judy. "Phew—"

"How lovely," said Beryl, with a giggle.

"You see, you're only girls," ended Bertram, scowling more heavily. "You can't handle a thing like buried treasure. You wouldn't even know how to set about finding it."

"But you would?" asked Hilda, her eyes glimmering.

"A—a whither?" said Beryl, exchanging frowns with Judy.

But Bertram merely gave a disdainful shrug.

"Oh, you girls wouldn't understand, anyway," he said airily.

And then, deep in thought, he turned and wandered off.

Judy, watching him go, turned to Hilda.

"Well, what's the answer? It's got nothing to do with the treasure, has it?"

"What is the answer?" insisted Beryl.

"His head," said Hilda simply. "It separates his ears, is a complete void, yet solid as wood, but useless for knocking in nails. But don't tell him, let him find out."

Chuckling, Hilda led her friends away, but only for a few yards. Then